

Routledge Research in Language Education

ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN SAUDI ARABIA

**NEW INSIGHTS INTO TEACHING AND
LEARNING ENGLISH**

Edited by
Christo Moskovsky and Michelle Picard



English as a Foreign Language in Saudi Arabia

English as a Foreign Language in Saudi Arabia: New Insights into Teaching and Learning English offers a detailed discussion of key aspects of teaching and learning English in the Saudi context and offers a comprehensive overview of related research authored or co-authored by Saudi researchers. It provides readers with an understanding of the unique cultural, linguistic, and historical context of English in Saudi Arabia – with a focus on the principal factors that may influence successful teaching and learning of English in this country. Uniquely, the book looks separately at issues pertaining to in-country English learning and learners, and those pertaining to in-country English teaching and teachers. The volume also explores issues concerning Saudi learners and teachers in overseas contexts. Lastly, the book touches on the future of English as a Foreign Language and TESOL in Saudi Arabia and its implications for the field.

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Dr. Christo Moskovsky is a senior lecturer in linguistics at the University of Newcastle where he has led the University's research program in applied linguistics. His research has focused on social, cognitive, and psychological aspects of the learning of second/foreign languages – particularly English. His research output has been published in some of the highest ranked journals in this field. Dr. Moskovsky also has a strong track record in research supervision in applied linguistics including a number of successful candidates from Saudi Arabia with most of whom he has established long-lasting personal and professional relationships.

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Introduction

Christo Moskovsky & Michelle Picard

For a number of political, cultural, and economic reasons, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has a special status in the Middle East. It is the largest country in this part of the world, with a population of about 29 million. It is the birthplace of Islam, hosting two to three million pilgrims annually from all over the world visiting the revered holy cities of Madinah and Makkah. Saudi Arabia is by far the largest producer and exporter of crude oil in the world; the latter alone provides up to 75% of Saudi Arabia's budget revenues. Taking advantage of the quite substantial petro-wealth accumulated over several decades, a number of successive Saudi Governments have more recently engaged in a nation-building enterprise the magnitude of which has absolutely no precedent in human history. The Government's Scholarship program launched in the early 2000s has been a critical part of this nation-building effort. The scholarship program which involves funding the tertiary studies of a large number of Saudi nationals at offshore institutions is in essence a prodigious investment in human resources – a campaign to upskill a new generation of Saudis and in this way to build a very highly educated, skilled, and knowledgeable nation. A crucially important added benefit of this initiative has been that it effectively has served to open up the traditionally conservative Saudi community to the wider world and thus prepare it for life in a very globalised 21st century.

Despite only being in operation for just around 15 years, the scholarship program has already started bearing substantial fruit. This is particularly true of the academic domain where one can observe not only a considerable expansion of the Saudi university sector, but also a very strong growth in academic research and publications.

The Saudi Government has clearly recognised the crucially important role that the English language has to play in all of this. Indeed, due to a range of social, cultural, historical, and economic reasons, English holds a special place within the Saudi community. English is the principal and – in some cases – only medium of communication in a wide range of social, administrative, educational, and professional domains. English is the lingua franca used for communication between Saudis and the vast cohort of foreign workers who are widely engaged in the Saudi economy. In essence, a high English competence has become an indispensable component of most professional and administrative establishments – one

without which it would be impossible to operate successfully. More broadly, English has now firmly established itself as the international language of science and technology, of business, commerce, and finances, the language of the internet – effectively a global language. In recognition of the special status of English and its immense importance for a wide range of social and professional domains in the Saudi context, the Government has over the last 15 years undertaken a number of reforms designed to raise the level of English proficiency of Saudi learners. These reforms have involved (among other things) introducing English instruction at an earlier age, increasing students' exposure to English at all levels of the Saudi educational system, modernising the English school syllabus, the teaching methodology, and the teaching/learning materials, improving pre- and in-service teacher training, etc.

In addition to that, the Scholarship program has given a tremendous boost to academic research examining issues of teaching and learning English as a second/foreign language (EFL) in Saudi Arabia. Our review of Saudi EFL research in Chapter 1 (and elsewhere) of this volume reveals that prior to the year 2000 barely a handful of EFL-related studies were conducted in Saudi Arabia each year. It would not be an overstatement to say that after the start of the Scholarship program we have seen an explosion of academic research on EFL issues in Saudi Arabia – most typically as part of a research degree at a Western university leading to the production of an impressive number of research theses. More recently we have also witnessed an exponential growth in Saudi-authored and co-authored EFL-related publications – some of them in the most prestigious academic journals in this field, such as *Language Learning* and *Applied Linguistics* (among others). It deserves to be noted that this research effort shows absolutely no sign of slowing down. Given all this, one can faithfully describe it as a golden age for Saudi EFL research – an extraordinary achievement. Again, it is worth reiterating that it all has occurred as a direct consequence of the Saudi Government's nation-building agenda – especially the Scholarship program. It just shows what can be achieved when a government chooses to invest into its most precious resource – its people.

Having said all this and having given credit where credit is unreservedly due, these developments – extremely positive as they undeniably are both for EFL teaching/learning and for EFL research – have not entirely been free of problems. And while achievements are to be acknowledged and celebrated, perceived problems and issues need to be discussed and addressed in order to advance Saudi EFL teaching/learning and research further.

This is indeed the key objective of the current volume – to conduct a detailed exploration of the most important issues relating to EFL teaching/learning and research in Saudi Arabia.

The book starts with a comprehensive review of Saudi-authored and co-authored EFL-related literature covering around 25 years of academic research on issues of EFL teaching and learning in this country.

Chapter 2 provides a historic overview of English and English teaching in Saudi Arabia including its early 'Golden Age', its virtual disappearance during the

‘Wahhabi Period’, and its reintroduction and expansion from the ‘Unification’ period to the present.

Chapter 3 is concerned with attitudes to English teaching and learning in Saudi Arabia. More specifically, the chapter focusses on the social-psychological factors that are responsible for the formation of Saudi learners’ attitudes towards the English language and its speakers, such as social identity, para-social contact, and perceived out-group threats.

Chapter 4 considers issues relating to in-country EFL learning/learners in Saudi Arabia. Various properties/traits of Saudi EFL learners as a group are examined with respect to their effects on EFL learning and achievement including motivation, attitude, aptitude, anxiety, gender, age, learning styles, and learning strategies. The chapter further reviews common characteristics of the EFL learning environment, such as culture, religion, learning facilities and resources, learning conditions, and more generally aspects of the Saudi EFL educational system and the role these play in relation to EFL learning in the country.

Chapter 5 examines in-country EFL teaching/teachers in Saudi Arabia. It starts with a historical overview of English language teaching policy in Saudi Arabia since 1970 including the most recent 2014–2020 New English Language Teaching Framework. The evolution of English language teaching methodologies in the Saudi context is also mapped in a historical plan including issues of EFL curriculum and EFL teaching practices. The chapter critically examines perceived problems/obstacles to effective EFL instruction, and considers ways in which these can be addressed.

In view of the fact that student mobility is an integral part of the Government’s Scholarship program, there is a growing number of Saudi EFL teachers who are acquiring their teaching qualifications at Western institutions – particularly the USA, the UK, and Australia. Chapter 6 examines issues of EFL teacher training taking place in English-speaking environments – with a focus on the perceived privileges of Western qualifications and the ideologies underlying dominant TESOL pedagogies in the West.

Given the rather dynamic state of EFL affairs in Saudi Arabia and the extraordinary growth the EFL field is experiencing in this country, our book would be incomplete without considering the future of EFL teaching/learning and research in Saudi Arabia. This is the main focus of Chapter 7 – based on a critical examination of current trends and existing policies the chapter makes a range of predictions in relation to how the EFL sector in Saudi Arabia will evolve over the following two decades or so.

The concluding Chapter brings together the book’s most important findings and recommends a range of measures designed to promote the further development of the EFL sector in Saudi Arabia.

1 EFL teaching and learning in Saudi Arabia

25 years of research

Christo Moskowsky

Introduction

For a variety of historical, social, cultural, and economic reasons English holds a special place within the Saudi community. English is the principal (and, in some cases, only) medium of communication in a wide range of social, administrative, educational, and professional domains. English is indeed the lingua franca used for communication between Saudis and the rather large cohort of foreign workers widely engaged in the Saudi economy. In essence, an advanced English competence has become an indispensable component of most professional and administrative establishments. In addition, English has firmly established itself as the international language of science and technology, as well as the language of the internet and virtual communication (Alrashidi & Phan 2015).

In recognition of the special status of English, the Saudi Government has in recent years introduced a number of reforms designed to raise the level of English proficiency of Saudi learners. These reforms have involved (among other things) increasing learners' exposure to English instruction as part of the Saudi educational system and modernising the English school syllabus, the teaching methodology, and the teaching/learning materials. Another major development has been the launch of a government scholarship program which has enabled thousands of Saudis to complete undergraduate and postgraduate programs abroad – mostly in English-speaking countries. These developments have in turn given a significant boost to Saudi academic research including research on EFL teaching and learning.

This chapter's key goal is to provide a comprehensive review of EFL-related research conducted by Saudi scholars between 1990 and 2016. This specific timeframe was chosen for a number of reasons. In the first place, pre-1990 studies could not faithfully be described as 'recent'. Besides, the volume of the earlier EFL research in Saudi Arabia was actually rather small – both in terms of the number of studies that had been carried out and in terms of the breadth of the topics examined. Even in the period between 1990 and 1999 Saudi EFL research remained relatively low-scale. It has only been after the introduction of the Saudi Government's Scholarship program in the early 2000s that we have seen a strong growth in EFL research. The number of EFL studies started increasing steadily in

the period between 2000 and 2009, with a sharp rise after 2010. The period following 2010 is also when we have seen the bulk of journal publications reporting Saudi EFL research. It seems that a lot of the Saudi academic research on EFL that took place in the form of postgraduate research programs in the early and mid-2000s has gradually been being translated into scholarly papers finding their ways into different applied linguistics outlets.

For the purposes of the review around 400 sources (including books, scholarly papers, and dissertations) were collected from three electronic databases – Scopus, ProQuest, and the Saudi Digital Library (SDL). The latter is a relatively new digital repository of research theses (both masters and doctoral) produced by Saudi students and academics. The establishment of SDL can only be applauded although it is not clear why access to it is largely limited to Saudi nationals within Saudi Arabia.

In view of the breadth of the review undertaken here, some categorisation of the available literature was essential. As it turned out, in terms of the themes they tackle, most of the sources reviewed here fall naturally into a number of well-established and widely recognised topic areas in second language (L2) acquisition research. One such major topic area concerns *EFL teaching* in Saudi Arabia. This includes issues of *pedagogy* and the *curriculum*, teaching *methodologies*, teachers' *teaching styles* and *techniques*, teachers' *competence*, EFL teachers' *pre-service* and *in-service training*, etc. Within the EFL teaching theme, one issue seems to have generated quite considerable interest among Saudi EFL researchers – there have been numerous studies examining the pedagogical benefits of deploying the new *digital technologies* as part of language delivery.

A second major topic area concerns issues of EFL *learning* in Saudi Arabia. This has been a particularly popular and fruitful area of Saudi research investigating the full range of often interrelated learner variables which have been found to affect both the process of attaining a second/foreign language and its product – the learners' emerging L2 competence. Among these L2-related variables, a very substantial amount of attention has been devoted to the examination of language *attitudes* (both by learners and the Saudi community more generally) and *motivation*. Some work has also been done on the use of *learning strategies* by Saudi EFL learners, on *learning styles*, as well as language *anxiety*.

Another important topic area covers the *major language skills* – listening, reading, writing, and speaking, as well as vocabulary. Some attention has also been given to aspects of the learners' *interlanguage* (IL) *grammar*. Readers should note that the term 'grammar' is used broadly here to cover all of the principal components of the linguistic system – phonetics/phonology, morphology, syntax, and pragmatics.

The role which the learners' *native language* (L1) plays in L2 acquisition has long been an issue of keen interest and it is, therefore, not surprising to find quite a few Saudi EFL studies devoted to examining the possible *effects of Arabic on the learners' IL system*. There have also been attempts to establish the extent to which *controlled use of the learners' L1* in the EFL classroom can be beneficial (or otherwise) to the teaching/learning process.

Finally, there have also been a small number of studies examining other EFL-related issues, such as *language planning* and *language policy*, *bilingualism* and *acculturation*, etc., which do not seem to fit well into any of the categories defined above.

A clarification is in order at this point. Much as a categorisation as the one above is useful and indeed necessary, not all of the reviewed sources fall neatly into a single category. In fact, we find overlapping themes in a number of them. Take for instance Almudibry (2012). This research concerns both the pedagogical use of digital technology (and as such seems to be well suited for the category of *teaching*) and the development of L2 vocabulary (one of the *major language skills*). We took the view that use of digital technologies was the primary focus of study and because of that we classified it together with the other *teaching* issues. Another example of a study involving some element of classification ambiguity is Alebsi's (2002) research which explored the effects of an innovative teaching technique on EFL reading comprehension skills. In this case, it seemed that the primary focus was not so much on nature and properties of reading as an L2 skill, but rather on the dedicated pedagogy deployed for the development of that skill.

The reader should bear in mind that it has not been among the objectives of this review to produce a stringent categorisation of the Saudi EFL research output. The categorisation conceived for the purposes of the review was one of common sense and, frankly, convenience – mostly to enable us to impose some order in what is undeniably a very rich and diverse domain of science.

The rest of this chapter is organised as follows. The bulk of its body is devoted to a comprehensive review of the EFL-related research conducted by Saudi scholars over 25 years or so. The review is divided into subsections in line with the thematic categorisation proposed above. This is followed by some commentary on issues arising from the review of Saudi EFL-related literature, such as trends in thematic orientation, under- and over-explored topics, research design and methodology, etc., including a broad evaluation of the contribution of Saudi EFL research to this field of science.

Research dealing with issues of Saudi EFL teaching/teachers

Teachers

The majority of EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia are typically Arab non-native speakers of English and because of that their performance in the target language (TL) commonly involves non-native phonological features. Al-Arishi's (1991) research focussed on the role of context – EFL versus ESL – in which Saudi teachers received their training in relation to their phonological competence in the TL; ESL contexts are those where the L2 is acquired within the L2 community as a second, not foreign, language. Not entirely surprisingly, the study established that phonologically the TL performance of the ESL-trained teachers was significantly superior to that of the EFL-trained teachers. Further Al-Arishi examined

the role of the context in which the teaching was taking place – urban versus rural – on teachers' EFL phonological competence. No significant differences were found between urban and rural EFL practitioners in terms of their TL phonology even though the urban context presumably provides considerably greater opportunities for social interaction with native speakers of English.

One quite unusual and particularly interesting study was that of Alharthi (2014). It tracked productive and receptive vocabulary knowledge among Arabic-speaking EFL teachers over a period of two years after they completed their university degrees. The research established very substantial attrition in EFL teachers' vocabulary knowledge almost immediately following the end of their education. Some – although far from complete – recovery of vocabulary knowledge was observed at the end of the two-year period.

Alnofaie (2013) examined the benefits of using critical thinking pedagogy to elicit high-quality verbal interaction/performance by learners (see also Alnofaie & Gritter 2016). The study's objectives were only partially accomplished mostly because the participating teachers did not have the autonomy to properly implement the critical thinking pedagogy in their teaching. Some important conclusions were made about Saudi teachers' disempowerment – teachers in Saudi Arabia are typically required to blindly follow a curriculum and a teaching model imposed from above. They are denied the license/authority to introduce and implement novel teaching methods, techniques, and materials. Very similar conclusions were reached in Albedaiwi's (2014) thesis.

On the basis of a broad historical review of education in Saudi Arabia, Elyas and Picard (2010) took a rather unique look into issues of teacher identity in this country – with the associated social, traditional, and cultural pressures of teaching English in the Saudi context. The study established a direct link between past teaching practices and present EFL delivery.

Alshenqeeti's (2014) aim was to analyse the nature of the questions used by teachers in the L2 classroom and to determine their functions. Particular attention was devoted to examining teachers' question modification strategies in response to learners' failure to respond.

Al-Beiz (2002) examined Saudi female EFL teachers' openness to novel ideas/techniques for EFL delivery – for instance, using a story-based approach to teaching grammar to secondary school students. The researcher also explored their preparedness to take leadership roles in relation to curriculum change.

Native vs. non-native teachers

Al-Omrani (2008) examined EFL learners' perceptions of native and non-native (typically Arabic-speaking) EFL teachers. The study's results deserve careful considerations. Native-speaking English teachers are recognised by Saudi EFL learners for their value in teaching L2 speaking skills, but non-native EFL teachers are perceived as better-attuned to learners' needs – possibly because of their own experience in learning a second/foreign language. It is interesting to note that Mosbah (2007) did not find major differences between native and non-native

EFL teachers in terms of correcting learners' oral errors. Neither native, nor non-native EFL teachers seemed to have a well-developed awareness of effective strategies for providing corrective feedback. Ultimately, teaching qualifications and teaching experience are regarded as teachers' most important assets – more so than native L2 competence (but for diverging results, see O. S. Alenazi 2014). One very important implication emerging from the Al-Omrani study points to the considerable benefits of EFL programs which involve cooperatively working native and non-native EFL teachers. This view was strongly endorsed by Alseweed and Daif-Allah (2012). For a related study, see also Moores-Abdool, Yahya and Unzueta (2011).

Teacher training

A relatively small number of studies have considered issues of EFL teacher training; their findings are not very encouraging. Using a mixture of quantitative and qualitative instruments, Alansari (1995) collected data from EFL teachers, EFL inspectors, and EFL teacher-trainers about their perceptions of the merits of current teacher-training programs. Participants were also asked about their views about what high-quality teacher training should involve. The study found a substantial gap between the two ultimately admitting that current Saudi programs for preparing EFL instructors were of relatively low standard. Arishi's (1995) study of the perceptions of current and former EFL teacher-trainees of the effectiveness of EFL instructor training programs provided further evidence in that regard. A more recent study, Al-Hazmi (2003), strongly reinforced Alansari's conclusion, describing teacher-training programs in Saudi Arabia as 'non-systematic' and 'inadequate', and suggesting they are much better suited for training translators, not teachers. Binghadeer (2011) produced evidence that textbooks and other teaching materials used in teacher-training programs generally lack the capacity to provide prospective teachers with adequate training in EFL phonology.

Teaching the target language culture

There is a widely held view among L2 researchers and language teaching professionals that teaching the TL culture is an essential part of L2 instruction. Indeed, some even argue that successful L2 delivery is practically impossible without a strong TL cultural component. The picture emerging from Saudi research on the role of the TL culture is quite mixed, however. Mekheimer and Aldosari (2011) and Shamail (2015) strongly endorsed the value of teaching the TL literature and culture as part of language instruction. In Al Hasnan's (2015) study participating teachers regarded the delivery of culture-specific content as highly beneficial to the learning process, but such content was largely missing from textbooks and language learning materials. Teachers were also mindful of negative societal attitudes towards the spread of English-speaking cultures within the traditional conservative Saudi community.

O. Alenazi (2006) established that EFL teachers and their learners generally held positive attitudes to their English writing textbook, *Interactions II Writing*, and believed that the book had the capacity to develop learners' L2 writing skills. That said, participants did find issues with how various culture-specific themes (especially gender) were treated in the textbook.

One of the earlier studies conducting an evaluation of EFL teaching, Zaid (1993), also deserves consideration. The author examined the nature of EFL instruction taking place at Saudi intermediate schools. It was established that the Audio-Lingual method remained the prevailing teaching methodology, and that there was too much emphasis on grammar and not enough effort for promoting learners' communicative skills. The report recommended reducing the volume of English literature content delivered to learners. Zafer (2002) made similar recommendations with regard to the undergraduate EFL teacher preparation program in Saudi Arabia – he proposed a reduction of the content involving English literature, English culture, history of the English language, etc. This position, according to Alfahadi (2012), is in accord with Saudi EFL teachers' views of the EFL textbook's Anglo-cultural content – the latter was perceived as contradictory to local values and because of that was regarded as inappropriate. Participating teachers recommended that the EFL textbook be revised or even re-designed in order to be better aligned with local cultural norms.

Some further commentary on the provision of content specific to the TL culture is offered within the Discussion section below.

Teaching specific language skills

A handful of studies have looked at aspects of the teaching of specific language skills, e.g., reading, writing, speaking, etc. Among them, Alebsi (2002) is of particular interest because it used an experimental design to explore the development of EFL reading comprehension skills. The study's experimental group was exposed to the communicative approach and to authentic reading materials while the control group received the traditional grammar-based instruction. In a post-treatment reading test the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group.

Alsaedi (2012) focussed on the pedagogy of teaching EFL speaking skills in Saudi secondary schools. The results were rather disconcerting. Participating teachers were found to dominate classroom discourse allowing few opportunities to learners to engage in L2 communication (see also Alfallaj 1998). Using Arabic for a broad range of teaching-related functions was found to be commonplace practice. Aliumah (2011) equally acknowledged existing problems with the development of EFL speaking skills, but pointed to the rather widespread reluctance among Saudi EFL learners to participate in communicative activities in the classroom. Aliumah advocated integrative teaching as the best way to facilitate the attainment of EFL speaking skills. Alasmari and Ahmed (2013), on the other hand, favoured using in-class debates as a technique to promote learners' speaking skills.

Most of the participating teachers in Farooq's (2015) research recognised the benefits of Communicative Language Teaching and its capacity to promote learners' communicative competence. At the same time they identified a number of serious obstacles to adequate implementation of Communicative Language Teaching in the Saudi classroom including overcrowded classes, lack of visual aids, learners' low proficiency, insufficient exposure to instruction, etc.

R. Alghamdi's (2014) research established experimentally the superior capacity of the cooperative learning method to improve EFL learners' communicative skills – compared to a control condition involving standard delivery.

Al-jasser (2008) was specifically interested in the pedagogy of EFL phonology. The study established that explicit instruction of English phonotactic rules can lead to an improvement in learners' EFL phonology – especially in relation to lexical segmentation.

Altuwairash (2013) considered ways of improving Saudi EFL learners' TL listening skills. After receiving metacognitive instruction and extra dedicated practice in listening comprehension, learners in the experimental group outperformed controls on a TOEFL listening task. Hamouda (2012) identified quite a big range of classroom variables generating listening comprehension problems for Saudi EFL learners including the teacher's accent, speed of speech, and sub-standard audio equipment (among others). Based on these findings, the author offered ideas in relation to how Saudi EFL teachers can help their learners develop effective listening strategies and improve their TL listening skills.

Jouhari (1996) investigated the benefits of a process-centred approach to teaching English composition. Collecting a range of different data, the researcher established that learners responded quite positively to process-centred teaching developing a number of writing-related skills. More recently, Alhosani (2008) examined the benefits of using a process approach to developing the EFL writing ability of 5th-grade Saudi Arabian students.

Some attention has also been given to the teaching of EFL vocabulary. Al-Qadi (1991) recommended providing learners with instruction on derivational morphology arguing this would lead to an improvement in their L2 vocabulary competence (see also Al-Qadi 1992). Al Nassir (2012) found that using pictures to teach vocabulary was more effective than translation with younger low EFL-proficiency learners (such as primary school students) – a somewhat predictable result. Junaid's (2014) research indicated that using English corpora as a way of teaching English collocations can enable learners to retain vocabulary knowledge better while B. Al-Harbi (2012) emphasised the role of dictionaries in relation to building learners' EFL vocabulary proficiency, and explained that teachers can play a crucial role in enabling their learners to develop dictionary competence.

EFL curriculum, methodology, policies and policy implementation

Several studies have examined the EFL curriculum used in Saudi public education institutions, but no clear outcomes have emerged from most of them. Take, for instance, Al-Hajailan (1999) whose research was specifically conducted to

evaluate a new EFL textbook, *English for Saudi Arabia*; at the time of the study this textbook had recently been adopted by the Saudi Ministry of Education. The study found that stakeholders were generally happy with various features of the textbook although they were ambivalent with regard to the book's capacity to fulfil national educational goals. Other evaluative studies of English textbooks with no clear-cut outcomes include Al-Yousef (2007); Madkhali (2005); and Rahman (2011). In comparison, Alfallaj's (1998) research stands out. It was devoted to a comprehensive evaluation of the English curriculum at a Saudi College including learners, teachers, administrators, teaching and learning materials, etc. Alfallaj's findings were largely unfavourable. According to the study, the English curriculum was not properly aligned with learners' needs, the teaching and learning materials used as part of EFL instruction were inadequate and ill-suited, the teaching was almost exclusively grammar-oriented and was often delivered in Arabic, and the teachers dominated the classroom providing little or no opportunity to learners for interactive communicative use of the L2. On the related issue of power distance between Saudi teachers and learners, see Alshahrani (2016).

Poorly designed and/or poorly delivered EFL curricula seem to be a rather pervasive problem – much broader than the context of a single institution. In what can be described as a seminal review of EFL education across the Arab world, Kharma (1998) reported a high degree of community awareness among Arab nations of the importance of competence in English as a second/foreign language. However, in the author's view the English curricula in these countries seemed to be constructed and delivered in an *ad hoc* fashion – not on the basis of dedicated systematic research. Kharma also pointed to very widespread underachievement among EFL learners – a situation which seems to be unanimously acknowledged by relevant stakeholders (see, e.g., Alhawsawi 2013, among many others). The author concluded that a very well planned and focussed research effort is required in order to improve EFL delivery – with a special emphasis on the specific needs of various stakeholders including learners, employers, educational institutions, etc.

Hasan (2003) specifically looked at the capacity of an existing program – *Basic English Program* delivered to Saudi Aramco employees – to foster high-level communicative competence in English; within the Saudi context it is widely acknowledged that Saudi EFL learners largely fail to develop an adequate level of communicative competence. The study collected data via direct observations and audio-recordings of English classes. The findings reveal that learners in this program were not provided with sufficient opportunities to engage in meaningful and socially appropriate communication in English.

Aben Ahmed (2013) examined the English business communication literacy needs of several Saudi EFL companies concluding that current EFL business communication education generally fails to meet these needs. The author recommended changes to the English curriculum in order to address this.

With specific reference to English communicative skills, Alharbi (2015) advocated substantial reform to higher education policy. In her view, EFL delivery