Book Review

Language Education in Saudi Arabia: Challenges and Opportunities in Language Pedagogy and Policy-A Book Review

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Abstract

This review offers a critical analysis of "Language Education in Saudi Arabia: Challenges and Opportunities in Language Pedagogy and Policy" ISBN: 978-3-031-91442-3, edited by Ali H. Al-Hoorie, Connie Mitchell, Tariq Elyas and published by Springer Nature Switzerland in July 2025. As part of the English Language Teaching: Theory, Research and Pedagogy series, the book investigates the major educational reforms underway in Saudi Arabia through the lens of Vision 2030, emphasizing English's evolution from a marginal academic subject to an essential component of national progress and modernization. The twelve chapters present a comprehensive exploration of diverse topics, including classroom dynamics, teacher development, and systemic policy shifts, illustrating the complexity of language education transformation in the Kingdom. The review commends the book's broad analytical scope, methodological rigor, and contribution to global scholarly discourse, while also identifying gaps in its coverage of longitudinal data, regional variation, and deeper critique of policy trends. Ultimately, this volume stands out as an important scholarly resource for research on applied linguistics, language policy, and English education in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf region.
Keywords: Language education reform, English language teaching (ELT), Saudi Arabia, Vision 2030, Language policy.

Saudi Arabia is undergoing a moment of unprecedented educational and linguistic change. Over the past two decades, English has shifted from a peripheral tool to a central pillar of national development. At the heart of this transformation lies *Vision 2030*, the Kingdom's sweeping reform agenda designed to diversify the economy, boost global competitiveness, and prepare younger generations for participation in a knowledge-based society. Language, and English in particular, plays a pivotal role in this process, symbolizing modernization while simultaneously raising questions about cultural continuity and identity.

It is against this backdrop that *Language Education in Saudi Arabia: Challenges and Opportunities in Language Pedagogy and Policy* makes its intervention. Edited by Ali H. Al-Hoorie, Connie Mitchell, and Tariq Elyas, the volume assembles twelve contributions that probe the intersections of English teaching, policy, pedagogy, and ideology. The editors frame English as both an indispensable resource for modernization and a contested terrain of cultural tension and ideological struggle. As they note in their introduction, English has moved from being a foreign language of utility to an infrastructural necessity, shaping not only education but national aspirations. This dual framing, English as a tool of progress and a site of contestation, echoes debates across many non-Anglophone contexts. Scholars have shown how English can simultaneously enable global integration and destabilize local linguistic and cultural ecologies (Canagarajah, 2013; Jenkins, 2015). In the Gulf, Mahboob and Elyas (2014) highlight this ambivalence: English promises access to international networks yet stirs anxieties over cultural authenticity. What makes Saudi Arabia distinctive, however, is not merely the presence of such tensions but the scale and intensity of reform. While other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have pursued gradual educational changes, Saudi Arabia's reforms are sweeping, system-wide, and explicitly anchored in national transformation.

The editors situate this collection within applied linguistics, TESOL, and language policy studies. Their approach aligns with Hornberger and Johnson's (2007) call for multi-scalar perspectives that trace both top-down directives and bottom-up enactments, while also resonating with Pennycook's (2010) notion of "language as a local practice". In this way, the book transcends its

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immediate context: it is not only about Saudi Arabia but also about how English, as a global resource, is appropriated, contested, and reconfigured in late modernity.

The volume is organized into three thematic sections that together capture the complexities of language education in Saudi Arabia. The first section focuses on classroom practices and learner experiences, examining how students engage with English in their everyday learning contexts. The second turns to pedagogy, teacher development, and family ideologies, exploring the professional trajectories of educators and the influence of familial beliefs on language learning. The final section addresses systemic and policy concerns, analyzing institutional reforms, curricular shifts, and the broader policy frameworks driving educational change under Vision 2030. Collectively, the twelve chapters blend empirical research, theoretical perspectives, and policy critique, offering a nuanced and multifaceted portrait of English education in the Kingdom.

El-Dakhs and Sonbul investigate vocabulary learning strategies (VLSs) among Saudi university students, employing a robust quantitative design. Their study uncovers significant discrepancies between students' self-reported strategies and teachers' perceptions of learner behavior. Female students, in particular, are found to employ more cognitively demanding strategies than their male counterparts, suggesting gendered dimensions of strategy use. The authors argue for a pedagogy that is sensitive to actual learner practices, echoing Borg's (2015) call for contextualized teacher cognition research. Almalki and Alzahrani explore how students engage with religious texts in English (L2) and Arabic (L1). Through group discussions, they reveal striking contrasts: while Arabic discussions are rich but emotionally charged, English conversations foster neutrality, tolerance, and reflection. This finding highlights the ways language choice mediates cognition and ideology, resonating with translanguaging research and intercultural competence debates (Pennycook, 2010). Importantly, the chapter demonstrates that English is not just a medium but a cognitive and ideological filter.

Ahmed's contribution focuses on English for Business Communication (EBC) in Saudi workplaces. His research identifies a sharp misalignment between academic ESP curricula, which emphasize academic registers, and employer expectations, which prioritize communicative competence, genre awareness, and digital literacy. This finding mirrors global ESP scholarship (Belcher, 2009), reinforcing the argument that ESP curricula must be redesigned to better align with professional realities. Alzuhairy applies the framework of family language policy (FLP) to explore Saudi parents' beliefs about early English learning. Parents, he

finds, widely support early English instruction as a form of social capital but remain anxious about the sidelining of Arabic. This ambivalence illustrates bottom-up dimensions of language policy, confirming Hornberger and Johnson's (2007) point that families are critical sites of policy negotiation. Almatrafi critiques the uncritical adoption of imported methods. Drawing on Kumaravadivelu's postmethod pedagogy and Hallidayan cohesion theory, he presents a quasi-experimental study demonstrating that locally grounded, reflective pedagogies significantly enhance student writing proficiency. His chapter underscores the importance of pedagogical pluralism and contextually relevant teaching practices.

Almaneea contributes an ethnographic study of English-medium instruction (EMI) in a Riyadh kindergarten. Her observations reveal how teachers employ play, gestures, and visual scaffolding to support young learners. While pedagogically effective, the study raises unresolved ideological questions about the early dominance of English. Similar tensions have been observed in Tunisia (Abdeljaoued, 2023), where EMI promises global mobility but generates challenges in classroom interaction and content learning. Alzahrani turns to teacher professional development (PD), identifying significant gaps in digital pedagogy, assessment literacy, and intercultural awareness. He calls for sustainable, teacher-led PD initiatives that align with both international benchmarks and local needs. Alnufaie closes this section with an assessment of strategy instruction research, noting that interventions remain fragmented, sporadic, and under-theorized. Alruwaili analyzes correlations between GPA and teacher licensure test scores. While statistically significant, the predictive power is modest, suggesting the need to better align university curricula with national assessment frameworks. Kalfut's historiographic chapter examines textbook evaluation in Saudi Arabia. She critiques superficial checklist-based evaluations and instead calls for discourse-analytic and longitudinal approaches that treat textbooks as ideological artifacts. Her work resonates with Ricento's (2005) argument that language policies and materials are never ideologically innocent. Almohizea focuses on translator and interpreter training, an area often overlooked in language education reform. Her analysis reveals structural deficiencies, including the absence of standardized curricula, limited interpreter training, and minimal professional certification. She calls for reforms, including structured internships and digital integration to better prepare graduates for global engagement.

The strength of this volume lies in its multi-scalar framing of language reform, which moves beyond simplistic, top-down perspectives to consider classroom, familial, and systemic dimensions. At the classroom level, El-Dakhs and Sonbul's research on virtual learning spaces (VLSs) underscores a persistent mismatch

between teacher perceptions and student practices, a misalignment that lies at the heart of learner-centered pedagogy. Almalki and Alzahrani's examination of religious texts further demonstrates how English functions as an epistemic tool, mediating not only comprehension but also ideological positioning. Ahmed's study reinforces the critical need for curricula that are responsive to workplace realities, reminding policymakers that educational content divorced from professional contexts risks irrelevance.

Moving beyond the classroom, the volume illuminates how pedagogy and family practices intersect with policy enactment. Alzuhairy's study of family language policy (FLP) exemplifies bottom-up implementation, showing how household practices actively shape language use and learning trajectories. Almatrafi's call for contextually grounded pedagogy highlights the limitations of directly importing international teaching methods, emphasizing that adaptation to local conditions is essential for meaningful learning. Almaneea's ethnographic work on English-medium instruction (EMI) in early childhood settings further reinforces that education is not only a site of knowledge transmission but also a space where ideological and social norms are communicated and contested. Collectively, these chapters reveal that reform efforts cannot succeed without careful attention to the lived realities of learners, teachers, and families.

At the systemic level, chapters by Alruwaili, Kalfut, and Almohizea bring into focus the broader institutional and ideological dimensions of reform. Kalfut's treatment of textbooks as cultural and political artifacts is particularly insightful, aligning with global critiques of hidden curricula and demonstrating how ostensibly neutral materials can reproduce values and power structures. Almohizea's analysis of translator training highlights the professional stakes of language education in a multilingual, globalized economy, drawing attention to the consequences of inadequate preparation for emerging linguistic and occupational demands.

these contributions exemplify Hornberger and Johnson's (2007) argument that language policy is inherently layered and enacted differently at each scale of educational experience. They also resonate with Pennycook's (2010) insistence on the local: The Saudi English education reforms presented in this volume are not mere reproductions of global models but are actively reshaped, negotiated, and contested within specific social, cultural, and institutional contexts. In doing so, the volume offers a nuanced, multi-dimensional account of language reform that balances macro-level policy analysis with micro-level attention to everyday practices.

The volume makes a timely and important contribution to the study of language education in Saudi Arabia, yet its impact is shaped as much by its limitations as by its strengths. On the positive side, the collection achieves thematic coherence by moving systematically from classrooms to pedagogy to systemic policy issues, a structure that mirrors the multi-scalar nature of reform itself. Its empirical diversity, ranging from quantitative surveys and quasi-experimental studies to ethnography and historiographic critique, demonstrates the methodological maturity of Saudi applied linguistics scholarship. Certain chapters, particularly Alqahtani's discourse analysis of institutional texts, Almatrafi's quasi-experimental intervention in writing pedagogy, and Kalfut's historiographic examination of textbooks, stand out as exemplary. These contributions succeed not only because of their rigorous design but also because they are theoretically ambitious, engaging with frameworks such as critical discourse analysis, postmethod pedagogy, and ideological critiques of materials. In doing so, they position Saudi scholarship within global conversations on language, ideology, and pedagogy.

Yet, the volume also illustrates some of the broader challenges facing emerging national scholarship. A number of chapters are primarily descriptive, offering valuable inventories of practices or beliefs, though at times with limited engagement in wider theoretical debates. This can give the impression of localized case studies rather than fully articulated contributions to the global field. Methodologically, several studies draw on relatively small and homogeneous samples, often from urban universities, which somewhat limits the scope of generalization. In addition, issues such as gender, regional variation, and socio-economic stratification, factors that significantly shape educational access and outcomes, receive more limited attention than their importance might warrant.

The treatment of Vision 2030 also leaves room for further critical engagement. While the reform agenda is consistently recognized as a powerful backdrop to language education, its deeper implications are not always fully explored. For instance, the neoliberal emphases on human capital, competitiveness, and efficiency are often referenced but not systematically problematized. Darvin and Norton's (2015) model of identity and investment suggests that such large-scale reforms inevitably reshape access to symbolic and material capital. More explicit engagement with how Vision 2030 redistributes linguistic opportunities, or potentially reinforces existing hierarchies, would have further strengthened the analysis. Without such interrogation, there is a tendency to treat English primarily as a neutral instrument of modernization rather than also as an ideologically contested resource.

Beyond the issues already noted, the volume also leaves open several areas that could enrich its contribution. One such area is the use of longitudinal

data: most of the studies are cross-sectional, offering insightful snapshots of reform but not always tracing developments over time. Another is the inclusion of more diverse perspectives. While the volume captures important dimensions of urban educational contexts, voices from marginalized groups, such as students in rural regions or female learners outside elite institutions, are less visible, even though these perspectives would add depth to the picture of language reform. Similarly, the emphasis on major urban universities, while understandable, means that regional variation remains less fully examined.

The political economy of reform, particularly the neoliberal dimensions of Vision 2030 that prioritize competitiveness and employability, is acknowledged but not always critically unpacked. Greater engagement with frameworks such as Darvin and Norton's (2015) model of identity and investment could have illuminated how reforms redistribute linguistic capital and affect different groups unevenly. Finally, the book might have been strengthened by stronger comparative engagement. Given Saudi Arabia's embeddedness in the wider Gulf and MENA regions, connections with parallel developments in Qatar, the UAE, or North Africa could have offered a richer regional perspective and broadened the book's appeal to comparative education scholars.

In his afterword, Barnawi situates the volume within broader debates about coloniality, raciolinguistics, and epistemic injustice in TESOL. He argues that the edited collection could not be more timely, as it engages with urgent questions about how practitioners, educators, policymakers, and institutions in the Global South might disrupt coloniality, monolingualism, and native speakerism. By foregrounding issues of vocabulary and reading strategies, language ideologies, assessment practices, and intercultural communication, the volume offers a comprehensive account of English teaching and learning in Saudi Arabia with particular attention to policy and pedagogy. The book speaks to a wide audience, from teachers and curriculum specialists to policymakers, graduate students, and researchers.

Despite some limitations, this edited volume makes a substantial and timely contribution to the study of English in Saudi Arabia at a moment of profound national transformation. It provides a critical yet locally grounded account of language education, convincingly showing how English functions both as a tool of modernization and as a site of cultural and ideological negotiation. Its multi-scalar design, spanning classrooms, families, and national policy, captures the layered realities of reform in ways that resonate well beyond the Saudi context. At the same time, its insights extend to global debates on English as a lingua franca, English-medium instruction, and linguistic identity, aligning productively with Pennycook's (2010) notion of language as local practice and Spolsky's (2004) view of policy as negotiated compromise. While some chapters are more descriptive and certain perspectives, longitudinal, regional, and marginalized voices, are underrepresented, these gaps highlight directions for future scholarship. Ultimately, the collection invites readers to confront larger questions of coloniality, epistemic injustice, and equity in the Global South. For applied linguists, TESOL professionals, policymakers, and scholars of Middle Eastern and comparative education, it is a timely, ambitious, and thought-provoking work that deserves careful attention and will remain a valuable reference point for years to come.

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