Alignment of policy and practice: EFL teachers implementing ICT in Saudi Arabian male public secondary schools

Sami Alghamdi, School of Education

Abstract

For the last several decades there has been tremendous expansion in the educational facilities in Saudi Arabian schools. More recently, educational policies have placed a greater emphasis on the use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in schools. Consequently, many national educational projects have been conducted to promote ICT use in Saudi Arabian schools. However, these trials have resulted in poor quality outcomes; particularly in the EFL context. The purpose of this paper is to describe proposed research to investigate the alignment between EFL teachers' knowledge of and attitudes towards implementing ICT into the EFL classroom, and what the educational policy dictates to be optimal ICT practice in Saudi Arabian male public secondary schools. The proposed research utilises a mixed method research design with three sources of data. First, a document analysis of education policy will be conducted to determine the expectations of ICT implementation in schools. Second, an online survey will be employed to determine EFL teachers' knowledge of and attitudes towards implementing ICT into the EFL classroom. Third, a purposive sample of EFL teachers will be invited to participate in an in-depth interview to clarify any disparity between their practice and what was stated in the policy. This paper describes the methodology to be used in the proposed research.

Introduction

Since the 1950s the Saudi Arabian government has accumulated huge wealth from oil incomes. The government decided to spend some of this oil income in developing the country's sectors including the education system and this has resulted in a tremendous transformation in the education system (Bahgat, 1999). The Ministry of Education (MOE) has implemented four national education projects promoting Information and Communication Technology (ICT) integration in the education system (Al-Aqeely, 2001). Research is proposed to investigate whether policy specifications are aligned with practice in the use of ICT when teaching and learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

This paper provides a brief background of Saudi Arabian education policy, a description of ICT use in education in Saudi Arabia, a review of policy and practice and finally, proposed methodology.

Education Policy in Saudi Arabia

The national administration of education in Saudi Arabia is highly centralised (Elyas, 2010; Oyaid, 2009). Education policy is subject to government control by the Supreme Council of Education in Saudi Arabia through two main agencies were established in 1975; the Ministry of Education (MOE) and Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) (MOHE, 2012; UNESCO, 2010). MOE originally consisted of 42 education directorates, half of these directorates for male education and half for female education, which work as links between the local schools and the MOE (Al-Aqeely, 2001; Oyaid, 2009). In 2010, the MOE decided to minimise the efforts of each education directorate by grouping some directorates together and joining the male

and female directorates under one general directorate in each city to form 13 education directorates (MOE, 2011). The Education Policy is developed by the MOE and distributed to the 13 directorates of education. Each directorate contains an Education Resources Department (ERD), which is responsible for the distribution of the ICT related aspects into schools. Schools within a particular directorate should request their required education facilities including ICT equipment from the ERD within that directorate.

The MOE responsibilities are to deal with administrative issues and to provide: policy for the education system, school buildings, maintenance, textbooks and educational materials. The curriculum department in the MOE is responsible for curriculum development and preparation of subject textbooks.

An education policy was first introduced into Saudi Arabian education system in 1925 (Oyaid, 2009). This policy (18 pages) laid out in 236 clauses with a strong emphasis on the Islamic teachings and conduct. Later on some parts of the policy were updated to cope with the developing education system in Saudi Arabia.

The current version of the Education Policy updated after the establishment of the MOE is not dissimilar to the first policy announced with a strong emphasis on the importance of religious education at all levels of education (Rugh, 2002). Islam continues to be the main influence on education policy and decision makers in Saudi Arabia (Prokop, 2003) and this is reflected in the education policy, which strictly promotes loyalty to Islamic law. This is also reflected in the school system where six religious subjects, specified by the educational policy, are taught daily in schools (Oyaid, 2009). In secondary schools this is 35 per cent of the student learning time. The Education Policy also promotes free education and separation of sexes in the schools and all education sectors.

There are three important policy directives relating to textbooks, teaching calendar and examinations. There is one fixed textbook for each grade and for each subject, which must be used by all public and private schools in the country. The teaching calendar is divided into two semesters f consisting of 18 weeks, 16 weeks of teaching and 2 weeks for examination (Prokop, 2003). All students must study for examinations of contents as presented in the textbooks and teachers are advised to restrict examinations to textbook content.

The Education Policy encourages the increasing use of technology in schools and education sectors (Rugh, 2002). In article twenty-eight of the Education Policy, there is a significant emphasis in each school on the use of learning resource centres including ICT facilities (Alshumaimeri, 2008). This emphasis was realised by building in each school of an Educational Resources Centre (ERC) including ICT facilities. The policy encourages all stakeholders to be involved in the use of ICT in education including teachers, head teachers and all staff working either in schools or the education directorates. The policy emphasises the importance of ICT for students and ICT training for teachers (MOE, 2011).

For each subject in the curriculum the Education Policy specifies how many lessons per week and the duration of each lesson and what textbooks are to be used. In particular for EFL context, an average of four lessons per week are stated for each classroom in the secondary schools. The time allocated for each lesson is 45 minutes, which can be either in the morning or afternoon. All EFL textbooks are designed and distributed to students by the MOE and are the same for all the secondary schools in Saudi Arabia.

Training is conducted by the ERD for teachers after a process of arrangement including getting an approval from the head of each directorate, allocating the suitable training time and assigning the attached materials by instructor. These training sessions held once or twice per semester. EFL teachers in particular are advised to attend a minimum of one training session per year.

ICT in Education in the Saudi Arabia

The introduction of ICT has gone through two main phases in the history of education in Saudi Arabia. The first phase *Computer Literacy Program* and started in 1985 with an introduction of an optional subject in the secondary school. This subject was highly appreciated by the field supervisors and beneficial to students which encouraged the MOE to introduce ICT studies into the curriculum as a compulsory subject in 1988. This program provided most of the secondary schools with a computer laboratory and relevant training course for teachers (Al-Aqeely, 2001). However, due to the shortage of teachers in some areas of the country and ICT support staff this program was discontinued.

The second phase of introducing ICT into education involved the integration of ICT into the process of teaching and learning (Rugh, 2002). To achieve this, the MOE had to increase its commitments to build and develop the ICT infrastructure in the school environment (Oyaid, 2009).

The adoption of ICT in education has accompanied many national reform actions were conducted by MOE. There have been four national projects conducted as reform actions to develop the ICT integration into the process of teaching and learning in general over the last three decades (Al-Maini, 2009). The first projects, *Education Resources Centre (ERC),* demonstrated the MOE's commitment to ICT integration in education. This project developed schools libraries into Education Resources Centre (ERC) (Oyaid, 2009). Each ERC contains all the pedagogical materials for the school including ICT equipment and facilities (MOE, 2008; Oyaid, 2009). The MOE has established over 1500 ERCs covering all education directorates and plans to continue these as a basic feature in each school (Oyaid, 2009).

The second project, *Watani*, introduced computer-based workstations into each school which represented a positive change from traditional methods of teaching (MOE, 2008; Oyaid, 2009). Further significant decisions made by the MOE promoting ICT use in education were the introduction of ICT into primary schools as a compulsory subject in 2003 and resulted into the launch of 'Watani' project which aimed to promote the use of ICT in education.

The third project, *Jehazi*, enabled teachers to buy laptops, printers and scanners at reasonable prices with no deposit and easy to repayments (Oyaid, 2009). The purpose of this project is to raise awareness and increase the technological knowledge amongst teachers in preparation for the electronic government future (Jehazi.com, 2006; Oyaid, 2009). The Jehazi project package for each teacher consists of: free of charge hard drive and laser mouse; one year subscription to computer magazine and six hours training at The New Horizon Institute of technology to obtain the International Computer Driving License (ICDL) (Jehazi.com, 2006; Oyaid, 2009). This project is considered the opening key for teachers to start a technological era which is still valid till the present time.

The fourth project, *Tatweer*, is considered the largest educational reform project in the country and was announced by King Abdullah in 2008 (Jehazi.com, 2006; Oyaid, 2009). This project is based upon the idea of technological learning environments. The project started with 50 secondary schools for male and females as a pilot for the main project (Alshumaimeri, 2008). The project has built new schools that depend on the use of ICT including: attendance systems in which electronic finger print machines have been brought to the main school doors; teacher training to handle classes in the high-tech style; distribution of laptops to both teachers and students; and the provision of school wireless Internet connections. Within this project, 40000 male and female teachers of different subjects will be provided with ICT training and the required ICT equipment (Alshumaim & Alhassan, 2010). English language teachers in these schools have to adopt the comparative learning approach supported equipped with ICT. EFL Students are asked to work in groups to create their own ICT lesson materials; including presentations through the PowerPoint program. The project emphasises extracurricular activities for the purpose of developing the

intellectual, creative and communicative skills of students. The expectation, particularly for EFL teachers is that there would be extensive use of ICT in teaching. This use of ICT includes all areas of management in the classroom. English language in KSA is basically treated as an academic discipline in the school system and is not extensively used outside of the classroom. EFL teachers have realised the importance of using ICT in their classes to learn to operate in an Information Age (Alshumaim & Alhassan, 2010; Alshumaimeri, 2008). This project began a new era in the development of modern education in KSA.

Several studies have been conducted investigating the level of ICT use in Middle Eastern education systems, including Saudi Arabia particularly in EFL context. (Al-Aqeely, 2001; GDP, 2005; MOE, 2008; Oyaid, 2009) reviewed the history of reform actions of the educational system in Saudi Arabia particularly the ICT use in EFL context. The MOE introduced ICT training programs, which aimed to eliminate the ICT literacy amongst teachers. Al-Aqeely (2001) investigated the main barriers to successful integration of ICT into the EFL teaching and learning in Saudi Arabia. These barriers were categorised into two main classifications: teacher-level barriers and school-level barriers. The teacher-level barriers were: lack of teacher confidence, lack of teacher competence, resistance to change, and negative attitudes. The school-level barriers were: lack of time, lack of effective training, lack of accessibility to resources and lack of technical support. The adoption of ICT into EFL context according to Bingimlas (2008) and Alshumaim and Alhassan (2010) was conducted after an extended processes of evaluation of the current level ICT use in Saudi Arabian EFL context.

In similar study conducted in Saudi Arabia within an EFL context, Shaabi (2010) identified factors affecting the use of ICT in EFL classroom in Saudi Arabia. These factors fell into three main categories: institutions factors, resources factors and teacher factors. Teacher factors were further grouped into three subcategories: personal, social and external factors each of which included references to ICT. The personal factors include EFL teacher's attitudes and commitments toward the use of ICT in EFL classroom. The social factors include the influence of the school environment whether to encourages or discourages the use of ICT in EFL classroom. The external factors include the accessibility, availability and quality of ICT in school (Oyaid, 2009).

Oyaid (2009) identified types of incentives available to EFL teacher in integrating ICT in their teaching including; wage bonuses and getting faster promotions. Numerous research studies conducted in Saudi Arabia within an EFL context including Al-Ghonaim (2005); Al-Jamhoor (2005), Al-Juhani (1991) and Al-Kahtani (2001) have reported that EFL teachers have positive attitudes towards ICT integration in EFL teaching and learning. This means that EFL teachers were able to apply ICT in their teaching provided that the large majority of them had the knowledge required to integrate ICT into their teaching.

The future is promising for promoting ICT in all aspects of life in Saudi Arabia. The use of ICT has become a national policy and not only implemented in the education (Bingimlas, 2008). The most significant example for the ICT national policy was a project called Home Computer Initiate controlled and sponsored by the ICT commission in Saudi Arabia in association with the National Bank (Oyaid, 2009) The main purpose of this project was to enable one million Saudi families to obtain a personal computer with easy payment methods and free of charges Internet subscription for 12 months (Oyaid, 2009).

Current ICT use in the Saudi Arabian Education System

ICT is used in the MOE in many forms at all levels of management including schools. It is being used as a tool to store and process information related to student records, teachers and administrative issues (Alshumaim & Alhassan, 2010). After the start of King Abdullah national project for developing the education Tatweer, the MOE extensively started providing institutions related to each education directorate with ICT facilities, staff and regular maintenance. In addition, ICT training courses for teachers and administrative staff began (Alshumaim & Alhassan, 2010). Internet connection become available for most of the institutions related to the MOE including schools located in urban and non-urban areas. General education directorates (GED) are using ICT in all communication with both schools and MOE with designed related programs and software. The adoption of ICT in the GED was an appreciated decision especially in communication with schools. All administrative issues become electronically treated rather than papers handled in person.

Teachers are using ICT to contact the GED or the MOE for all correspondence including; transfers between schools, requesting pedagogical aid, seeking off times and many other valuable electronic services (MOE, 2008). The fingerprint attendance system launched along with Tatweer is one of the ICT daily activities for teachers in schools and GED. In terms of the pedagogical ICT use, teachers have been provided in each classroom with data shows, smart boards and a personal computer. Teachers are strongly encouraged to use these ICT facilities in their teaching.

For students, ICT has been part of their daily activities in schools related to Tatweer and even in many other schools related to the MOE. In Tatweer for example, 24000 laptops have been distributed to students in each of the related schools (Alshumaim & Alhassan, 2010). Students are using ICT to communicate with teachers, submitting an assignment for instance, or creating their learning projects inside the classrooms and doing homework. In Tatweer secondary schools, students are dealing with a different teaching approach. This approach emphasises that each subject department within schools should have a clearly separate location. This means students have to circulate during school time attending different lessons distributed according to the subject department's location. This system, known as the flexible program, replaced the old approach that made students remain in the same classroom for the entire school day. The flexible program has made it easy for teachers in terms of integrating ICT into the process of teaching. Teachers started developing their teaching spaces with all the ICT and other pedagogical materials related to their subjects (Alshumaim & Alhassan, 2010; MOE, 2011). The King Abdullah Project for developing the education system in Saudi Arabia is considered a new academic endeavour aiming to upskill teachers, develop the curriculum and improve the school environment (Alshumaim & Alhassan, 2010).

According to Alshumaim and Alhassan (2010) the MOE and in support of English language teaching and learning, developed supplementary e-learning materials for both students and teachers. Additional software was published by privates companies and approved by the MOE for the secondary schools English curriculum, which includes training exercises supporting English learning and teaching (Bedaiwi, 2007). Teachers use ICT in schools while teaching, for recording the students' achievements and for communicating with the MOE for related administrative or pedagogical issues.

The alignment of education policy with ICT practice

Since the declaration of education policy particularly associated with ICT, MOE increased its commitments to develop the learning environment. The development of the school environment and the building of ICT infrastructure were its commitments to promote the technological environment in schools. However, the actual use of ICT in schools faced many barriers and obstacles that have hindered its successful integration. Consequently this has resulted in lack of quality learning outcomes

amongst students. Therefore, a gap is believed to exist between what the policies dictate and the actual use of ICT in schools. The alignment of policy and the actual use of ICT in schools will be extensively discussed from the EFL context perspective.

Numerous research studies have been conducted investigating the successful integration of ICT into the EFL context. Some of these studies discussed the barriers confronting with the ICT integration into the process of EFL teaching in some Middle Eastern countries including Saudi Arabia. Only a few of found research studies have been conducted investigating the alignment of ICT policy and practice in the Saudi Arabian education system.

Oyaid (2009) reviewed the Saudi Arabian education policy and compared it with the actual use of ICT in schools. A predicted misalignment of the policy and the actual ICT use was the main concern of her mixed methods sociocultural study. There are three main reasons for the predicted misalignment of the policy and the actual use of ICT in schools according to the review of the related literature in Oyaid (2009). The first reason was the numerous locally and internationally calls for a quick reform and development of the educational system, which was mostly based on memorisation (Oyaid, 2009). The locally calls for the national educational reform were concentrating on the quality of the outcome which does not match the local market demands. The old educational system was mostly based on memorisation of the religious sayings of the profit Mohammed 'Peace be upon him', reciting the holly Quran and studying the Arabic language, history of the Muslims with some basics of mathematics. The internationally pressure was strongly accompanied the 9/11 attacks of the World Trade Centre (WTC) in the United States. Since it was announced that 19 terrorist who attacked the WTC were from Saudi Arabia, many editorials and writers have accused fingers pointing to the Saudi education system (Oyaid, 2009; Prokop, 2003; Rugh, 2002).

The second reason for the mentioned misalignment was the quick actions for a national reform done by MOE in the rush without any prior research of the exact required needs for the current education environment (Elyas, 2010; Prokop, 2003; Rugh, 2002). These actions resulted in wasting time, efforts and money though it has been assumed that there was some improvement. In addition, these reform actions were conducted as fast as possible to cope with the developing countries. However, these quick reform actions accompanied no further evaluation and received negative feedback from those working in the fields mainly teachers and schools staff.

The third reason, considered the focus of this discussion, was the ICT integration into the Saudi education system. The Saudi Arabian decision makers, in responding to the increasing pressure and calls for an educational national reform, brought all the ICT equipment from the developing countries to be placed in schools without prior knowledge and studies of the current education setting (Oyaid, 2009).

Lately and as a response to many journalists and writers who badly criticise the MOE policy being conducted over years, the MOE is struggling with many files dealing with the current situation. More than five technological project were conducted in the rush, plenty of money have been spent with no fixed plan for a national reform and generations of students still suffering the current situation of everyday educational experiments done by MOE.

The research in hand is seeking to fill in the gap existing in the literature on ICT policy and practice. The ICT related policy will be reviewed seeking its alignment with the actual ICT practice in schools. In addition, investigation of factors affecting the ICT use in the EFL context will be conducted. For this reason and from the mentioned literature about the current ICT use in school and its alignment with the education policy, the researcher arrived at the following research questions:

What is the nature of alignment of policy and practice in the use of ICT in EFL teaching? The research secondary question is:

What is the degree of the alignment of policy and practice in the use of ICT in EFL teaching?

The proposed study

The aim of this study is to investigate the alignment between ICT related policy and practice, and its relation to teachers' knowledge of and attitudes towards ICT integration in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. Alshumaimeri (2008) stated that there is a lack of English language proficiency amongst most of the secondary school graduates in Saudi Arabia. The education policy emphasises the importance of a good quality learning outcomes; however, the misalignment between what has been dictated in the policy and EFL teachers' performance in schools is increasing (Oyaid, 2010). To investigate the degree of this misalignment, a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of teachers' responses through survey and interviews, and documentary analysis of the education policy; particularly in EFL teaching and learning, will be conducted. In the data collection stage, an online survey will be used to determine EFL teachers' knowledge of and attitudes towards implementing ICT into EFL teaching. This will be followed by in-depth interviews with purposefully selected sample of EFL teachers.

Male EFL teachers from 30 secondary schools in the city of Al-baha in south-western Saudi Arabia, will be invited to participate in the study. From this population, 100 participants will be randomly selected. All participants' native language is Arabic and they teach only English. The majority of the participants will have at least two years of EFL teaching experience and a minimum qualification of a Bachelor's degree.

The research will utilises a mixed method of quantitative and qualitative research design. The instruments for data collection to be used will be; an online survey and in-depth follow-up interviews to gather data from the EFL teachers. The online survey will be designed to determine EFL teachers' knowledge of and attitudes towards implementing ICT into EFL teaching. Associated with the survey will the collection of a range of demographic items that include: age, qualification, number of students in each classroom, school location, ICT availability in school, ICT training and ICT support in schools. This survey will be conducted in English because as EFL teachers, participants are proficient in English. This survey will be followed by purposefully selected sample of EFL teachers to participate in the in-depth interviews.

For qualitative data analysis, document analysis of the education policy and a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of responses of EFL teachers to survey and interviews will be conducted. For quantitative data analysis, both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques will be applied to the online survey data. Descriptive statistics will include frequency analysis and sample means. Inferential statistic will include independent sample t-tests and One Way ANOVA. The purpose of both qualitative and quantitative analysis will be to help provide a better picture of the study population's knowledge of and attitudes towards implementing ICT into EFL teaching and the associated demographic data.

Conclusion

Numerous research studies have been conducted investigating the level of ICT in Saudi Arabian context but few investigated the alignment with its practice in schools. This paper described the proposed research aimed at investigating the alignment between EFL teachers' knowledge of and attitudes towards implementing ICT into EFL classroom and what the educational policy dictates in Saudi Arabian male public secondary schools. The study is expected to come up with valuable suggestions for addressing the apparent misalignment and propose solutions to improve the ICT practices in Saudi Arabian male public secondary schools in an EFL context.

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