

Voices Across the Sands: A Historical Journey of English Language Teaching in Saudi Arabia

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doi: <https://doi.org/10.37745/bjel.2013/vol12n32445>

Published August 24, 2024

Citation: Al-Seghayer K. (2024) Voices Across the Sands: A Historical Journey of English Language Teaching in Saudi Arabia, *British Journal of English Linguistics*, Vol.12, Issue 3, pp.24-45

Abstract: *The evolution of English-language teaching in any country is inextricably linked to its historical context. This descriptive article presents a comprehensive framework for examining the historical trajectory of English-language instruction in Saudi Arabia, emphasizing key milestones, discontinuities, and continuities in the country's English-language teaching policies and practices. It traces the introduction and gradual expansion of English within the Kingdom's educational system, delves into the development of the Saudi English curriculum with a focus on pivotal reforms and global pedagogical influences, and scrutinizes the shift from traditional to modern, communicative, and learner-centered teaching strategies. A particular emphasis is placed on the significant historical developments involving Saudi English teachers over the past several decades. Understanding this historical context is crucial for situating current practices and policies within Saudi English-language education. It offers valuable insights for directing future advancements and addressing present challenges and opportunities in the field. Additionally, this historical perspective serves as a vital tool for policymakers in shaping the future of English-language education in Saudi Arabia.*

Keywords: Historical development of English language teaching in Saudi Arabia, English-language education, Saudi English curriculum, Saudi English teachers.

INTRODUCTION

Examining the evolution of English teaching within a specific country is essential for developing a distinct and effective national approach to English-language education. This exploration yields deep insights into the educational priorities, values, and societal demands for English proficiency within that country. By tracing the historical development of English teaching, language educators can better appreciate the cultural and linguistic influences that have shaped pedagogical practices. As Smith (2021) observed, understanding the historical trajectory of English language teaching not only offers a lens through which to view current trends but also informs future growth in the field, ensuring that language education remains

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rooted in sound, evidence-based practice rather than being swayed by ephemeral trends. Similarly, Kim (2016) emphasizes that this historical perspective facilitates a critical examination of the power dynamics embedded within English language teaching, underscoring the importance of context-sensitive approaches in shaping equitable and effective educational policies.

The historical development of English language teaching in Saudi Arabia is particularly compelling. From its introduction in the early 20th century as a foreign language in a few schools to its current status as a critical component of the Saudi educational system, the evolution of English teaching in Saudi Arabia mirrors the nation's broader socio-political, cultural, and educational transformations. This progression reflects the Kingdom's ambitions on the global stage and offers a unique perspective on how historical forces shape educational policies and practices.

This article offers a comprehensive overview of the key phases in the historical development of English language teaching in Saudi Arabia. It begins with a broad historical overview, tracing the roots of English education in the Kingdom and examining the factors that spurred its introduction and expansion. The discussion then explores the historical development of the Saudi English curriculum, chronicling its transformation in response to evolving educational goals and global influences. An in-depth analysis of pedagogical approaches used over the decades is included, underlining the interplay between theoretical underpinnings and practical implementation. Finally, the article investigates the historic evolution of English teacher development initiatives in Saudi Arabia.

While past research has studied particular facets of English teaching in Saudi Arabia, a substantial gap remains in studies providing a comprehensive overview of the field's historical evolution, particularly in areas such as its introduction and expansion, curriculum development, pedagogical approaches, and teacher development. By addressing this gap in the existing research, this article strives to deepen the understanding of the historical course of English-language teaching in Saudi Arabia, and to inform future policy and practice.

Understanding the historical context of English language teaching in Saudi Arabia is not merely an academic exercise; it is a crucial step toward shaping effective educational policies and practices for the future. By examining how past developments have influenced current methodologies and curricula, educators and policymakers can identify best practices and potential pitfalls. This historical insight empowers stakeholders to craft informed strategies that not only enhance English-language proficiency but also promote equity and relevance in education. Ultimately, a deep understanding of this evolution will guide future advancements in the field, ensuring that English-language teaching in Saudi Arabia is not only responsive to global trends but is also deeply rooted in the Kingdom's unique cultural and educational landscape.

This discussion offers valuable insights into the historical forces that have shaped educational changes in Saudi Arabia, laying the groundwork for future research and policy initiatives

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development–UK designed to enhance English language teaching in the country. By contextualizing current practices and policies within this historical framework, we achieve a clearer understanding of how past developments affect present-day English-language education. This knowledge is crucial for guiding future advancements in the field, ensuring that new policies and reforms are informed by a thorough understanding of the historical context and its impact on the evolution of English teaching in Saudi Arabia.

The Introduction of English in Saudi Arabia: How It All Began

Providing an accurate account of how English was introduced in Saudi Arabia is challenging because, unlike other countries in the region, Saudi Arabia was never under the control of a European power. Consequently, English did not emerge as a residual effect of colonization or as a legacy of missionary work. Instead, the Saudi government took the initiative to introduce English to its people. Therefore, the more pertinent question is not how English was introduced, but rather: “Why did English become a part of Saudi society in general and the educational system in particular?”

Shortly thereafter, establishing the modern Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932, the Saudi government quickly recognized the critical need to equip its citizens with the ability to communicate effectively with the outside world. The rapid expansion of the oil industry crystallized for the government the necessity of developing to develop a robust foreign language program, particularly to meet the growing demand for skilled personnel in both government roles and the various positions created by the Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO) (ARAMCO, 1968). As Alam (1986) observed, the early stages of oil production significantly heightened the need for Saudi English speakers who could engage with international stakeholders. Furthermore, it became imperative to communicate effectively with the influx of foreign experts arriving in the country whose common language was English. Additionally, throughout the year, Muslims from around the globe visited Saudi Arabia for Umra, and nearly two million pilgrims of diverse nationalities and languages arrived annually for the ritual pilgrimage. Consequently, it became essential for Saudis to learn English to facilitate communication with the large number of English-speaking visitors to their country.

The aforementioned reasons remained the catalytic fuel behind the introduction of the English language to Saudi Arabia, with additional factors emerging as the country advanced through its developmental stages. The substantial revenues generated by the oil industry enabled the Saudi government to embark on ambitious development programs in the early 1970s (Saudi Arabia: A Country Study, 1993). These programs were intended to establish critical infrastructures in transportation, telecommunications, electrical power, water, education, health, and social welfare. Such augmentation required importing manpower whose common language was English as well as training Saudis who could communicate effectively in English. Recognizing this need, educational policymakers prioritized the integration of English into the curricula of intermediate and secondary schools, as well as higher education, to align with the country’s rapid growth and to equip its workforce with the linguistic skills required for positions demanding English proficiency. The teaching of English became imperative not only to meet the demands of burgeoning commercial and business enterprises but also to ensure that

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Saudis could effectively engage with foreign experts assisting in the modernization of the nation's academic, technical, diplomatic, and international affairs. As Alam (1986) noted, English was introduced as a strategic tool to enable Saudis to navigate the complexities of a rapidly modernizing society and to participate fully in the global arena.

The integration of English into the Saudi educational system was a strategic response to the intertwined demands of the government and society. English emerged as a gateway for the Saudi public to access global development and technological advancements, while also serving as a vital link that bridged Saudi diplomacy and commerce with English-speaking nations. By fostering connections between Saudi citizens and the broader international community, the introduction of English became a pivotal element in the country's modernization efforts. Ultimately, this move reflects a broader strategy to align Saudi Arabia with global economic development and international interaction, positioning English as a crucial component of the nation's future.

The Genesis and Evolution of English Language Education in Saudi Arabia

The precise date of English language introduction into the Saudi Arabian educational system has not been definitively recorded. However, the formal inception of English is widely acknowledged to have occurred in 1928, shortly after the Directorate of Education was established on 15 March 1926 in Mecca by royal order (Al-Abdulkader, 1978; Assah, 1989; Al-Seghayer, 2005; Al-Seghayer 2011). This era marked the beginning of structured educational reforms in the newly unified Kingdom of Saudi Arabia under King Abdulaziz Al Saud. According to Ochsenwald (2019), there were only 10 public and four private schools in Saudi Arabia in 1926. The total enrollment was roughly 700 students. Over the past nine decades, English education in Saudi Arabia has undergone significant historical development. This section outlines the key milestones in the evolution of English education, from its initial introduction to the present, across public and higher education, as well as private schools and language institutions.

Public, private, higher education, and language institutions

The evolution of English language teaching in Saudi Arabia epitomizes the nation's burgeoning acknowledgment of English as a vital tool in the globalized world. This progression has culminated in a sophisticated and diverse landscape of English-language education, characterized by innovative teaching methodologies, enhanced curriculum design, and a broadened scope of linguistic and cultural studies.

English was initially taught for four hours per week at the elementary school level; that protocol was established in 1929. When the elementary level was combined with the previously established preparatory school, English was included in the study plan for the elementary level. In 1931, English instructional hours were reduced to three hours per week under a new plan. By 1937, English instructional hours still remained at three hours for grades 3 and 4; students in grades 1 and 2 received four hours. In 1942, preparatory schools and primary schools were merged into a single educational level, the elementary level, comprising six grades. According

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development–UK to Baghdadi (1985), the newly developed curriculum for this elementary level did not include English.

The reason for the removal of English has not been explicitly stated. However, four possible explanations can be speculated. First, English might have been planned for inclusion at the secondary level with significant instructional hours. Second, policymakers might have believed that young Saudis should first master Arabic before beginning to learn a foreign language; as a result, Arabic language proficiency was the primary focus. Third, the perceived need for English language skills might not have been as prevalent in the early 1940s. Lastly, there might have been a shortage of qualified English teachers to support instruction across all six grades.

In 1945, English was introduced into the Scholarships Preparatory School curriculum, which was founded in Mecca in 1937 to prepare Saudi students to study abroad. In 1945, English was added to the school's curriculum (Al-Joudi, 2000). The 1945 academic plan consisted of five grade levels, with English taught for 12 hours per week in Grades 1 through 3 and 8 hours per week in Grades 4 and 5. In that year, a total of 150 students were learning English at the school. The Preparatory School ultimately closed in 1959 (Dada, 2022).

In 1957, English and French were introduced as subjects at the secondary school level. English was taught for 11 hours per week in the first three grades. Grades 4, 5, and 6, were part of both art and science curricula, with 8 hours per week dedicated to each. French was discontinued in 1972 (Al-Abdulkader, 1978), but English retained its existing hours. By 1974, the number of contact hours of English instruction was reduced to six hours per week and further decreased to four hours per week in 1980, a schedule that continues to the present day. At that time, English was taught in 50 secondary schools, with 12,638 students learning the language (Al-Qafilah Magazine, 2020).

Upon the creation of the intermediate level in 1959, English became an established subject with specific instructional objectives and syllabi. The intermediate level, constituting Grades 7, 8, and 9, was introduced to serve as a transitional stage between the elementary and secondary levels (Jan, 1985). This level featured a comprehensive curriculum, including detailed instructional objectives and syllabi, with English being taught for six hours per week. In 1963, the number of English instruction hours increased to 8 hours per week. However, since 1980, English has been taught for only 4 hours per week.

In 1960, English was made a subject of study at the already-established secondary level, solidifying its place in the Saudi educational landscape; its hours of instruction per week have fluctuated over time. Initially, it was taught 8 hours per week, but this was reduced to six hours in 1980 and further reduced to four hours in 1982, which remains the current practice to this day (Al-Seghayer, 2011).

The curricula employed at the intermediate and secondary levels were adopted from those of neighboring countries' curricula. The implemented English program, called *Living English for the Arab World* remained in use for nearly 20 years, until 1980. Al-Subahi (1988) argues that

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this program was neither feasible for Saudi education nor aligned with the needs and interests of Saudi learners. In 1980, a new English program called *Saudi Arabian School English* was introduced at the intermediate and secondary levels. This newly introduced program was believed to better correspond, to some extent, with the needs of learners (Al-Johani, 2009).

In 1995, English was taught as a core subject in both intermediate and secondary schools through a newer program formally introduced that year. This program, *English for Saudi Arabia*, was developed domestically, with a significant emphasis on the cultural and moral values of Saudi society. It represented a shift towards a more localized approach to English education, striving to meet the specific needs of Saudi students more effectively. (Directorate of Curriculum, 1995).

In 2004, the *Say It in English* textbook series replaced the previous English textbook in Saudi Arabia. According to the Ministry of Education (MoE), approximately 1,100,000 students used these textbooks in 2010 (Ministry of Education, 2010). The introduction of *Say It in English* marked a commitment to keeping English-language education up-to-date and relevant to contemporary educational standards and the evolving needs of Saudi society.

In 2005, English became a mandatory subject for Grade 6 (the final year of elementary school) in Saudi Arabia, with classes held for 2 hours each week. This initiative, formally approved in 2003 and implemented in 2005, paved the way for the introduction of English teaching at elementary schools. The textbook used was entitled *English for Saudi Arabia*, and it was published by the Saudi MoE (Al-Seghayer, 2011).

The initial introduction of English in Grade 6 in 2004 was intended, as indicated by Al-Seghayer (2011), to be an “experiment”, with the outcomes to be thoroughly studied and evaluated before deciding on further expansion. However, the implementation was rushed, with only six months between the decision and the start of teaching in Grade 6 primary classrooms. Two years later, it was implemented in Grade 5. In addition to these changes, the National Committee for English Language suggested incorporating computer-based instruction into the EFL curriculum in 2003 (Ministry of Education, Educational Development Center, 2003).

In 2008, English teaching in Saudi Arabia experienced a major shift with the launch of the King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Public Education Development Project, also known as the Tatweer Project. This major educational reform, introduced by the MoE, was a comprehensive five-year program that ran from 2008–2012 from 2008 to 2012. Its primary goal was to enhance the quality of education, especially in the teaching and learning of English, and to modernize the educational system in line with global standards. With an allocated budget of approximately SR11.8 billion (around 3.1 billion USD), the Tatweer Project aimed to improve educational quality through various programs, including curriculum development, teacher training, and the integration of technology into classrooms.

This initiative began in the second semester of the 2008 academic year. It was initially piloted in 61 secondary schools and involved collaboration with four international companies that

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development—UK specialized in teaching English. As the project advanced, its scope expanded across multiple educational levels and stages, and the number of companies providing international curricula increased to six.

A key component of the Tatweer Project was the English Language Development Project, which aimed to standardize English language teaching materials by aligning them with a comprehensive national curriculum. This alignment ensured that the materials adhered to Saudi Arabian cultural principles and contributed to the creation of the first version of the Saudi English Language Teaching Framework.

To support this, three publishing houses in the United Kingdom —Macmillan, McGraw Hill, and MM Publications—were contracted to provide customized English language textbooks and supplementary materials. Each publisher developed three series for various educational levels. Additionally, English textbooks were printed locally in Saudi Arabia to enhance efficiency and logistical effectiveness.

The Saudi edition of the Traveller series was initially piloted in schools across four main regions: Riyadh, Qassim, Jeddah, and the Eastern Province. Following the pilot phase, which lasted from 2008–2015, the distribution of these materials was expanded nationwide. The piloting scheme concluded in 2016, with the Saudi edition of the Traveller series continuing to be used throughout the country. The series used for each school level were as follows (Ministry of Education 2009):

Table 1
Traveler Series Used for Each School Level

Elementary Level	Intermediate Level	Secondary Level
1 Get Ready	1 Full Blast	1 Mega Goal
2 We Can	2 Lift Off	2 Flying High
3 Smart Class	3 Super Goal	3 Traveller

In 2013, the Saudi Arabian English educational curriculum underwent a significant modification, mandating the inclusion of English as a compulsory subject for Grade 4. This expansion, which began in 2011, was rolled out in roughly 30% of elementary schools without any prior evaluation. The policy mandated two instructional hours of English per week using the textbook *Get Ready 1&2*, published by Macmillan. In 2018, an experimental plan was adopted to teach English in the second semester of the academic year to primary school in Grades 2 and 3 spanning five education departments, each with two schools (one for boys and one for girls). This project sought to determine the feasibility and effectiveness of introducing English at these educational levels. A year later, in 2019, English was formally introduced in these grades, marking a watershed moment in the country's English-language education policy.

By 2021, the scope of English language instruction had been further expanded to encompass Grade 1 in primary school apparently to build stronger foundational English language skills. The instructional material for this cohort was the textbook *We Can I*, published by McGraw Hill. This move aimed to enhance students' language skills and better prepare them for future academic and professional pursuits.

As previously stated, the English textbooks consisted of three series across all educational stages from three distinct publishing companies: Macmillan series, McGraw Hill series, and MM Publication series, each with three textbooks. In 2021, these textbooks were unified into a single series by McGraw Hill. Currently, the textbooks used are: *We Can* for the elementary level, *Super Goal* for the intermediate level, and *Mega Goal* for the secondary level.

Currently, the Saudi government launched Vision 2030, a comprehensive plan aimed at diversifying the economy, developing various sectors, including education, and increasing international engagement. As part of this vision, English-language education has received significant attention. The focus is on improving teacher quality, modernizing the curriculum, increasing the use of technology in teaching, and developing practical English language skills. English is now taught from early grades through higher education (Al-Seghayer, 2023).

The Historic Evolution of English Teaching at Saudi Universities

Prior to the 1970s, higher education in Saudi Arabia primarily focused on Arabic and Islamic studies, with English playing only a minimal role. English was typically viewed as secondary to the core cultural and religious education, a situation that reflects the Kingdom's historical and cultural context.

The 1970s marked a significant shift in Saudi Arabia's approach to higher education, driven by the oil boom and the ensuing economic growth. Recognizing the need for modernization and international engagement, the Saudi government began to introduce English into university curricula. There, English language courses were initially offered as elective subjects, mainly aimed at students pursuing degrees in science, engineering, and medicine, where English was increasingly seen as essential (Al-Seghayer, 2011).

The first institution of higher education to teach English as a foreign language was the College of Islamic Law, in the city of Mecca, in 1949. English was a mandatory subject, and was taught for 2 per week over the course of four years (Baghdadi, 1985). The first English department in Saudi Arabia was established at King Saudi University in 1957 (Al-Abed Al-Haq and Smadi, 1996), and the second was established at the College of Education in Mecca in 1963. In 1972, the first department in the College of Arts at King Abdulaziz University was the English department. The first English department for female students was established in 1972 at the Women's College of Education in Mecca. Educators also point out that during the 1970s, there was a notable increased interest in English within the sphere of higher educational in Saudi Arabia (Baghdadi, 1985). The universities founded during this period that established English

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development–UK departments included Imam Mohammad Ibn Saud University (1974), King Fahd University (1975), King Faisal University (1976), and Umm Al-Qura University (1980).

In the 1980s, the expansion of higher education in Saudi Arabia continued, with more universities establishing comprehensive English departments that offered both language courses and degrees in English literature and linguistics. This emphasis on English was driven by the growing importance of global interaction and the need for Saudi students to possess advanced language skills and cultural competencies. The curricula often included literature, linguistics, and advanced language courses, preparing students for careers in education, translation, and international business. Moreover, during this time, English language courses became mandatory in many undergraduate programs, particularly in the fields of science, engineering, and business, during this time. In recent, the universities have expanded their offerings to include a College of Languages and Translation (Al-Seghayer, 2005).

By the 1990s, education officials in Saudi Arabia recognized the crucial role of English in higher education. This realization led to the formalization of English language programs at universities and marked a pivotal shift in educational policy. The focus on English proficiency aimed to enhance students' global competitiveness and facilitate international communication.

During this period, universities began implementing structured English language programs. These programs necessitated hiring native English-speaking faculty and establishing advanced language laboratories. Such initiatives were part of a broader educational strategy designed to improve English language skills among students and reflected the country's increasing awareness of English as an essential tool for national development and international engagement. The establishment of English programs at universities was accompanied by a significant increase in the number of English departments and language institutions. This growth was driven by the demand for qualified English teachers and the need for graduates proficient in English to meet the requirements of a rapidly evolving job market (Al-Seghayer, 2011).

In 2007, many universities introduced preparatory-year programs that provided incoming students with intensive English language training before they commenced their degree courses. These preparatory programs aimed to ensure that all students achieved a sufficient level of English proficiency to excel in their academic pursuits. By this time, nearly all universities and colleges in Saudi Arabia had established English departments, and most also featured language centers and translation institutes. Additionally, several universities introduced Master's programs in Applied Linguistics to train future English language instructors.

The turn of the millennium brought strategic enhancements to English teaching in Saudi universities, aligned with broader national development goals. Vision 2030, launched in 2016, emphasized the need for comprehensive educational reform, with a particular focus on improving English proficiency. Universities responded by integrating advanced technology and innovative teaching methods into their English programs. E-learning platforms, digital resources, and interactive language labs became integral components of English education and

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development–UK set new standards for language instruction. Saudi universities have also formed partnerships with international institutions to improve English language programs. These partnerships often involve curriculum development, faculty exchange programs, and joint research initiatives (Al-Seghayer, 2022 a).

The Historic Evolution of English Teaching in Saudi Private Schools

In the early 1970s, private schools in Saudi Arabia began teaching English in Grade 1 with four 45-minute classes per week. Recognizing the importance of English for future professional and academic prospects, many private schools swiftly integrated the language into their curricula.

The 1980s witnessed a proliferation of private schools throughout the Kingdom, many of which placed greater emphasis on English than their public counterparts. These schools began incorporating international curricula, such as the British and American systems, which included comprehensive English instruction from the earliest grades.

By the 1990s, the importance of English was firmly entrenched in Saudi Arabia's educational landscape. Private schools continued to lead in this area, often employing native English-speaking teachers and adopting bilingual programmers. These institutions marketed their robust English programs as key differentiators, appealing to parents who saw English proficiency as essential for their children's future success in a globalized world.

The turn of the millennium brought a strategic emphasis on enhancing English education, aligned with the broader national development goals outlined in Vision 2030. Launched in 2016, Vision 2030 underscored the need for comprehensive educational reform, with a specific focus on improving English proficiency across the Kingdom. Private schools embraced advanced technology and innovative teaching methods, incorporating digital resources, interactive platforms, and language labs to set new standards in English education.

From the 2010s onward, the integration of e-learning platforms and digital tools has revolutionized English teaching in Saudi private schools. These institutions have formed partnerships with international educational organizations, further enhancing their English programs. The competition among private schools has driven up standards, with many schools emphasizing their strong English instruction as a key marketing point. Additionally, the widespread adoption of standardized international exams, such as International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), has cemented English proficiency as a critical component of educational success.

The Historic Evolution of English Teaching at Saudi English Language Institutes

The history of private English language institutes (ELIs) in Saudi Arabia is closely intertwined with the overall development of English language teaching in the country. As the emphasis on English-language education in the public school system grew, private institutes emerged and evolved in response, reflecting the increasing national focus on English proficiency.

Prior to the 1970s, ELIs in Saudi Arabia were scarce, and individuals interested in learning English primarily relied on private tutors or informal interactions with foreign residents. This lack of institutional support meant that resources for learning English were minimal, and individuals had to take personal initiatives to develop their language skills.

During the 1970s, pioneering local institutes began to emerge that offered English language courses. These institutes catered mainly to students seeking opportunities for further studies or employment abroad. The focus was on foundational language skills, with a limited range of course offerings.

Recognizing the growing demand for English-language education, international language institutes with established teaching methodologies began opening branches in Saudi Arabia in the 1990s. This period witnessed a surge in private education, leading to a proliferation of ELIs. These institutes introduced a variety of courses and offered a wide variety of courses that ranged from general English to specialized programs for different age groups and professional needs. English language institutes also employed teaching techniques that were previously unavailable locally. This period marked the beginning of a more structured and professional approach to English language teaching in Saudi Arabia (Al-Seghayer, 2011).

From the 2000s to the present, both local and international institutes in Saudi Arabia have expanded their offerings to cater to a broader range of needs and proficiency levels. Specialized English for Specific Purposes courses focusing on areas such as business English, English for academic purposes, and other industry-specific language skills became increasingly popular. This period also witnessed the incorporation of advanced teaching technologies and methodologies that enhanced the overall quality and effectiveness of English-language education in Saudi Arabia.

A Journey Through the Historical Development of the Saudi English Curriculum

Over the course of 90 years, the curriculum for teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in Saudi Arabia has undergone several significant historical developments. The Saudi English curriculum's evolution reflects the Kingdom's commitment to equipping students with the English language skills essential for the 21st century. This journey highlights Saudi Arabia's shifting educational priorities and its increasing recognition of English proficiency's importance in a globalized world. This section explores the key milestones in this development.

From 1928 through 1960, English was taught in Saudi schools without an established curriculum. During this pre-curriculum era, textbooks comprised collections of short stories aimed primarily at enhancing students' English reading skills, making this era one of a non-definitive EFL curriculum (Al-Seghayer, 2005). The early 1960s marked the advent of a comprehensive English curriculum. For two decades, this curriculum was implemented using three textbooks: *Red Primer*, *Green Primer*, and *Reader 1–2*. Initially, eight weekly periods were allocated for English instruction. However, in 1971, the number of instructional periods was reduced to six and later to four (Ministry of Education, 1982). This progression from short story collections to specific

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development–UK textbooks reflects the nascent English-language education system in Saudi Arabia, indicating a growing emphasis on structure and standardized learning. This period, known as the Secondary School phase, occurred before the school system was divided into two separate levels:

intermediate and secondary. The secondary level spanned five years, with each year having its own textbooks. In the first year, students were taught two books: *Red Primer* and *Green Primer*, as well as *Reader 1* (Al-Hajailn, 2006). The subsequent series, *Reader 2* through *Reader 5*, was taught to certain secondary-level students. During this time, the predominant teaching method was the reading approach, with the primary objective being enhancing students' English reading abilities. This suggests that Saudi Arabia placed a high value on reading skills as the cornerstone of early English language development (Zaid, 1993).

In 1960, secondary school was split into two separate levels: intermediate and secondary, each lasting three years. At this time, the MoE commissioned Longman, a British publishing company, to develop a book for the intermediate level, which resulted in *Living English for the Arab World*. This marked a shift from solely adapting existing materials. The textbook includes a range of activities to develop listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Key features often include dialogue, vocabulary exercises, grammar lessons, and cultural notes to enhance language learning in the Arab context. This textbook was used for nearly 20 years at the intermediate level until a new textbook was introduced in 1980. (Al-Seghayer, 2011).

Specialists believe that the decision to change this textbook could be attributed to its failure to adequately address the interests and cultural context of Saudi EFL learners (Al-Subahi, 1988). In other words, perceived uneasiness expressed by Saudi English-language experts demonstrated that the substituted textbook fell short of certain criteria in terms of the social setup or context, cultural background, and to some extent the religious sensitivity of the Saudi society.

This change highlights the growing awareness of the importance of culturally relevant materials for effective EFL teaching. The introduction of *Living English for the Arab World* and its subsequent replacement show the ongoing efforts to develop a curriculum tailored to Saudi Arabia's specific needs.

The secondary level featured a distinct set of textbooks and a curated collection of stories. The primary textbooks included *Living English Structure*, focused on grammar and usage, and the *First Book in Comprehension and Practice*, designed to enhance students' reading comprehension and practice skills.

Students each year read a specific literary work. In the first year, students read *Traveler's Cheque* and *The Pearl*. In the second year, they studied *Vice Versa*. In the third year, they explored *All Around the World in Eighty Days* and *Easier English Practice* (Al-Hajailn, 2006), which appeared to have served as a supplementary text to reinforce reading skills. The audio-lingual method was the primary teaching approach employed during this period.

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This curriculum paints a picture of a well-rounded educational strategy that combined structured learning, with the development of grammar and comprehension skills through the mentioned textbooks; exposure to literature, with the inclusion of classic stories aimed at broadening students' cultural awareness and literary understanding; and focused practice, with the use of audio-lingual drills and activities to improve pronunciation and fluency.

In a significant shift for the Saudi Arabian English language curriculum, a new program was introduced in 1979. Designed to address the limitations of previous approaches, this curriculum prioritized practical communication skills. The MoE partnered with Macmillan Press to create a series of textbooks titled *Saudi Arabian Schools English*, which was specifically tailored to Saudi students' needs. These textbooks were released progressively over three years, with the first-year editions for both intermediate and secondary levels introduced in 1981, followed by the subsequent year releases of the second-year editions in 1982, and the final-year editions in 1983.

The curriculum adopted a communicative approach alongside the functional-national approach teaching method. This meant students learned English functions relevant to their daily lives and Saudi Arabia's national context, focusing on real-world communication.

However, despite being in operation for nearly 15 years (Ministry of Education, Directorate of Curriculum, 1990), this curriculum could not achieve the desired improvement in Saudi students' English proficiency. This lack of progress, coupled with perceived ineffectiveness, led to a decision to revise the curriculum (Al-Seghayer, 2005). Recognizing the need for further improvement, the Curriculum Department embarked on a revision project in 1990. Collaborating with EFL specialists from King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals, including Khedir Al-Qurashi, Martin Watson, Hafeseth, and Douglas Hickman, the Department aimed to create a more effective English language curriculum for Saudi Arabia (Al-Seghayer, 2011).

The result of this collaboration was a new curriculum implemented in 1995. This revised program, titled English for Saudi Arabia, placed a stronger emphasis on integrating local, Arabic, and Islamic cultural issues into the learning experience. This shift aimed to make the curriculum more relevant and engaging for Saudi students. The new textbooks were rolled out progressively across the intermediate level, starting in 1989 and continuing through 1991. Notably, the curriculum continued to adhere to the principles of the communicative approach, emphasizing practical communication skills for real-world use. The ongoing development of the English language curriculum in Saudi Arabia showcases a thoughtfully executed revision process aimed at creating a more effective and culturally relevant English language curriculum. Here are some interesting notes to consider: The revision project in 1990 highlights the MoE's responsiveness to the limitations of the previous curriculum, demonstrating a commitment to addressing educational needs. By collaborating with EFL specialists, the project reflects a focus on expertise and the incorporation of fresh perspectives. The new textbook series, titled *English for Saudi Arabia*, emphasized a curriculum tailored to the specific needs and cultural context of Saudi students. This increased emphasis on local, Arabic, and Islamic cultural issues reflects the growing understanding of the importance of cultural relevance in language learning. The phased implementation of textbooks across the intermediate level, introduced over three years (1989,

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1990, and 1991), indicates a well-planned approach to curriculum changes. Furthermore, the continued adherence to the communicative approach demonstrates a focus on practical communication skills, ensuring that students gain valuable real-world language proficiency (Al-Seghayer, 2005).

In 2004, the English curriculum continued to evolve with the introduction of *Say It in English*, a new textbook for intermediate-level classes, which replaced the previously used *English for Saudi Arabia* series. This textbook was authored by in-house MoE experts, specifically by the female section of the MoE in Jeddah. This authorship suggests a focused effort to align the curriculum more closely with the specific needs identified within the Saudi education system. In addition, a textbook entitled *English for Saudi Arabian Sixth Grade* was published by several specialists within the MoE. According to Al-Seghayer (2011), the book was developed based on the constructivism learning theory and Gardner's (1993) theory of eight intelligences: musical, kinesthetic, intrapersonal, interpersonal, spatial, logical-mathematical, naturalist, and linguistic. The activities in the textbook primarily involve musical, kinesthetic, and spatial intelligence to cater to various learning styles—visual, auditory, and kinesthetic—to optimize student engagement and input.

Despite the change in authorship, the emphasis on practical communication skills remained a core principle. Like its predecessor, *English for Saudi Arabia*, *Say It in English* centered on language functions. This consistency highlights the ongoing importance placed on practical language proficiency in the curriculum. Driven by a national push to enhance education quality and align with global standards, the English language curriculum in Saudi Arabia has undergone significant changes since 2008. This overhaul, implemented by the MoE, introduced a new curriculum for primary, intermediate, and secondary schools. Notably, this new curriculum aligns with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), a widely recognized benchmark, and was based on a variety of approaches, including the communicative approach, constructivism, and triple-A framework, all of which are consistent with contemporary pedagogical strategies that emphasize engagement and relevance in language education and prepares students for real-world communication challenges (Ministry of Education 2009).

The core focus of the new curriculum shifted toward equipping students with communicative competence. This meant integrating all four language skills—speaking, listening, reading, and writing—to ensure students can effectively use English in real-world situations. To achieve this, the teaching methodology moved away from rote memorization and embraced interactive, student-centered learning. Engaging and informative resources were introduced alongside the new curriculum. The *Traveller* series, featuring contemporary content, activities, and exercises, exemplifies this alignment with international textbooks. These materials aim to make language acquisition more effective and engaging for students. Technology has also become a cornerstone of the curriculum. E-learning platforms, digital textbooks, and interactive learning resources have been integrated to enhance accessibility and make learning more dynamic. Technology has also become a cornerstone of the curriculum. E-learning platforms, digital textbooks, and interactive learning resources have been integrated to enhance accessibility and make learning more

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dynamic.

Finally, the assessment approach has shifted toward competency-based education. This means students are evaluated on their ability to use English in practical situations, rather than solely on their theoretical knowledge. This focus on real-world application aims to ensure students are equipped with the necessary communication skills to thrive on the international stage (Al-Seghayer, 2022 b).

The Historical Evolution of English-Teaching Approaches in Saudi Arabia

The evolution of English-language approaches in Saudi Arabia illustrates a dynamic interplay between local needs and global trends. Over time, these approaches have been adapted through various phases, each marked by shifts in educational priorities, pedagogical theories, and societal values. Implementing a new approach in education demands substantial pedagogical changes, teacher training, and curriculum development, a process that unfolds gradually within a national education system. This section explores how English-language teaching methods in Saudi Arabia have evolved, reflecting these broader changes in the educational landscape.

From 1928 through 1959, Saudi Arabia was in the early stages of introducing English-language education. Given the limited focus on English at the time, there was likely no widely adopted, standardized teaching method. However, based on the historical backdrop, it is plausible to assume that Saudi Arabia's approach in 1940 prioritized basic language skills through traditional techniques, such as memorization and translation (Al-Seghayr, 2005).

From the 1960s to the 1970s, the reading method was widely employed to teach English in Saudi Arabia. This approach emphasizes extensive reading practices to improve reading abilities, comprehension of texts, and vocabulary. It prioritized comprehension and translation of written material over speaking and listening skills, aligning with the educational priorities of that era (Alhajailan, 2006).

From the 1970s to the 1980s, the predominant teaching methods employed in Saudi Arabia were the audio-lingual method (ALM) and the grammar-translation method (GTM). The ALM focused heavily on listening and speaking skills, using repetition and drills to help students mimic native speaker patterns. This method emphasized correct pronunciation, intonation, and grammatical structures through repetitive practice, often conducted in language labs. This shift reflected a growing emphasis on oral proficiency and practical communication skills during that period (Al-Mazrouu, 1988).

Conversely, the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) emphasized reading and writing skills, focusing on the memorization of vocabulary and grammar rules. Translation exercises were a central component, with students translating texts between English and their native language. This method prioritized accuracy and the ability to understand literary texts over speaking and listening skills, reflecting the educational priorities of that time (Al-Mohanna, 2010; Shah, Hussain, and Nasseef, 2013).

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From the 1980s to the 1990s, the English-language teaching method in Saudi Arabia saw the introduction of the functional-notional approach (FNA). This approach emphasized teaching language through functions (such as requesting, apologizing, and suggesting) and notions (such as time, quantity, and location). By organizing language content around practical themes and real-life functions rather than focusing solely on specific linguistic points, the FNA was intended to enhance students' ability to communicate effectively in everyday situations.

However, it is worth noting that the FNA did not entirely replace the dominant methods of the time. During this period, there was a growing awareness of the limitations of the ALM's and GTM's limitation and a search for alternative methods. The FNA likely emerged as a potential alternative, with educators exploring its principles and incorporating some aspects into their teaching practices. Full implementation of the FNA might have been limited or gradual, with ALM and GTM remaining the primary approaches in Saudi Arabia throughout most of the 1980s and 1990s.

Although the FNA emphasized practical communication, it might not have completely replaced the GTM's focus on grammar in the initial stages. Educators might have incorporated FNA elements while still valuing a solid grammar foundation. Overall, the 1980s and 1990s were likely a transitional period during which educators in Saudi Arabia began to move away from GTM and explore more communicative approaches, such as the FNA. From the 1990s to the present, the predominant English-teaching method in Saudi Arabia was the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach (Ministry of Education, Directorate of Curriculum, 1990).

From the 1990s to the present, the seeds of change in English-language teaching in Saudi Arabia began to take root, marking a turning point in methodology. The limitations of the ALM and the GTM in equipping Saudi EFL learners with practical communication skills became increasingly apparent. Consequently, Saudi educators started exploring alternative methodologies, with communicative language teaching (CLT) emerging as an attractive option (Al-Seghayer, 2017).

CLT emphasizes functional language use in real-life contexts, intended to develop students' communicative competence. This method focuses on interaction as both the means and the ultimate goal of learning, incorporating activities such as role-plays, group work, and the use of authentic materials. This shift reflected a global trend toward more learner-centered and communication-focused language-teaching methodologies. Although full adoption of CLT might have taken some time, its principles gradually became the guiding force in curriculum development and teacher training throughout the 2000s and into the present day. This transition marked a significant move away from traditional methods, emphasizing practical communication skills and real-world language use. Additionally, there was a greater focus on developing both fluency and accuracy through the implementation of modular learning designs.

As Al-Seghayer (2015) notes, instructional practices in Saudi EFL classrooms adhere to an integrated, holistic teaching method that is drawn from a skills-based language teaching approach. This approach entails teaching major language skills and sub-skills together. In Saudi EFL classrooms, the four macro language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, along

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with specific micro- or language-related skills, namely, grammar, vocabulary, and culture are integrated consecutively in a 45-minute class period; each skill is allotted a designated portion of the class period.

The Evolving Landscape of Saudi English Teacher Development: A Journey of Growing Professionalism

The history of Saudi English teacher development is intertwined with the broader evolution of English education in the country. This development has undergone through various stages, reflecting changes in educational policies, pedagogical approaches, and socio-economic dynamics. This roadmap highlights the key historical developments of Saudi English teachers over the past several decades. In the 1940s, when English was formally introduced into the Saudi education system, an urgent need to cultivate a dedicated group of English teachers arose. Initially, the country had a scarcity of trained English educators, heavily relying on expatriates from English-speaking nations and other Arab countries. During this period, the primary objective was to provide basic training for these teachers, often through short-term courses and workshops. Formal training opportunities for English teachers were limited, and many teachers relied on their own language skills or informal training methods.

As the demand for English teachers increased, the MoE began establishing more structured teacher training programs in the 1970s. In 1970, the MoE launched a training initiative for prospective Saudi English teachers. The program required high school graduates to first study undertake a year-long English study followed by a comprehensive exam. Successful candidates then had the opportunity to study at select British universities for 100 weeks to earn a teaching certificate, qualifying them to teach English at the intermediate school level (Ibrahim, 1985). Additionally, teacher colleges dedicated to training educators, including English teachers, were established. These institutions offered diplomas and degrees in education with a focus on language teaching methodologies, significantly enhancing the professional development of English language educators in Saudi Arabia. Since the early 1980s, English teachers in Saudi Arabia have been trained through programs offered by the English departments of various Saudi university colleges of education and colleges of arts, or in four-year English programs of various colleges. These programs aim to prepare Saudi instructors for teaching English at the elementary, intermediate, and secondary levels in public schools, culminating in a bachelor of arts degree in English upon graduation. Additionally, the MoE has implemented initiatives to train English teachers, often facilitating their participation in short-term courses or intensive language programs abroad. These early training programs primarily focused on improving language proficiency rather than teaching methodologies (Al-Seghayer 2014). Moreover, specialized Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) courses were introduced to provide targeted training for English educators. The training programs during this period were often short-term workshops that focused on basic English language skills and teaching methodologies.

In the 1990s, an increasing number of Saudi universities began offering bachelor's and master's degree programs in English language teaching and applied linguistics. Some teachers seized the opportunity to pursue higher education and training abroad, particularly in English-

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development–UK speaking countries, thereby introducing new teaching methodologies and perspectives into Saudi classrooms. Concurrently, there was a growing recognition of the importance of continuous professional development, leading to more frequent workshops and refresher courses. Notably, English-teacher-preparation programs have continuously evolved over the years. In the early 1990s, these programs primarily focused on teaching English literature, with less emphasis on linguistics and English language skills (Sheshsha, 1982). Al-Hajailan (1999) observed significant directional changes in subject matter in recent years, with greater emphasis placed on linguistic knowledge and proficiency in English language skills.

The 2000s saw a significant emphasis on integrating technology into language teaching. Teachers received training on effectively using digital tools and online resources. E-learning platforms and online professional development courses became available, offering more flexible training options (Al-Seghayer, 2022; Alswilem, 2019; Saqlain et al., 2013). Training programs also began to emphasize student-centered learning approaches, encouraging teachers to create more interactive and engaging learning environments. It was also during this time that training programs became more comprehensive, covering a wider range of pedagogical skills, classroom management techniques, and the use of technology in teaching.

The 2010s witnessed comprehensive reforms in Saudi education, including the professional development of English teachers. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, launched in 2016, prioritizes improving the quality of education and aligning it with international standards. As part of this initiative, comprehensive teacher training programs were developed in collaboration with international educational institutions and experts (Albiladi, 2022). These programs focused on advanced pedagogical skills, classroom management, and the use of technology, ensuring that Saudi English teachers were up to date on the latest trends and best practices in language teaching. Efforts were also made to establish professional certification standards for English teachers, ensuring a high level of competence and proficiency. Significant investment was directed toward professional development, including scholarships for teachers to pursue advanced degrees and training abroad. In 2016, the MoE launched the Building Leadership for Change through School Immersion (BLCSI) project, commonly known as the Khebrat program, which is managed by the National Institute for Professional Educational Development. This initiative aimed to enroll 25,000 participants in five years to achieve two primary objectives: (a) to elevate the professional development of teachers, English instructors, student advisors, head teachers, and supervisors by equipping them with cutting-edge teaching methodologies, leadership skills, and global best practices; and (b) to transform the knowledge base, skill sets, and attitudes of Saudi education professionals through university-guided immersion experiences in outstanding K–12 schools abroad.

The Khebrat program provides educators with opportunities to study and train internationally, allowing them to acquire insights into diverse educational systems and practices through professional training seminars, English language courses, and immersive experiences in top-tier K–12 school systems worldwide. The MoE sponsors this initiative, sending teachers to more educationally developed countries for hands-on professional training in outstanding educational environments. The idea is for these teachers to work with their international

Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development–UK colleagues and obtain practical experience. It is a year-long professional development program. They first undergo a three-month language preparatory course. They also take part in a brief training program offered by partner universities in these countries to keep up with the latest educational practices and trends. To qualify for this program, teachers must have at least two years of experience, a good grade in their last academic qualification, a minimum score of 4 on the IELTS or an equivalent score on tests like TOEFL or STEP, and 75 hours of training. Additionally, they must pass a personal interview with the MoE (Ministry of Education, 2017).

One of the more recent initiatives to train Saudi English teachers was introduced in 2021 when the MoE launched the Optimum Utilization of Teachers' Skills Program (OUTSP). The OUTSP aimed to retrain teachers of Islamic studies, Arabic, geography, and history to become qualified English teachers, regardless of their original subject of specialization. As part of this program, the English Language for Primary Schools (ELP) initiative was introduced, offering training over two terms. The first term focuses on improving teachers' English language proficiency, while the second term concentrates on developing their teaching methodological skills for both upper and lower primary schools (Ministry of Education, 2021).

Overall, the professional development of English teachers in Saudi Arabia has progressed significantly, transitioning from rudimentary training programs to sophisticated professional development initiatives. These contemporary programs emphasize modern pedagogical methodologies, the integration of technology, and the importance of lifelong learning. This evolution has mirrored the broader educational reforms within the country, all aimed at enhancing the overall quality of English-language education.

CONCLUSION

This article has traced the evolution of English-language teaching in Saudi Arabia, examining its historical trajectory, curriculum transformations, pedagogical shifts, and teacher development initiatives. The analysis revealed a dynamic landscape characterized by both challenges and advancements. The insights gained underscore the importance of grounding future advancements in a thorough understanding of the past, ensuring that educational reforms are contextually relevant and informed by evidence-based practices.

Looking ahead, further research is needed to explore the ongoing challenges and opportunities with English-language education in Saudi Arabia. Future studies could delve deeper into specific aspects of curriculum implementation, the impact of global pedagogical trends, and the evolving role of English teachers in the Kingdom. By continuing to build on the historical foundation laid out in this article, stakeholders can more effectively navigate the complexities of English-language education and ensure its future success in Saudi Arabia.

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