

Original Research Article
From EFL to ESL in the Eye of Saudi Vision 2030

ABSTRACT:

Aims: Starting with the definitions of EFL and ESL, this paper aims to explore the transformation from teaching English as a foreign language to a second language in the context of Saudi Arabia to cope with the promising Saudi Vision 2030. At all levels, teaching in the Saudi context is inclined to be EFL teaching. However, English language proficiency has become an emergent need to determine the employment value in the competitive job market, nationally and internationally. Therefore, the transformation to ESL teaching is a focus nowadays for modulating the evolution of English Classroom Teaching in Saudi Arabia.

Study design: This study is a qualitative one that uses a semi-structured interview has been conducted at the participants' convenient time and venue.

Place and Duration of Study: The study has taken place at one of the languages Institute (ELI) at King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, during the second semester of the academic year 2021 – 2022.

Methodology: The participants who took part in this study are six female English teachers, Saudis, and non-Saudis, holding Ph.D. and master's degrees in different fields of language teaching with teaching experience varying from 5 years to more than 10 years.

Results: The study sought to investigate the university English language teachers' beliefs about the transformation of teaching English from a foreign language to a second language in line with SAV 2030. Data analysis has brought a variety of issues considering the benefits of shifting from EFL teaching and learning to ESL, the obstacles related to such a transit, the challenges that may be encountered throughout the transition process, and the adaption readiness of all stakeholders, educational policymakers, teachers, and students. Looking at participants' responses to the research questions, it was found that they were in agreement with the transformation from EFL to ESL. The study's findings were categorized according to the responses to the four research questions.

Conclusion: Since the declaration of VAS 2030, higher institutions in the kingdom have obliged their educational policies to an influential reformation that drives improvements in higher education to reach the successes intended by VAS 2030. The study results have provided substantial evidence that teaching the English language as an ESL rather than an EFL will conclusively add to Saudi English learners' skills and proficiency levels.

Keywords: EFL; ESL; job market; Saudi vision 2030; transformation

1. Introduction

One of the paramount goals of the 2030 Saudi Arabia Vision (SAV), launched by the Royal Highness Prince Mohammed bin Salman in 2019, is to solidify human quality and development by empowering the minds and preparing its people for the promising future ahead (Vision, 2030). Based on that, all Saudi sectors, where the educational sector is no exception, reformed their policies to fulfill the vision objectives. Relying extensively on the human force and the advancement of the entire populace, the Saudi Ministry of Education (MoE) is tasked to ameliorate the education standards by proposing a futuristic plan to reform the educational system that aligns with SAV. One of the aims that posed significant challenges to the Ministry of Education is to prepare

the young generation for the competitive job market locally and internationally (Ministry of Education, 2019e). However, tracing the Saudis' language proficiency, their preparedness for higher education, and the job market, the outcomes are disappointing. (Al-Harbi, 2015; Al-Nasser, 2015; Dakhiel, 2017; Ministry of Education, 2019b). A proficient English language user is becoming a demand in every facet of the international and national labor market (Al-Harbi, 2015; Al-Omran, 2018). With this demand in mind, MoE aimed to deconstruct the existing curricula and design a new one to reinforce the teaching and learning process and enhance students' outcomes.

When a new curriculum is accounted for, two essential concerns come to the fore: teachers' competence and the job market's demand. In any educational setting, teachers are always considered a significant factor in the employment of any reform-based innovations. Therefore, teachers' competence is an absolute necessity for a new curriculum to succeed and obtain its intended outcomes (Al-Asmari & Khan, 2014; Liu, 2011; Picard, 2018). Teachers should be well-equipped in terms of knowledge base, teaching strategies, readiness, and flexibility for new challenges (Liakopoulou, 2011; Mustafa, 2013; Umiyati, 2017).

2. Literature Review

2.1. English Language in Saudi Arabia as an EFL

It has been proven that learning a language in a second language (SL) context differs from learning it in a foreign language (FL) context. As defined by Yoko Iwai (2011), EFL refers to the language learned and practiced in a non-English-speaking country. As a result, learners have limited input for the learned language, and therefore, the outcome in most cases is not at a reasonable rate. As for ESL, according to Nordquist (2018), it is when English is used as a means of communication and spoken formally on all occasions. Learners in such an environment will have many opportunities to practice and use the language daily.

Based on the expanding circle of Kachru, English in Saudi Arabia is considered a foreign language (EFL) (Kachru, 1985). The English language is presented professionally in media, the labor market, and education (Elyas & Al Grigri, 2014; Kachru, 1982). However, Saudis have limited exposure to the language and insufficient opportunities to practice it in their daily routine (Dörnyei, 2020; Getie, 2020; Shamim et al., 2016). Thus, the demanding educational transformation of the English language curriculum requires highly competent and masterful teachers and students alike who are open to new changes and can meet the demands of this historic era in the kingdom.

Therefore, VAS 2030 offers abundant scopes for academia to improve English language teaching and formulate the teaching policies that will lead to a successful shift from a foreign language to a second language.

2.2 EFL to ESL

Due to Saudi Arabia's strong commitment to putting into practice the 2030 vision that aspires to reformulate the foundation of Saudi society's social and economic components, English will no longer be used as an EFL in the next few years. The Saudi government prioritizes the education and training of its youth to become critical thinkers with strong academic backgrounds. This, in turn, will significantly contribute to the social and economic development of the nation (Mitchell & Alfuraih, 2017). With that in mind, the Saudi vision has imposed considerable modification of the educational policy of all subjects, in general, and for teaching the English language as an ESL, specifically (KSA Vision, 2016; MoE, 2019e). Shifting from the teaching of EFL to ESL may result in great benefits for the country and individuals alike. Such a shift may dwarf the global differences and allow good connections with other countries to contribute to mutual understanding in different scopes, politically, economically, educationally, and socially (Al-Zahrani, 2017; Arcand & Grin, 2012; KSA Vision, 2016).

In consideration of the higher educational settings, the benefits are not only limited to learners; they also have connections to other elements like university standing and raising academic standards in terms of research and learning results. This has forced the upgrading and expansion of private institutions and international collaborations between governmental and private universities. In short, shifting to ESL rather than EFL will result in significant benefits, socially, economically, and educationally. These benefits will be discussed further,

yet due to the limited scope of this paper, the advantages of such a shift in education will be discussed in more detail.

2.2.1 Social Benefits

In the realm of social connections, language's contribution to social communication has been clearly considered a crucial factor for individuals' communications. World motion is maintained by connections between individuals with either similar or adverse cultures and identities. Effective communication strengthens the bond between organizations and companies and supports the growth of various businesses. Additionally, it provides an avenue for new possibilities and assists individuals to reach their destinations.

Countries seeking growth rely on the linguistic abilities and skills of their people to connect effectively with others worldwide. Language functions as a communicative system of common understandings within the context of the economy, assisting organizations in achieving their global goals. During meetings and other professional conversations, such communicative formats assist parties in interacting with one another and understanding one another. Effective social networking is crucial within multinational corporations and international businesses (O'Rourke et al., 2018). Additionally, individuals with a broad social network can have more identities and express reduced adverse psychological and cultural effects (Ibid).

Taking into consideration the benefits social connections bring to individuals and, hence, to societies, Vision 2030 believes that promoting proficiency in the English language will strengthen the communication of Saudi citizens with others worldwide, and therefore, shifting to ESL rather than EFL will act as a bridge toward effective and fluent communications.

2.2.2 Economic Benefits

Without a doubt, language has a crucial role in developing the economic sector. Globally, companies compete to have partnerships that help them grow worldwide and expand their services (Eliasson, 1998; Hejazi & Ma, 2011; Lee, 2012). Language as an effective communication tool allows parties to interact, have shared understandings, and build successful economic relationships related to common job interests (Abid). For this international economic relation to succeed, companies worldwide, where Saudi Arabia is no exception, are setting up high standards for their employees.

Higher education has a pivotal role in the economic sector, which affects the global market and responds to its needs. That is, it enriches the minds of the young generation with financial knowledge, enhances their critical growth, and prepares them for the competitive world. A proficient language user is one of the significant standards in the money-making business. Job seekers are eager to develop their abilities and language skills to become suitable employment candidates. Therefore, many educational institutions in Saudi Arabia constantly reform their policies, reconstruct their curriculum, and evaluate the performance of their staff and graduates to reflect the job market needs. Low language proficiency may constitute "a barrier to effectiveness and to doing international business due to communication problems" (Jonsen et al., 2011, p. 48). To diminish the barrier and prune its effect, educational policymakers in Saudi Arabia should reappraise language education to achieve the SAV 2030 goal, which copes with the high standard in the world arena. Based on that, the transformation from teaching English and learning as a foreign language to a second language will improve Saudi graduates' proficiency level and reflect their qualifications for today's job market.

2.2.3 Individual Benefits

The importance of effective interaction and purposeful communication is undeniable to many individuals. Connecting with others in their language or a common one will bring up mutual understanding and build an excellent rapport among individuals in different aspects, socially, academically, and in business. Individuals with proficient language abilities can adjust and cope with differences found in other cultures, communities, workplaces, academic settings, or others where communication is necessary for effective interaction (Zarei & Zarei, 2015). Personal characteristics such as self-esteem, confidence, and dependability are also affected by the individual's language proficiency (Novikova et al., 2020).

In one of the studies, Zabihi (2011) conducted research on 168 Iranian intermediate EFL students. The data was collected by two instruments: the Interchange Objective Placement Test and The NEO-Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI). The results showed some personal traits significantly correlating with the learners' language proficiency. These are straightforwardness, compliance, level of trust, altruism, openness to experience, and tendermindedness. The findings of other studies have also shown similar traits that have some effects on the learners' achievement scores (Al-Yami, 2018; Kochergina, 2013).

2.2.4 Institutional Benefits

Higher education is pivotal in the economic sector, which affects the global market. For that, many universities in Saudi Arabia strive to promote the level of their staff and students, which will reflect highly on the university ranking. A highly ranked university is a prestigious status that worldwide universities militate to achieve. The quality of many aspects, including educational policy, curriculum, research projects, staff efficiency, student quality, and outcomes, will all work towards the university's high reputation and situate it within the world-class university title. Moreover, highly ranked universities will attract many from the broader public, prominent stakeholders, and higher world researchers.

The English language holds a high position in Saudi higher education as it is used widely among Saudi researchers holding their highest grades from different international universities. They are highly motivated to position themselves in academia and reach out to scholars in the English countries and globally. Therefore, shifting the English language teaching from EFL to ESL in the Saudi context will support academicians' development and encourage creativity and innovations, reinforcing research excellence and interest in collaborations and adding to the university ranking. For that, many Saudi universities are urging their researchers and Ph.D. graduates to contribute to the university ranking by publishing their works in high-impact journals to give more weight to the university in the worldwide arena.

By far, academic publications significantly impact politics, economics, and society. Accordingly, enriching the English language input and enhancing the learners' fluency in the target language will furnish the floor for academic cooperation nationally and, most importantly, internationally. To reach the optimal, paradigm shifts from teaching the English language as an EFL to ESL seems to be a requisite. The shifting effect will be captured in improving the quality of teaching and learning, the students' outcome measures, and hence learners' performance.

3. The Study Aim

The current study aimed to explore the perspectives of English language teachers towards the transformation from EFL to ESL and the expected result from such a shift that aligns with the promising Saudi Vision 2030. It also aimed to delineate some challenges encountered during the transformation process. This study will likely propose some effective strategies and practical solutions that help to constrict some of the drawbacks during the transformation stage. The qualitative approach was chosen for an in-depth analysis of the research questions. Therefore, the researcher used an interpretive lens, which "embraces subjectivity and acknowledges multi-realities and meanings and is socially constructed" (Rapley, 2018, p. 187), which leads to gaining more knowledge on the topic under investigation. The researcher believes that the transformation from EFL teaching to ESL teaching will improve Saudi students' language proficiency, make a considerable change in the position of Saudi graduates, and create fair chances for them in the global market arena.

Methodology

4. Research Questions

This study is based on the following research questions:

- 1- Based on SAV, what beliefs do English language teachers have concerning transforming from EFL to ESL in Saudi?
- 2- In what ways does the transformation contribute to the achievement of the target language?
- 3- What are the tools needed during the transformation stage?
- 4- What are the challenges the transformation may face?

5. Study Participants

The study was held at one of the language institutes at one of the leading universities in Saudi Arabia. After finalizing the study's objectives, aims, and research questions, along with a brief overview, 10 teachers were approached by the author to ask them to participate in the study. Based on the changes in the system of KAU at the time of this study and the decision made by the KAU board to shift from two semesters to tri-semester, many teachers were very anxious and occupied to accommodate the shift. Due to that, it was difficult to allocate more than six teachers to volunteer and keep up with the study till the end. All six participants who took part in this study are female English teachers, Saudis, and non-Saudis, holding Ph.D. and master's degrees in different fields of language teaching, with teaching experience varying from 5 years to more than 10 years.

6. Data Analysis

The study sought to investigate the university English language teachers' beliefs about the transformation of teaching English from a foreign language to a second language in line with SAV 2030. A semi-structured interview was conducted at the participants' convenient time and venue. Data analysis has brought a variety of issues considering the benefits of shifting from EFL teaching and learning to ESL, the obstacles related to such a transit, the challenges that may be encountered throughout the transition process, and the adaptation readiness of all stakeholders, educational policymakers, teachers, and students. Looking at participants' responses to the research questions, it was found that they were in agreement with the transformation from EFL to ESL. The study's findings were categorized according to the responses to the four research questions.

7. Result

The first research question was set to explore teachers' beliefs about the transformation from EFL to ESL in the Saudi context. One teacher said:

"From my experience, Saudi students are good, but one of their major problems is that they only use English inside classrooms, which doesn't give them enough practice. So, if English is used and spoken elsewhere, that will reinforce the good practice of the target language".

Another teacher also said: *"Extensive use of English and daily practice will, without doubt, improve students' ability and language proficiency."*

Believing in the importance of the vision, one of the participants asserted that:

"When His Royal Highness, Prince Mohammed Bin Salman, announced the Saudi Vision, he knew the ability of his citizens, and he has great faith in them, which will bring this great nation to a leadership position regionally and internationally."

She elaborated more on the role of education by stating:

"Educating the young generation and developing their minds is a responsibility the government has taken as its first priority. However, all efforts must be gathered to fulfill this compelling goal, and of course, the Ministry of Education has its big share".

In the same vein, based on the long experience of one of the participants as an English teacher at public schools and then a university teacher, she commented:

"A considerable reformation is needed for the educational system in Saudi Arabia, especially in public schools. The SAV provides many opportunities for enhancing the teaching and learning of English, which will eventually result in a high level of language proficiency".

Moving on to the second research question, the participants were asked about the advantageous shift from EFL to ESL. As a response to this question, one teacher said:

"The language outcome of our students is still suffering, and we as English teachers are putting our hopes in the shift from EFL to ESL, which will bring out good results even in the short term because students will be listening and practicing English on a daily basis and not only inside classrooms."

Interestingly, one of the teachers confirmed that many students are ready for the shift, as a significant number are using the English language now as ESL. She said:

"With the internet that closes a big gap between countries and societies, our students are connecting worldwide through different channels, and the shift will make such connections even much easier."

Another teacher also made the previous point clear by confirming that:

"We are experiencing a competitive market nationally and worldwide. However, it is unfortunate that our graduates may not find a place for themselves in such job markets. The reason tends to be so obvious: the level of language proficiency. The shift will undoubtedly improve learners' language abilities and skills".

She spoke of her fear about the Saudis' position in the local or international market. She stated:

"The job market today is only seeking the best candidates who could add to any workplace. Language proficiency is one of the criteria that list/institutions or else have on the top of the employment list".

Based on the responses above, it became apparent that all teachers were consistent in their views on the benefits ESL learning will bring to students' academic outcomes and future jobs. The participants made firm arguments about the need for the shift based on the competitive employment in the global markets, which the Saudis need to fit themselves in (Yusuf, 2017; Alyami, 2018).

The response to the third research question reads, "What are the tools needed during the transformation stage?" One of the teachers touched on the need to integrate technology into the teaching and learning process. She stated:

"Even though the university provides the necessary tools to integrate technology, many teachers don't put this facility to better use."

Another teacher also highlighted the need for technology as an effective tool in teaching all subjects, in general, and the teaching of English, in particular. Considering the existing coursebooks, one teacher confirmed that the transformation stage should be aligned with the curriculum modification. She commented:

"In my view, the shift to ESL needs lots of effort. The books and course materials in hand aren't good enough and won't serve the change. So, the Ministry of Education should work on that at a higher level, considering the design and content of all coursebooks starting from the primary level".

Technology use is a demand due to rapid worldwide changes and global openness (Dakhiel, 2017; Al-Qahtani, 2019). It is also significant to note that teachers' comments regarding technology integration reflect the usefulness of online materials to language learners, especially in contexts like Saudi Arabia, where the target language is still limited to classroom settings. Several empirical studies found in the literature have pointed out the significance of technology resources and how online materials have already pathed their way into actual teaching practice (ibid).

One of the spoken benefits of technology is that it helps language learners to immerse themselves, to a certain extent, in a setting where the target language is the dominant one and is used extensively. The teachers also pointed out that effective utilization of technology and encouragement of its use lies on the teachers' shoulders and this according to them, will mark a turning point in students' proficiency in the target language and hence their academic achievements. These findings confirm Al-Qahtani's assertions: "The use of modern technology in English language teaching has therefore become indispensable, especially in the wake of unprecedented developments across numerous fields and disciplines" (2019, p. 169).

It can be reasonably concluded, then, that the necessary practical tools for the transformation from EFL to ESL, as perceived by the teachers' participants, are modified coursebooks that connect students with contexts different from their own and the effective use of various technological websites and online resources.

Before closing the interview, the participants were asked about the challenges the shift may encounter. One of the teachers sounded pessimistic. She explained:

"I really wish for this shift to come to life and succeed, but I'm not very optimistic. My one big reason for that is the readiness of the Ministry of Education for such a shift".

When asked to elaborate more, she added:

"From my experience, we had different changes in books, materials, and even modes of teaching and learning, but what happened is that the content is the same. Only the cover changed if you know what I mean".

Similar concerns were found in the response of another teacher, as she confirmed the previous view by stating:

The biggest challenge will be the materials that should be developed to fulfill the aim of the shift. I can say that I don't have any clue how the coursebook designers will accommodate such a change".

Speaking of other challenges, one teacher has touched on the use of technology, which, according to her, brings life to the teaching process and aids students in their study, especially outside the teaching context. She spoke of her unpleasantness and said:

"No matter how often we called and recommended an effective implementation of technology inside classrooms to help students experience the benefits of self-learning, the responses are shameless."

She added:

"If we really want to activate a smooth and effective shift, the use of technology should be on board. Unfortunately, many classrooms don't have internet access, so we teachers cannot offer much to the students. I mean more exercises, listening passages, and exciting games found online, and because of that, we only stick to books".

Considering these challenges, the researcher was inquisitive to learn more about teachers' views toward the implementation of ESL teaching and whether there will be a correlation between the shift and English learners' outcomes. Interestingly, one teacher strongly connected improving students' language proficiency to shifting from EFL to ESL. However, responding to the same inquiry about the application challenges, she confirmed that turning from EFL to ESL has become a heated debate among teachers and students. In her words,

"Many colleagues don't find shifting to ESL a good idea. Some think it will lead to the loss of Islamic and Arab identities. However, if you ask me, I will say that they have gone so far. Teaching ESL will improve students' abilities and raise their confidence, which they need nowadays to face the future ahead".

Based on the above viewpoints, the benefits of ESL teaching over EFL were not debatable among the participants, who always agreed with such transformation. However, their main concerns were the curriculum's application and reformation and the teaching and learning process that will accompany the shift and help towards its success.

8. Discussion

Through the analysis of the interviews, the researcher was able to identify specific interpretations and potential implications insuflated in the data. There is not a substantial difference between the beliefs of all participants toward the shift from EFL teaching and learning to ESL. However, there was an interesting difference between the groups regarding the obstacles that could be faced during the change.

One concern that was spoken about is the loss of identity and Muslim culture. Some language teachers and others, stakeholders, parents, and Saudi social intellectuals, have frequently voiced their fears about teaching English as a second language. They believe that teaching the English language as an ESL will bring more than the language, like the culture and different life aspects that may affect Muslims' cultures and identities, and therefore, they may stand against the shift. However, considering the position of the English language in Saudi Arabia and its teaching from an early age at both public and private schools, this hue of disquiet has significantly dwindled (Al-Yami, 2018; MoE, 2019e).

Promoting the use of technology is one of the effective teaching and learning procedures for all subjects. However, the case with teaching and learning the English language is even more critical. English learners will benefit from various exciting and challenging exercises and games on many websites. Additionally, there are ample opportunities to experience multiple settings, listen to different accents of the target language, and engage with others of diverse cultures. This, in turn, will broaden students' knowledge, strengthen their communication skills, and improve their proficiency in the language. This concurs with the findings from different studies proving the necessity of enhancing the use of technology in language classrooms and reporting that the familiarity of students with technology can significantly contribute to their improvements socially and academically (Shamim et al., 2016; Yusuf, 2017; Al-Qahtani, 2019).

9. Recommendations

The in-depth analysis of the interview conducted here has increased our knowledge of the fundamental challenges that could obstruct a smooth and effective transition to ESL teaching and learning. One of the prime issues to consider is to work effectively toward changing the teachers' aptitude, mindsets, and teaching process as these are influential ingredients to students to become "more critically reflective and to integrate meaning perspectives that are more integrative of experience" (Moore, 2005:408). Nonetheless, it is worthy of note that teaching the English language as an ESL can be enhanced to cater to the country's demands and indigenous interests.

Even though this study has provided evidence on the importance of teaching and learning English as a second language rather than a foreign language, future research is needed to test ways such shift may require and to explore the many benefits the transformation would bring to the educational context and hence to the competitive international and local job market.

10. Conclusion

Since the declaration of VAS 2030, higher institutions in the kingdom have obliged their educational policies to an influential reformation that drives improvements in higher education to reach the success intended by VAS 2030. Even though the study has shed light on some contentious aspects of the transformation from teaching and learning of EFL to ESL, they are significant. The results, thus, provided substantial evidence that teaching the English language as an ESL rather than an EFL will conclusively add to the skills and proficiency levels of Saudi English learners.

Indeed, this itemized research finding will direct significant pedagogical implications for all stakeholders in the Saudi educational systems to place excellent concentricity and percipient effort on developing a knowledge-based circular that eliminates the use of the conventional language teaching and learning approach. Additionally, it is significant to bridge the gap between today's and tomorrow's teaching, which will fulfill the success proposed by Vision 2030. Going forward, English teachers and Saudi learners will be in a better position by executing educational strategic plans that align with the goals and expectations of the Saudi Vision.

As a closing statement, soon, English teaching and learning in the context of Saudi Arabia will not continue as it is now. However, a vast change will be experienced as an exigency to execute the 2030 Vision. This necessitates reformulating the strands of politics, economy, education, and, most notably, the mindset of the Saudis. It is also significant to pay more attention to the pedagogical and technological aspects implemented by teachers and students within and outside the teaching contexts since these initiatives will undoubtedly progress the teaching and learning process.

CONSENT

As per international standard or university standard, participants' written consent has been collected and preserved by the author(s).

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