IDENTITY LOSS IN THE STRICT RELIGIOUS CONTEXT OF SAUDI ARABIAN SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT: *Saudi Arabia is experiencing an era of policy reform across different government departments, including the education system. However, these plans have attracted criticism from those who see these new educational paradigms as a threat to the vitality of the Islamic identity that characterizes conservative members of Saudi society. Adopting a descriptive discursive approach, this paper sheds light on the objections raised to the changes and considers whether fears that such reforms constitute attempts to reconstruct the religious ident, ity of the younger generation via the public-school curriculum are justified. The analysis shows that these reconstructive attempts can be seen as a way of exposing children to an unfamiliar culture by supplying teaching materials laden with ideological content, allowing a new policy of mixed-sex education, and reintroducing the teaching of previously banned subjects.*

INTRODUCTION

English has become the world's most widely spoken language, dominating day-to-day communication. This has put English at the heart of almost all educational systems as the main medium of classroom instruction (Rao, 2019). Moreover, English language is globally appreciated. According to Smokotin and Bollani (n.d.), an official vote carried out by UN members identified English from several languages as the language of excellence. Although that might sound healthy, using a language reflects a myriad of impressions and hidden intentions that go far beyond communication or educational use. Bucholtz and Hall (2004) stated that language is the tool by which individuals categorize themselves as members of one group rather than another. Moreover, it is the means through which identity is claimed and expressed. The sociolinguistic literature abounds with studies of the relationship between language and identity (Shahrebabaki, 2018), the intersection between English language and religious identity is particularly widely mentioned. Behtash et al (2017) found that the success of English language teaching and learning is negatively affected where English language and culture are perceived to be at odds with the religious identity of the learners. This is especially clear in Islamic nations where it is thought that the English language is part of a plot orchestrated by enemies to weaken Islam and promote Westernization (Hidayati, 2017). The relationship between the English language and Islamic identity is yet more complicated in Saudi Arabia, a society that is characterized by conservatism and orthodoxy. According to Mustafa (2017), Islam plays a major part in shaping social behavior in Saudi Arabia. Further, he claimed that Saudi Arabia is the only nation where Islam is rooted in government policy. This has impacted the Saudi educational system, which used to revolve around deepening students' Islamic identity by focusing on teaching approaches that are directed towards religious sciences (Alghamdi and Li, 2012).

The Turning Point

Although there is no single moment at which the English language was introduced into Saudi curricula, there

is a consensus among specialists that the teaching and learning of English in Saudi Arabia has always been cautious and has never exposed students to foreign languages beyond the minimum requirement. (Alsharani,2016).

This again has been justified by the common conservative refusal of Western customs that stand in conflict with the Arabic language and Islamic upbringing (Elyas and Picard, 2010). Since the events of September 11, 2001, the traditional Saudi Arabian educational system has been a topic of much attention in the Western media. The majority involvement of Saudis in the attacks has opened the door to accusations against Saudi social ideology (Wagemakers et al, 2012).

This ideology was believed to be the offspring of educational curricula that encourage radicalism and religious intolerance. Walsh (2009) argued that primary school students in Saudi Arabia were bombarded with extreme contents that inculcated a sense of hatred and violence toward non-Muslims. They envisaged the West as a real threat to Islam, raising explicit orders to fight non-believers (Prokop, n.d.). Since then, for several reasons, the educational system has passed plans to mitigate the religious content and expose school students to a more tolerant view that instills the concept of religious diversity (Al-Otaibi, 2020). This was put into practice with the launch of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP), which gave students the opportunity to study abroad, exposing them to Western culture (Taylor and Albasri, 2014). Moreover, the educational system has mandated intensive English language teaching in school curricula at all levels, including primary school (Elyas,2008). This has led to an unprecedented resentment of the government and decision-makers by conservative community members. The government was accused of taking part in the weakening of Islamic identity among Saudi youth, instilling a Western notion of liberty that stands in contradiction to the rigid Islamic teaching (Azuri,2006). This research aims to highlight those aspects of Saudi educational reform that are seen by community members as undermining or erasing Islamic identity.

METHODOLOGY

This research applies the qualitative descriptive approach, which, according to Nassaji (2015), lends itself to educational and classroom research where conducting monitored experiments might be difficult for varied reasons. It has been claimed that such a method describes a phenomenon that is linked to the surrounding cultural (physical) context where the research is undertaken (Gall et al, 2007). This is especially important, as meaning cannot be interpreted without consideration of both linguistic and cultural contexts (Yule,2010). This paper relies heavily on observation, which is not the sole strategy of qualitative descriptive methodology. The benefit of observation is manifested in the fact that analyzing small amounts of data might be reliable enough in interpreting a certain behavior (Kawulich,2012). Therefore, it has always been a tool to study questions of classroom identity construction (MacDonald,2016) that could be related to sociolinguistic analysis (Altuna and Basurto, 2013).

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

A. **Textbooks with culture clash**

The early implementation of English curricula in Saudi Arabian schools reflected conservative calls to exclude all instances of Western culture (Mahboob,2013), and instead presented students with materials specially designed to preserve local Islamic values (Mahboob and Elyas,2014). Consequently, English syllabi concentrated on general themes and/or topics that promote Islam, such as conversations about Ramadan and fasting. However, the government attempts to promote a sense of cultural openness and social diversity has

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necessitated the adoption of new curricula with a more Western perspective (Al-Saadat,2011).

Under Islam, women are required to wear the *hijab* (a veil, or head-covering), and failure to do so is explicitly prohibited by the Quran. This situation is socially critical in Saudi Arabia, where the wearing of the *hijab* is radically enforced (Quamar,2016), and women with no *hijab* experience a sense of social exclusion. It has been further added that women with no Hijab are still experiencing a sense of social disdain. Moreover, it is generally accepted in Saudi society that the *hijab* helps minimize the incidence of sexual harassment. (DeCoursey,2017). However, a closer examination of the newly modified English textbooks in use in Saudi schools reveals a clear potential to mitigate this rigorous view. Some include examples of teachable conversations between females with and without the *hijab* (Picture1). This violation of norms made teachers, especially those from the older generation, wary of exposing students to such a threat, which further affects the quality of teaching and the achievement of learning objectives (Khulaif and Alshammari,2016).

It is widely postulated that the educational environment is the ideal site for governmental ideology to be passed to children and young people (Orlowski,2012). Moreover, it has been claimed that these ideological views put forward by course content are best expressed visually (Mccallum and Stephens, 2010). Therefore, it could be argued that the teaching materials presented in picture 1 might have been used to normalize among students the rejection of the *hijab*, calling for individual liberty in this respect, which is a defiance of Islamic tradition and practice. Further, Elyas (2008) has documented several references to Western culture, where primary school students confront examples of proscribed behaviours, such as drinking wine, and dating, to name just two.
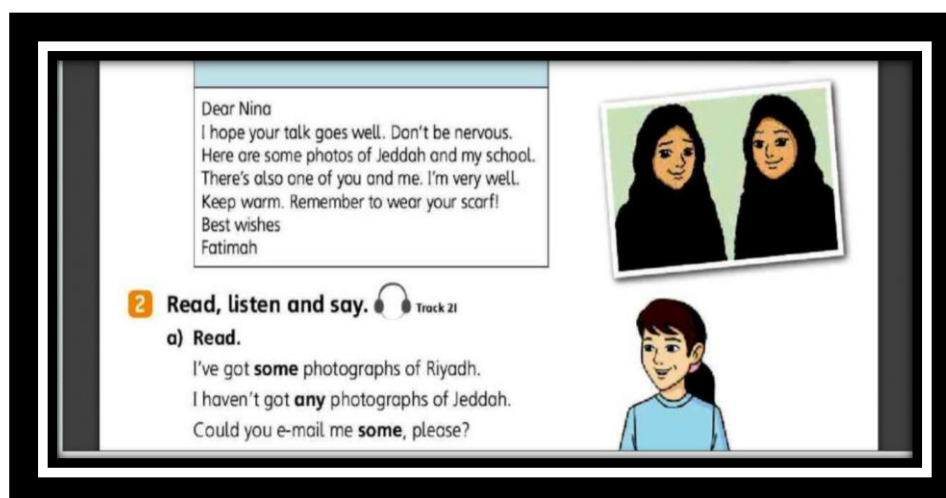
Picture1: English teaching materials for intermediate students illustrated by images of females with and without the Hijab.

Mixed-sex Education

Saudi Arabia has long deprived females of educational opportunities (Alabbasi,2016). However, the focus of the educational system on providing sex-segregated spaces has served to ease the ban on female education (Roula,2004). This goes in line with the traditions of Islam where direct contact between unrelated individuals of the opposite sex is forbidden (Bajnaid and Elyas,2017). Although sex-segregated education has been thought to have a negative impact on student outcomes that may affect the fit of a graduate to the needs of labor market (Rawaf,1991), such ideas have received little attention. Although the educational body in Saudi Arabia has expressed resistance to mixed-sex education (Arab News,2013), this policy has recently started to

be relaxed. According to Hammad (2014), private institutions are free to adopt less-religiously informed policies and procedures, including the provision of mixed-sex education. This has always been justified with the claim that these institutions are neither public nor run by the official education system. Later, this has turned to be socially intolerated with applying the governmental decree that allows women to take teaching and supervisory roles in classes of primary school boys' (Al-Arabiya News,2019). Although this has been justified by the ability of women to build a positive rapport with young children, which may further develop their socio-cognitive skills (Longobardi et al,2013), this decision has met with condemnation from conservatives who repeated their warnings about the threat posed by coeducation to young people's Islamic integrity (BBC News,2019). More radical is the reaction of members of more isolated or socially closed communities who have kept their children from enrolling in and attending school. This clearly illustrates the concern of parents who prioritize the maintenance of Islamic identity over the other social advantages provided by school attendance.

Re-introduction of music sessions

The inclusion or otherwise of music and musicology as academic subjects has long been a matter of debate, resulting from doubts over the real-life relevance of music as a subject and from its opaque religious adjudication. However, the literature abounds with studies that demonstrate a correlation between music education and the development of cognitive abilities (Vargas,2015). Additionally, musical rhythm can raise student awareness of the suprasegmental features of language, making music a useful tool in foreign language classes (Besedova,2019). The pedagogical vitality of music made it a core subject in Saudi schools in the mid-1960s and 70s (Saudi Gazzette,2021), though it was later removed from the curriculum under the influence of conservative Muslim scholars arguing for the prohibition of music in Islam (Alamer,2015).

This has continued to be a unique feature of the Saudi educational system. However, after years of absence, in line with government-led social reforms, music has reappeared as a subject in Saudi schools, reflecting the country's new educational philosophy (Al-Otaibi,2020).

This decision has prompted objections to the educational system. It is alleged that such a step is intended to undermine the teaching of Islamic literature and pave the way for further exclusion of Islamic courses from the curriculum, thus alienating the new generation from their Islamic identity (Al-Sultan,2010). This has led parents to reject the incongruities of a situation in which children are instructed that Islamic morality prohibits music, while expected to take part in formal music education at school. Consequently, calls have been raised to make these courses optional rather than mandatory, especially in schools that serve communities that adhere strongly to Islamic tradition.

CONCLUSION

Using a descriptive approach and real-life data, this paper has outlined some features of contemporary education that Saudi Arabia's strict religious educational system has accused of contributing to the erosion of students' Islamic identity. The first issue presented here surrounds government attempts to normalize the rigidity of wearing *hijab* through hidden messages transmitted to school children. The decision to adopt mixed-sex education was cited as a further plan to reshape Saudi identity. Additionally, the conservative attack on the reintroduction of music into the curriculum was briefly illustrated. Although this research has shed light on the real threat to religious identity posed by the newly modified teaching philosophy in Saudi Arabia, this study does have several limitations. First, not all of the arguments presented here are necessarily applicable to all community members. At the best, they will be the perspective of the majority. Second, a lack of comprehensive data means that some further research and analysis might be needed to confirm the findings presented here.

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