ENGLISH AS THE LINGUA FRANCA OF DEVELOPMENT: FINDING COMMON CORRELATES IN SAUDI ARABIA

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Abstract

Technological dependence, interconnectivity of nations, interlinked economies, and interdependent politics across countries in the global village have given a new definition to communication. With one sure though slow thrust, peoples across borders are moving towards what can be seen as one unifying characteristic for the human race: One language to communicate, and the natural choice is English. True, it is Mandarin and not English that is spoken by the largest number of people, but true also is the fact that this is more a matter of natural circumstance than choice. The second most popular language is Spanish but then, it is the English and not Spanish speaking people who are in a position to influence economies, develop trade and move the commerce. In other words, proficiency in English can be directly linked to socio-economic prosperity. In the KSA too, as in the other members of the so-called Developing Bloc of nations, there is a growing consciousness to the fact that to realise the dream of Vision 2030 and to establish a petro-money free economy, the country has to abandon its insular character and adopt a more open-door attitude. One significant factor in the success of this approach will, of course, be the ability of the people to communicate with the world. Hence the need of the hour: Proficiency in English. Globally, researchers have postulated on the effects of English learning on the ‘development’ of limited groups and even individuals. As a corollary to this observation, the role of effective communication and negotiation cannot be overstated in any circumstance that involves people. In fact, ability to ‘communicate in English’ appears to be the catch phrase in academic, political, economic, and even social situations. However, such endeavours are notably missing in the Saudi Arabian context, given the older policies of keeping ‘outside’ influence at a minimal to preserve the purity of the local culture. The current study presents a catalogue and review of the previous studies linking socio-economic development to English with the aim to establish why and how the country stands to benefit in the long run by empowering the general public with English language.

KEY WORDS: ENGLISH, DEVELOPMENT, PROFICIENCY, VISION 2030

Introduction

“A close relative had been diagnosed with a rare disease. We searched for information on it in Arabic and found websites that were unstructured or were essentially chat forums,” recalls Dr Majid Altuwaijri.

“But when we searched in English we found a wealth of good quality information.”

As co-founder of the Saudi Association for Health Informatics, Altuwaijri was well-placed to help his relative, given his expertise in information technology and fluency in English.

-Bulletin of the World Health Organization

This is just one instance of how important it is to know English. English today is almost a world language. It is the native or first language in the United Kingdom, the United States of America, New Zealand and Australia, among other nations. For much of Asia, Africa and Europe, it is the second or parallel language. It remains so in the former colonies of the British. Precisely because English is spoken and used by a vast majority of nations and communities, knowledge of English offers intellectual, cultural, economic and political bridges between the diverse peoples. It is also the vehicle that immediately places a young nation like Saudi Arabia in the midst of knowledge explosion and technological upheavals. However, the medium of instruction in schools and most government run echelons of higher education continue to be Arabic, much to the disadvantage of the learning populace. Where the medium is
English, the ownership is private, which is rare anyway. Going beyond the academia, the government and business function wholly in Arabic. What is realised by few people is that the use of English in Saudi Arabia today is not a simplistic matter of choice of language. It is a veritable question of life and death. For Saudis who are or aspire for a place in the global eco-political scenario, English language and, in some cases, literature, is of immeasurable crucial significance.

Saudi Arabia does not allow foreign involvement and ownership in institutions of higher education, a situation that could have warranted more of English education as in the case of UAE where the USA, Australia and other English-speaking nations are free to establish English medium educational institutions and teach their home curricula. The onus to bring about this change, therefore, rests wholly on the Saudi administration and policy makers. Opposing views exist on the good and bad influence of more English in the Saudi educational system and life vis-à-vis Islam and the entire religio-cultural ethos associated with it. Though the administration recognises the importance of English language and literature, personal, academic and trade life are highly fragmented in the country as they are divorced from a vast corpus of knowledge in legal, technical, scientific and medical information as it exists in English and wholly translating the same into other languages, including Arabic has not been feasible. One challenge in this endeavour is at times the unavailability of lexis in the target language. Sometimes it is not due to the dearth of words in the target language, but the variety of meaning attached to a word that causes that problem. One field, however, where Arabic competes with English on equal grounds is classical literature where Arab treasures beat those of English, there too not in numbers but in depth of philosophical thought. Indeed, the question of English being given a more significant role in the country is today tied up with maintenance of high educational standards. Global assessment of students’ knowledge, measuring their varied abilities, testing the width and depth of their perspective in various fields, and their ability to succeed in acquisition of advanced knowledge, all these somehow get restricted for the Saudis with their narrow language proficiency, automatically relegating the aspiration of setting up of national and international academic and living standards to the realm of the farfetched. Against this backdrop, Crystal’s (2003) evaluation of the place of English is startling by any standards:

- More than 80% of scientific research papers are first published in English.
- English is the official language of communication in more than 85% of international organisations.
- 85% of the world film market is in English.

Whether as a gateway to studying abroad or succeeding as a professional or a worker in the labour market or simply being a tourist, not knowing the language means being lost. This is even truer for all wise of employment, and especially so where professionals have to directly deal with an English-only speaking population. I cite here the case of UK: According to an Independent business survey, though Arabic figures in the top nine languages desired by employers for the highest paid jobs, these are fewer in number than for other languages even down the ladder. What is even more notable is that applicants still need to be as fluent in English as in Arabic to land these jobs!

Saudi Arabia today faces a daunting challenge of sitting on a ticking bomb of widespread unemployment and discontent amongst the young population. Nearly a quarter of a million young people enter the Saudi job market each year with the figures in 2016 placing the unemployment rate at an alarming 11.6% (Arabian Business). With almost half of the Saudi population under twenty-five years of age, and suitable job opportunities not being created at the required rate, we can look towards entrepreneurship as a way out. However, on the trade and entrepreneurship front too, we need our nation to be better with their English. Here are a few reasons why:

1. The middle east is fast developing as a religious and shopping tourism hub. This can be a great opportunity for fostering new business ventures, taking the economy away from dependency on Petro-money, which is also a stated aim of the administration under the Crown Prince.
2. This is an age of the internet and with software so far being incompatible with rendering website content in Arabic, very soon we would perhaps be the only (or one of the very few) peoples without a net-presence.
3. With other regions of the world opening up to the wave of change in the middle east, diplomacy, and its by products such as intelligence, cooperation and development would not be possible without us being more proficient with English.

We, the educators have to undertake a larger responsibility than teaching the young people a mere working knowledge of English. This language has multiple dimensions in modern society and it is for this society that we have to prepare the nation. Our current casual efforts and even more casual attitude to English cannot develop in the young generation the required competence and, later, the ability to use it.
English is taught in Saudi Arabia as a foreign language (with focus more on content than proficiency) from the class four onwards, near to the closure of the critical threshold of language learning. In the universities, however, English literature can be opted for right at the entry level, though with limited proficiency, it is undersubscribed or where the intake of freshmen is full, the learning outcomes are not as expected. In either case, and especially at the higher education institutions, we need to frame two-fold objectives: One, to highlight the learning of literature at all levels in the university courses; and two, to upgrade the language competence of all students whether they are majoring in English or not. Further, these two levels of English teaching have to be seen as one continuous frame.

Given this background, I now move on to review previous studies that have clearly linked English language and literature to the development and economic prosperity of society.

Discussion

Shehu and Shittu (2015) have reiterated that entrepreneurship is a new way of combating unemployment and poverty. They cite the case of ‘low income but high growth’ nations such as Nigeria, Senegal, Kenya and South Africa. Through continuous and studied economic liberalisation, these nations welcome foreign investment in entrepreneurship and trade. But the products of entrepreneurship, whether tangible or intangible, cannot hope to engage public interest without world-wide appeal. This is possible only through a language like English. They hold that the use of English allows greater access to foreign markets, enables the entrepreneurs to learn new business practices, and has a positive impact on general productivity. They see communication skills as a critical factor in trade growth. They again cite Crystal *ibid.* who says that a sizeable portion of the world’s trade transacts in English. Consequent to this, businesses prefer to offer employment to a workforce that is proficient in the language. Outlining the communication process which is central to business, the authors very rightly note that the entrepreneur’s success depends heavily on his/her communicative competence whether to transact an idea or a good. Finally, they connect marketing skills, negotiation and entrepreneurial activity with better communication skills in English as a panacea for economic well-being.

Mkwinda-Nyasulu (2014) declares at the outset that without language there can be no development. She further points out that language has a major role to play if we wish to bring about socio-economic development of people at any significant rate. A unifying language can help achieve this aim and it does not even need to undermine or overshadow the prevalent language(s). In this paradigm, she sees language as a vehicle of communication which, in turn, is seen as a prerequisite of development.

Underlining the importance of English as a dominant language of negotiation and trade, Negash (2011) cites an interesting incident relating to a branding dispute between Ethiopia and the American company, Starbucks. I reproduce here the original narration of a biodiversity expert interviewed in 2010 who participated in the talks:

*We feel the importance of English when we participate in international negotiations that involve people from Africa and other regions. Usually the ones from English-speaking countries express their ideas very clearly and dominate debates. I remember one negotiation event in Nagoya, Japan, on biodiversity. We spent an unnecessarily long time on understanding the word ‘eminent’. In our debriefing after the event, we talked about lack of mastery of English as the main challenge. We concluded that our children should learn English properly for us to make our contributions and take our rights.*

Where anti-English and pro-MT activists might argue that the west is not the only region that Africa trades with, to counter this, Negash points out that with growing global interest in Africa as a popular tourist destination, local business in the form of hospitality industry, aviation, handicrafts, and all the other wherewithal connected with the indigenous culture is slowly but surely creating jobs which fit the profile of even the low skilled workers. However, this still depends largely on competence in at least one international language, the clear choice being English. It would be worthwhile to note here that many of the African countries recognise French and Portuguese as their official languages. Then why English as the obvious choice? The reason is simple to discern: French or Portuguese are not spoken by the Chinese, Indian, Japanese or Korean people who form a bulk of the aggregate spenders in Africa. But they do speak English. This is so much true for Saudi Arabia as well.
Countries with Better English have Better Economies. Well, this does not come from me (though I believe in this maxim) but is actually the title of an article published in the Harvard Business Review. McCormick (2013) claims that research establishes a direct correlation between the English skills of a people and the economic standing of their country. Looking for a relationship between per capita income and the EF English Proficiency Index (it is the world’s largest ranking of nations by their English skills), McCormick could establish that there did exist a positive correlation between the two. The survey was based upon data from as many as sixty countries. The logic behind this is that better salaries come with knowledge of English which generates revenue for the government which can spend this on improving language learning facilities or other parameters that positively impact people’s standard of living. The standard of living also improves as people have more spending power owing to better jobs. What is even more surprising amongst the findings is that Human Development Index also showed northward trend with improved English proficiency. The author calls knowing English a *sina qua non*, ie, not a luxury but a necessity for global business. Finally, English proficiency of the people also has positive ramifications on educational standards, life expectancy, and quality of life found in that country. We present below a graphical representation of these assertions as provided by the United Nations as presented in the Harvard Business Review *ibid*. Graphical Representation 1 depicts the correlation between English and income. Representation 2 depicts the correlation between English and quality of life:

**Graph 1**

**BETTER ENGLISH AND INCOME GO HAND IN HAND**

English proficiency shows a strong correlation with a country’s gross national income.

**GROSS NATIONAL INCOME PER CAPITA**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>EF EPI Score</th>
<th>GNI Per Capita</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>$80,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>$60,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panama</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>$40,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>$20,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>20,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>10,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SOURCE** UNITED NATIONS, GNI PER CAPITA PPP(s), 2012 AND EF EPI 2013 REPORT

**HBR.ORG**
The British Council, a non-profit institution working to spread the language to all corners of the world, succinctly lists the reasons for the pristine place enjoyed by English as the queen of languages: 1. It is the world’s common language; 2. It gives a competitive edge; 3. It drives growth and international development; 4. It changes lives.

Coleman (2011) in a paper commissioned by the British Council, rightly remarks that before we find a connection between knowledge of English and development, we first need to define ‘development’. According to him, current thinking defines Development as whole that has social as well as economic elements. Finding a connect between economic development and English, Coleman concludes that in specific circumstances, English does positively impact individuals. However, he advises that looking at the development of particular sectors vis-à-vis English may bring forth more usable outcomes. It is interesting that the author notes that tourism is an important factor in poverty alleviation in the developing countries. He cites how even the United Nations World Tourism Organisation recognises this through its ST-EP (Sustaining Tourism-Eliminating Poverty) Programme. This programme assists in developing tourism to uplift the especially marginalised and impoverished communities. Finally, he notes that with 45% of the world’s international students studying in the four English speaking countries, USA, UK, Australia, and Canada, the importance of English in student mobility cannot be underestimated.

In a rare study that used macro-economic tools to study the economic impact of language, Ufier employed the TOEFL as an index of English language skills to evaluate the impact of English proficiency on four factors: per capita income, net exports, FDI, and emigration. This is a macro-study of 139 countries and the period chosen is a span of twenty years ending 2012. The outcome was that higher English abilities positively impacted profitable export-based industries. This can also be interpreted to mean that with greater English proficiency, entrepreneurs found more world markets open to them and consequent to this, improved standards of living as higher per capita incomes are found to relate to higher net exports. In other words, domestic industry stands to profit with higher English abilities.
Conclusions

Saudi Arabia has set itself a tough target for socio-economic reform the highlights of which are controlling the rising unemployment, uplifting the status of women, and creating a sustainable non-petro-money-based economy. Given these targets, the need of the hour is to take the young generation towards entrepreneurship which holds unlimited potential in the country. Tourism, handicrafts, and cottage industries are some ventures that can bring about immediate returns and clamp the rising wave of discontent amongst the young people. This would also ensure revenue generation for the administration, a matter of much concern. On the academic front, it is true that we have schemes for scholarships to send our students abroad for higher education. But what good will such offers be if the beneficiaries lack the basic language skill needed to survive and succeed in these alien climes. Therefore, solemn changes need to be brought about in the education policy to empower the youth with the tool of English language which can veritably open the world to them. As shown in the previous sections, development today means much more than merely economic change. For the upliftment of our womenfolk, therefore, we need to follow a two-pronged approach: One they should be empowered, at least as much as men, so far as English proficiency is concerned as much as education in general; two, they should be encouraged (and indeed requisite infrastructural and legal changes must be thought out for this) to enter the world of trade and commerce (and for this, as supported by literature cited here, English proficiency will be a precondition). All things said and done, one factor that lies in great favour of Saudi Arabia is the element of novelty it holds for the world, being so far, a country more or less closed to the world. Right policies, backed up with right implementation and an honest urge to bring about change can surely steer the country on the path to the realisation of Vision 2030.

Recommendations

Though at policy level the administration are doing their best by laying down the right foundations for a linguistically empowered nation, action is needed at the implementation stage. There needs to be a change in the language philosophy of the masses who live in a state of ignorant blissfulness. Educationists have to become instrumental in bringing about a social change by promoting bilingualism among the compatriots wherever and whenever possible. Greater autonomy should be given to the institutions to enforce the use of English in day to day dealings, and if possible, the medium of education should be rethought in favour of English. After all, we need to train our people to ‘think’ in English if we truly believe in the positive role of English in ensuring development.

References


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