

The Place of Inner-Circle Culture in Saudi Secondary School Textbooks

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Abstract:

In spite of the general availability of English textbooks in Saudi Arabia, many school textbooks that are used lack any reference to English/American culture. This article attempts to analyse two secondary school textbooks; English for Saudi Arabia and the Traveller 5. In particular, it aims to determine the extent to which these textbooks refer to inner-circle culture (countries that use English as a first language such as the UK/USA). It will follow two methods; analysing the content of the textbooks and interviewing educational supervisors. English for Saudi Arabia refers to the Saudi local and Islamic culture and its main focus is on linguistic competence. However, Traveller 5 refers to multi-cultural topics and it emphasises the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approaches. The researchers conclude with the recommendation that Traveller textbooks need to give more attention to inner-circle culture but in ways that will be acceptable to the learners' local culture.

Key Words: *textbook, linguistic competence, communicative competence, culture, inner-circle culture.*

Introduction

English school textbooks are deemed the most relevant source of learning English, and in Saudi Arabia in particular almost all classrooms still focus on using textbooks and the accompanying package such as the student's book, the workbook, class CDs and the test CD. They are used as reference materials; students need to access their books to cover the whole lesson and activities and the audio CDs as well. More generally with EFL teaching, the course book helps English teachers, particularly trainees, to organise the objectives of their lessons. In addition, the school textbooks involve guidelines and tips that will help both teachers (the teacher's manual) and

students (the student's book). Han (2004: 151) discusses that "The classroom input – comprised primarily of (1) teachers' talk, (2) textbooks, and (3) peer speech". By the same token, Bartram (2010) mentions three factors that influence the learners' views towards the target language learning; influences relating to the teacher, to the school and to the textbooks.

The relationship between language and its culture

Any language transmits its values and culture explicitly or implicitly. That means it is necessary to access the culture to enable a speaker to use the target language successfully. Krech, Crutchfield and Ballachey (1962) illustrate the functions of language involving the following characteristics:

- Language is delivered by communication among people.
- Language reflects speakers' culture.
- Language transfers its culture through interactions.

These functions show that a language and its culture are interwoven. All of them complement each other in order to convey a message. Chastain (1988: 56) says that "Language is the key that opens the door and allows us to look into the minds of others, to share what they have learned, and to feel what they have felt." According to this point of view, it can be inferred that learning English language requires learning its culture whether overtly or covertly.

Regarding English uses around the world, Kachru (1985) classifies world Englishes into three circles; inner circle societies (English is used as a first language) such as in the UK, USA, Canada and Australia; outer circle societies (English is used as a second language) such as in India, Pakistan and Zambia; and expanding circle societies (English is used as a foreign language) such as in the Arab and Gulf countries, China and Japan.

This article attempts to apply Kachru's classification to Saudi secondary school textbooks to determine the type of cultural content in those textbooks and identify the extent of the availability of inner-circle culture in those textbooks. Cortazzi and Jin (1999) categorize textbooks according to cultural content into three categories:

- Textbooks reflect the local culture.
- Textbooks reflect the target culture.
- Textbooks reflect multicultural topics.

English school Textbooks in Saudi Arabia

Although the accessibility of learning tools such as the Internet has expanded, still school textbooks are the main source of learning English in the classroom. Szende (2014: 299-300)

mentions that “the textbook constitutes a prism through which we perceive objectives, methodologies, an idea of the culture of the L2 and of the L1 communities”.

The Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia has made tremendous efforts to improve educational outcomes and enable learners to get benefits from school textbooks as much as possible. In fulfilling this mission, the Ministry had replaced English textbooks four times between the 1960s and 2013. The development passed through four stages, and Al-Seghayer (2005) outlines the history of school textbooks in Saudi Arabia. The first textbook, entitled *Living English for the Arab World*, was implemented between the 1960s and the 1980s. This course book was replaced by the Ministry of Education with another textbook entitled *Saudi Arabian School English*. This was then replaced by another series entitled *English for Saudi Arabia* in the mid-1990s. The earlier course books reflected Arab and Saudi culture. However, Faruk (2014) mentions that the Ministry of Education and Saudi citizens' views about teaching English language alongside inner-circle culture have become more positive over the last decade. So books have become more oriented towards Western culture recently. The first three textbooks were replaced by a new series entitled *Traveller* to expose the learners to different cultural elements rather than the local ones.

Tracing the history of the textbooks; replacement reveals that the results of using school textbooks do not currently match the Ministry of Education's visions and needs. Also, the history indicates that modernising textbooks is a constant process required to improve the educational outcomes and keep the learners' knowledge about other cultures up to date. Hence, reforming school textbooks may be attributed to different reasons. They are as follows:

- Developing students' communicative competence.
- Enabling students to use English language successfully.
- Exposing the learners to a variety of cultures rather than the local culture.
- Keeping students in touch with the outer world in order to build bridges between the learners and other people around the world to avoid isolation.

Statement of problem

In spite of Saudi students' high marks in tests (especially in grammar and vocabulary), they are still unable to speak English successfully as reported by Al-Nasser (2015) and Alharbi (2015). This may be due to the lack of inner-circle culture and inner-circle interactive situations in the current school textbooks. Therefore, the researchers focused on analysis of the textbooks to explore their cultural content and to determine the position of inner-circle culture in them by analysing the texts that are available in those course books.

This paper is based on five research questions:

1. To what extent do the Saudi secondary school course books objectives fulfill learners' needs of communication skills (spoken and written)?
2. To what extent do the Saudi secondary school course books emphasise linguistic competence?
3. To what extent do the Saudi secondary school course books emphasise communicative competence?
4. To what extent do the Saudi secondary school course books utilise authentic inner-circle texts?
5. To what extent do the Saudi textbooks reflect inner-circle interactive situations?

In order to uncover the cultural content type in English school textbooks and then to determine the place of inner-circle culture, the qualitative approach was used. Two research methods were used to collect data. Firstly, textbook analysis which enabled the researchers to diagnosis their weaknesses and strengths and provide recommendations to develop the outcomes from studying them. Two books were analysed; *English for Saudi Arabia* (2011) a 3rd year secondary school first term Student's book and *Traveller 5* (2013), a 3rd year secondary school first semester, Student's book. Secondly, a semi-structured interview was carried out with educational supervisors in the city of Makkah to validate the findings from the book analysis and acquire more information related to the cultural content type in these books. Seven educational supervisors were interviewed because they are experts in the English language field. The interviews were face to face. They were conducted in Arabic then the data was translated into English and reviewed by an Arabic educator and two English teachers.

Results and Discussion

Textbook Analysis

This section presents findings from the study and discusses them in order to answer the research questions. They are as follows:

1. To what extent do Saudi secondary school course books objectives fulfill learners' needs?

A. English for Saudi Arabia

This course book does not explicitly present the lessons' objectives, which relate to teaching vocabulary and grammar. The textbook does not help the learners to use English as a communication medium because it does not refer to how English is used in real life. Hence, the textbooks objectives do not satisfy the learners' needs for using English in comprehensible manner.

B. Traveller 5

This course book states the lessons' objectives at the beginning of each module. The objectives encompass different skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing). They assist students to practice inside the classroom but still the lessons' objectives do not emphasise the language as used in inner-circle societies. The objectives cover different topics globally, there are some texts which refer to inner-circle culture, for instance, a lesson about places and holidays in the USA, elsewhere students are presented with different advertisements for five museums in the USA. There is also a text about Iceland and a text about the natural environment in South Africa.

2. To what extent do Saudi secondary school course books emphasise linguistic competence?

A. English for Saudi Arabia

This textbook includes six units and each unit covers six lessons. It focuses on linguistic competence as the main competence in teaching English by emphasising teaching vocabulary and grammar in isolated sentences. Lesson Three of each unit introduces grammar deductively (starting with rules, then examples, then practice). Lesson Five presents word study (single words with parts of speech, definition and using them in full sentences). Lesson Six in each unit presents the revision of grammatical rules again.

B. Traveller 5

Although the textbook includes receptive and productive language skills and multi-cultural topics as well, there is still a special focus on vocabulary and grammar. This course book consists of four modules, each module covers two units, and each unit includes four lessons. The structure of each module is presented in three pages of grammar and vocabulary lessons. At the end of each unit the textbook introduces examination practice (Round-up); this section includes reading and listening skills and also it revises grammar and vocabulary again.

This course book presents grammar and vocabulary both in isolated sentences and within reading texts, *Traveller 5* introduces grammar inductively (starting with presenting examples, then practice, then rules). For instance, the grammar rules for 'Future forms' are introduced both within and out of context.

3. To what extent do Saudi secondary school course books emphasise communicative competence?

A. English for Saudi Arabia

This textbook does not focus on communicative competence. The main emphasis is on teaching grammar and vocabulary as mentioned above. The textbook refers to Saudi and Islamic culture (this point will be discussed in the next research question).

B. Traveller 5

Traveller 5 still focuses on vocabulary and grammar but these areas of language learning are introduced and practiced both in isolated sentences and within reading texts. This textbook also includes a variety of communicative activities such as role play, problem solving and classroom discussions in order to encourage personal responses inside the classroom and to assist the learners to be independent learners.

4. To what extent do Saudi secondary school course books utilise authentic inner-circle texts?

A. English for Saudi Arabia

The *English for Saudi Arabia* course book includes seven texts; three are about global topics such as 'Water', 'Conservation' and 'Earth and its neighbors'. Also, it contains three texts related to the Saudi situation such as 'Air travel in Saudi Arabia', 'How Saudia trains its flight attendants' and 'Arab Aid'. And one text refers to Islamic culture 'The Holy Month of Ramadan'.

B. Traveller 5

Traveller 5 provides students with different reading materials such as advertisements, brochures and magazine and newspaper articles. They reflect multi-cultural topics about different areas around the world. For instance, one text that is taken from a magazine article about travelling 'Interrailing around Europe'; in another the learners read advertisements about different museums in the USA, then talk about the one they would like to visit most. Another example of this introduces a text related to life in South Africa, titled 'My Natural Environment'.

5. To what extent do Saudi secondary school course books reflect inner-circle interactive situations?

A. English for Saudi Arabia

This course book contains neither texts nor communicative tasks to show how English is used in inner-circle societies. The main focus is on the local culture. So, this textbook lacks any inner-circle interactive situations.

B. Traveller 5

Traveller 5 does not pay full attention to inner-circle interactive situations. The textbook includes two texts that reflect how English is used in inner-circle communities. The first text displays a communication between a Saudi and his English friend 'Peter' who lives in the UK. Peter offers to pick up his Saudi friend up from Manchester airport and take him to different attractive places within the UK. This lesson shows how to use English in the UK and also how to write a response in order to express certain functions, such as expressing thanks, apologising, and accepting and

declining an invitation. Also, another lesson presents an interactive situation between Edward and his friend Jack. The lesson illustrates how to extend an invitation to friends, give information about an art exhibition in England, and how to find out about ticket costs.

Interviews

In order to validate the results from the textbook analysis method, the educational supervisors were interviewed in the city of Makkah to determine their views on the inner-circle culture position in the Saudi school course books. The educational supervisors who were interviewed reported that *English for Saudi Arabia* textbook refers to the Saudi local and Islamic culture. An example of this is reported by interviewee 2:

I think it reflects Saudi and Islamic culture. If you look back to the textbook carefully, you will not find any text refers to the foreign culture. This textbook may help our students to read but they can't use the target language as a communication medium.

A similar comment was made by the interviewee 3:

If you check the textbook, you will find 7 texts; 3 texts refer to Saudi situations, 3 global topics and one text refers to Islamic culture "Ramadan". The words and sentences don't refer to American or English culture.

Mahboob and Elyas (2014) report that all course books in the series of *English for Saudi Arabia* reflect the Saudi local and Islamic culture. Another study was carried out by Al-Hijailan (1999), the researcher found that this textbook focused on the learners' culture in order to simplify the learning process inside the classroom. A similar result was found by Faruk (2015).

In contrast, there was a consensus among the educational supervisors about the *Traveller 5* textbook. They believed that this textbook reflects multi-cultural topics. For instance, interviewee 1 mentioned that: "Well, I think it refers to multicultural topics. Some topics are taken from magazines and newspapers".

Another comment related to *Traveller 5* textbook was reported by interviewee 3:

The textbook covers different contemporary topics and provide the learners with multicultural topics related to real life. Also, it covers activities referring to the real world to enable the students to use English confidently. I think it needs more focus on people's real life situations who use English as a first language.

Based on the above results, there is clear evidence that the previous textbooks' outcomes do not fit the Ministry of Education's vision; developing students' knowledge with a variety of skills in order to prepare them academically and culturally at local and international level. Hence, there is

a movement from within Saudi local culture to engage learners in more global cultures. It seems that the vital goal is to enable learners to travel around the world and use English as an international language without referring to a certain culture, and also to assist scholars who want to study abroad to apply the new knowledge and share it with others around the world. The biggest disadvantage of this approach is that learners will face difficulties in using English in a comprehensible manner in particular in inner-circle societies, because English language is inseparable from its culture as stated by Abdollahi-Guilani et al. (2012) and Krech, Crutchfield and Ballachey (1962). English is the only foreign language that is taught in Saudi schools, hence using such language effectively requires learning about inner-circle culture rather than learning English alongside multicultural topics.

The series of *Traveller* textbooks compared with the earlier textbooks constitutes an improvement in the history of school textbooks in Saudi Arabia. This series is characterised by useful new features such as covering English receptive and productive skills, involving multicultural topics and implementing the CLT approaches (discussion, role playing and problem solving tasks). And also it takes the learners through a variety of classroom activities that help them to reflect their personal responses. As a result, the *Traveller* course book transports learners from memorising vocabulary and grammatical rules to practice in the classroom by implementing communicative tasks. It might be argued that these characteristics create a gap between the teacher and the new textbook and between teacher and students because teachers are better prepared to teach traditional approaches rather than the communicative approaches. It is worth noting that the new textbooks are accompanied with useful packages; one of the textbook components is the teacher's manual, designed to guide teachers in general and novice teachers in particular with suggestions and tips to use these textbooks inside the classroom. Because of the new textbook emphasis on the CLT approaches, the teacher's manual also prepares them for the challenges they may face in the classroom.

Recommendations

According to the findings of this study, the researchers recommend some issues that need to be taken into consideration in order to develop English course books for schools. They are as follows:

- The school course book should emphasise communicative competence rather than linguistic competence.
- The school course book should refer to inner-circle culture but making sure that it does not conflict with the local culture.
- The course book should focus on acceptable authentic materials that are taken from inner-circle societies.
- The school course book should refer to inner-circle communicative situations to show how real English is used in daily life.

- Teachers should be well prepared by being provided with training courses to integrate inner-circle culture into the EFL classrooms.

Suggestions for further studies

The researchers made some recommendations for conducting further studies to evaluate school textbooks, and to explore their weaknesses and strengths. They are as follows:

- A further study to evaluate school textbooks in Saudi Arabia in order to explore their usefulness for teaching communicative competence.
- Textbooks analysis should focus on the place of inner-circle culture rather than on their appearance and degree of suitability for the different levels of learners. Therefore, a revised textbook which includes reference to inner circle culture is recommended.

Conclusion

The goal of this article has been to explore the type of cultural content in Saudi secondary school textbooks and to determine the place of inner-circle culture in those textbooks. So the article focused on five questions in order to determine the type of cultural content in both school textbooks. They were as follows: the extent to which *Traveller 5* and *English for Saudi Arabia* fulfil the learners' needs, focus on linguistic competence, focus on communicative competence, use authentic inner-circle texts and refer to inner-circle interactive situations. From the outcome of the investigation it is possible to conclude the following:

English for Saudi Arabia:

- The course book's objectives do not fulfil the learners' needs to use English language effectively.
- This course book does not pay attention to English language skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing).
- This course book emphasises linguistic competence.
- This course book refers to the Saudi local culture.
- This course book does not contain authentic materials.

Traveller 5:

- The course book's objectives fulfil students' needs to a low level to use English as communication medium.
- This course book focuses on receptive and productive language skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing).
- This course book pays attention to communicative competence to a low level.
- This course book exposes the learners to multi-cultural topics.
- This course book contains authentic materials.
- This course book includes communicative tasks assist the learners to be autonomous.

Based on these results, and in summary the *English for Saudi Arabia* refers to local and Islamic culture while *Traveller 5* reflects multicultural topics. There is no reference to inner-circle culture made in *English for Saudi Arabia*. But two texts refer to inner-circle communicative situations. Therefore, there is a need for a new kind of textbook which includes reference to acceptable aspects of inner-circle culture to the Saudi culture.

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