EFL Learning and Vision 2030 in Saudi Arabia: A Critical Perspective

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Abstract

Vision 2030 is a key economic transformation plan for Saudi Arabia conceived in 2016. It envisions the shift from oil to a knowledge-based global economy. Along with this historical event, Saudi Arabia undergoes another historic transformation, i.e., the strategic growth of EFL learning in the domain of education in the second decade of the twenty-first century. Since economy and education go hand in hand, scholars wonder whether EFL learning induces Saudi Vision 2030 or vice versa. The relation between them is causal by nature, but the order of effect is inexplicit. If Saudi Vision 2030 motivates EFL learning, then its present situation is inadequate for the fulfillment of the Vision. If not, then how the inadequate EFL competency of Saudi student can contributes to the visionary transformation of Saudi Arabia. Hence, the problem is an essential concern in academic understanding since its resolution redefines both EFL learning and Vision 2030 of Saudi Arabia. The study uses qualitative research on the existing scholarly books and articles on EFL learning and Saudi Vision 2030 to understand the causal order of these phenomena, to illustrate the present condition and explain interrelation of EFL Learning and Vision 2030 of Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: Saudi Vision 2030, EFL Learning, economy, education

1. Introduction

Saudi Vision 2030 is a grand visionary transformation of Saudi Arabia from an oil-based economy to a knowledge-based global economy. In this visionary plan for a prosperous, sustainable, and cohesive Saudi society, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman judiciously dovetails the enhancement of human capital with the diversification of the economy. To transform Saudi Arabia into a leading global economy, Prince Mohammed encourages the private sector and foreign investors to work in association with public agencies to build the global hub of manufacturing, export, industry, and business. In these international exchanges and communication, EFL learning is a vital strategic catalyst for rendering Saudi nationals more competent in the global market and labor economy.

The present study is a critical investigation of EFL learning in the context of Saudi Vision 2030 (henceforth SV2030). The role of EFL learning in fulfilling SV2030 is the focal point of debate. Scholars are divided on the issue of the relation between EFL learning in Saudi Arabia and the fulfilment of SV2030, that is, whether SV2030 motivates the current EFL learning in Saudi Arabia or EFL learning helps in fulfilling the vision itself being an important global skill strategy. Almegren (2022) argues that SV2030 has become a principal motivator among Saudi citizens to learn English following its announcement. With the sample of 150 Saudi citizens, the study has established that SV2030 is a significant political intervention in EFL learning as it generates an instrumental motivation to the participants. Motivation is a key factor in the Saudi context for its link with achievement, learning, and competence in English (Al-Khairy, 2013; Alrabai, 2014b; Khan, 2011). Most Saudi learners are unmotivated, and their proficiency in English is low even after graduation (Alhawsawi, 2013; Al-Johani, 2009; Fareh, 2010; Khan, 2011; Rajab, 2013). Hence, Al-Zahrani & Rajab (2017) argues that the current EFL learning condition is inadequate to materialize SV2030 because, in the knowledge economy of the present post-industrial era, the incompetence in EFL learning can fail the Saudi students to adapt to the new competitive scenario of globalization, technology, artificial intelligence, and international workforce. The failure of incompetent human capital is also a failure of SV2030. Hence, Al-Maimooni (2016) proposes restructuring education to decrease the gap between education and employment which only then can EFL learning effectively engage Saudis in the global market and labor economy and materialize the 2030 vision of Saudi Arabia's transformation from oil to a knowledge-based global economy.

The study is historical in its approach as it critically examines two historical conditions of Saudi Arabia: one, SV2030,

which deals with economic transformation; and two, the EFL learning in the twenty-first century. The aim of the study is to reconcile these two historical developments and to understand their mutual relation. The reconciliation of these two phenomena is important because both economic policies and education contribute to the successful progress and prosperity of a nation. The study employs the qualitative research to form a judgment and gather supportive facts from secondary sources. It seeks to understand the relation between EFL learning and SV2030. Hence, the study closely analyses other studies on EFL learning and SV2030 to de-limit the academic understanding of these researches that are bound to local and small-scale surveys. To produce a large-scale and comprehensive understanding of the interrelation between EFL learning in Saudi Arabia and SV2030, the study conducts a library-based review of scholarly and critical books and articles. The study addresses four objectives: one, to evaluate the present condition of EFL learning in Saudi Arabia in relation to its history and recent developments; two, to establish the relation between SV2030 and EFL learning; three, to understand the role of EFL learning in fulfilling the SV2030; and finally, to recommend the strategic steps of improvement in the present condition of EFL learning.

2. Literature Review

The historical research in the context of EFL learning is not unprecedented. There are four seminal works that are too scholarly to avoid their impact in re-thinking and re-conceptualizing the development of the present study. The first work is an article entitled "Saudi Arabian Educational History: Impacts on English Language Teaching", published by Tariq Elyas and Michelle Yvette Picard in 2010. The work introduces a historical perspective in the area of EFL learning and teaching in Saudi Arabia. Elyas and Picard have accounted for the history of education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The work is historical in the sense that it delves deep into the tradition of teaching practices associated with EFL learning. Like the present study, it reconciles the traditional and the current teaching practices and recommends 'hybridity' to Saudi teachers in creating [inter]national identities to meet contemporary challenges. Elyas and Picard have explored the historical origin of educational practices in Saudi Arabia. They trace the origin to two traditions, i.e., the traditional or Quranic and the formal. This historical research is important in understanding the trend, character, and growth of EFL learning. The present study significantly acknowledges the rationale of rooting EFL education in practices of the *Quranic* (traditional) and the *kuttab* and *madrassa* (formal schools), and, therefore, links the present condition of EFL learning with the traditional approaches of teacher-centric and grammar-translation models of teaching that use memorization and rote learning. The second work is entitled "A Brief Historical Perspective of English in Saudi Arabia" published by Merzin Alshahrani as an article in 2016. The article brilliantly segregates the historical periods in the development of Saudi EFL learning. Alshahrani has rightly juxtaposed the government policies in Saudi educational practices and the development of EFL learning. The work has helped the present study to form a similar strand of argument and map out the present condition of EFL learning through the historical and developmental aspects of Saudi governmental policies. In fact, the work provides a ground to the current study of evaluating EFL learning in twenty-first-century Saudi Arabia. Alshahrani's hypothesis of grounding the status of EFL learning in social, cultural, and religious concerns has proved beneficial in contextualizing SV2030 in the historical analysis of the present condition of EFL learning. The third work is "A Brief History of English and English Teaching in Saudi Arabia", published by Elyas and Picard in 2019. The work differs from the earlier two works in that it focuses on the religious perspective of the Saudi government's plans and decisions in educational reforms to form the EFL curriculum and teaching strategies and promote EFL learning. The article precisely breaks the history of EFL learning from the history of English in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Elyas and Picard have argued that English as a foreign language entered the State through the transcontinental Saudi traders in the first century BCE, and its usage developed in Makkah and some other areas with Jewish and Christian inhabitants. The historically dynamic religious motivation in Saudi educational policy of EFL learning has encouraged the present study to explore the relation between SV2030 and EFL learning on the ground of religious interest and commitment of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia as a heartland of the Islamic world. The fourth work is a chapter entitled "EFL Teaching and Learning in Saudi Arabia: 25 years of Research", written by Christo Moskovsky (2019) and published in the book *English as a Foreign Language in Saudi Arabia New Insights into Teaching and Learning English* in 2019. As a grand narrative of the history of EFL learning, the work is an encompassing survey of researches done on EFL teaching and learning. The chapter is highly influential on any historical research on Saudi EFL learning. Thus, the present study is no exception and, therefore, owes the idea and the procedure of conducting historical researches to Moskovsky's meritorious output. Moskovsky suggests several aspects of looking at the history, such as teacher training, target language culture, teaching specific skills, EFL curriculum and methodology, and so on. Like the previous three works, these aspects of historical exploration have largely shaped the development of some arguments in the present study.

However, the explicit acknowledgment of the suggestions and influences by the previous works instead situates the present study in a wider context than diminishes its relevance in the historical continuum of the scholars' efforts in the Saudi EFL learning field. The study is unique in framing the present status of EFL learning in the historical context of SV2030. Since the present is rooted and enlightened in the past, the present study resembles the abovementioned works in its historical

approach. However, it differs in theorizing and reflecting in the polemics, that is, the chiastic relation of SV2030 and EFL learning in the twenty-first-century Saudi Arabia.

3. The Present Condition of EFL Learning

The twenty-first century marks the pragmatic shift in EFL learning and teaching in Saudi Arabia in following the advancements around the world (Alshahrani, M., 2016). In this regard, Saudi Govt. in 2003 introduced English in all schools from the primary level (Elyas, 2008). Two years later, in 2005, Eighth Developmental Plan began to reduce Saudi's traditional reliance on oil (Kayed & Hassan, 2011). The proliferation of ELT learning and Saudi 2005 economic policy of diversifying the economic base are interlinked (Faruk, 2013). It is because the shift in Saudi economic policies has always asserted a positive impact on ELT learning (Al-Haq & Smadi, 1996). However, the expansion of ELT learning began in the 1970s and 80s with the influx of non-Arabic workers and pilgrims and the Saudi government's initiative to build a positive ideology for English among the citizens through TV and radio (Faruk, 2013). It results in establishing the English department and offering ELT in private schools and six public universities of the time (Al-Haq & Smadi, 1996). Despite this, ELT learning has been neglected for the following two decades for Saudi students' lack of motivation (Zaid, 1993). Until the 1990s, both the teachers and students of medicine and engineering at King Saud and King Faisal Universities preferred Arabic to English (Al-Jarf, 2008). The principal ideological reason behind low motivation in EFL learning has been the negative sentiments towards English as a non-Arabic language (Azuri, 2006). However, in the second half of the 1990s, this nonchalant attitude shifts gradually in favor of ELT (Abu-Arafa et al., 1998; Al-Haq & Smadi, 1996). Only in the 2000s, the motivation reaches a moderate level. There are three factors behind the phenomenon. First, there is an attitudinal change towards EFL learning and its importance. Al-Jarf (2008) finds that 96% of Arab participants consider English as the superior and more appropriate language of teaching in the early 21st century because it is the primary communicative language in the international organizations of business, finance, hospitality, medicine, science, and commerce. Second, Saudi political and educational policies have begun to prioritize EFL learning. In the post-9/11 era, the global, negative view of the Saudi Education system and the national concern with the competence of Saudi graduates for the global economy has forced a change in Saudi educational policies (Elyas & Picard, 2010). For the global economy, EFL proficiency is a vital skill. The worldwide demand for English speakers and the need for qualitative EFL education (Barnawi & Phan, 2014) have led the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia to employ English in National interests (Barnawi & Al-Hawsawi, 2017).

Although mass literacy programs of English began in the 1990s (Barnawi & Phan, 2014), the major financial allocations are made in the present century: in 2004, Royal Decree No. 171 granted millions of dollars for launching English education from 6th grade in schools; in 2005 the Saudi MOE introduces intensive language learning programs in higher educational institutes; in 2011 the Royal Decree No. 160 issues the establishment of English Education Development project to teach English as a core subject from 4th grade in primary schools and to improve the quality of EFL learning in secondary schools; and in 2015 the MOE launches 'Education for Career' program to emphasize EFL learning for academic, professional, and vocational purposes (Barnawi & Al-Hawsawi, 2017). Third, the use of technology in education has indirectly motivated EFL learning (Assulaimani, 2019). Though ICT was introduced to Saudi education in 1991, it became a compulsory subject in 2003. In 2005, the ten-year developmental plan promoted the use of technology and computer in education (General Directorate for Planning, 2005). However, in 2012, The King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz Education Development Project, '*Tatweer*', extended the use of technology in building curriculum, training teachers and reforming the education system (Kamal, 2012). In the Saudi context, ICT and digital media have contributed to several pedagogical benefits. The EFL students perform better with the use of computers (Alotaibi, 2009, 2010). Abuseileek (2009) has found the effectiveness of computer-enabled instruction in learning grammar that helps the students to solve issues with complex grammatical structures; the computer-assisted language learning (CALL) has improved vocabulary and helped in using word-solving techniques (Almudibry, 2012); intensive reading on the internet motivates the students to gain more knowledge of vocabulary (Alshwairkh, 2004); a web-based inquiry-oriented lesson format, WebQuests, has helped the students develop more improved reading skills (Alshumaimeri & Almasri, 2012); online blogs have been proven to be motivating learners to engage more with EFL classes (Alaboudi, 2014); podcasts, audio programs in digital format, is another ICT-enabled tool that improves the students listening skills (Al Fadda & Al Qasim, 2013). Besides, informal interaction on Facebook, WhatsApp, and content writing and creation on YouTube cultivate the language acquisition skill of EFL learners (Almekhlafy, 2016; Alwehaibi, 2015; Mahdi & El-Naim, 2012). Hence, the EFL teachers recognize the potential benefits of ICT to improve EFL teaching and learning (Abalhassan, 2002; A. M. Al-Asmari, 2005; Al-Kahtani, 2001; Al-Mukhallafi, 2014; Gamlo, 2014).

In addition to the promotional initiatives for ICT, the '*Tatweer*' project also reforms the contemporary EFL teaching and learning with the following measures: one, forming a qualitative English curriculum; two, starting teacher training programs; three, building networks for exchanging teaching guidelines; four, allowing the experienced teachers to develop and share teaching strategies; five, using ICT for learning; six, enabling the EFL students to interact with native English speakers

online; seven, using digital resources in EFL teaching and learning; eight, building cooperation of higher institutes to implement latest EFL teaching strategies in schools; and finally, developing a nationwide network for EFL teachers to share strategies and resources (National Strategy for Public Education Development, 2012 qt. in Assulaimani, 2019). However, 'Tatweer' enhances EFL learning with ICT integration (Assulaimani, 2019) that has induced positive attitudes toward EFL comprehension (Abanomey, 2013), writing (Al-Jarf, 2002, 2004), vocabulary learning (Fageeh, 2014), grammar (Al-Jarf, 2004), and overall performance (Al-Mekhlafi, 2006), no other govt. policies than SV2030 before 2016 could have aroused positive feelings and emotions in the 'highest' degree towards EFL learning and teaching as reflected in the students' priority in increasing the vocabulary for further learning in the future (Almegren, 2022). It is because the announcement has also changed Saudi nationals' vision of employment, career, and commercial activities in the future with upcoming nonconventional economic life.

The continuous intervention of the Saudi govt. to energize and motivate EFL learning points out the need for it. Saidi (2009) and Alrabai (2016) show that the EFL performance of the majority of students in intermediate and secondary schools is very low. The low performance is related to the low standard of EFL learning in Saudi public schools (Springsteen, 2014; Wiseman et al., 2008). Despite ten years of learning, the Saudi students show low performance (Altwaijri, 1982), and their low score in university proves their lack of EFL skills (Al-Nasser, 2015; Alrahaili, 2014; Alrashidi & Phan, 2015; Elyas & Picard, 2010). Inadequate learning at the primary and secondary levels overburdens students with the additional effort of remediation in college and university (Al Zahrani & Elyas, 2017; Alnofaie, 2013). There are several factors behind it. The first and most important one is the cultural factor (Nouraldeen & Elyas, 2014). Saudi Arabia is a tribal, Islamic, and Arab country. The religious, ethnic, and linguistic identities can encumber the Saudi students with various socio-cultural barriers to the acquisition of foreign culture, language, and education. It is due to the conservative attitude of the Saudis to tribal and religious traditions (Alrahaili, 2014; Al-Saraj, 2014). According to Elyas & Picard (2010), Al Dameg (2011), Mahboob & Elyas (2014), and Al-Seghayer (2014), Saudis think that EFL learning can negatively affect the acquisition of Arabic language and culture. It reflects in the Saudi educational system that starts EFL learning at the age of nine in the fourth grade (Elyas, 2008). The second factor is the EFL teaching and learning strategies. These strategies are outdated now (Al Zahrani & Elyas, 2017; Alnofaie, 2013b; Bunaiyan, 2019; Makhlouf, 2021). The Saudi schools follow the grammar-translation method (Abduh & Algouzi, 2020; Eisa, 2020; Milawati, 2019) and practice code-switching (Alkatheery, 2014; Almansour, 2016; Alshugithri, 2015). Both the method and the practice require the use of Arabic in the classroom. Besides, the grammar-translation method leads to memorization and rote learning that undermines the prospect of EFL proficiency (Alkubaidi, 2014; Alrabai, 2014a). The reason behind using these methods of language acquisition is that they imitate the learning method of Arabic (Elyas & Picard, 2010). The EFL teachers use Arabic to compensate their lack of knowledge (Alshammari, 2011) and low confidence in English (Alhawsawi, 2013). It decreases the students' use of English in the classroom (Alharbi, 2015). The third factor is the insufficient exposure to EFL usage. Outside the class, the Saudi students find fewer occasions to communicate in English for the convenience of using Arabic with those who are not competent in EFL, be it family members, neighbors, friends, and others (Khan, 2011). There are rare real situations that require the knowledge and usage of EFL (Alharbi, 2015). The predominance of Arabic usage in daily life leads to a weaker motivation to make progress in EFL learning and proficiency (Alharbi, 2015; Alqahtani, 2011). The fourth factor is the environment of the EFL classroom. Mostly the classes are overcrowded and unlikely to facilitate interpersonal interaction (Al-Mohanna, 2010; Bahanshal, 2013). The teachers tend to lecture in most of the classes (Alharbi, 2015) and are considered indisputable authority (Alwadai, 2014). Hence, the classroom interactions are teacher-centric that prohibit the students from raising individual problems (A. Alshahrani, 2016). Moreover, the teachers assume that students are self-motivated (Gulnaz et al., 2015). Nevertheless, the students remain passive in the learning process and underachieve the goal of EFL acquisition and competence (Ahmad, 2014; Alkubaidi, 2014). The fifth factor is the rigid scope of EFL learning through textbooks. Real-life situations are dynamic, unpredictable, and infinite. The EFL textbooks in Saudi Arabia do not reflect the students' goals, desires, and concerns (Al-Subahi, 1991). The teachers do not participate in designing the curriculum (Almalki, 2014). The sixth factor is the lack of motivation for EFL learning. Fareh (2010) contends that improper training and the teacher-centric approach render the teachers less inclined to motivate students. The seventh factor is the ideological resistance to EFL learning. Elyas and Picard (2013) have pointed out the tension between the Western discourse of globalization and the Islamic principles inherent in the Saudi educational policies and reforms. The Neoliberal reforms have failed, owing to the strong religious concern to preserve 'Islamic Identity'. However, some religious concerns with the cultural indoctrination regarding EFL learning stem from the absence of demarcation between religious and education affairs. Hence, any initiative to develop EFL learning has been confused with the religious or cultural model of Westernization. Elyas (2011) shows how, as a Western-educated Arab, Ali's (an interviewee in Elyas's research) frustration over the conflicts of value in teaching the EFL contents which go against the Islamic and Arab system of thoughts, values, and ideas. Being a medium of Western ideology (Al-Haq & Smadi, 1996), English is seen to have a missionary function (Pennycook & Makoni, 2005).

The anti-Islamic and anti-Arabic sentiments begin to change in the Post 9/11 era, and the real transformation of the negative attitude towards EFL learning took place after the announcement of SV2030. It is because Islamic principles are inherent in vision 2030 (Bunaiyan, 2019). Almegren (2022) has found that the motivations following the announcement of SV2030 are intrinsic. Unlike the other economic policies taken before, SV2030 is different in that it reforms the negative view of EFL learning as the agent of cultural infiltration.

4. The Relation Between Vision 2030 and EFL Learning

To improve the nation's position and reputation in the Middle East and around the World (Bunaiyan, 2019), SV2030 was announced by the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman on 25th April 2016 (Rashad, 2016). At the suggestion of international organizations (Moshashai et al., 2020), SV2030 presents a plan to reform the Saudi economy by shifting its dependence from oil to public service sectors for enhancing the Saudi quality of life (Pavan, 2017). This transformation is envisioned through the diversification of the economy and long-term investments (Bunaiyan, 2019). The plan lays bare Prince Mohammed's long-drawn initiative of economic transformation and his skepticism of the oil-based economy (Yusuf & Atassi, 2016). In SV2030, the economy is the pivot in the wheel of transformation and, hence, empowers the other two goals, i.e., 'Ambitious Nation' and 'Vibrant Society'. With the motivation of building a 'thriving economy', SV2030 has identified two goals, i.e., 'grow and diversify the economy' and 'increase employment'. These two goals merge in human resource development because the emphasis on the global dimension of doing business and running industry necessitates the development of 'human capital' with global competency for the Saudi markets poised for globalization. In the interest of global outreach, EFL learning is an important strategic catalyst because it can prepare Saudi students for the global economy and employment.

There is an intrinsic link between EFL learning and SV2030. The link is established by the goals of economic diversification and social development. Education is the ground where both of the goals can be fulfilled. Without qualitative education, the achievement of SV2030 reforms would be impossible (Yusuf, 2017). It is because a qualitative education can prepare for the diverse needs of the market. Ramadi (2005) has revealed the growing imbalance between the quantity and the quality of professional expertise produced by the educational system. The lack of sound theoretical understanding leads to poor performance and low skill set (Bosbait & Wilson, 2005). Education is the driving force of reform (Bunaiyan, 2019). Hence, the visionaries of SV2030 claim to "build a thriving country…. through education and training, and high-quality services such as employment initiatives" (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, p. 7, 2016). If the Saudi students are equipped with technical knowledge and communicative skill, then the diversification of the oil-based economy becomes successful. Without a skilled workforce, SV2030 cannot benefit Saudi nationals. In 2016, SV2030 made an exclusive focus on education:

> We will continue investing in education and training so that our young men and women are equipped for the jobs of the future. We want Saudi children, wherever they live, to enjoy higher quality, multi-faceted education…We will also redouble efforts to ensure that the outcomes of our education system are in line with market needs. (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016 p. 16)

SV2030 makes an investment in human resources so that the Saudi citizens will take the lead in the vision, take full self-dependence and enjoy the fruits of their own efforts. In this regard, the National Budget for the Fiscal Year 2017 allocates 22.5% of the total expenditure of SAR890 billion for public education and training (Ministry of Finance, 2017). The budget encourages new projects and supports the existing ones in all levels of education in schools, colleges, and universities. These financial initiatives aim to materialize the aspect of improving the Saudi education system (Yusuf, 2017).

SV2030 appeals to foreign investors and companies like Amazon, IBM, Microsoft, Huawei Technologies, Oracle, Apple, and others to open up offices in Saudi Arabia (Barnawi, 2022). The employment opportunities in these international organizations are available only on the ground of EFL competency. To enhance the EFL competency level, the Ministry of Education has launched the Kheberat scheme under SV2030 for training public school teachers in the United Kingdom, the United States, and seven other countries (Barnawi, 2018). However, such a program can be seen as a continuation of the initiatives of internationalizing the Saudi students' exposure to English under the King Abdullah Scholarship Program of 2005. The financial support to students for EFL learning is an effective action to render the Saudi nationals competent for the global market. In this regard, the Ministry of Education calls English the 'driver' of building a knowledge-based economy (Elyas & Picard, 2019). Hence, to fulfill the aim of situating the nation in the global market, the National Transformation Plan (NTP) in 2016 emphasized that EFL learning is an investment for the future (Barnawi, 2018), and the government has begun spending more on English teaching (Barnawi, 2022).

5. The Role of EFL Learning in Fulfill Vision 2030

EFL learning is the need of the twenty-first century. Today, the world is global, and a competitive and dynamic

knowledge-based economy can only lead to a prosperous and sustainable society (European Commission, 2003). In a global economy, the soft skills developed through EFL learning can produce a better outcome of industrial training and education (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2015). It is because English as a language has a global outreach for a number of reasons. First, English has the largest number of global speakers (Abugohar & Yunus, 2018). Second, being the language of academic writing in the world (Askari, 2010), it has become a common communication medium among non-native English-speaking nations and peoples of diverse ethnic backgrounds (Al-Mukhallafi, 2014; ur Rahman & Alhaisoni, 2013). Third, as a foreign language, its dominant position is recognized internationally, and it has become an official language in many countries (Al-Sobhi & Preece, 2018). Fourth, it is the communicative language of ICT, E-Learning, artificial language, science, and research (Al-Mukhallafi, 2019). For its worldwide span of usage, English is considered a global language suitable for the global economy (Crystal, 2003).

EFL learning can drive the fulfillment of SV2030. In the visionary transformational transition of SV2030, EFL proficiency can enhance Saudi Arabia's economic potential (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015; Habbash, 2011). It is because the Saudi economy has an intrinsic relation with EFL learning. Before the discovery of oil, Saudi Arabia had a poor economy dependent on agriculture, tourism, and customs duty on goods brought by pilgrims (Ali, 1976). Appeals to foreign aid used to fail, owing to compromising negotiations. It was only after the discovery of oil in the 1930s that foreign investments came to Saudi Arabia (Elyas & Picard, 2010; Habbash, 2011). The oil companies provide the majority of employment (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). The reliance on the oil and gas industry has encouraged Saudi Arabia to prefer English over other foreign languages. In the beginning, the oil companies needed Saudis EFL speakers to communicate with foreign experts (Alam, 1986). Hence, the discovery of oil also led to the introduction of English, particularly in the commercial domain (Al-Johani, 2009); at the same time, the teaching of English began to prepare Saudis for scholarships to travel abroad and gain Western education (Al-Ghamdi & Al-Saddat, 2002). Since the oil companies are run and managed by British and American companies, they depend on English speakers (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). The dependence on English speakers affects the Saudi economy as it depends on the revenues from oil. 88.4% of the total workforce in the private sector is foreigners (Central Department of Statistics and Information, 2013 qt. in Alrashidi & Phan, 2015). It is because Saudi nationals prefer to work more in public than in the private sector for higher wages, greater benefits, and better social security (M. G. H. Al-Asmari, 2008). During the period of economic boom from 1969 to 1980, most Saudi students ignored technical and vocational training and employment (Yamada, 2018). The shortage of technicians, operators, engineers, and other skilled workers has forced the kingdom to outsource the foreign expatriates (Aldossari, 2020). However, the dominance of foreign workers in the national labor market in the private sector owes to the lack in the Saudi nationals of EFL competency apart from other professional skills (Ramadi, 2005). With the diversification plan of the economy, this dependence will not diminish. The diversification aims to expand the commercial services of tourism, manufacturing, and international trading center. These services are international in orientation, execution, and operation. The greater number of international businesses will require a greater number of EFL speakers. Hence, the need for EFL speakers will drastically increase. However, this need began with the Saudisation policies in the 1990s, which required the EFL competency in Saudi nationals to overtake the key managerial, technical, and other operational roles and positions (Looney, 2004). There are two factors for the demand for Saudi EFL speakers: one, private sectors prefer English speakers; and two, Saudi EFL speakers can serve as the medium of communication between Saudi and non-Arabic foreign expatriate workers (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015). Saudisation necessitates a world-class professional competence in Saudi nationals to limit or replace the number of foreign expatriates in the local labor market (Al-Khuzaim, 2003). Besides, the professional courses in the field of science, technology, medicine, and engineering are taught in English in several Saudi universities (Rugh, 2002). Hence, Crystal (2003) has highlighted the importance of EFL proficiency in the economic growth of Saudi Arabia. Moreover, with the increase in the number of graduates from technical and other professional schools, colleges, and universities, the requirement for jobs is ever-increasing (Ramkumar & Ash, 2002). The increasing demand for jobs can be met with the growth of the private sector or the privatization of government services (Al-Khuzaim, 2003). However, the privatization does not intervene with the policy of Saudisation as it requires the private sector to target a 25% reservation of Saudi nationals (Al-Khuzaim, 2003). SV2030 envisions the growth of the economy through privatization to enhance the quality of the services: "We will also grow our economy and improve the quality of our services by privatizing some government services, improving the business environment, attracting the finest talent and the best investments globally, and leveraging our unique strategic location in connecting three continents" (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016, p. 13). Although the strategy of privatization plans to de-nationalize some more services, it pledges to materialize 'a vibrant society' by creating more jobs.

The goal of 'a vibrant society' has two commitments, i.e., 'strengthen[ing] Islamic values and National Identity and' offer[ing] a fulfilling and healthy life', that can be achieved with two programs, i.e. 'The Human Capital Program' and 'The Privatization Program' (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2016). Both of these programs focus on employment. It is because employment is a vital catalyst for Saudi Arabia as an 'Ambitious Nation'. With employment, the number of Saudi nationals

participating in the nation-building process will increase. Lowi (2018) argues that the absolute dependence on foreign labor interrupts the consolidation of Gulf nations and shapes the national identity because the longer residence of a higher number of foreign workers reduces the citizenship to a community. Hence, the number of Saudi nationals higher than the foreign expatriates in the labor market can empower the Saudi national integrity. In terms of the unemployment rate, the Saudis are twice as affected as the non-Saudis (Madhi & Barrientos, 2003). During the period from 2000 to 2015, the unemployment of Saudis has increased by 3.35%, which is contrary to the decrease of unemployment by .12% among the non-Saudis (Meteb, 2017). Ba Ishen (2002) explains why private companies are reluctant to hire Saudi nationals. Among other reasons for qualification, aspiration, and greater remuneration, employers have notified the requirement of English being an essential qualification even in jobs that do not require communication with non-Arab speakers (Ghaban, 2002). Hence, employment is a strong extrinsic motivation among Saudi students to enroll in the courses of EFL learning (Shamiry & al Fuad, 2020). Besides employment, EFL learning can promote and, therefore, strengthen Islamic values. The linguistic competence of Saudi EFL speakers can empower them to speak, educate, explain, represent and share Islamic culture, religion, and etiquette with non-Islamic individuals (Osailan, 2009; ur Rahman & Alhaisoni, 2013). It can also disrupt the negative as well as the biased image of the Arabs and the Muslims in the West and maintain a peaceful and tolerant relationship with the non-Islamic countries (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015).

6. The Strategic Steps of Improvement to Fulfill Saudi Vision 2030 with EFL Learning

It is an inescapable reality that Saudi Arabia is currently in dire need of transforming the education system to improve the standard of EFL competency to realize SV2030. As SV2030 transforms the resource-based economy into a knowledge-based economy, Saudi education must emphasize EFL learning to prepare students for new commercial activities and organizational positions. The Saudi educational policymakers must consider language education seriously (Alzahrani, 2017). To fulfill the goals of SV2030, all the stakeholders, including the visionaries, policymakers, educators, investors, and employers must come together for an effective collaboration to identify the challenges of improving the current status of EFL learning. The policies taken under SV2030 must pay attention to the importance of EFL learning in transforming the economy. To comply with the long-term goals of SV2030, the initiatives for reforming EFL learning have to be long-term. For sustainable improvement, many reforms are required to develop the skills for effective EFL competency.

To compete with the global workforce, EFL learning has to be prioritized. It must be introduced in primary education, and secondary education must focus on language proficiency to reduce the burden of remediation in graduate education. Higher education should be made more accessible to all, which shall engage the Saudi EFL learners for a longer period with the constant practice of EFL in their pursuit of professional and scientific courses. The special education programs for industrial training must be conducted in English to prepare the Saudi graduates for more competitive jobs and new career options. The curriculum must integrate EFL with Arabic learning and balance the traditional values with the challenges of globalization. The learners must be encouraged to enrich the tradition by learning the foreign language. English can be used as a linguistic medium to promote Arab culture. The EFL teachers must identify the learning barriers in students and motivate them to overcome those barriers. The curriculum should be flexible, and the teachers must be involved in designing it to maintain the relevance of EFL learning beyond the class (Alnefaie, 2016). The curriculum must highlight the changes needed for SV2030. The policymakers must ensure that the educational reforms must empower the individuals with EFL learning proficiency with the goal of equal opportunities for more meaningful and successful career paths. Hence, Al-Sulami (2016) suggests that it must be designed to engage students more effectively in the global labor market (qtd in Alzahrani, 2017). Public school teachers must develop an international perspective to nurture critical thinking, independent personality, and creativity among students. The Saudi EFL teachers must attend international forums and conferences to develop their professional competence and be equipped with the latest pedagogical strategies to teach the English language. The teachers must be open to changes. The education must focus on the individual's potential and capacity to achieve larger economic goals.

As SV2030 promotes the Western standards of open market and globalization the educational policies should be aware of meeting its needs, of which EFL learning should also be taken into consideration as English plays a vital rule in the global culture. Anti-Islamic and anti-Arab sentiments must be countered with the goals and commitments of SV2030. Islam is a progressive religion and prepares the millions of followers with the right motivation for a dynamic world. The Islamic principles and values enable Muslims all around the world to compete and conquer unforeseen challenges in life. Islam recommends critical thinking (Al Zahrani & Elyas, 2017; Alaqqad, 2014). It is a primary cognitive tool for adapting to and assimilating the dynamic global culture and economy. Saudi English educators should foster critical thinking (Al Zahrani & Elyas, 2017; Hazaea, 2020) in the process of reformulating the learning goals and instructional procedures to enhance the growth of language competence (Báez, 2004). Critical thinking developed through EFL learning can equip the Muslim Arabs with moral and philosophical insights of Western epistemology that can enable them to propagate the Islamic values

with convincing rhetoric in the language of the foreigner. EFL competency can counter the anxiety of Western cultural infiltration with the production of Arab cultural materials in English. In this regard, the cultural content of EFL learning should be considered during the designing of the curriculum. The contents of English culture, literature, and history of language overburden the undergraduate EFL teachers' preparation and training (Zafer, 2002). There is discontent among Saudi teachers with the Anglo-cultural nature of EFL learning (Alfahadi, 2012). The EFL learning can reduce the negative social attitude toward Western culture, especially when the EFL contents agree with the Arabic cultural values and local cultural norms (al Hasnan, 2015). Having reduced the foreign cultural material, the educators can insist on using English more in the classroom, because the Arabic culture-specific contents in English can lead to more engagement of teachers with Arabic in class. The policymakers should encourage the EFL teachers to move away from the authoritative stance in conducting the class and promote student participation with interactive activities. In the unrestricted environment, the teachers can implement Alghamdi's (2014) cooperative learning method that enhances the EFL learners' capacity for verbal interaction. Under the schemes of SV2030, the governments must recruit more EFL teachers to make classes less crowded. With the higher scope of interactive occasions, the students can benefit from communicative language teaching (Farooq, 2015). The curriculum must support autonomy with a pre-defined rationale of the reading unit for learner-centric activities that promote self-directed learning (Alrabai, 2017). The policymakers must engage in continuous planning of curriculum and industry-oriented programs with the Saudi private sector to meet the particular requirement of occupational knowledge and skills for the current business environment. The gap between the education output and the needs in the labor market should be reduced by complying with the requirements in the current labor market, such as the knowledge of automation, digitalization, risk management, and cyber security (Al-Rashaidan & Al-Thwaini, 2021).

The use of ICT in EFL learning has contributed wonderful benefits in language acquisition, practice, and utilization (Al-Mwzaiji & Alzubi, 2022). The knowledge of ICT and Internet connectivity must be utilized for the exposure of Saudi EFL learners to native and non-native English speakers around the world. It will develop the idea of global culture and an emphatic concern for humanity across the world.

Creativity is an important aspect of learning. The educators must emphasize the creative aspect of EFL learning. The acquisition of a foreign language cultivates creative thinking as the exercise of the second language transforms existing ideas, unravels repressed thoughts, and develops the cognitive skills of using the information in a coherent and comprehensible manner (Ismail & Kassem, 2022). For the dynamic global economy, creative thinking is an effective cognitive faculty for encountering diverse social, political, and commercial issues with transnational financial activities.

7. Conclusion

In twenty-first-century Saudi Arabia, EFL learning is in a critical phase of transformation. SV2030 has provided a significant cultural and economic stimulus in this historical phase of the revolution of EFL learning in Saudi Arabia. Unlike the previous economic plans, SV2030 has promised several social and cultural benefits to the EFL learners. The potent economic boom with foreign investment, privatization of public services, localizing the manufacturing industry, and proliferation of hospitality business have unleashed unprecedented opportunities for Saudi EFL learners. The history and development of EFL learning are very long and strategic. However, the recent developments following the announcement of SV2030 are phenomenal. The relation between SV2030 and EFL learning is mutual and complementary to each other.

EFL proficiency is an unfailing strategy for realizing the goals and commitments of SV2030: human capital development, employment, cultural enrichment, prosperity of Islam, and many other scopes of economic growth. EFL learning can help the Saudis serve the religious interest of spreading and representing Islam. In this regard, SV2030 resolves the ancient negative attitude to English as a cultural disruptor. Instead of forcing the Saudis to adapt to Western culture for professional enhancement, SV2030 contextualizes the opportunity for individual growth of global humanity with an acute sense of Arab identity integrated with the prolific cultural adaptability. EFL learning serves the National interest. With EFL proficiency, more Saudi nationals can work in the private sector and reduce the dependence on foreign workers. Greater employment can reduce the unemployment of the Saudis and the cost of welfare schemes for their long healthy life. Remittances cast a negative effect on Saudi's economic growth with a disruption in the circulation of wealth (Alkhathlan, 2013). The gradual decrease in foreign laborers shall bring down the wealth transfer or remittances outside the nation. Being the principal linguistic and communicative medium of ICT, science, technology, and commerce, EFL learning can render Saudi professionals competent for both local and global markets of scientific innovation, technological progress, commercial enterprise, and ICT-enabled services. With competent Saudi EFL speakers, Saudi Arabia can materialize the diversification of the economy with non-oil-based industrial and commercial activities. The local markets will grow with foreign investments. Like the oil companies in the 1930s enabling the first economic boom, SV2030 will induce many more economic revolutions in several other industrial, commercial, and service-related sectors. In these potential social, cultural, and historical transformations, EFL learning is the fundamental educational enrichment of the Saudi human resource and capital.

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