AN INTEGRATED PROGRAM TO PROMOTE THE CONFIDENCE OF SAUDI PUBLIC SCHOOL STUDENTS IN SPEAKING ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

This case study investigates the introduction, implementation and evaluation of an integrated program—Let's Speak English (LSE)—in a Grade 7 Saudi Arabian classroom. This program is designed to promote students' competence and confidence in speaking English. Saudi public schools aim to educate students to use English in real-life communication. However, the current curriculum does not meet these expectations. The majority of Saudi high school students graduate with low levels of understanding and competence in speaking English, despite having been taught English from Grade 4. This situation in schools demands the development of a syllabus that embraces communicative and interactive pedagogies. This study investigates the teaching and learning associated with LSE over 16 weeks on a daily basis. LSE is based on four themes: 'My News', 'Islamic Chants', 'Stories in English' and 'Videos in English'. The LSE curriculum differs from the traditional teacher-directed approach to introducing a learner-centred approach. Twenty-one teachers, four supervisors and 28 students contributed to this study and participated in observations, interviews and surveys. This study found that LSE contributes positively to students' linguistic confidence and competence. The factors found to contribute to students' increased confidence and competence included increased opportunities to participate in group activities and speak English in front of peers, connecting learning to real-life experiences and the Islamic religion, authentic activities, and a supportive learning environment. The outcomes from this study will inform current practice and policy in the teaching and learning of English in Saudi Arabian classrooms, and will contribute to creating an engaging, interactive and learner-centred syllabus for the future.

Keywords: Education, FLE, challenges, Saudi Arabia

INTRODUCTION

Saudi public schools aim to educate school leavers to use English in real-life communication. However, the current curriculum—particularly the spoken English syllabus—does not meet these expectations. Large numbers of Saudi high school students graduate with little knowledge of English. This problem was evident based on a number of sources:

    i.   The Saudi MoE (2005a) is aware of the failure of most of the Saudi curriculum, including the English curriculum

    ii.   Educators relate student deficiencies in speaking English to the negative attitudes towards speaking held by students, teachers and peers. There are limited opportunities for students to speak English, despite being taught from Grade 4, and the English speaking curriculum and teaching methods are considered inappropriate (Al-Seghayer, 2014; Dukhayil, 2002)

    iii.   Parents are concerned that the current strategies of teaching and learning English do not produce students who can communicate in English (Al-Abdallay, 2010; Al-Bluey, 2016)

iv.   My 20-year experience as a public intermediate school teacher gave me firsthand insights into language-learning issues, such as students' reluctance, avoidance, resistance and embarrassment related to speaking English. A preliminary pilot study was conducted to investigate this initial problem, and to seek ways to improve the curriculum opportunities for Saudi students in English-speaking classrooms. The pilot study was undertaken in two public schools in Riyadh. Ninety students from Grades 7, 8 and 9 and their six teachers were surveyed. The studies found that most Saudi students admitted to lacking confidence in speaking English. Most teachers and students were dissatisfied with the way English was taught and learnt in Saudi classrooms, and did not like the English textbook. This agrees with the findings of Al-Seghayer (2014) and Dukhayil (2002). The students showed preference for learning how to use the language, rather than learning about the language. These results suggested the need for more opportunities to practise speaking in classrooms via authentic resources and interesting activities in which students can talk about themselves and their hobbies, tell real stories, watch English films and role-play.

This situation in schools demands the exploration and development of English speaking programs that incorporate communicative and interactive pedagogies, as opposed to teacher-centred, worksheet-based instruction.

In the context of Saudi education and curriculum innovations, this study is ground-breaking. Little research has been undertaken on this topic, and education in the traditional Western sense is a relatively new consideration in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). A new approach that emphasizes a two-way interaction between teachers and students will be adopted. The findings from this research can lead to improved classroom practices, particularly in the area of FL teaching in Saudi classrooms. Policymakers will also be informed about changes required in the spoken English curriculum and pedagogy.

CONTEXT

English enjoys a high status in the KSA, being the only FL taught in public education. Until the academic year for 2001/2002, English was a required subject for Grades 7 to 12 for both boys' and girls' public schools. The English curriculum was introduced at the upper elementary level (Grades 4, 5 and 6) at the beginning of the academic year 2002/2003. Since then, Saudi students have learnt English as a compulsory FL in Grade 4 and continue to do so throughout their schooling (Saudi MoE, 2005a). Saudi students are required to study English for a total of nine years.

At all stages of schooling, most public school students undertake four English classes per week, each lasting 45 minutes. In other words, they are exposed to compulsory English classes for three hours each week. Of the total 180 days in the school year, 28 are designated for revision and 28 for exams. Students have 112 days of English instruction each year. By the time a student has reached Grade 12, 756 hours of English instruction have been completed (personal experience).

Teaching English at Saudi Public Schools

Saudi English speaking-classrooms are traditionally teacher-directed and adhere to a rigid curriculum with prescriptive content. In addition, classroom learning in the KSA adheres to a traditional teaching and learning model, in which the student is the receiver of information and the teacher is the imparter of knowledge. The physical appearance of classrooms is a traditional one, with desks arranged in parallel rows in front of the teacher's desk (personal experience).

Teachers use extrinsic motivation—that is, they grant grades to encourage Saudi students to learn English. Intrinsic motivation is non-existent. Students usually do not pay serious attention to learning English because there is no immediate application. They tend to devote little effort to achieving the minimal grade required to pass. They memorise vocabulary, grammatical rules and passages of composition because that is what is required for their final exams (personal experience).

EFL Curriculum

The EFL curriculum in Saudi public schools has undergone a number of changes. With each successive curriculum, the government has sought to improve the quality of FL education in terms of interest, content and relevance and the competency of Saudi EFL learners (Al-Seghayer, 2014). Unfortunately, all these textbooks fail to produce students who can undertake basic conversations or comprehend simple oral or written messages.

The curriculum in place when this study was conducted was *Say it in English* (GDC, 2007/2008). Teaching this curriculum lasted approximately 15 years (1990-2004). There is a textbook for each semester consisting of eight units—six main units and two revision units. Each unit contains four lessons related to one topic or theme. Lesson 4 of each unit is revision of what was covered in the whole unit. Each lesson occupies two pages and is taught over two days—that is, students work with the materials of each topic as a unit for eight classes.

EFL Teachers

According to Al-Hazmi (2003), EFL teacher preparation programs in the KSA over the four decades before 2000 can be described as non-systematic and inadequate. Relying on unqualified and inexperienced English teachers has long been a problem. Many EFL teachers lack essential English skills, particularly the ability to speak the language (Saudi MoHE, 2010). As non-native speakers, Saudi teachers face the challenges of teaching pronunciation, overcoming the perception of inferiority, and seeking to choose authentic oral resources. In addition, most English teachers are not qualified to teach English. They lack subject knowledge, language proficiency and competence in FL teaching methodology. In-service education programs for teachers are conducted on a limited scale via the local education departments across the Kingdom (Al-Qurashi, 2002).

Challenges of Education in the KSA

The challenges facing the educational system in the KSA include the growing number of students, the changing nature of education and the inadequacies of the present education system to prepare students for a global future.

The Growing Number of Students

The first challenge facing the Saudi education system is the growing number of students, and the subsequent greater demands placed on the current education system (Saudi MoE, 2005a). Significant to education in the KSA is the fact that 42% of the population is in the age range of zero to 15 years (Al-Sha`lan, 2010). The public educational system in 2010 comprised 500,000 teachers and more than 5 million students. In 2016, the number of students in public education increased to become 6 million students. This percentage is expected to increase in the coming years. The annual increase in the number of students gives the KSA a high ratio of students to teachers.

According to Al-Sunbul et al. (2008), there is an urgent need to provide educational opportunities for students at various stages, especially at the primary level. In addition, the quality of this education needs to be considered. Providing more schools and qualified teachers is a considerable challenge facing the MoE.

The Changing Nature of Society and its Effect on Education

In the KSA, global industrial, technological and economic developments have influenced the transformation of the society's needs and nature of the labour market. They impose various challenges on the Saudi educational system to successfully face international competition (Arani, 2004). This situation has resulted in increased demand for better and increased education. Countries with a rich culture, such as the KSA, are more challenged to achieve this aim, while maintaining traditional values (Saudi MoE, 2005a). Therefore, there is an urgent need in Saudi for a long-term plan to raise the standards of education and ensure the improvement of its outcomes, while still promoting Islamic and Arabic traditions and culture.

Constraints of the KSA Classroom

The constraints of the KSA classroom include the use of a textbook-driven curriculum, rigid schedule and intensity of the curriculum, large classes and fear of change.

Textbook-driven curriculum

KSA education is dominated by a textbook-driven curriculum that prescribes what is taught and how it is taught. It is mandatory for all schools at all levels to use the same methods of instruction, textbooks, evaluation techniques and educational policy. English teachers for each grade are required to adhere to identical syllabus guidelines and deadlines, and all students of the same age start from the same point. This strategy limits teachers' and students' creativity, and focuses on the mastery of content.

Rigid schedule and intensity of the curriculum

Teachers are required to follow a rigid schedule. For example, a lesson of 45 minutes of English generally consists of activities to practise the four skills of reading, listening, speaking and writing. Teachers are expected to complete the materials prescribed for each lesson, and the homework from the previous lesson is checked. Teachers must complete the curriculum on time, irrespective of whether the lessons' objectives have been achieved by students. As a result of this rigid curriculum and prescriptive pedagogy, the competency of students receives insufficient attention, including their competency in speaking English.

Large classes

Classes in Saudi public schools have 35 to 40 students. Teachers have indicated a number of constraints that affect effective communicative approaches in large EFL classes. These constraints are as follows:

1. Teacher discomfort resulting from the demands of more physical work, such as needing to speak loudly and having a lack of room to move freely around the classroom.

2. Discipline problems caused by increased noise, which can prevent learning and can cause the teacher to feel overwhelmed and unable to control the class.

3. Ignoring individual needs because of space and time limitations.

4. Struggling to evaluate all students effectively because of the demands of large classes and increased workload.

Fear of Change

Saudi teachers and students are afraid of change because they are confused and suspicious about the functions and effectiveness of interactive classroom activities (Al-Hazmi, 2003).

King Abdullah's project, Tatweer (2004 to 2014), is attempting to address the challenges that face education in the KSA (Saudi MoE, 2005a). For example, the units of work in each textbook were reduced from 14 to eight to allow students more time for understanding and consolidation. Many new schools have been established and the number of students in each class has been reduced from 40 to 30. In addition, a comprehensive approach was introduced to address the issues associated with the lack of teacher qualifications. Systematic in-service education programs for teachers have conducted on an unlimited scale across the Kingdom by national and international trainers. Finally, there has been a notable improvement in the use of technology in Saudi public schools. In 2000, the National Committee for the English Language suggested the incorporation of computer-based instruction in the EFL curriculum (Saudi MoE, 2005b). At the time of conducting this study, the MoE had integrated resource centres and smart-board rooms, which include a variety of technological resources, in all public schools.

For continued reform in education, research strongly suggests that teaching and language learning strategies should focus more on learning, thereby moving students from being passive recipients of information and services to being critical thinkers and lifelong learners. Through Tatweer, the MoE has embraced new perspectives on educational policy and has replaced educational goals, curricula, contents and methods with creative new approaches that are appropriate for the twenty-first century.

METHODOLOGY

This case study examined the introduction and implementation of the innovative English speaking curriculum, Let's Speak English (LSE), in a Grade 7 Saudi classroom. LSE was developed and implemented in order to promote Saudi students' competence and confidence in speaking English. LSE is a learner-centred program based on new content and new pedagogies that are different to those of the traditional Saudi classroom. It includes 46 interactive activities based on the following themes: Theme 1—'My News', Theme 2—'Islamic Chants', Theme 3—'Stories in English' and Theme 4—'Videos in English'.

The focus of the study was to investigate the effect of the speech-based activities of LSE on students' willingness to participate and engage in their English-speaking classroom. LSE was implemented and evaluated daily for four months. The case study was set in the authentic context of a KSA classroom with 28 students; as such, it 'explores a real-life contemporary bounded system involving multiple sources of information' (Creswell, 2013). The study took place at an intermediate public school located in the north region of Riyadh. Twenty-eight students, 21 teachers and four supervisors participated.

Data sources included observations, interviews and artefacts that included language learning diaries, field notes, samples of students' work and surveys (student self-evaluation, competency, participation, evaluation of LSE and evaluation of the teacher role, and teacher and supervisor evaluation of each theme and LSE). The data were analysed using a grounded theory approach. The study systematically examined the development of the LSE curriculum, its classroom implementation, and its effect on the students as they engaged in speaking English.

The questions that guided this case study included:

1.   What is LSE?

2.   Does LSE build confidence and increase the participation of female students in a Grade 7 English-speaking classroom? If so, how does it do this?

3.   What teaching and learning strategies of LSE contributed to the improvement of spoken EL in a Grade 7 Saudi classroom?

4.   What is the role of the LSE teacher in an English-speaking classroom?

FINDINGS

This study found that LSE contributes positively to students' linguistic confidence and competence. Based on the observations of the students, interviews, surveys and language learning diaries, it was apparent that the students' confidence increased and they showed increased willingness to participate and try new experiences. Self-doubt, anxiety, resistance, uncooperative group members and lack of English vocabulary were a few of the challenges that the students faced. The students' linguistic competence was evident in their increased vocabulary and confident use of English words that were content specific and previously unfamiliar to most students. They acknowledged that by increasing their vocabulary, they were better placed to communicate meaningfully in English.

The supervisors, teachers and students identified a number of teaching factors that contributed to the students' improvement of spoken English. These factors includes a stimulating learning environment, a positive atmosphere, planning, timing, promoting fluency, collaboration, interactive pedagogy, authentic activities and a learner-centred approach.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Need for Ongoing Classroom-based Research

Research in KSA classrooms is minimal, and case study research is non-existent. Classroom-based research would provide an added benefit for Saudi teachers. Providing Saudi teachers in English-speaking classrooms the opportunity to network and reflect on their teaching would result in the sharing of innovative ideas and up-to-date resources. Teachers would be better prepared to make informed instructional decisions and cater to the individual needs of students (Creswell, 2013). They would be more informed about effective teaching strategies that are research based, and could contribute to the improvement of English speaking. In order for research to be sustained, effective and beneficial to students, there must be support from all stakeholder groups. This case study was unique because the principals, teachers, parents and students had not engaged in any previous research studies. It was a new experience for all stakeholders, and they valued the opportunity to share their views and experiences in order to improve the English-speaking classroom.

The Need for Supportive Learning Environments

This study highlights the difference that a supportive, collaborative learning environment can have for students' engagement and participation. By creating a stimulating learning environment through LSE, positive attitudes replaced negative attitudes. The students had fun interacting with others, and enjoyment and enthusiasm replaced fear, anxiety, doubt and hesitation. Over time, the students felt comfortable and confident speaking English with their peers as suggested by Cook Hirai, Borrego, Garza and Kloock (2010). LSE emphasises the need for Saudi teachers to consider their roles to reduce student anxiety in order to encourage increased participation, positive attitudes and elimination of fear. In such a context, students' confidence and participation in English-speaking classrooms is enhanced.

Employing an interactive pedagogy contributed to the improvement of the students' engagement in the classroom language learning practices. The adoption of an interactive pedagogy in LSE is completely different from the typical classes in Saudi public schools,

and, in this case study, it resulted in an increase in students' positive attitudes towards their English speaking classes. The students had more opportunities to listen, engage with and apply their developing English speaking skills by interacting with and learning from their peers.

The Need for Planning

While the typical Saudi teacher is dependent on the textbook for planning, LSE highlights the need for the teacher to plan to meet the individual learning needs of students. The Saudi curriculum assumes that all learners start at the same place and progress at the same rate. In LSE, lesson plans are flexible and can be adjusted to accommodate all learners, irrespective of their levels of competence. While the teaching activities move in a logical sequence and are planned, the teacher is expected to reflect and adjust teaching to ensure students are given adequate assistance or challenged as required. With LSE, it was found that planning added a layer of assurance for the teacher and contributed to the teacher's confidence as noted by Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011). Planning allowed the teacher time to think about options and alternatives to deal with issues that may arise. From my own perspective, when conducting LSE, I realised that the more confident I became with the pedagogy and content, the more confident were the students.

The Need for Time to Participate

Being well planned and conscious of time use was critical to the success of LSE. Establishing a classroom routine was necessary to allow the classroom activities to move smoothly as recommended by Bermel (2008). Each theme continued over an extended period to allow more opportunities to present and more time to adjust. It is recommended that:

  i.   English speaking classes be held early in the day when the students are active and ready for learning

 ii.   A minimum of a one-hour period per week be devoted to English speaking

iii.   English speaking activities be focused on a theme.

The Need to Promote Communication and Fluency

Students' fluency improved when they had ongoing and daily experiences of speaking aloud about topics that were relevant and interesting (Meise, 2011). In typical Saudi classrooms, students have limited opportunities to speak English, and learn primarily from a prescribed textbook. It became apparent in LSE that, by increasing the opportunities for students to speak English with their peers, the students' self-perceptions as English speakers were enhanced, and the fear of speaking in public dissipated. It is recommended that all students have the opportunity to participate in free discussions, role-plays and gap activities as a means of encouraging meaningful communication.

With LSE, the classroom environment was encouraging and students were expected to speak, even if they made mistakes. They were also allowed to substitute Arabic words for unfamiliar English words. Their conversations were only corrected when the errors impeded the meaning. Generally, in traditional KSA English-speaking classrooms, students avoid participating when they lack confidence or understanding. With LSE, these strategies are ineffective and contrary to assisting students develop their confidence and competence to speak English.

The Need for Collaboration

Typically, a collaborative classroom is uncommon in Saudi Arabia. In contrast, LSE emphasises the need for and benefits of collaboration between students to practise and master English speaking.

In a collaborative learning environment, students learn by observing, imitating and modelling the behaviours and attitudes of their peers (Gass & Mackey, 2012). Working in groups proved a challenge for the students in this study because of their uncertainty regarding the process. Addressing group work difficulties and challenges as they arise is the responsibility of the teacher as suggested by Griffiths (2008). The teacher and students together learn to practise tolerance and make adjustments. In LSE, it became apparent that long-term group work—particularly when groups included the same students—had a significant influence on encouraging participation, commitment and competition in the Saudi-speaking classroom. Group competition—particularly through presentations—proved a motivation for students to try new strategies, attract the audience's attention and maintain the audience's interest. It is recommended that Saudi classroom teachers receive support and guidance in using collaborative approaches in English-speaking classrooms, with the intention that such an approach may filter into other disciplines and teaching areas, to the benefit of all students.

The Need for Authentic Reasons to Engage with English Speaking

LSE found that when the speaking activities were comprehensible and designed to accommodate the students' level of linguistic competency and learning styles, acknowledged their religious and cultural beliefs, embraced their interests, and related to real-life situations, the students showed greater willingness to participate in the activities as suggested by Martínez-Flor and Usó-Juan (2010). They became more confident and their competence increased in terms of fluency and accuracy. Thus, it is recommended that Saudi students understand the relevance of what they are learning, and that curriculum content be related to their experiences, cultural backgrounds and interests. When content is meaningful, students are more likely to take risks and try, rather than succumb to the obstacles of insufficient or inadequate input (Coyne, Kame'enui & Carnine, 2010).

The Need for a Learner-centred Approach

When implementing a learner-centred approach in LSE, a significant change occurred in the role of the teacher and students, compared to the typical classroom experience of the Saudi student noted by Doyle (2011) and Lamb and Reinders (2008). The teacher role changed from that of the dominator and director of learning to the facilitator and supporter of the students' independent learning. The role of the students changed dramatically from passive responders to textbook learning and teacher direction to active participants and independent learners. The learner-centred approach is an uncommon experience for Saudi students, but it is recommended by this study. It was found that, through increased opportunities for learner participation, the students' personalities blossomed and they willingly shared their feelings, insights and understandings with the teacher and each other. This study recommends that Saudi teachers be encouraged with support to explore the advantages of a learner-centred classroom. When students are given more opportunities to be independent and to think and reflect on their learning, their confidence to participate is enhanced (Cullen, Harris & Hill, 2012). In this study, learning-centred activities, oral presentations and participation in group work assisted the students to overcome their sensitivity to speaking in front of their peers, and decreased their fear of practising English.

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ISSN: 2223-9944, e **ISSN: 2223-9553**
www.journals.savap.org.pk

The Need for a Systemic Approach to Overcome Current Constraints

The continued development of English speaking programs, such as LSE, in public schools is constrained primarily because teachers lack the academic knowledge and necessary skills to teach English as an FL. In order to address this primary concern, this study recommends that a systematic approach to improving pre-service and in-service education for EFL teacher education programs be instigated.

As is evident from this case study, students exhibit a range of EL proficiencies and, while some students require assistance, others need to be challenged. In addition, the students' high levels of participation and interaction in this study indicated that group work and interesting activities promoted a higher level of learning than did passively following a textbook and completing a workbook. Thus, this study recommends that a review of the English speaking curriculum and prescribed textbook be undertaken to enable accommodation of the range of student needs, interests and learning styles.

At a system level, improvement in the English speaking curriculum requires collaboration between all stakeholders, including students, teachers, supervisors, researchers, curriculum specialists, program managers and administrators (Minichiello & Kottler, 2010). A system-wide research agenda in effective English speaking approaches is paramount, and the extension of LSE as a possible model to be adopted by other neighbouring schools is highly recommended.

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