



English in Saudi Arabia: Language Policy, Sociocultural Dynamics, and the Vision 2030 Transformation

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Abstract

English has gradually transformed from a foreign language to a strategic asset central to education, economic reform, and international engagement in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. This study explores the evolving role of the English language in Saudi Arabia, particularly in the context of the national development plan, Vision 2030, historically introduced in the early 20th century through oil and commercial partnerships. Drawing on literature reviews, policy analysis, and sociolinguistic perspectives, the manuscript investigates the historical trajectory, policy reforms, drivers of growth, and sociocultural implications of English expansion in the Kingdom. The findings reveal that English is increasingly perceived as a tool for empowerment, global mobility, and modernization, particularly among youth and urban populations. However, the study also highlights pressing concerns about cultural identity, Arabic language preservation, and linguistic equity. Implications include adopting an explicit additive bilingual framework that safeguards Arabic while scaling quality English provision; investing in equitable teacher development and bridging supports; aligning assessment with communicative outcomes; and monitoring EMI effectiveness to prevent gatekeeping effects.

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Keywords: English language policy; English in Saudi Arabia; Vision 2030; bilingualism; cultural identity

Introduction

The English language has evolved from its origins in the British Isles to become a global lingua franca, widely used across sectors such as diplomacy, commerce, education, science, and entertainment. This global dominance can be attributed to historical factors such as British colonial expansion and the subsequent rise of the United States as a superpower in the 20th century (Crystal, 2003). Today, English is spoken by over 1.5 billion people worldwide, with non-native speakers forming the majority, which a testament to its function as a tool for international communication rather than a marker of native identity.

Within this global context, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) has experienced a growing emphasis on the English language. Traditionally, KSA has prioritized Arabic, both as the national and religious language. However, as the country attempts an ambitious transformation through its national development plan, Vision 2030, English is increasingly recognized as a strategic asset. Vision 2030 outlines a comprehensive roadmap for reducing the nation's dependency on oil, by diversifying the economy, with a view to enhancing global

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competitiveness. Language, particularly English, plays a critical role in realizing these objectives by enabling Saudis to engage with international partners, access global knowledge systems, and participate in a knowledge-based economy (Al-Hoorie et al., 2025).

The adoption and expansion of English in Saudi Arabia can be observed across multiple domains: in education, where English is introduced at earlier stages in public schooling and dominates instruction in science and engineering disciplines; in business, where multinational corporations demand English proficiency as a prerequisite for employment; and in media and technology, where English permeates social media, entertainment, and digital learning platforms (Alghuwainem, 2025).

This growth is beneficial for global integration; nevertheless, it also raises complex questions about cultural preservation, linguistic equity, and the role of English in shaping social identities. For instance, concerns about linguistic imperialism and the potential erosion of Arabic identity persist, particularly among conservative and rural communities (Elyas & Badawood, 2017). Meanwhile, disparities in access to quality English education between urban and rural regions risk exacerbating existing social inequalities.

To address these concerns, this paper explored the following research questions:

1. What are the key factors contributing to the growth of English in Saudi Arabia?
2. How is English reshaping the linguistic and cultural landscape of the Kingdom?
3. What are the educational and policy implications of this linguistic shift, particularly in relation to Saudi Vision 2030?

Although significant scholarship links English to Vision 2030, much of it is either sector-specific (e.g., higher education only) or primarily descriptive. There remains a need for an integrated account that connects policy intentions to sociocultural dynamics and classroom/assessment practices, and that evaluates who benefits—and who risks exclusion—during rapid reform.

Despite ambitious language and education reforms, evidence on how policy logics translate into lived practice is fragmented. Unclear implementation pathways and uneven capacity can produce inequities in access, attainment, and opportunity, while fueling concerns about the status and functions of Arabic. A synthesized, equity-oriented analysis is needed to clarify trajectories and guard against unintended gatekeeping effects.

Literature Review

The formal inclusion of English into the national curriculum began in the 1950s, initially limited to the secondary level and often restricted to grammar-based instruction. During the subsequent decades, especially amid the post-oil boom of the 1970s and 1980s, the need for a technically skilled, English-proficient workforce increased substantially. Higher education institutions such as King Saud University and King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals began adopting English as a medium of instruction (EMI) for disciplines including medicine, engineering, and computer science (Elyas & Badawood, 2017). Although these shifts were largely driven by academic and professional imperatives, public skepticism toward English persisted due to cultural and religious concerns. Arabic remained the primary language of instruction in the humanities and religious sciences, and conservative elements within society viewed English with suspicion, as they feared it would undermine Islamic values. Still, the demand for English-literate graduates continued to grow, as employers increasingly associated English proficiency with technical competence and access to international standards (Alanazi, 2025). By the 1990s, English was no longer marginal but was becoming embedded in Saudi Arabia's evolving educational infrastructure.

A major turning point in the development of English in Saudi Arabia came with the announcement of Vision 2030, the Kingdom's national transformation plan introduced in 2016. One of the pillars of this vision is to equip Saudi citizens with the skills needed for a post-oil economy. This included technological proficiency and global engagement, both of which require a high level of English fluency (Alotaibi, 2024). Vision 2030 redefined the role of English as a strategic asset, essential for integrating the Saudi workforce into international markets and diversifying the economy through tourism, investment, and technology.

Consequently, the Ministry of Education undertook curriculum reforms, including a significant policy change: beginning in 2021, English became a compulsory subject starting in Grade 1 in all public schools (Alqahtani & Albidewi, 2022; Al-Hoorie et al., 2025; Barnawi & Alzahrani, 2025). This marked a departure from earlier practices where English typically began at Grade 6 or later. The reforms also introduced new learning outcomes based on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), prioritizing communicative competence over rote memorization. These efforts point to a broader governmental shift toward early bilingualism, digital learning integration, and international benchmarks for educational excellence.

In parallel, universities and training institutes adopted new pedagogical models for English language

education. The use of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programs grew in fields like business, nursing, and information technology, with the goal of preparing students for specialized workplace communication. Placement tests became more common, and English language proficiency was integrated into graduation requirements at many institutions. Moreover, the shift from grammar-translation methods to task-based and project-based learning represented a pedagogical reform to comply with global best practices (Aljasir, 2024). Technological tools, such as ChatGPT and other AI-driven platforms, were introduced to enhance writing and vocabulary development, particularly in higher education ESP courses (Elmotri et al., 2025). These advancements highlight the Kingdom's increasing reliance on digital tools to modernize language education and provide students with flexible, individualized learning experiences.

Despite these progressive developments, the expansion of English has not been without cultural tension. English is sometimes perceived as a symbol of Western cultural dominance, a concern which raises fears of linguistic imperialism and erosion of Arabic identity. These concerns are especially pronounced among religious scholars and conservative social groups, who argue that English should serve only functional and economic purposes, not displace Arabic in cultural or religious domains (Alghuwainem, 2025). However, sociolinguistic research indicates that Saudi youth are increasingly adept at negotiating bilingualism—using English in academic and professional settings and maintaining Arabic in familial, religious, and social communication. Rather than replacing Arabic, English appears to be undergoing localization, being used in ways that take into account Saudi values and goals (Alanazi, 2025). This approach allows for the coexistence of both languages and identities, representing an adaptive model of multilingualism.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative integrative review and documentary policy analysis to examine the role of English in Saudi Arabia within the Vision 2030 context. This research design synthesizes peer-reviewed empirical studies with official policy documents (e.g., Vision 2030 roadmaps, ministerial circulars, curriculum frameworks) to link policy intentions, implementation practices, and sociocultural dynamics. The approach is appropriate for capturing system-level change and triangulating convergent or divergent patterns across sources without limiting the analysis to a single site or dataset.

Sampling and Research Procedure

Sampling proceeded in two coordinated streams: (1) Policy/Program Corpus (Documentary Analysis): this included Vision 2030 strategic documents; Ministry of Education frameworks and implementation guidelines; national assessment and accreditation materials; teacher development initiatives; and relevant agency reports. A comprehensive search strategy combined controlled vocabulary and keywords (e.g., "Saudi Arabia" AND "English" OR "EMI" AND "Vision 2030" AND "policy"/"curriculum"/"teacher development"/"assessment"/"attitudes"/"bilingualism"), was conducted across major indexing databases (e.g., Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC) and Google Scholar. Arabic search used equivalent databases (e.g., "2030", "السياسة اللغوية", "اللغة", "الإنجليزية", "التعليم"). Snowballing from reference lists and citation tracking captured additional materials. Records were screened in two passes (title/abstract, then full text) against the criteria above.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion criteria: documents issued by Saudi government bodies or nationally mandated programs related to English policy, EMI, curriculum, teacher preparation, assessment, or workforce alignment. Inclusion criteria: studies centered on Saudi Arabia; report empirical data or systematic analysis; published primarily from 2016 onward (to align with Vision 2030), with earlier foundational work included when necessary for context.

Exclusion criteria: non-official commentary, opinion editorials, and documents without clear relevance to language education. Exclusion criteria: purely theoretical pieces with no data; linguistic analyses unrelated to education/policy; non-Saudi contexts unless used for contrastive framing.

In addition, peer-reviewed studies focusing on English language policy/practice in Saudi Arabia, including EMI, teacher professional development, learner attitudes, assessment, technology-mediated learning, and equity/access formed the empirical literature corpus (Integrative Review).

Data Collection Procedure

For the policy/program corpus, official portals (e.g., ministry websites and repositories) were used to retrieve the most recent versions of strategic plans, regulatory circulars, curricular standards, and implementation toolkits. Version dates were noted to ensure recency and trace changes over time. For the empirical corpus, bibliographic metadata (title, year, venue, methodology, sample, instruments, key findings) were extracted into a study matrix. Duplicates were removed; reasons for exclusion at full-text stage were

logged (e.g., non-empirical, out of scope). Where necessary, Arabic-language documents were translated or summarized to ensure analytic comparability.

Data Analysis Techniques

Analysis proceeded in four steps:

1. Framework-guided coding: an initial codebook reflected the study's objectives (policy aims, implementation mechanisms, EMI scope, teacher capacity, assessment practices, learner attitudes, equity/access, Arabic maintenance).
2. Thematic analysis: codes were iteratively refined and grouped into higher-order themes using constant-comparison across the two corpora (policy vs. empirical). This enabled alignment (or tension) between "policy on paper" and "practice on the ground."
3. Matrix synthesis: a cross-tabulation mapped themes against Vision 2030 priorities (human capital, diversification, internationalization) to identify convergences, gaps, and unintended consequences (e.g., gatekeeping risks via assessment or EMI access).
4. Credibility checks: analytic decisions were documented in an audit trail; rival explanations were considered; and claims were warranted with multiple sources where available. Because the study synthesizes publicly available documents and published research, formal human-subjects review was not required.

Results and Discussion

Government Policy and Vision 2030

Since its launch in 2016, Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 has served as the blueprint for a national transformation grounded in economic diversification, educational modernization, and global competitiveness. A central component of this strategy is the elevation of English language proficiency as a skill essential for workforce development, digital innovation, and international diplomacy. In line with this national ambition, the government has repositioned English not merely as a foreign language but as a strategic instrument of development. It is increasingly integrated into national education policies and is being promoted across all levels of schooling and professional training. English is now viewed as a necessary medium for achieving modernization goals and ensuring the Saudi labor force is in conformity with international standards. This shift signals a strategic adjustment in language planning, in which English becomes a national resource that will contribute to human capital enhancement, foreign investment, and technological exchange.

One of the most important reforms under Vision 2030 has been the restructuring of the English curriculum in public education. In 2021, English language instruction was introduced from Grade 1 in all government schools, which marks a notable shift away from the prior practice of beginning at the intermediate level. This early exposure policy aims to develop students' linguistic competence from a young age, and is consistent with international models that advocate for early second-language acquisition (Jabeen, 2023). The revised curriculum includes an emphasis on communicative competence, listening and speaking skills, and cultural awareness, rather than solely focusing on grammar. These reforms also brought in new textbooks, language labs, and digital platforms for interactive learning. Importantly, the curriculum is structured in accordance with international benchmarks, such as the CEFR, to ensure consistency with global standards. The Ministry of Education's clear policy shift indicates an ideological and pedagogical transformation that sees English not only as an academic subject but as a tool for global participation.

In conjunction with curriculum reform, there has been a dramatic rise in English-Medium Instruction (EMI) at the tertiary level. Many Saudi universities now deliver instruction in English, especially in programs related to science, technology, engineering, and medicine (STEM). Institutions such as King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) and Prince Sultan University offer programs entirely in English, including business, IT, and health sciences. This shift is not merely about linguistic fluency but is embedded in broader objectives to enhance the quality of education, attract international faculty, and foster global research collaboration (Barnawi & Al-Hawsawi, 2017). However, the implementation of EMI has also raised concerns about students' comprehension, faculty preparedness, and unequal access to support systems. Urban, elite institutions are well-equipped to implement EMI successfully, whereas many regional universities lack sufficient infrastructure and qualified staff. (Alhazmi & Nyland, 2013). These challenges suggest that although EMI aligns with Vision 2030, its equitable implementation remains uneven and calls for more targeted policy support.

A critical enabler of these reforms is teacher development, which the Saudi government has prioritized through both domestic and international initiatives. Teachers are now expected to meet higher proficiency levels and employ modern pedagogical techniques that emphasize student-centered learning. National initiatives such as the Tatweer Professional Development Program and international collaborations with institutions in the UK, Australia, and Canada have been launched to train Saudi English teachers in both

language and methodology (Alyami, 2016). Moreover, many teachers are now encouraged to complete certifications such as CELTA or TEFL to improve instructional quality. Nevertheless, significant disparities remain in teacher readiness across the Kingdom. Studies show that in rural areas, many English teachers still lack adequate training and professional development opportunities, which directly affects student outcomes. Therefore, more systemic investment and monitoring are needed to ensure consistent national standards in line with Vision 2030's emphasis on teacher development.

Digital transformation is another cornerstone of Saudi Arabia's language policy evolution. The government has rapidly integrated edtech solutions into classrooms to support language instruction, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Online platforms like "iEN National Education Portal" and mobile apps have been deployed to provide interactive learning tools, video tutorials, and automated assessments (Alzahrani, 2019). Artificial intelligence, including tools like ChatGPT, is beginning to shape writing instruction and vocabulary building in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses. These digital platforms provide flexibility, individual feedback, and scalability, which makes them suitable for a country with a rapidly growing student population. However, digital literacy remains a barrier in less technologically equipped regions, and there are concerns about over-reliance on automated tools without sufficient pedagogical support.

Despite these transformative initiatives, Vision 2030's English policy trajectory is not without cultural and ideological tension. Critics have argued that the aggressive promotion of English may lead to the marginalization of Arabic, especially in academic and corporate settings. There is also skepticism among more conservative sectors regarding the cultural implications of English dominance, particularly in light of its association with Western media, values, and secularism (Al-Haq & Smadi, 1996). Recent studies suggest that Saudi society is increasingly embracing a model of functional bilingualism—using English for education and work, and retaining Arabic for religion, family life, and national identity (Al-Ahdal, 2020). This pragmatic bilingualism is seen as a reconciliatory model that strikes the balance between global ambitions with cultural preservation. Vision 2030 thus reflects a strategic expansion that accommodates both global integration and local continuity, rather than a linguistic replacement.

In conclusion, the integration of English language policy within Vision 2030 represents one of the most ambitious and comprehensive educational transformations in Saudi history.

Through early curriculum reform, EMI adoption, teacher training programs, and digital innovation, the Saudi government is embedding English deeply into the educational infrastructure of the Kingdom. These efforts are not only reshaping how English is taught but also reframing its symbolic value, from that of a foreign language to that of a national asset. Despite ongoing challenges concerning equity, capacity, and cultural balance, the general direction is clear: English is no longer peripheral in Saudi Arabia, but central to its future. The continued success of Vision 2030 will depend on the ability to implement reforms equitably, address sociolinguistic concerns, and ensure that English is not just taught, but truly learned and used in meaningful contexts.

Drivers of Growth of English in Saudi Arabia

The growth of English in Saudi Arabia is driven by a combination of interrelated factors, ranging from state-led economic reforms to bottom-up sociocultural shifts. Unlike countries where English proliferated due to colonial legacies, in Saudi Arabia it has emerged as a strategically adopted language, shaped by policy, globalization, and the Kingdom's rapid transformation in line with Vision 2030. English has moved beyond its role as a subject in school to become an integral part of higher education, commerce, tourism, digital communication, and even entertainment. Policy frameworks have accelerated its institutional presence, and the public's increasing engagement with English through media, technology, and social aspiration has also contributed to its spread. As the language becomes increasingly embedded in the lives of Saudi citizens, it functions both as a tool of economic participation and as a marker of modern identity (Elyas & Badawood, 2017). Understanding the diverse drivers of English growth is essential to grasp its unique trajectory in the Saudi context.

A primary driver of English expansion is the changing economic structure of Saudi Arabia. The shift toward a diversified, knowledge-based economy under Vision 2030 has placed English at the center of national development. Sectors such as tourism, hospitality, aviation, and information technology require strong English communication skills for both domestic professionals and international visitors. For instance, the launch of NEOM, a futuristic mega-city built on principles of sustainability and global integration, explicitly demands a bilingual workforce fluent in English and Arabic (Touri, 2024). Similarly, the growing presence of multinational companies and foreign investment has elevated English to the status of a lingua franca in business interactions. The language is now often seen as a prerequisite for employability and career mobility, especially in high-income urban centers like Riyadh, Jeddah, and Dammam. Consequently, individuals are gradually motivated to learn English not just for educational purposes, but as a direct pathway to economic empowerment and upward mobility (Alkaabi, 2016).

Another significant driver is educational reform, which has not only expanded the presence of English in

curricula but also reshaped pedagogical approaches. English is now introduced from Grade 1 in public schools, with additional emphasis on task-based learning, communication skills, and digital platforms. This early start reflects growing awareness among policymakers and parents that proficiency must be cultivated over time, and that earlier exposure leads to better outcomes (Altalhab, 2023). Furthermore, higher education institutions increasingly require English proficiency for admission into STEM programs, and standardized tests such as IELTS or STEP (Standardized Test of English Proficiency) are becoming more widely accepted. Teacher training programs and international partnerships with institutions in the UK, US, and Australia have also reinforced best practices in English language teaching. These educational shifts collectively signal that English is now an academic standard, not a supplementary skill.

The role of technology and digital media cannot be underestimated in the spread of English, especially among younger generations. Saudi youth are among the most digitally connected in the Arab world, with widespread use of platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter), many of which feature English-dominant content (Fadaak & Roberts, 2018). This exposure facilitates informal language learning, encourages code-switching, and increases familiarity with idiomatic expressions and cultural references. In addition to passive consumption, many young Saudis create content in English, engage in gaming communities, or participate in global online discussions. Digital learning tools such as Duolingo, Memrise, and ChatGPT have also made language learning more accessible, personalized, and gamified. These technologies lower the barriers to entry and create immersive environments where English is acquired organically, outside the formal classroom. As digital fluency becomes synonymous with global citizenship, English proficiency is increasingly viewed as a cardinal component of digital literacy.

Social and demographic factors further accentuate the demand for English. Saudi Arabia has a young population, with over 60% under the age of 30, many of whom view English as a bridge to the world and a symbol of cosmopolitan identity (Al-Mubireek, 2025). Urbanization, international travel, and a growing expatriate population also contribute to the visibility and use of English in public spaces such as shopping malls, airports, universities, and cafes. Code-switching between Arabic and English has become commonplace, especially among bilinguals who move fluidly between languages depending on context and audience. Additionally, English is increasingly used in branding, advertising, and corporate communication, which reinforces its visibility as a prestige language. These sociolinguistic practices are shaping a new cultural norm in which English proficiency is associated with modernity, professionalism, and social capital.

Religion and global diplomacy, often perceived as counterforces to English expansion, have also evolved into complementary factors. For instance, English is now commonly used in Islamic scholarship and interfaith dialogue, which allows Saudi religious figures to engage with global audiences. Hajj and Umrah tourism, which bring millions of Muslims to the Kingdom annually, require English as a common medium of communication in services, signage, and hospitality. The internationalization of Saudi universities, through scholarships and visiting scholars, has similarly necessitated the integration of English into religious and academic discourse (Le Ha & Barnawi, 2015). These intersections demonstrate that English is being strategically localized and repurposed in ways that complement rather than conflict with national and religious identity.

In summary, the growth of English in Saudi Arabia is propelled by a host of economic, educational, technological, and sociocultural forces. As the Kingdom repositions itself as a global player under Vision 2030, English has become embedded in institutional structures and everyday life alike. Far from being imposed, the expansion of English reflects widespread individual motivation, institutional prioritization, and global connectivity. Its growth is not simply linear but multidimensional, sustained by top-down reforms and bottom-up engagement. If current trends continue, English is likely to evolve from a secondary foreign language to a co-primary language of opportunity, interaction, and innovation in Saudi Arabia.

Cultural and Linguistic Impact

The growing prominence of English in Saudi Arabia, particularly in education, media, and professional settings, has prompted substantial cultural and linguistic shifts. As the Kingdom has consciously embraced English as a tool for modernization and international integration, critical debates have emerged about the sociocultural implications of bilingualism. Concerns about the erosion of Arabic, loss of traditional values, and Western cultural influence frequently appear in public discourse and scholarly analysis (Elyas & Badawood, 2017). Yet, alongside these concerns, many Saudis, especially younger generations, are developing new forms of linguistic and cultural identity that reflect both global fluency and local rootedness. Thus, the cultural and linguistic impact of English is not unidirectional or inherently detrimental; rather, it is complex, negotiated, and increasingly context-dependent.

One of the most debated issues is the impact of English on the Arabic language, particularly in urban and elite spaces where English is increasingly the medium of education, business, and digital communication. Critics argue that the proliferation of English will result in marginalizing Arabic, especially when English terms are borrowed excessively or replace Arabic equivalents in common discourse. This phenomenon, often referred to as "language shift," has been observed in Saudi advertising, higher education, and corporate

communication, where English is sometimes preferred for its perceived modernity and prestige (Albirini, 2016). Some linguists warn that such patterns can weaken formal Arabic proficiency over time, especially if young people associate English with advancement and Arabic with formality or constraint (Al-Jarf, 2008). This tension highlights the ongoing challenge of maintaining Arabic as a vibrant, functional language in a globalized environment increasingly dominated by English.

Despite these concerns, there is growing evidence that bilingualism in Saudi Arabia is becoming adaptive rather than subtractive. Research indicates that many Saudis now use English for functional domains, such as education, travel, and employment, while retaining Arabic for religion, family life, and cultural expression. This form of functional division allows both languages to coexist within distinct social spheres, which reduces the likelihood of total language displacement. For example, English may dominate in STEM university courses; nevertheless, Arabic remains the language of religious studies, local literature, and political discourse. The Saudi linguistic landscape thus reflects a model of contextual bilingualism, wherein language choice is determined by purpose, audience, and social setting. Far from being passive recipients of linguistic influence, Saudi speakers actively negotiate their bilingual practices in culturally meaningful ways.

The impact of English extends beyond language into cultural values, identity formation, and social behavior. Exposure to English-language media, entertainment, and online platforms has introduced new cultural references, lifestyles, and interactional norms. Some scholars suggest this may lead to a form of cultural hybridization, where local customs are reshaped or diluted by global trends (Schaefer, 2021). Examples include shifts in dress codes, gender roles, and social etiquette among university students who study abroad or in EMI programs. However, this transformation is not uniformly perceived as negative. Others argue that cultural contact through English can foster intercultural competence, critical thinking, and open-mindedness, all of which are necessary for effective global citizenship. In this view, English acts as a medium of intercultural dialogue, not simply as a conduit of Westernization.

Paradoxically, English has also been instrumental in projecting Saudi culture to the world, especially in diplomacy, religious tourism, and international broadcasting. Government agencies and cultural institutions increasingly rely on English to communicate the Kingdom's world view and vision to international audiences. For example, the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah uses English websites, brochures, and mobile apps to assist millions of non-Arabic-speaking pilgrims each year (Alotaibi, 2024). English is also used in Saudi academic publications, TEDx events, and YouTube channels that aim to correct stereotypes and showcase local heritage. This global outreach is part of a broader soft-power strategy, which sees English not as a threat but as a vehicle for cultural export. Through English, Saudi scholars, artists, and professionals engage in transnational conversations, and contributes to a more pluralistic and global understanding of Saudi society.

Nevertheless, cultural resistance remains a real and compelling force, particularly among conservative circles that view English as symbolic of secular, liberal, or Western ideologies. These critics often argue that the spread of English dilutes religious values, undermines traditional authority structures, and introduces moral relativism through media and education. Language, in this sense, becomes a site of ideological contestation. Public debates on gender inclusion, Western curricula, or international pop culture often reference the "corrupting" influence of English as a manifestation of a broader cultural anxiety. The state, for its part, attempts to balance these tensions by framing English as a tool of economic growth and national pride, rather than as a foreign imposition (Sargeant & Erling, 2011). This balancing act reflects a serious attempt to negotiate bilingual modernity without eroding the cultural and religious foundations of national identity.

In conclusion, the cultural and linguistic impact of English in Saudi Arabia is deeply multifaceted. It simultaneously generates challenges and opportunities, tensions and accommodations. Some fear the erosion of Arabic and the rise of Western influence, whereas others view English as a means of global engagement, intercultural communication, and national representation. Saudi Arabia's experience demonstrates that the adoption of a global language does not necessarily entail cultural loss, especially when managed through thoughtful policy, educational reform, and societal reflection. As English continues to spread, its future in the Kingdom will likely be shaped by collaboration and coexistence, and thus reflect a uniquely Saudi model of bilingualism in the 21st century.

Attitudes Toward English

Saudi attitudes toward the English language have undergone a significant evolution over the past three decades. Early studies conducted in the 1990s often documented a prevailing skepticism or negative sentiment toward English, primarily due to its association with Western culture and perceived threats to Arabic and Islamic identity (Assuhaimi & Al-Barr, 1992; Zaid, 1993). However, a growing body of research indicates that such attitudes have gradually shifted. A review by Faruk (2022) found a marked transition from negative perceptions in the 1990s to more favorable attitudes in the 2000s. This change is widely attributed to economic liberalization, global connectivity, and educational reforms that recontextualized English as a tool for empowerment rather than cultural imposition.

More recent studies confirm the growing acceptance of English among Saudi youth and students. Alkaabi

(2016), Alnofaie (2017), and Almahmoud (2012) report positive orientations toward English learning, often driven by its perceived utility in accessing knowledge, securing employment, and participating in global discourse. These findings align with earlier insights by Al-Jarf (2008), who observed that Saudi students consider English a superior language due to its global status and its association with science, technology, research, and innovation.

The transformation in public sentiment is also reflected in academic environments. Al-Haq and Smadi (1996) documented a growing trend of positive attitudes toward English among university students, particularly those enrolled in EMI and international programs. It has been noted that many students did not view English as a vehicle of Westernization or cultural imperialism, but rather as a means of engaging with global knowledge while maintaining their Saudi identity. These results support the broader claim that attitudes toward English in Saudi Arabia are becoming more instrumental and pragmatic, focused on utility and opportunity rather than ideology.

Educational and Policy Implications

The institutionalization of English in Saudi Arabia under Vision 2030 has brought with it far-reaching educational and policy implications that extend beyond mere curriculum updates. As English gains prominence across public schooling, tertiary education, and workforce development, it is reshaping pedagogical models, teacher competencies, national assessments, and equity of access. These transformations reflect the Kingdom's ambition to model its educational system after international benchmarks, yet they also expose structural challenges that need urgent attention. Adopting English may aim to elevate competitiveness and global integration, but it also raises questions about language equity, identity, and the sustainability of reform. This complex situation requires policymakers to carefully balance modernization with inclusion, innovation with tradition, and strategic aspirations with the lived realities of Saudis.

One of the most visible consequences of the English expansion is the redefinition of curricular priorities. The introduction of English in Grade 1 has altered the structure and sequencing of language education, by restricting traditional Arabic language instruction and adding pressure to already busy timetables. Schools are now required to adopt internationally benchmarked curricula, often sourced from British or American publishers, which do not always endorse local practices (Rose & Conama, 2018; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2015, 2016). Moreover, these imported curricula tend to emphasize global culture and communication norms, which necessitates careful localization to ensure cultural sensitivity. At the same time, the push for performance-based learning in English has shifted emphasis from rote memorization to skills-based instruction, with respect to listening, speaking, and writing. These changes require significant shifts in classroom dynamics, classroom management, and teacher-student interaction models, many of which are unfamiliar or underdeveloped in traditional Saudi pedagogical settings.

Central to these transformations is the professionalization of English teachers, who are increasingly expected to deliver instruction in ways that meet international standards. The Ministry of Education has launched national initiatives focused on upskilling teachers through workshops, postgraduate diplomas, and overseas training. However, the success of these initiatives remains uneven. Rural and underserved regions often suffer from a lack of qualified English teachers, inadequate facilities, and poor access to digital tools, which collectively lead to educational disparities. Furthermore, many teachers, especially those trained in older, grammar-focused methods, struggle to adapt to communicative and technology-integrated approaches. These challenges point to a pressing need for more sustained, localized, and equitable teacher development programs, supported by mentoring, peer collaboration, and institutional incentives.

The rise of English has also affected higher education policy, specifically in terms of admissions, assessment, and program structure. Many Saudi universities now require standardized English test scores (e.g., IELTS, STEP) for program entry in medicine, engineering, and business (Gaffas, 2016). This has led to the proliferation of English language preparatory programs or "foundation years," during which students are expected to achieve academic English proficiency before commencing disciplinary coursework. However, research indicates that these programs often vary in quality and fail to bridge the gap between high school English and the demands of EMI (English-Medium Instruction) at the university level. Furthermore, students from less privileged backgrounds or Arabic-medium schools are disproportionately disadvantaged by these language barriers, which creates a socioeconomic divide in educational access and performance (Milligan, 2022). These findings suggest that, on the one hand, English functions as a gatekeeper to academic and economic opportunity; on the other hand, it may inadvertently reproduce existing inequalities unless accompanied by inclusive language support policies.

From a policy standpoint, the integration of English also necessitates system-wide assessment reforms. Traditional exams in English have focused heavily on grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension, with little attention to productive skills like writing and speaking. In contrast, recent reforms seek to link assessments with communicative competence, including portfolio evaluations, oral presentations, and task-based activities. These innovations represent a positive shift, yet their implementation across schools has been inconsistent. Teachers cite a lack of training in formative assessment methods, insufficient rubrics, and

time constraints as barriers to effective evaluation (Alqahtani, 2024). Moreover, national exams such as the General Aptitude Test (GAT) and the Standard Achievement Admission Test (SAAT) remain predominantly in Arabic. This creates a disconnect between high-stakes assessment and bilingual education policy, which highlights the critical need to ensure that assessment practices reflect the pedagogical conditions of a bilingual curriculum.

A final, but crucial, implication of English language policy in Saudi Arabia relates to its long-term cultural and linguistic sustainability. Even as English proficiency is vital for economic participation, it must not come at the cost of Arabic fluency, cultural literacy, or national identity. There is a growing call among educators and scholars for additive bilingualism, a model in which English is learned in addition to Arabic, rather than at its expense (Al-Issa & Dahan, 2021). Achieving this requires a careful balancing act, where Arabic is given equal prestige, protected through well-funded initiatives, and positioned as a language of modern intellectual inquiry. Furthermore, education policies must recognize the plurality of Englishes, by acknowledging that English in Saudi Arabia can evolve with its own localized norms, accent, and usages. This approach would empower students to navigate global discourse without surrendering their linguistic or cultural identities.

In summary, the spread of English in Saudi Arabia has transformed the educational arena, as it introduced new standards, expectations, and challenges. Although the policy reforms tied to Vision 2030 reflect a forward-thinking and globally oriented agenda, their successful implementation requires holistic and inclusive strategies. It is, therefore, vital to address regional disparities, rethink assessment, enhance teacher development, and protect linguistic equity in order to ensure that English acts as a bridge to opportunity rather than a barrier. It is only through sustained investment, collaborative planning, and cultural sensitivity that English education can become a tool for both national development and personal empowerment in the Kingdom.

Conclusion, Recommendations & Implications

The growth of English in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia represents one of the most significant sociolinguistic and educational transformations in the region. Over the past two decades, and more rapidly since the announcement of Vision 2030, English has evolved from a peripheral foreign language to a central medium of instruction, commerce, and global engagement. This shift is not accidental but the product of deliberate policy, global economic restructuring, and shifting societal aspirations. English is now embedded in national education policy, university programs, workforce training, digital platforms, and international diplomacy. Though its expansion offers unprecedented opportunities, it also raises critical questions about linguistic equity, cultural identity, and educational quality. As such, English in Saudi Arabia must be viewed as a strategic resource, a policy concern, and a cultural artifact in its own right.

The analysis in this study has demonstrated how various structural, institutional, and sociocultural factors have collectively contributed to the rise of English in the Kingdom. Vision 2030 has served as a key driver that has been reshaping national priorities toward diversification, global integration, and knowledge-based development. English proficiency has emerged as an essential competency for economic participation, particularly in sectors like tourism, technology, education, and healthcare. Simultaneously, English has entered Saudi homes, schools, and digital spaces, and influenced youth culture, media consumption, and identity formation. The government's commitment to introducing English from Grade 1, expanding English-medium instruction (EMI) at universities, and digitizing English pedagogy reflects a broader recognition that linguistic capital is now economic capital (Bourdieu & Thompson, 1991). However, the paper also revealed key concerns around regional disparities, insufficient teacher training, and the risk of Arabic erosion, challenges that must be addressed to ensure equity and sustainability.

One of the core policy implications emerging from this transformation is the need for a coherent bilingual framework that integrates English education without displacing Arabic. Saudi Arabia must resist framing English and Arabic in adversarial terms. Instead, policymakers should adopt an “additive bilingualism” model, where both languages are nurtured to serve complementary roles. For instance, Arabic should remain the language of religion, legal discourse, and cultural production, and English can be capitalized on for scientific innovation, business, and international communication (Ismail & Namaziandost, 2025). National language policy must therefore institutionalize support for Arabic, including investment in Arabic digital resources, scientific publications, and Arabic-medium degree programs, in addition to expanding English curricula. By embracing global participation, this approach ensures cultural continuity.

Secondly, the government must invest more deeply in equitable teacher development and pedagogical capacity. Because urban schools and elite universities enjoy access to advanced English programs and global partnerships, a stark contrast emerges with public and rural schools that still struggle with underqualified teachers and insufficient digital infrastructure. A national strategy for English teacher training should include differentiated pathways, incentives, and ongoing mentorship programs, particularly in underserved areas. Professional development must also include intercultural pedagogy, by equipping teachers to handle

the cultural tensions and linguistic challenges that often accompany EMI environments. In this regard, a national English teacher licensing framework could standardize quality and create a more transparent career progression model.

Third, assessment systems must be reformed to correspond with communicative and functional uses of English. Current exam-centric approaches often privilege memorization over real-world application. Instead, Saudi schools and universities should implement performance-based assessments, such as portfolios, group presentations, and real-world language tasks, to evaluate proficiency. These should be complemented by national benchmarks and exit standards across all levels of schooling to ensure uniformity. Importantly, English proficiency testing should not serve as a barrier to educational access, especially in science and humanities, but rather as a monitored support system accompanied by preparatory pathways (Latif, 2021). Inclusive testing design and differentiated assessment will be essential in addressing systemic inequities.

At the higher education level, EMI must be evaluated not only for its symbolic value but also for academic efficacy. Recent research suggests that EMI is beneficial for elite students, though it can alienate or demotivate those with lower English proficiency, and hence lead to poorer outcomes or higher attrition rates (Curle et al., 2020). Universities should therefore conduct longitudinal impact studies on EMI and provide tailored academic support, such as English-language bridging courses and bilingual instructional materials. Faculty training is also essential; subject specialists must be equipped not only to deliver content in English but also to scaffold comprehension and support students' dual-language literacy. Such adjustments would mitigate linguistic gatekeeping and democratize access to knowledge.

Finally, there is a need to enhance public awareness and policy transparency. Language policy decisions must involve broader stakeholder engagement, including teachers, students, parents, and cultural scholars. Public discourse around English must be reframed not as a threat to tradition but as an asset for the nation's future. Clear communication from the Ministry of Education regarding policy rationale, intended outcomes, and implementation timelines will also enhance trust and reduce resistance. Simultaneously, continued investment in Arabic language education, Islamic scholarship, and cultural institutions can strengthen national identity amid linguistic pluralism.

In conclusion, English is transitioning from a foreign language to a national instrument of progress in Saudi Arabia. As the Kingdom pursues economic diversification and cultural diplomacy under Vision 2030, English proficiency is no longer optional; it is an essential currency of participation in global systems. However, this growth must be managed with foresight, inclusivity, and cultural sensitivity. Policy must not only promote English but also protect Arabic, bridge regional divides, and ensure that no student or teacher is left behind in the race toward bilingual excellence. With targeted reforms and sustained commitment, Saudi Arabia can nurture a linguistically plural society that reflects both global ambition and cultural authenticity.

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