Chapter 2  Education in Saudi Arabia

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, brief background to the context of the study will be presented. In the first section (2.2), this chapter presents an overview of the administration of the education system in Saudi Arabia. Secondly, the organisation of the education system is presented in section (2.3). The status of English in Saudi Arabia will be discussed in the next section (2.4). Afterwards, this chapter presents the aims of teaching English at the secondary stage, an analysis of the secondary year 1 textbooks, the textbooks and teachers, and the examination system for secondary year 1 in sections 2.5, 2.6, 2.7, and 2.8 respectively. The last section (2.9) presents the conclusions drawn from the previous sections.

2.2 Administration of Education

The administration of the education system in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is highly centralised. All educational policies are subject to government control and supervision by the Supreme Council of Education. Curricula, syllabi and textbooks are uniform throughout the Kingdom. Educational administration in Saudi Arabia is conducted through nine agencies, four of which are main government agencies.

The four principal authorities responsible for education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia are: the Ministry of Education; the General Presidency for Girls’ Education; the Ministry of Higher Education; and the General Organisation of Technical Education and Vocational Training. There are also other ministries, which have some educational responsibility, to provide education for their staff and/or their children. One such ministry is the Ministry of Defence (MOD). The Ministry of Education supervises about 51.4% and the General Presidency for Girls’ Education about 39.0% of all schools. The other governmental departments supervise about 3.4% of schools. Just over 6% of schools are controlled by private sector (Ministry of Education, 1992).

There are two main departments responsible for providing education in MOD. One of them is the military training department, which supervises all military schools and training centres for in-service and pre-service staff. The second department is the Department of Education and Culture at MOD. It is responsible for providing education for the children (male and female) of the Ministry’s staff. In each military campus there are schools in the three main stages of general education: elementary, intermediate and secondary. All these schools follow completely the national curriculum, but are supervised by the Department of Education and Culture. One of them is Al-Abna’a Secondary school in Riyadh, from which the sample for this research was drawn.
2.3 The Organisation of the Education System in KSA

The education system in Saudi Arabia has five divisions. They are: kindergarten for children from three to six years old, elementary (6-11), intermediate (12-14), secondary level (15-18), and university level (typically 19-24, depending on the subjects studied, and the form of higher education).

The secondary stage is the final phase of general education in the Kingdom. It is a three-year period, following on from the intermediate stage. Students are admitted to this stage if they have obtained the intermediate stage certificate. Normally students follow secondary stage education between the ages of 16 and 18 years. This stage is considered the most important period in the general education ladder because students who successfully complete this stage are eligible to join any higher education institution.

2.4 English in KSA

In Saudi Arabia, English is spoken as a foreign language (i.e. it is an EFL country), and the Saudi English is essentially a performance variety. To gain a better understanding of what this means, one might refer to Kachru’s concept of three concentric circles, which represent “the types of spread, the patterns of acquisition and the functional domains in which English is used across cultures and languages.”(1985: 12) The “inner circle” is comprised of such countries as the UK, the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, where English is the primary language. In the “outer circle”, English is used quite widely for internal (intranational) purposes; examples are India and Singapore. As an EFL country, Saudi Arabia belongs to the third circle, the “expanding circle”, where English is used as a tool for communication, trade, business, diplomacy, travel, and as a medium in higher education.

Saudi Arabia is one of the biggest countries in the world that have a population of long distance foreigners in relation to citizens’ population (Parfit, 1998). Mainly the people of Saudi Arabia communicate with them by using English. Non-native speakers of English from countries like Pakistan, India, Philippine, Indonesia and Bangladesh, represent the majority of the foreigners’ population in Saudi Arabia.

Another point is that English language is a medium for many subjects at the tertiary level, such as science, medicine, dentistry, engineering and computers and to a lesser extent in others. One of the conditions for acceptance into schools such as Medicine and Dentistry, is English language proficiency. The need for the language is even greater at higher degree level; it is essential in most majors.

Economic factors also play a role in the status of English in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi Arabian economy has grown at a very rapid rate over the last two decades, and is no longer totally dependent on oil revenues. Moreover, Saudi Arabia plays a leading role in support of the world economy through its contribution to international
organisations. The growth of the Saudi economy has achieved international respect and interest. Therefore, it has become a big market for South Asia, South East Asia and Europe as well. Moreover, as a member of the world community, Saudi Arabia has diplomatic relationships with countries of native speakers of English and non-native speakers as well. For all these activities, English language is a means of communication.

Consequently, the government of Saudi Arabia realised the need for teaching English quite early, and introduced the English language course as a compulsory subject from the intermediate level through the secondary level to tertiary level.

2.5 Aims of Teaching English in the Secondary Stage in KSA

According to the overall syllabus for the three years of the secondary stage (1970) the general aims are:

1- To afford the secondary school pupil a window on the world.

2- To give the secondary school pupil an experience of delight through reading samples of English that have a universal appeal both in arts and sciences.

3- To cultivate the pupil’s critical thinking as a useful adjunct to intelligent reading of English texts.

4- To give play to the pupil’s imagination by means of imagery in poetry and visualisation of character.

5- To provide the pupil who intends to join the university or other higher institutes with an adequate knowledge of English to help him in his future studies.

6- To give the pupil who finishes his formal education in the third year of secondary education sufficient knowledge of the language to help him in his vocation.

The specific objectives are:

1- To help the pupil gain in three years a reasonable mastery of the four language skills which are:

   • Listening with understanding to spoken English;
   • Speaking current English correctly with the proper stress and intonation;
   • Reading with understanding English texts that vary in difficulty from adapted and simplified material to the original in an abridged form;
   • Writing a connected passage of up to a full page on a subject of a descriptive or a discursive nature.

2- To stress the instrumental value of learning a foreign language as a useful tool for cultural as well as social and economic communication.

3- To foster in the pupil an interest in reading so that later on he may be prepared to read reference books,
periodicals and pamphlets bearing on his future field of specialisation.

Based on these objectives, textbooks for the secondary stage were designed. Through the years, the textbooks have been revised and renewed. The latest version is called “English for Saudi Arabia”. It has been designed especially for Saudi Arabia. In the next section, an overview of the textbooks for Secondary stage, Year 1 will be presented.

2.6 The Analysis of the Secondary Year 1 Textbooks

The textbooks under study are called, ‘English for Saudi Arabia’ (EFSA). They are first year secondary textbooks. EFSA is one volume of a national school textbook series. There are two books for First year secondary: Eng.1, and Eng.2. As the writers (Al-Qurashi ET al, 1995a: P6) said, “these books form a bridge between the intermediate and secondary courses”. Like all textbooks in Saudi Arabia, they reflect the national curriculum; indeed, the Ministry of Education is in charge of setting the objectives and designing these books.

These textbooks were a product of needs assessments conducted by the writers. As they report, ‘We talked to Ministry officials. We talked to supervisors. We talked to many teachers. We visited many schools in cities, towns, and villages. We observed many classes and watched how the existing materials were being taught. We tried to see where they were successful and where they were not so successful. We tried to find out what teachers’ problems were by listening to their suggestions and by watching them teach’ (Ibid. 1995a: P2).

According to this statement by the writers, one notices that the process did not involve the learners actively. The writers did not address the learners directly or try to find out the learners’ needs. This point raises the main research question, namely, how far does EFSA meet the students’ needs?

Not all language skills are given equal emphasis in EFSA. Each year, the course concentrates on one or two skills so that all skills are brought to the highest possible standard by the end of the stage. The emphasis of the Secondary year 1 course is on listening and speaking skills, as the writers pointed out (Ibid. 1995a). They believe that this is appropriate for the students of year 1, because some of them may leave school at the end of the year (this year is a kind of filter year during which students face a lot of new subjects). Also, they claim that the activities presented use the language that students will meet and need outside the classroom. How well this aim is met in practice will be investigated in this study.

The writers (1995b) used an approach similar to Opening Strategies (Abbs and Freebairn, 1983; cited in Gibbons, 1984), that of using a story line to link the other elements around the functional strand. There are six units in each book. The six units of Eng.1 and 2 are linked by the idea of a TV programme. In most units, a TV host called Ahmad Al-Ali introduces the topic with an interview (see appendices C1-C3, for examples of
lessons showing the programme).

Each unit is divided into eight lessons. Lesson 1 gives practice in Listening and Speaking. The teacher is asked to use a poster to introduce the subject, and a cassette player to practise listening and speaking. Lesson 2 concentrates on Grammar points from the interview. Pupils are expected to practise saying them. The main grammatical points are summarised in tables or diagrams. Lesson 3 is usually for reading. It is mainly for teaching pupils how to read on their own. Lesson 4 contains a word study. New words are defined and explained in English in context. Lesson 5 concentrates on Writing. Pupils are asked to write memos and short paragraphs based on notes, tables, maps and pictures. Lesson 6 and 7 are two activities’ lessons (see appendices D1-D4, where the Contents of EFSA term 1 & 2 are presented). In them, pupils practise speaking in different situations, using the words and structures which they know. Lesson 8 revises some of the grammar in the unit.

Another language strand that, indeed, is sequenced simultaneously with the functional strand is Grammar (structures). So, the syllabus underlying the textbook seems to be a ‘multi-dimensional’ (Johnson, 1982), (semantic) type of syllabus as the writers integrated the notional and functional meaning with grammar, thematic content and lexis (see appendix E1, summary of the contents of two units).

Although there have been minor revisions to the textbook, the methodological framework for language teaching has stayed the same since 1970, the oral approach. The syllabus (1970: 293) states that “the teaching of English in the secondary school should enhance the pupil’s oral ability and not to allow it to flag. At the secondary stage the oral approach is based on the assumption that the spoken language underlies writing” (guiding the spoken language like the written language). One of the points against this approach is that it sees language learning as a matter of imitation as Littlewood pointed out (1982). It argues that students should have a clear-cut model to follow. Thus, there is a great effort to prevent students’ errors. There is no freedom to create. Also, language structures are introduced using repetitive drills. Moreover, there is dependence on memorisation of set phrases. The approach views the pupils as empty vessels.

Hatch (1978, cited in Nunan, 1991) suggests that in learning a second language, instead of the assumption that one first learns how to manipulate structures and builds up a repertoire of forms and then learns to put them to use in a communicative function, we should consider the assumption that one first learns how to converse; one learns how to interact verbally, and as a result of this interaction the ‘syntactic structures’ are developed. Bygate (1988, cited in Nunan, 1991) supports this notion that one starts off by learning how to interact, as he demonstrates that most inter-actional talk consists not of complete grammatical structures, but of what he calls ‘satellite units’; any dependent syntactic element like noun, adjective, adverb, prepositional phrases and so on.
These satellite units consist of ungrammatical structures like prepositional, adverbial, or noun phrases.

However, learners see the textbooks as a framework or guide that helps them organise their learning both inside and outside the classroom, during discussions in lessons, while doing activities and exercises, studying on their own, doing homework, and preparing for tests (Hutchinson & Torres, 1984). The textbooks provide a sort of security to the learners, especially language learners. The impact is inevitably high, as many students pointed out (Al-Shumaimeri, 1998) that the textbooks are very useful and they see them as a reference and as guidance. This is the way learners view the textbooks, which makes it more important that the textbooks must fulfil these needs. This study will investigate that whether or not the textbooks (EFSA) do fulfil the students’ expressed needs.

2.7 The Textbooks and Teachers

Textbooks provide teachers with teaching techniques, refresh their memories about the ones they had learned, and teach them new techniques. Hutchinson and Torres pointed out that “the more complex a textbook becomes, the more skill is required of the teacher in using it.” Therefore, the textbook should be seen as a means of re-skilling not de-skilling. (1994: 325) The writers (1995a) also provide the teachers with a teacher’s book (TB), which contains detailed lesson plans and teaching techniques, test directions and a model test based on the syllabus and the course objectives (see appendices F1-F4, sample of a lesson plan). Teachers are asked by the general inspectorate at the Ministry of Education to follow the teacher’s book. Thus, little or no scope is left for individual teaching styles and approaches.

Teacher training programmes in Saudi Arabia seek to provide training for an adequate supply of teachers qualified in subject matter and method, because the government believes that the teacher is critical to the classroom processes and can maximise the use of various facilities available such as curricula, textbooks, buildings, audio-visual aids, laboratories and so on. However, in-service programmes are poorly handled. They are not sufficient. According to the writers (1995a), the teacher’s book is considered to be an in-service training course and what is presented in it is a result of the needs assessment conducted by them. The writers (1995a: 03) said, “The teacher’s book is a kind of in-service training course. If you use it carefully all the time, it will help you to improve your teaching.” This statement is overstated as in-service training is devalued by being purely book-based.

2.8 The Examination System for Secondary Year 1

Tests in Saudi Arabia are used solely for the sake of assessing the students’ performance with regard to what has been taught: “achievement tests” (Hughes, 1989). They are school-based tests, constructed and designed
by the teachers of the school. From the researcher’s experience as a teacher of this level, the teachers always follow the instructions and the marking scheme of the General Directorate of Education in designing their tests (see appendices G1-G2, Official instructions for tests and mark scheme).

According to the writers of the textbook employed by the Ministry of Education, the test objective is “to find out what skills the pupils have in English” (Al-Qurashi et al, 1995a: 201). In addition, according to the syllabus document, tests are also necessary in order to determine if the teaching has been effective. The tests also help the teacher to find out the difficulties of the pupil. The results of the test form a basis on which the teacher plans his future work (Ministry of Education, 1970).

In Secondary Year 1, language tests are divided into two parts, an oral test, which includes the skills of listening and speaking; and a written test which includes the skills of grammar, reading, vocabulary, and writing. As mentioned above, the teachers always follow the instructions and the marking scheme of the General Directorate of Education in designing their tests. According to the instructions given by the General Directorate of Education (appendices G1-G2), 29 marks are allocated to the written test and the remaining 6 marks are for the oral test. That means that the oral test accounts for 17% of the overall mark.

On the other hand, the marking scheme proposed in the teachers’ book, which is based on the syllabus and the course objectives differs (appendices H1-H2, the mark scheme from Teacher’s Book). The oral test represents 25% for speaking skill and 20% for listening, which makes a total of 45%. However, teachers all over the country follow the official scheme, which is the first one (appendices G1-G2).

The mismatch between the marking scheme from the inspectorate department and the teacher’s book affects the design and construction of the test. Teachers and students may focus on the written test, as this accounts for most marks. The mismatch in focus between the test and the textbook objectives may create a gap between what the textbooks claim, what the students need, and what the test demands. The washback of the test on the learning process, teachers, and students may be a negative one. It may cause students to develop a negative attitude toward the language (this point is discussed further in Ch. 6).

2.9 Conclusion

This chapter has focused on providing an overview of the education system in Saudi Arabia, and the aims of the secondary stage with an analysis of the textbooks of secondary year 1 which are the target of this study. Also, the examination system at this year (secondary year 1) was presented. From the textbook analysis, one can see that the writers claim that these textbooks concentrate on developing the skills of listening and speaking. That is the basis on which the textbooks were written. Also, they claim that the activities presented use the language
that the students meet and need outside the classroom. Although they conducted needs assessments, however, they failed to involve the learners. Moreover, it has been discovered that there is a mismatch between what the textbooks focus on and what the test demands. This raises the question of how this mismatch affects the students. Also, it relates to the research question, namely, how far does the textbook meet the students’ need? The answer to all these questions can be provided by needs analysis. The next chapter will discuss why needs analysis is necessary, what type is needed, and how it should be conducted.