

# **DOES THE SAUDI ENGLISH LANGUAGE CURRICULUM REFLECT THE CURRENT STATE OF ENGLISH? A DOCUMENTARY ANALYSIS FROM A GLOBAL ENGLISHES PERSPECTIVE**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Saudi English language education has experienced a continuous process of reform and revision. Recently, the Saudi English Language Curriculum (SELC) has been introduced to the research and practice community. The lack of research investigating language policies in the Saudi context is where the current study situates itself. Thus, a qualitative documentary analysis was carried out to study the document. The findings suggest that the newly reformed curriculum recognises the new global status of the English language, though implicitly. However, this recognition of English as a global language is not reflected in the desired practices. The native-speaker model seems to be the one that SELC has adopted. This is shown in the use of CEFR as the assessment reference of grading and in the traditional teaching approach. Regarding culture depiction in SELC, there was an emphasis on the role of culture in language education. The local culture (source) has received a considerable amount of attention in the form of topics relevant to Saudi Islamic culture yet the understanding of the notion of culture was still that of a traditional one. A number of research implications and limitations are reported in the conclusion of this paper.

**Key Words:** English Language Teaching, Global Englishes, English as a Lingua Franca, Language Policy and Planning

## **INTRODUCTION**

Curricular documents are vital means in foreign language education policy-making, particularly in terms of framing formal curriculum policy, i.e. “the official, mandatory statement of what is

to be taught to students” (Connelly & Connelly, 2010, p. 224). Indeed, curricular documents tell us more than the content of instruction. They also specify several curriculum matters, e.g. teaching methods, techniques, classroom materials, activities, new technologies in the classroom, assessment and cultural issues (Gray, Scott & Mehisto, 2018). The role of curriculum in any educational system is pivotal in that teachers, as the key policy actors, are tasked in a top-down manner with planning their education procedures for a particular period of time (e.g. a single lesson, session or term) and then transferring educational goals into concrete practices in accordance with the curriculum objectives. It can thus be regarded as a roadmap for teachers to rely on during their attempts to reach the desired outcomes. Given the importance of the curriculum in the domain of education, the curriculum adopted should be functional, up-to-date and relevant to the needs of learners, bearing in mind recent developments and innovations in the field.

There have been drastic linguistic changes and developments in the field of applied linguistics and consequently in English language teaching (ELT) practices in recent years. To illustrate, the recent era has witnessed a significant increase in the number of speakers whose first language is not English (non-native English speakers= NNESSs) and currently, the number of these speakers greatly exceeds the number of speakers speaking English as their L1 (native English speakers= NESs). This change in the profile of English speakers has paved the way for English to play new roles and serve different functions across the world, resulting in the emergence of new paradigms, e.g. New/World Englishes, English as an International Language (EIL), English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), and Global Englishes (Crystal, 1997; Galloway & Rose, 2015; Graddol, 1997; Jenkins, 2015). Also, the emergence of such paradigms have generated some ideological debates and reforms as a result of questioning the premises of traditional EFL pedagogy with respect to issues on post-colonial varieties of English, ownership of English, native-speakerism (NES model and target), identity and culture (Jenkins, 2007; Jenkins, Cogo, & Dewey 2011; Widdowson, 1994). Against the backdrop of such debates and reforms, several researchers across the world have turned their attention to curricular documents (e.g. Karakaş, 2019), textbooks (e.g. Syrbe & Rose 2018; Vettorel, 2013) and coursebooks on specific skills (i.e. speaking and listening) (e.g. Caleffi, 2016) with an eye to identifying whether/to what extent these documentary sources have acknowledged the current status of English and have been designed in a way to teach English as a global language in light of the principles of new

paradigms.

As for the Saudi context, as far as the researchers are concerned, there has not been an attempt to investigate the Saudi English language curriculum in the light of recent changes in the field of English language teaching, particularly against the principles of the Global Englishes paradigm. As this paper is concerned with the Saudi English language curriculum, it is crucial to look at the contextual background at this stage to better understand the place of English language teaching in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (the KSA).

### **The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and English Language Teaching**

The KSA is located in western Asia and has the largest amount of land in the Arabian Peninsula with a population of around 35 million according to the Saudi General Authority for Statistics (2019). It came to be known as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932 when the dual kingdom of the Hejaz and Najd were united. It is also the birthplace of the Islamic faith and has historically served as an important trade center due to its geographical location. Its cultural roots are very rich, being largely shaped by Islamic values and Arab traditions. Moreover, it hosts millions of Muslim pilgrims from all around the world every year, and these pilgrims also contribute to the cultural enrichment and economic activities in the region as well as being affected by Arab traditions and culture in the areas of religious views, dress codes, arts and entertainment, cuisine and issues concerning women.

Its economy largely relies on oil trade as it is the largest oil producer in the world (Moliver & Abbondante, 1980). In an attempt to build a modern economy, the KSA has started improving its ties with foreign states, including western countries as well as neighboring countries and has strategically cooperated with the USA in the region. The modernization efforts in the country have paved the way for various economic, political, judicial and educational reforms “in accordance with Vision 2030, the plan to reduce Saudi Arabia’s dependence on oil income and diversify its economy” (Al-Soudeir, 2020, para. 2).

As for educational reforms, several factors largely revolve around culture. Similarly, the status of religion in Saudi society and government is reflected in education as in every aspect of life in the Kingdom. Foreign language teaching policies are no exception in this regard. Tracing the status of learning and teaching English in the Saudi context indicates that there are some factors that play a significant role in shaping theories and practices in education.

Historically, the majority of Saudis have adopted negative attitudes towards English in the past. English in the KSA in the past was only a required subject the students needed to study, and there was no real need for it in people's real lives. However, recently, there has been a conspicuously positive shift in Saudi learners' attitudes and perceptions towards learning English. It is believed that the status of English as the international language of communication has influentially reconstructed the attitudes and perceptions of Saudis towards English. Similarly, one can argue that this change is attributed to the recent political, cultural, social and educational reforms that the Saudi government has implemented.

In the late 1920s, English was integrated into Saudi higher levels of the education system and was seen at that time as a "threat" to the local conservative culture (Alshahrani, 2016). After the economic boom in the KSA after oil discovery, the use of English to facilitate international business was seen as a necessity (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). This has been reflected in major reforms in the Saudi education system. English was first taught as a required subject in the intermediate stage at grade 7 in 1970 and continued to be taught to students up until grade 12 in the secondary stage (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). Consequently, the total number of years English was taught in public schools was six. This continued to happen until the beginning of the new century when English was introduced at the elementary stage.

Introducing English as a required subject in the elementary stage has always been a continual debate in Saudi society, from voices that rejected the integration of English into upper grades of the elementary stage in 2003 when English was introduced to the 6th grade, to voices welcoming the move towards more reforms in English education. In 2012, the Ministry of Education continued its efforts to reform education in general and English in particular by introducing English to grade 4 in the elementary stage. Therefore, children start learning English as early as the age of 10 at grade 4 for a period of 9 years across the three stages of the Saudi education system; elementary, intermediate and secondary. With regards to the time dedicated to English language teaching, it increases as students advance from lower stages to higher. It started by two classes of 45 minutes per week in the elementary stage and increased to four classes per week in the intermediate and secondary stages.

The inclusion of English as a subject in the elementary stage was based on the Saudi government vision at that time where it wanted to lessen its dependency on oil by adopting a knowledge-based economy. In this model, English is seen as the language of science, arts and

international business (Faruk, 2013). Since that time, English has been given a higher status and profile as an economic instrument.

As for the textbooks used in the KSA, they are introduced by the Ministry of Education. The Ministry of Education (MOE) in the KSA offers this ready-made English curriculum in the form of English language textbooks. These textbooks are often customized and developed by international publishers (Mitchel & Alfuraih, 2019). However, these books often reflect the values of Saudi culture (Alrabai, 2019). Despite the fact that most textbooks are adopted from Western-oriented cultures, particularly the British, they still lack the Western British spirit in the nature, organization and planning of the books' contents and elements. It is evident that classroom activities in these textbooks are not in line with those emphasized in the curriculum (Alrabai, 2019).

### **Global Englishes Paradigm**

This new paradigm serves as a superordinate concept subsuming the core principles of WE, EIL and ELF paradigms which all move away from the monolithic view of English and the supremacy of NES norms in teaching practices. Besides this liberating ideology, Global Englishes considers and addresses several issues associated with the global spread and use of English. The oft-cited definition of Global Englishes embodies these issues and it goes as follows:

Global Englishes is a paradigm that includes concepts of world Englishes, English as a lingua franca (ELF) and English as an international language (EIL). It examines the global consequences of English's use as a world language. In many ways, the scope of Global Englishes extends the lens of World Englishes, ELF, and EIL to incorporate many peripheral issues associated with the global use of English, such as globalization, linguistic imperialism, education, language policy, and planning (Galloway & Rose, 2015, p. 224).

Global Englishes scholars have so far invested their efforts in discovering ways to incorporate this diversity and plurality of English into English language classrooms. These efforts have resulted in the Global Englishes Language Teaching (GELT) model (Galloway & Rose, 2015; Rose & Galloway, 2019). This model adopts the implications of previous WE, ELF, and EIL studies for teaching English in keeping with current linguistic realities of wide-reaching English use. The key principles of GELT are summarised in the

following table against the principles of traditional ELT (in other words EFL) pedagogy.

Table 1

*Comparison of traditional EFL and GELT principles (Adapted from Galloway & Rose, 2015, p. 208).*

	Traditional (EFL) ELT	GELT
Target speaker	(Educated) NESs	Any English user (both NESs and NNESSs)
Ownership	NESs	Any English user(both NESs and NNESSs)
Target culture	Essentialist view (NES cultures)	Fluid view
Ideal teachers	NES teachers and NNESS teachers with the same L1	NNESS teachers with the same and different L1s and NES teachers
Norms	Standard Native English	Diverse, flexible and multiple forms
Role model	(Educated) NESs	Expert (skilled, competent intercultural) users / communicators
Source of materials	ENL countries featuring NESs	ENL and non-ENL countries with relevant English speaking societies
The view of students' L1 and own culture	Deficit view: Regarded as a barrier and cause of interference	Regarded as a linguistic resource

As is seen, no principles about assessment stand in the table, yet it does not mean that GELT has nothing to say about assessment. It may be inferred from the table that GELT has no intention to judge learners against NES norms and standard English conventions. Therefore, it challenges the standardized tests, which adopt “an International English (IE) view” strongly resting on the assumption that “the only acceptable norms are those of native English speakers (NES)” (Davies et al., 2003, p. 571). Besides, Global Englishes researchers find language assessment frameworks on which the international tests are built, like the Common European Framework

of References (CEFR), unfit for assessing Global Englishes users' language proficiency. The reason is that the assessment criteria of such frameworks largely "corresponds to native-like proficiency in the respective language" (Jenkins & Leung, 2013, p. 1608). Additionally, from a Global Englishes perspective, the standardized tests and assessment frameworks fail to predict learners' success for using English for particular purposes in certain communities and contexts (Leung, Lewkowicz & Jenkins, 2016). Instead of assessing learners against NES norms, Global Englishes is informed largely by ELF principles for assessment, being more concerned about the outputs, or their 'Englishing' (Hall, 2014), namely what learners are capable of achieving and doing through using English as well as their L1 and/or other languages, i.e. their linguistic resources. Thus, GELT adopts a performance-oriented assessment in which the ultimate purpose is to assess language users' intercultural communicative competence.

### **Foreign Language Education Policy**

Curricular documents are among the key policy tools that reflect the language policy of a particular state. Despite various conceptualisations of the term, language policy simply refers to "the deliberate choices made by governments or other authorities with regard to the relationship between language and social life" (Djite, 1994, p. 63). The choices made are often in the form of a body of rules and decisions legally authorized to regulate and manage languages and their uses in a given society (McGroarty, 1997; Shohamy, 2006; Spolsky, 2012). The domain of education is of particular importance as it is strictly regulated through formal language education policies (LEP), i.e. "the process through which the ideals, goals, and contents of a language policy can be realized in education practices" (Language Education Policy, 2020, para. 2). A subdomain of LEP is the foreign language education policy (FLEP) being concerned with teaching and learning foreign languages in a nation-state. The implementation of FLEP occurs at two policy levels, i.e. macro policy level and micro policy level (Wang, 2006). The former deals with the decisions expressed in the national curriculum while the latter is concerned with teachers' practices while implementing the curricular decisions on foreign language teaching. FLEP involves several decisions on teaching practices, e.g. the foreign language(s) to be taught, current and future needs of learners, who will teach these languages and how will they teach them, and how many hours, among many others.

Some researchers argue that there are also implicit curriculum policies aimed to influence the curricular practices at the micro level. Ball (1993, p. 10) addresses such policies within the notion of “policy as discourse,” pointing to the role of the ideologies shaping the stated rules and decisions in the policy documents. Besides, taking a critical perspective on language policy, researchers, like McGroarty (1997) and Shohamy (2006), argue that language policy also consists of individuals’ actual linguistic practices, warning that the stated policies may not always match or be transferred into the desired practices. Therefore, real language policies are actually “embodied and realised through a series of mechanisms or structural arrangements” (Gray, Scott & Mehisto, 2018, p. 50). It is important to study these mechanisms and their impacts on de facto language policies “as it is through these mechanisms that the de facto language policy is created and manifested” (Shohamy, 2006, p. 54). Some of these mechanisms are language tests (assessment), methods and materials suggested to be used at the micro level by the policy makers at the macro level. Thus, it is essential to pay attention to these mechanisms while analysing curricular documents to determine the de facto language policies and practices.

### **Research on FLEP Documents from a Global Englishes Perspective**

Despite curricular documents being among the oft-studied documentary data in studies, the number of studies which have investigated these documents through the lenses of recent linguistic changes (e.g. ELF, Global Englishes) is rather scarce. Overall, the extant research investigated ELT coursebooks used across different contexts in terms of representations of English (e.g. Matsuda, 2002 in Japan; Truong & Phan 2009, in Vietnam; Ceruti & Lopriore, 2012 and Vettorel & Corrizato, 2012 in Italy; Kopperoinen, 2011 in Finland) indicated that submitting themselves to traditional EFL pedagogy, the coursebooks were, regardless of their being locally or globally produced, organised around standard Inner Circle (native) Englishes. It should be noted though, that in previous studies, the study of ELT coursebooks was mostly from a general and cultural perspective and from the perspectives of WE and EIL rather than analysing them from the outlooks of the newer paradigms in detail.

However, recent research has put these documents into the spotlight from the perspectives of the more recent paradigms. For instance, in the Italian context, Vettorel and Lopriore (2013) investigated ten coursebooks used in secondary schools to find out the extent to which these coursebooks were WE- and ELF-friendly



with references to WE and/or ELF and their principles for teaching English in classes. They found that the coursebooks lacked WE- and ELF-oriented (listening and speaking mostly) tasks and resources and do not largely represent NNEs as interlocutors in interactions. Yet, some changes were observed in the coursebooks as to raising learners' intercultural awareness. Likewise, a study investigated the speaking and listening activities of four recently published coursebooks designed by NESs observed (Caleffi, 2016). It was found that the activities were designed in a way to train learners to use English in conformity with NES norms and to reach native-like competence, yet with a recognition of the global status of English. A similar scenario was seen in the German context with textbooks used in schools (Syrbe & Rose, 2018). The researchers, taking a Global Englishes perspective, found that the textbooks fall short of representing the current sociolinguistic reality of English, with an overemphasis on ENL models of English, particularly British English and underrepresentation of NNEs from Outer and Expanding circle contexts.

Some researchers noted the importance of the curriculum as a major policy document, which even shapes the design of coursebooks, and studied national ELT curricula from the perspectives of ELF and Global Englishes. Take, for example, the study carried out by Karakaş (2019) in the Turkish context. He found that the current English language curriculum for high schools makes only little mention of ELF and does so at the policy level by name only and there is almost no recognition of ELF and its implications for teaching at the level of practice. The preceding review shows that the issue of curricular documents has become a meticulously studied area of research in the field of ELF and Global Englishes as it was in those of WE and EIL. Considering the timeliness of research and the lack of previous research in the Saudi context, this research attempts to add to the literature by exploring the English language curriculum in the KSA through the lenses of GELT.

## **METHODS**

### **Research Questions and Design**

As noted earlier, curricular documents can be taken as the backbone of “the overall plan or design for a course and how the content of a course is transformed into a blueprint for teaching and learning which enables the desired learning outcomes to be achieved”

(Richards, 2013, p. 6). Therefore, this study specifically aims to answer the following research questions while evaluating the curriculum in light of the principles of GELT.

1. What image of English is portrayed in the curriculum in terms of
  - a. the current status of English
  - b. the target model(s)/norms and ownership
2. How is culture depicted and addressed in the curriculum?
  - a. Is there any reference to local culture and other cultures relevant to Saudi learners?
  - b. Does the cultural content in the curriculum raise awareness of Global Englishes (e.g. diversity, global use of English)?

The research questions are addressed by adopting a case study within the qualitative research paradigm in an attempt to study the ELT curriculum in action and the ways it functions in the Saudi educational context. While analysing particular documents in a particular society, Yin (2003, p. 2) maintains that “the distinctive need for case studies arises out of the desire to understand social complex phenomena”. Since the case in hand (the ELT curriculum) is projected to play a supportive role in identifying the extent to which it gives space to the current state of English and GELT principles, the case study adopted in this study is instrumental (Grandy, 2010). Through this design, the aim is to obtain an in-depth analysis of the set of decisions with respect to teaching English, why they are taken and how they are planned to be implemented and whether these decisions are in any way informed by the well-attested findings of previous Global Englishes and ELF studies.

#### **Data Collection: Materials**

The policy data is the Saudi English Language Curriculum (SELC) for Elementary, Intermediate and Secondary Schools designed by the Ministry of Education to be in effect between 2014 and 2020. It has been written within the scope of an English language development project and designed for students in grades 4 to 12, spanning three levels of education. The writers of the document are anonymous as there is only reference to the Ministry of Education as the responsible

body. The SELC consists of 78 pages and is publicly available<sup>1</sup> on the Internet. Thus, anyone interested in the SELC can easily download a portable file (SELC, 2020). The first 14 pages introduce the curriculum, curricular goals, general aims, set out the principles lying behind it, and address issues around culture, emerging technologies and assessment. The rest of the curriculum has been allocated to grade-specific objectives, topics/vocabulary, phonics, functions and language exponents, grammar, syllabus and objectives. The curriculum ends with two appendices, one dealing with the suggested topics relevant to the KSA and Islamic Culture for the three levels of education and the other showing the correlations of grades, CEFR Levels and International Examinations.

### Data Analysis

For data analysis, a documentary analysis method was chosen to be used. In documentary analysis, documents are treated as “social products, located in specific contexts, and, as such, have to be interrogated and interpreted rather than simply accepted” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2012, p. 203). Keeping this point in mind, the analysis of the SELC was done through a combination of a manifest and a latent content analysis (Dörnyei, 2007; Krippendorff, 2012). The purpose was to understand the manifest content, i.e. what is said in the curriculum, and as well as the latent content, i.e. what is left unsaid. To particularly analyse the underlying meaning behind the explicit statements in the curriculum, negative analysis was employed to figure out what the “meaningfully absent” elements (Pauwels, 2012, p. 253), e.g. “aspects, issues and arguments that are not covered” (p. 256) in the policy data indeed tell about the real language policies. This was vital to understand “better the perspective(s) of the producer of these words”, i.e. the perspectives of the policy makers/writers (Berg, 2001, p. 242) because qualitative content analysis is concerned with the “analysis of what is and what is not there in the material” (Schreier, 2012, p. 47). As noted by Karakaş (2019, p. 4) “meaningfully absent policy items [e.g. topics, implicit values, norms] may be symptomatic of widely held assumptions of the policy makers” since they tend to dismiss what they consider to be taken for granted. Through this type of analysis, it would be feasible to determine whether the avowed curricular goals align with the realities of real-

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<sup>1</sup> <https://eelyanbu.files.wordpress.com/2014/02/english-language-curriculum-for-schools-in-the-ksa-final.pdf>

world English use and accordingly the principles of GELT.

The analysis of the data was done via a four-step process, i.e. “finding, selecting, appraising (making sense of), and synthesising data contained in documents” (Bowen, 2009, p. 28). To this end, a predetermined coding scheme informed by the research questions of the study was developed. Following Hsieh and Shannon’s (2005) suggestion for a predetermined coding framework, the categories and the coding scheme were derived from three resources: relevant theories (of GELT and traditional EFL, see Table 1 for their principles), previous studies (see, Karakaş, 2019) and data (the SELC). These sources helped us to identify a predefined set of codes against which we could categorise the relevant data in the curriculum through a concept-driven approach. The following is the coding frame used in the analysis of the curricular data.

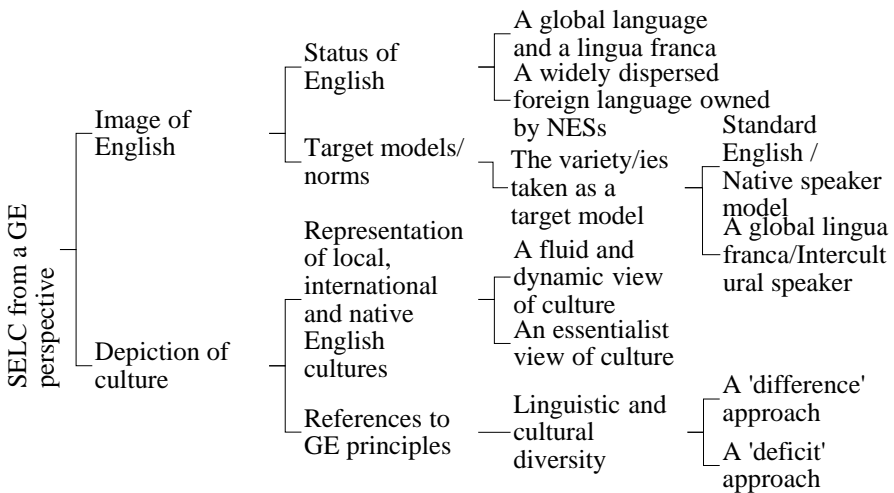


Figure 1. Hierarchical coding frame for the analysis of the SELC from a GE perspective

Using directed content analysis, the words and phrases that underscore the key concepts in the document (e.g. English, language, global, culture, CEFR, assessment, native speaker, and communicative competence) were searched in the data to determine the relevant sections of the curriculum for further inspection.

Moreover, the document was read line by line by the researchers to prevent any relevant information from going unnoticed. After getting all the instances of the keyword search and reading the whole document, we examined the surrounding discourse of the keywords and phrases to interpret the data and draw conclusions to answer the research questions. For purposes of validity, several illustrative extracts from the document were provided in the presentation of findings with a reference to the relevant pages to ensure that the analysis is “solid”, “comprehensive” and is “presented in a transparent way, allowing readers, as far as possible, to test the claims [and conclusions] made” by the researchers (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 173).

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **The Image of English in the Curriculum**

In response to the first research question, i.e. the image of English portrayed throughout the curriculum in respect to the current status of English, the model(s) and norms targeted (in teaching, assessment) and ownership of English, a keyword research was utilized throughout the SELC to identify the sections where the relevant information can be acquired to answer the research questions. The sections identified were later subjected to both manifest and latent content analysis together with negative analysis.

### **The Current Status of English**

Concerning the current status of English, the manifest keyword search with the words ‘*global*’ collocating with ‘*language*’, ‘*English*’ being used to refer to ‘*wider communication*’, among ‘*a growing number of people*’ indicated that the curriculum writers recognize the global status of English and admit the fact that English is a language used more by NNEs than NESs nowadays. Below is an extract from the SELC that shows the curriculum writers’ awareness about the current status of English and its speaker profile.

As English becomes a global language, the question of how to teach culture and which culture to teach becomes more complex. English serves as a language of wider communication and is used as such by a growing number of people who are native speakers of other languages (SELC, 2020, p. 12).

Although not mentioning it by name, the negative analysis of the above blurb displays the implicit reference to English being a lingua franca among ethnolinguistically diverse speakers, i.e. “English is the communicative medium of choice and often the only option” for them to communicate across linguacultural boundaries (Seidlhofer, 2011, p. 7). Additionally, in the section ‘General Aims of the Curriculum’, Goal 5 also makes reference to the lingua franca status of English, expecting learners to “develop an awareness of the significance of English as a means of international communication” (SELC, 2020, p. 9). Recognising the role of English being a lingua franca among speakers, this remark highlights that the curriculum writers also want learners to be aware of this status of English for purposes of wider communication. This finding is consistent with that of Karakaş (2019) who observed that the curriculum in Turkey acknowledges the present status of English as a lingua franca and international language; however, unlike the Saudi curriculum, the Turkish curriculum explicitly uses the term English as a lingua franca in its description of the present-day status of English.

However, despite admitting that English is a global language and a vehicle of wider communication, the SELC still refers to English as a foreign language, which is at odds with the above understanding of the current status of English. While introducing the curriculum, it is averred that

The English Language Curriculum for Elementary, Intermediate and Secondary Schools, as it is set out in the following pages, elaborates these principles and guidelines and presents a functional curriculum based on **current developments in EFL (English as a foreign language) theory and practice** in the fields of curriculum design and teaching methodology (SELC, 2020, p. 8; emphasis added).

The curriculum writers still assume that they base the curriculum on “current developments in EFL”, yet forget the fact that current developments no longer regard English as a foreign language (Galloway & Rose, 2015). The difference in the curriculum writers’ approach to the status of English demonstrates the contradiction in their perceptions of English outside the classroom, truly a global language, and English at school, just a foreign language. This difference in their perceptions may stem from certain ideologies and previous educational experiences that guided the curriculum writers to take English as a foreign language alongside traditional EFL theory and practice (i.e. *English is learned to be spoken with NESs and the*

*ultimate purpose is to reach their linguistic competence*) in accordance with the 1960s and 1970s' old school of thought advocated through traditional approaches and methods to language teaching, e.g. the Audiolingual Method and CLT (Richards & Rodgers, 2014), notwithstanding its omnipresence not only in the KSA but anywhere in the world. This finding also broadly supports the work of others on ELT coursebooks used in different contexts portraying English as a foreign language, even though some of their titles include the words 'International' and 'Global' (e.g. Caleffi, 2016; Kopperoinen, 2011; Syrbe & Rose, 2018; Vettorel & Lopriore, 2013).

### **The Model(s) and Norms Targeted**

The curriculum does not make an explicit statement about which variety of English it takes as a model and what norms are meant to be taught to learners in schools. Thus, following Gray et al.'s (2018) and Shohamy's (2006) suggestion, a closer inspection was done on language policy mechanisms, such as the testing framework and decisions on band-levels. The inspection showed that there are 24 references to CEFR throughout the curriculum while speaking of how students' levels of language proficiency will be determined and which level they are likely to reach upon completing particular grades. For instance, the curriculum writes the following vis-à-vis the Intermediate School: "Upon completing Intermediate School, learners reach level A2.2 / B1.1, according to the CEFR scale of reference levels" (SELC, 2020, p. 33). It is obvious that the CEFR is the benchmark against which learners' linguistic progress will be judged. As noted in previous studies on curricular documents, "[t]he adoption of the CEFR in the curriculum implies that there is a hidden reference to Standard Native English (StNE) and that NESs are a presupposed target model for learners" (Karakaş, 2019, p. 5). This conclusion also finds support from ELF scholars who previously criticized the CEFR for enforcing NES norms on learners. To illustrate, Jenkins (2015, p. 10) argues that

[i]n all cases [the CEFR] is oriented to the native speaker version of the language ... it does not distinguish between a language used mostly as a foreign language (e.g. Japanese, Korean, Polish) and a language used mostly as a lingua franca.

McNamara (2012) holds a similar idea about the CEFR, basing his arguments on the discourse of some can-do statements, especially

for the skills of listening and speaking at the levels of B2, C1 and C2, (Proficient user). To illustrate such statements in their own context, one can look at the following statements in the CEFR:

C2 Listener: I have no difficulty in understanding any kind of spoken language whether live or broadcast, even when delivered at *fast native speed*, provided I have some time to get familiar with the accent (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 27)).

B2 Speaker: Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes *regular interaction with native speakers* quite possible without strain for either party (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 24))

From the latent content of such statements, McNamara reaches the conclusion that “the ever more demanding native speaker interlocutor is the presumed target of the communication efforts” (p. 201). Thus, it may be posited that the CEFR adopts the EFL principle, which maintains that learners’ de facto target interlocutors are NESs.

Furthermore, the CEFR uses several key words in the can-do descriptions which make implicit reference to linguistic characteristics of native English and NESs. For instance, it stresses the importance of being acquainted with *idiomatic expressions* and *colloquialisms* for spoken interactions. Most probably, the target idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms are those of NESs. Probably, this is not explicitly put since it is already taken for granted and beyond questioning in the domain of ‘*foreign*’ language education.

Although the curriculum rarely uses the phrase ‘native speaker’, the word ‘standard’ is frequently used and collocates with the words ‘input’, ‘speech’ and ‘English’ in the descriptions of the knowledge and skills in the grade-specific curricular objectives as to major skill areas. To illustrate, let us look at what is written in the curriculum for ‘Grade 11 objectives’ about listening skills. The learners in this grade are expected to:

Understand most interviews, news reports and documentaries broadcast on the radio or TV provided they are delivered in *standard English*.

Understand instructions and announcements on a variety of topics provided they are delivered in *standard English* and at a *normal pace* (SELC, 2020, p. 64).



Obviously, SELC uses descriptors in the curricular objectives, largely influenced by the CEFR descriptors, yet making it remarkably clear that the ultimate target is to use standard English. Interestingly, learners are also expected to understand speech given at a normal pace, but it does not clarify ‘whose pace’ is indeed ‘normal’. This is a meaningfully absent item left to the reader to make their own conclusions about the implicit meaning. Considering the assessment framework and what the curriculum demands from learners in desired practices, the current SELC seems to set standard native English as its target model and NES norms as the ultimate norms to be followed by learners in their linguistic acts. In accordance with the present findings, previous studies have demonstrated the primacy of NESs and their norms as the target speakers and models in ELT textbooks designed and developed in accordance with the curricular objectives in their specific contexts (e.g. Matsuda, 2002; Kopperoinen, 2011; Lopriore & Ceruti, 2012; Vettorel & Corrizata, 2012). This consistency may be due to the traditional EFL understanding of teaching English permeating across the world in which it is assumed that learners will mainly communicate with NESs in an ENL context or encounter them in their own context (Syrbe & Rose, 2018).

Another policy tool that actually exposes the real policy about the target model and norms is the teaching approach adopted for teaching English. In the general aims of the curriculum, the teaching approach to guide language teaching practices is the communicative language teaching (CLT) in which the major purpose is to develop learners’ “communicative competence in the English language” (SELC, 2020, p. 9). In the methodology section, this becomes even more apparent: “The Communicative Approach to language teaching has influenced the field of ELT profoundly and continues to be the most significant point of reference” (SELC, 2020, p. 11). However, the understanding of the communicative approach is that of the traditional EFL paradigm which emerged in the 1970s and was theorized on the basis of “the native speaker-based notion of communicative competence” (Alptekin, 2002, p. 57). Leung (2005, p. 120) also discusses that the notion of communicative competence “is itself in need of examination and recasting”. Therefore, the traditional understanding of communicative competence has been criticized for being “utopian, unrealistic, and constraining” (Alptekin, 2002, p. 57) and is considered to be entirely in disagreement with the understanding of communicative competence in GELT. That is, what matters in GELT is to help learners effectively communicate with individuals from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, including NESs, in a variety of salient contexts “with an awareness of difference, and with

strategies for coping with such differences” (Alptekin, 2002, p. 63). Therefore, from GELT perspectives, learners need to be equipped with various communication and pragmatic strategies (Björkman, 2011); however, this does not seem to be a point taken into account in the SELC. This case has also been confirmed in relation to the Turkish ELT curriculum which also draws on the narrow understanding of communicative competence, even mentioning the initial proponents of the communicative approach in the late 1970s, such as Hymes (1972) and Canale and Swain (1980).

From the above discussions, one can also infer that the ownership of English remains limited to the Inner Circle countries and NESs. Consequently, there seems to be no movement towards the appreciation of the feelings of global ownership of English and diversity/plurality of English as supported in GELT. GE scholars, such as Wang (2015, p. 92), accentuate the point that “English is no longer ‘the’ English but Englishes in plural, arguing for the legitimacy of claiming ownership of English by its speakers across the worlds (Widdowson, 1994). Although it was stated more than two decades ago by Graddol (1997, p. 5) that NESs “may feel the language ‘belongs’ to them, it will be those who speak English as a second or foreign language who will determine its world future”, there seems to be no serious consideration of this linguistic phenomenon by the SELC writers. One reason why they still perceive English to be the sole product of NESs might be because of the fact that they act under the ideology of NES ownership of English, which has been entrenched in their minds over the years through previous educational experiences and policy tools and agents, e.g. teachers and administrators (Jenkins, Cogo & Dewey, 2011; Seidlhofer, 2011).

### **The Depiction and Place of Culture in the Curriculum**

The issue of culture is an inseparable part of English language teaching. Especially in the GELT model, interculturality and intercultural awareness are the two key notions. To unearth how the curriculum depicts cultural issues, a manifest keyword search was carried out throughout the SELC, which generated 21 tokens of the use of word ‘culture’. Similarly, the adjective ‘cultural’ was used 12 times modifying and the noun ‘interculturality’ once. This shows that a great deal of space has been allocated to the subject of culture in the curriculum.

## References to Local and Relevant Cultures

The manifest content analysis of the curriculum indicates that significant emphasis is laid on topics and issues relevant to the local context and culture. The curriculum presents “[s]uggested topics relevant to the KSA and Islamic culture for Elementary, Intermediate and Secondary schools” in its appendix (SELC, 2020, p. 7). Among the suggested topics are Islamic civilizations, Islamic organisations, the Arabic language, Arabic literature and stories from Arab culture. Although there is no explicit explanation as to the content of these topics, the content of local culture revolves around food, special days, the arts (see SELC, 2020, p. 36 for more detail) as well as family in Islam, famous Muslim leaders, Hajj (pilgrimage), Kings of the KSA, Muslim crafts, to name but a few (see p. 76 for more detail).

Besides giving much space to the local culture, the curriculum does not ignore the importance of being aware of other cultures. To illustrate, the curriculum has a section dedicated to ‘Cultural Issues’ where curriculum writers consider “three types of cultural information that is advisable to use in language textbooks and materials” (SELC, 2020, p. 12). The first type of cultural information is concerned with “**source culture materials**” in which the content consists of learners’ own culture. The second type is related to “**target culture materials**” in which the content is organised around the culture of an ENL (e.g. the UK and/or the USA) country and the final type rests on “**international target cultural materials**” which include the use of a large number of cultures in Anglophone and non-Anglophone countries across the world (SELC, 2020, p. 12; emphasis in original). Evidently, the curriculum writers do not only aim to teach native English culture(s), but also cultures in non-English speaking countries. However, there is no specific information about how the international target materials would be selected, how representative of world cultures they would be and whether there would be space for cultures of neighbouring countries.

The local cultural elements the SELC covers were missing in some curricular documents previously investigated. For instance, in some documents, particularly textbooks, not surprisingly, the cultural content was restricted to idealized versions of the cultures of the inner circle countries, such as the UK and the USA (Karakaş, 2019; Syrbe & Rose, 2018; Vettorel & Lopriore, 2013). Unlike the SELC that makes the teaching of other cultures a primary goal, these resources largely attempted to make learners be part of the target culture. However, this orientation in culture teaching goes against the fact that “[m]any students are no longer learning English to join an inner circle

culture”, and hence curricular documents “may need to reflect this sociolinguistic reality in order to help innovate teaching practices” (Syrbe & Rose, 2018, p. 161).

### **Awareness of Global Englishes in the Cultural Content of the Curriculum**

Along with the recognition of English being a global language, the curriculum writers admit that “the question of how to teach culture and which culture to teach becomes more complex” (SELC, 2020, p. 12). It means that the curriculum recognizes the cultural diversity of people likely to use English in the contemporary world and how complicated the subject of culture is while teaching a global language and thus sets two goals for the purpose of teaching culture. These goals are grounded on firstly “establishing a ‘sphere of interculturality’ and, secondly, teaching culture as difference” (SELC, 2020, p. 12). Considering the range of materials (e.g. source culture, target culture and international culture) to teach culture as discussed above, the curriculum is highly likely to raise learners’ awareness of Global Englishes and its users. It is also noteworthy that the SELC adopts a ‘difference’ approach to cultural diversity rather than a ‘deficit’ one which underrates non-native and source cultures in the teaching of English with a sharp focus on teaching dominant Anglophone cultures (e.g. British (UK) culture and American culture).

However, it is doubtful whether the cultural materials intended to be used in teaching English can raise learners’ intercultural awareness, i.e. “*a conscious understanding of the role culturally based forms, practices and frames of reference can have in intercultural communication, and an ability to put these conceptions into practice in a flexible and context specific manner in real time communication*” (Baker, 2011, p. 202; italics in original). The source of this doubt is that while speaking of the types of cultural materials, the curriculum adopts an essentialist view of culture, using a bit old-fashioned perspective of Culture A versus Culture B versus Culture C by categorising cultural materials as source culture, international culture and target culture (Baker, 2016). This perspective disregards “the fluid and dynamic relationship” between languages and cultures (Baker, 2011, p. 1). Evident from such depiction of cultural issues is that on one hand, the curriculum writers desire to familiarise learners with a wide range of cultures, yet on the other hand, they limit learners’ awareness to ‘the static view of culture’.

**FINAL REMARKS**

The findings of the current research suggest that while the SELC recognizes, although implicitly, the global status of English, it still refers to it as English as a foreign language. It is believed that the SELC operates around the traditional view of EFL as it casts emphasis on the concepts, practices and developments within the EFL domain that have been criticised and described as old-fashioned (Galloway & Rose, 2015). This comes in line with the findings of previous studies that investigated various curricular documents, such as ELT coursebooks (e.g. Caleffi, 2016; Kopperoinen, 2011; Syrbe & Rose, 2018; Vettorel & Lopriore, 2013).

The findings of the present research suggest that via language policy mechanisms, such as the assessment framework and decisions on band-levels, the native-speaker model is implicitly adopted in the SELC document. This is clearly shown in embracing CEFR, which advocates NES norms through its can-do statements (Karakaş, 2019; Jenkins, 2016). In addition to assessment, teaching approaches identified in the SELC seemed to be built on traditional views of English language teaching. It is typically centred on traditional views of CLT that have been described as “utopian, unrealistic, and constraining” (Alptekin, 2002, p. 57). Therefore, it comes entirely in contradiction with the concept of communicative competence in GELT, where learners become interculturally communicative and can communicate with individuals from different ethnolinguistic backgrounds. Based on the evidence found in this study, it is assumed that SELC bestows the ownership of English to NESs and neglects the plurality of English.

Concerning the culture depiction in the SELC, the findings show that there was an emphasis on culture throughout the document. In addition, local culture has received a great deal of attention in the SELC as it contains suggested topics relevant to Saudi Islamic culture. While the curriculum document gave the local culture sufficient space, it did not neglect the other cultures as it dedicated a whole section for cultural issues covering local, ENL cultures and interestingly other international cultures. Nevertheless, the document did not explain how the local and other non-native international cultures will be represented in the materials, practices and policies.

As the findings suggest that there is recognition of the global status of English, the curriculum acknowledges the complexity this status adds to teaching culture. SELC proposes a set of goals to teach the culture that reflects interculturality, which should hypothetically raise students' awareness of GE. However, the way it deals with the

notion of culture is rather essentialist. Such a view of culture conceptualises every culture type (source, target and international) in isolation from the other, which decreases the level of dynamism of the relationship between language and culture. Thus, the chances for raising students' intercultural awareness are essentially minimised.

The findings suggest some significant implications relevant to three main beneficiaries, namely, policy makers, teachers and learners. While the SELC recognises the global status of English, it does not pay much attention to the fact that the core idea behind GELT is raising students' awareness of the available models of English (e.g. native, non-native, local). It is equally important to equip learners with the knowledge and the skills that assist them in making their learning choices. Thus, the current research recommends that the SELC should be revisited and revised in light of the new sociolinguistic reality by taking the general concepts, theories and practices of ELF, EIL and GE into greater consideration. As the analysis of SELC shows a neglect of the ELF pedagogy, it is pivotal that policy makers should operationalise the concepts and theories of ELF and turn them into practical procedures that include, but are not exclusive to, teaching methodology, materials and assessment based on an ELF framework. This would ensure that teachers (policy actors) are well informed and guided throughout the process.

The change will stay in the documents if it is done only at the policy level. Therefore, the policy actors (teachers) who work as the agents of the policy should receive adequate training to facilitate their job in translating the policy into practice. Such training on ELF pedagogical practices would help in maintaining a steady and successful shift towards a more diverse teaching environment that does not limit the learning choices to only one model, usually the nativist model. Further studies on what to include in teacher training, how the training should be carried out and how its effectiveness can be assessed are needed in the Saudi context.

The learners considered as the policy products should also be involved in the action plan that reflects policy on practices. This can be done by instructing them about the general concepts and theories of ELF (e.g. intercultural communicative language competence). Such training should also cover the practices of such concepts (e.g. pragmatic communication strategies). The content of such training, how it should be delivered, and its successfulness are all interesting areas of future work at both the Saudi and international levels.

Finally, the findings of this study should be seen in light of some limitations. The findings are entirely based on document analysis,

which can be seen as a considerable limitation. Due to the time constraints, interviews with policy makers, teachers and learners and field observations were not conducted. The inclusion of such research instruments could provide insightful information that can increase our understanding of the SELC, both at the theory and the practice levels. Therefore, further research is needed to adopt and build on the current research methodological recommendations to confirm or reject the current research findings.

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