

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 patterns by examining 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 are 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

I. INTRODUCTION

E NGLISH textbooks used in 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, 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.

Nevertheless, 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 by the Saudi Ministry of Education and written by Saudi writers. As Saudi Arabia has gone through these three phases in the past three decades, this paper investigates the cultural patterns of these three kinds of textbook and finds that the books adopted broadly two kinds of cultural patterns, taking into consideration both

international trends of using culture in English textbooks, as well as internal socio-economic perspectives.

II. 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 the hegemonic view of culture by Rothkopf and Friedman. Next, on the basis of Wallerstein's and Blommaert's view of the 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.

A. 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 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, the Baumanian view of culture asserts that a culture cannot be sustained if it does not allow change within its territory. Bauman (1999, p. xiv) states that culture is about "discontinuity as much as about continuation; about novelty as much as about tradition; about routine as much as about pattern-breaking...." He believes that man-made order

does not exist without human freedom to choose which invariably implies that change is inevitable in culture and society. It is to be noted here that Bauman does not believe in “discontinuity”, “novelty”, and “pattern-breaking” only, he also 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 not any longer 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 the US is the world hegemon whether it likes it or not.

B. 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 businesses and create the core zone, which controls the rest of the world, while the least developed countries, characterized by 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 quickly as possible. In order to do that, Wallerstein believes, a country has to develop a knowledge-based

monopolist mode of production, interact with the other states efficiently, and govern its citizens through gaining their consent.

As the demands of the world system, on the one hand, and the citizens' cultural, religious, and social norms, on the other, often contradict each other, a state has to be very cautious in managing its internal affairs so that nothing coming from above the state level is perceived as 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 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 behave in this manner because it is neither inwardly nor 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 cultural elements.

III. 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.

A. 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 from the middle 1950s until 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, in order 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 a 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 (Kramersch, 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 put 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 in a globalized world, where all kinds of

boundaries—political, social, and economic—are becoming increasingly porous. Hence 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 seems to be insufficient. Therefore in addition to acquiring intercultural communicative competence, the students should try to get intercultural citizenship in the modern world. In order to acquire such global cultural consciousness, they should be provided with the EFL education which has a transformative goal—transforming the locally oriented students into reflective, open, and globally oriented learners. However, very few textbooks have this transformative goal (Byram,2011).

B. 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 the same cultural patterns focusing on 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 have been replaced with those of Western culture.

The introduction of these cultural patterns was not always timed to coincide with the changes in Saudi economic development. For example, Saudi Arabia entered into the

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 until 2012. Faruk (2014a) 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 Western culture and the rest are based on Saudi and culturally non-specific elements. This 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 be by 2024.

The reason for not introducing the materials to acquaint the students with 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 Western culture and intercultural competence must have been a strong demand of the forces from above the state level but the state did not respond to the pressure perhaps due to its taking into consideration the factors active below the state level. 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; Faruk, 2014b)

In 2013, the textbooks took almost a U-turn in terms of the cultural elements. Now instead of Saudi and Islamic cultural elements, Western ones permeate the pages of the books of series like Traveller, Full Blast, and Smart Class etc. Although this phenomenon seems to be a reflection of Rothkopf's (1997) and Friedman's (1999) ideas, in fact 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 Western cultural elements that the state, nowadays, does not feel 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; Faruk, 2014b).

IV. 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 towards the national or largely in favor of the transnational cultures. The orientation of the books,

published prior to 2013, towards the national culture can be explained by putting them in perspective but the prejudice of the books, published after 2013, towards Western culture, when the objective condition has been 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 that reason is the importation of global course books. The global course books are not produced for any particular country—they are commercially composed usually by native writers of English for the huge global market, 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 make use of the books which are written exclusively for its students and by writers who are completely au fait with the learners' social milieu.

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