

Cultural Changes in Saudi Textbooks: Patterns and Perspectives

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Abstract

This paper investigates the cultural patterns in which English was contextualized in Saudi English textbooks published during the last 33 years and explains the continuity or discontinuity of the pattern by Saudi Arabia's progress through Wallerstein's (2006) modern world system. In order to put the changes in perspective, Saudi socio-economic and political developments during the state's movement from periphery towards the core through semi-periphery zones of the world system is discussed. The paper concludes that in the books published between 1982 and 1997 a pattern based on national culture was maintained, and almost the same pattern was followed in the books of the period between 1998 and 2012. The trend of pattern maintenance is still there in the books published recently in 2013 but there is a paradigm shift in terms of cultural elements—the national culture is almost replaced with the Western culture.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, English textbooks, culture, world system, state, switchboard

Introduction

English textbooks used in the public schools all over the world play a decisive role in developing certain attitudes towards English—orienting the students' towards a particular variety of English, acculturating them to particular culture/cultures, and providing them with intercultural and sometimes intra-cultural communicative capability, as they can “prompt learners to confront some of the taken-for-granted cultural beliefs about the Self and the Other” (Kumaravadivelu, 2008). Therefore the national curriculum designers all over the world select the textbook contents very carefully in order to meet the educational, economic, social, cultural, and sometimes political requirements of the states. However, for the linguistic and cultural constraints some states hire native writers of English to write their textbooks, some of them have their own writers, and a few states like Saudi Arabia buy the “editionized” global course books for their students.

However, Saudi Arabia did not always buy the “editionized” global course books for its students—for example in 1982 the third grade secondary level English textbook, *Saudi Arabian Schools' English* was not a global course book. It was written exclusively for Saudi Arabia though it was published by the Macmillan Press Limited and written by a native writer of English, John Field. In 1998, this book was replaced with another one, *English for Saudi Arabia*, published and written by the Saudi Ministry of Education and Saudi writers respectively. As Saudi Arabia has gone through these three phases in the past three decades, the paper investigates the cultural patterns of these three kinds of textbook and finds that the books adopted broadly two kinds of cultural patterns taking international trends of using culture in English textbooks and internal socio-economic perspectives into considerations.

Literature Review

I will review the conceptualizations of culture from three vantage points: the Parsonian view of culture as *system*, the Baumanian view of culture as *matrix*, and hegemonic view of culture by Rothkopf and Friedman. Next, on the basis of Wallerstein's and Blommaert's view of state as a *switchboard*, I will analyze these three different points of view in order to evaluate the English textbooks used in Saudi Arabia and to suggest the way in which the cultural pattern befitting an Islamic state trying to reach the *core* zone of Wallerstein's *world system* can be adopted in Saudi curriculum.

Culture as *system*, *matrix*, and hegemon

The cultures which seem to be impervious to change can be explained by the Parsonian theory of culture as *system* (Parsons, 1937). The Parsonian *system* neither allows any meaningful change inside its territory nor gives liberty to any of its components as it is believed that the change or liberty may collapse the network of the components which are interconnected with and dependant on each other. Sometimes some new elements are to be allowed from outside but they should be accommodated and assimilated to the *system*.

On the other hand, Baumanian view of culture asserts that a culture cannot sustain if it does not allow change within its territory. Bauman (1999, p. xiv) states that culture is “discontinuity as much as about continuation; about novelty as much as about tradition; about routine as much as about pattern-breaking...” Bauman believes that man-made order does not exist without human freedom to choose which invariably implies change in culture and society. It is to be noted here that Bauman does not believe in “discontinuity”, “novelty”, and “pattern-breaking” only, he advocates for the balance between the old and the new.

According to Rothkopf (1997) and Friedman (1999) both the views are outdated in the age of globalization. They argue that when the old concepts of national culture are no more pertinent to the states when they are being merged to a global village. Since, in order to be successful in this small world, a state should open its borders to the powerful culture—bow to the American cultural hegemony, to be precise. They further add that a state should adopt American culture even at the cost of its historic origins or cultural inheritance as, whether it likes it or not, the US is the world hegemon.

The trajectory of a state in Wallerstein’s *world system* and Blommaert’s *switchboard*

Wallerstein’s *world system* consists of *core*, *semi-periphery*, and *periphery* zones. The developed countries accumulate huge amount of wealth by means of their monopoly business and create the *core* zone in order to control the rest of the world, and the least developed countries for their poverty in terms of wealth and knowledge are marginalized into the *periphery* zone. The countries in between the *core* and *periphery* zones constitute the *semi-periphery* zone. Most of the countries of the world are obviously out of the *core* zone and they are struggling to move towards the *semi-periphery* or *core* zones as fast as possible. In order to do that, Wallerstein believes, a country has to develop knowledge-based monopolist mode of production, interact with the other states efficiently, and govern its citizens gaining their consent.

As the demands of the *world system* and the citizens’ cultural, religious, and social norms often contradict with each other, a state has to be very cautious about managing the internal affairs so that nothing coming from above the state level seems to be an imposition on its people. Therefore in order to maintain a balance between the forces active above (other states particularly the most powerful states of the world) and below (different quarters of the citizens which have the capability of exerting pressure on the government) the state level, the state has to act like a *switchboard* (Blommaert, 2005). A state has to do it because it cannot be either inwardly or outwardly sovereign (Wallerstein, 1997). If this is the way a state has to act in the modern *world system*, its national curriculum is supposed to organize the dynamic between the national and transnational cultures elements.

Discussion

In this section, I will first explore the general trends of introducing culture in textbooks and then I will try to trace the trends followed by the Saudi curriculum designers in different periods for different reasons.

General trends of introducing culture in English textbooks

The ways in which culture was treated in English textbooks might be broadly divided into three categories. In the period between the middle of the 1950s and the early 1990s both research and teaching treated culture as an object, certain facts to be learned about the target culture. Most of the curriculum designers of that time believed that it was necessary to immerse learners into the target language culture, as explained in Schumann's (1986) acculturation theory, to maximize any foreign language learning in the native way. Later on, Schumann was echoed by Dornyei (1990), Gardner (1988), and Gardner, Day, & MacIntyre (1992) when they found the positive correlation between integrative motivation and language learning.

In the 1990s culture was conceptualized in many different ways. The concept of cultural artifact was replaced with culture with small c (e.g., Pulverness, 1995; Tomalin & Stempleski, 1993) and considered to be an essential element to be aware of for learning the language associated with it (Kramsch, 1993, 1998). Meanwhile some scholars like Prodromou (1992) problematized the concept of target culture in terms of English language for the evolution of "Englishes" all over the world. Therefore the researchers of this period gave emphasis on intercultural, cross-cultural, and trans-cultural issues in order to develop intercultural communicative competence (Byram, 1997).

The current trends in research since 2000 give an almost exclusive attention to a "transnational or global/local approach, focusing on cultural complexity and hybridity" (Risager, 2011, p. 485). The key words of this era are "global cultural consciousness" (Kumaravadivelu, 2008, p. 164), "intercultural citizenship" (Byram, 2008, p. 157; 2011, pp. 11–12), "intercultural competence of the world citizen" (Risager, 2007, p. 222), and "critical citizenship" (Guilherme, 2002, pp. 50–51). According to these approaches understanding the target-language culture or reading something about culture in the textbooks is not enough, as in a globalized world, where all kinds of boundary—political, social, and economic—are being increasingly porous, the learners should be equipped with a critical and 'reflective mind that can tell the difference between real and unreal, between information and disinformation, between ideas and ideologies" (Kumaravadivelu, 2008, p. 164). In this fast globalizing world, fostering target-culture competence is no longer necessary and even gaining intercultural competence deems to be insufficient. Therefore in addition to acquiring intercultural communicative competence, the students should try to get intercultural citizenship of the modern world and in order to acquire the global cultural consciousness, they should be provided with the EFL education which has a transformative goal—transforming the locally oriented students to reflexive, open, and globally oriented learners. However, very few textbooks have this transformative goal (Byram, 2011).

Culture in Saudi English Textbooks

This paper, as mentioned above, traces the changes that occurred in Saudi English textbooks in terms of cultural elements in the last 33 years. From 1982 to 2012 the textbooks maintained almost same cultural patterns focusing the Saudi national culture in the form of the Parsonian

system, but in the books published in 2013 the trend changed and a huge amount of western cultural elements were introduced. However, as stated above, still now the Parsonian *system* is more or less maintained but the components of the Saudi national culture are replaced with those of the Western culture.

The introduction of these cultural patterns was not always timed to coincide with the changes in Saudi economic perspective. For example, Saudi Arabia entered into *semi-periphery* zone of the *world system* in the late 1970s but almost no attempt was taken to provide the students with suitable cultural elements through the textbooks to equip them with intercultural competence till 2012. Faruk (2014) analyzes the reading texts of three third grade secondary level textbooks—*Saudi Arabian Schools' English*, *English for Saudi Arabia*, and *Traveller 3*—used consecutively in the period between 1982 and 2014. He claims that these three books represent all other contemporary books in terms of language, content, style and illustration. Among all the reading texts of *Saudi Arabian Schools' English* and *English for Saudi Arabia* (used between 1982 and 2013) only one of them touches upon the Western culture and the rest are based on Saudi and culturally non-specific elements. It means that the writers and the curriculum designers treated the age-old Saudi culture as big C and as the Parsonian *system* though culture as *system* can never be conducive to a semi-peripheral state's movement towards the core zone where Saudi Arabia wants to reach by 2024.

The reason of not introducing the materials to acquaint the students with the Western cultural elements or to equip them with intercultural competence may lie in the state's obligation to act as a *switchboard* between the forces active above and below its level. Introducing the materials related to the Western culture and intercultural competence must have been the strong demands of the forces from above the state level but the state did not adhere to the pressure perhaps taking the factors active below the state level into consideration. Some research findings clearly show that the Saudis had a strong negative attitude towards English and the associated culture/cultures for a long time (Szyliowicz, 1973; Al-Brashi, 2003 qtd. in Elyas and Picard, 2010 p. 141; Azuri, 2006 p. 1; Elyas and Picard, 2010 p. 139; Al-Seghayer, 2013).

In 2013, the textbooks took almost a U-turn in terms of the cultural elements. Now instead of Saudi and Islamic cultural elements, the Western ones hog the pages of the books of the series like *Traveller*, *Full Blast*, and *Smart Class* etc. Though it seems to be the resonance of Rothkopf's (1997) and Friedman's (1999) ideas, nothing contradictory to Islamic or Saudi cultures is introduced in these books. Though the books continue the trend of the Parsonian pattern-maintenance, the culture with big C is replaced with the culture of small c. It might be inferred from the huge space devoted to the Western cultural elements that, nowadays, the state does not feel the pressure from the forces below its level to avoid English and the culture/cultures associated with it. Moreover there is evidence that Saudis' attitude towards English changed from a negative to a positive one (Alabed and Alhaq and Smadi, 1996; Abu-Arafah, Attuhami and Hussein 1998; Al Jarf, 2008).

Conclusion

The fact that the state wants to act like a *switchboard* is obvious in the general objectives it set for English language teaching. However, the dynamic it is supposed to organize between the national and transnational elements is not found in the cultural patterns woven in the textbooks. In other words, the cultural patterns always conformed, in one way or the other, to the Parsonian system; they could never become the Baumanian matrix. The books were biased either essentially to the national or largely to the transnational cultures. The orientation of the books, published prior to 2013, towards the national culture can be explained by putting them in perspectives but the prejudice of the books, published after 2013, towards the Western culture, when the objective condition is ripe for the state to act like a switchboard, is difficult to rationalize. There might be only one reason which engendered the disparity between the state's *de jure* language policies expressed in the general objective for ELT and the *de facto* cultural patterns of the textbooks, and perhaps the reason lies in the importation of global course books. The global course books are not produced for any particular country—they are commercially composed usually by the native writers of English for the huge market all over the world, and thus are inherently weak in terms of accommodating particular culture. Therefore, in order to obtain a balanced cultural pattern and to materialize its *de jure* English language education policies, Saudi Arabia should go for the books which are written exclusively for its students and by the writers who are completely *au fait* with the learners' social milieu.

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