

Title : Teaching English in Saudi Arabia: To Whom, When and How Should English Be Taught?

Author: Eid A.S. Al-Shammary

The growing economic interdependence of many countries and the huge development in the means of communication and transportation compel almost all countries to teach at least one foreign language. The need for teaching a foreign language produced sizeable research on many aspects of this field such as learners' characteristics, timing of instruction, curriculum contents, the effects of foreign language learning on the mother language and culture, and other related issues. The teaching of English was and still is the topic of debate among concerned Saudi educators. This debate has produced two distinct trends. The proponents of the first trend suggest to extend the English instruction to the elementary stage. They justify their proposition by the realistic growing need for English in many sectors of Saudi society. They also have some educational justifications for their suggestions. The proponents of the second trend suggest to eliminate the English instruction. As an alternative they propose establishing a national agency for translation and arabization from all languages into Arabic. They also call for the arabization of university education. They justify their proposition by the weakness of Saudi students in English despite the long time and high expenses allocated for English instruction. They also justify their proposition by some linguistic, cultural and religious considerations. The position of Saudi Arabia both Islamically and internationally, and its growing need for English in many sectors will reveal the importance of English for Saudi Arabia. The challenge facing Saudi educators is how to answer the following questions quickly and accurately: 1) Who should be taught English? 2) when should English be taught? and 3) what are the most effective methods to teach it? These questions have been answered briefly in this article. It is very important to improve English instruction for those who need it. However, pushing English instruction into the elementary stage will not improve English learning. This solution has been tried in many countries and failed. In addition to the reservations that many parents have about this solution, it will be very costly and difficult to attain in Saudi Arabia. It is also important to recognize the vitality of arabizing higher education. A nation that has pride in its native language should not continue to teach sciences in English forever in its institutions. These two trends in the debate are contradictory. However, they can be made complementary. This can be done by a plan whereby efforts to improve English teaching become a part of a more comprehensive plan for arabizing higher education in Saudi Arabia.