*Critiquing of Higher Education policy in Saudi Arabia: A Neoliberalism Approach*

Tariq Elyas, Alhasan Al-Sadi

King Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia

0029

The Asian Conference on Language Learning 2013

Official Conference Proceedings 2013

## Abstract

In this paper, we aim to step back in time and speak more broadly on the aspect of higher education policy in Saudi Arabia.  We will argue that the post 9/11 context of education in Saudi Arabia has brought into a new paradigm of thinking away from what McCarthy *et al.* (2009) call "safe harbors" in schooling and education. This new phenomena has merged to adopt a neoliberalism paradigm in many local Saudi schools and educators alike.  Therefore, this new trend may prove to be affecting the new reform policy of education in general; and higher education in particular. We will try to identify the dominant complex of relations now affecting Saudi schools as neoliberal re-articulation and transformations between the link of education and economy.  In this particular context of neoliberal hegemony and moral and cultural leadership itself and its relationship to what Michael Foucault has called government that we must examine in order to better understand the specific impact of current political, cultural, and economic forces on education, understand the specific impact of the public good (McCarthy *et al., 2009).*  Consequently, we will start by defining neoliberalism and discussing its relationship to the globalization of Saudi Higher education system. Second, we will discuss how neoliberalism has drawn a new paradigm of Saudi Arabian higher education in order to move it toward the wheel of globalization. While this might be a modest attempt to hypothesis a link between neoliberalism and educational reforms in Saudi Arabia, the paper suggests that a new understanding of the most current debates on this new phenomena in the history of educational in Saudi Arabia.
**Keywords:**  Higher Education policy,  Saudi Arabia, Neoliberalism, Globalization, Michael Foucault

*Invoking the opposition between movement and stasis in modern life, Dennis Carlson, in his book Leaving Safe Harbors admonishes to move out of the "safe harbors" of settled educational practices and philosophies in order to better address the challenges posed to schooling by the dynamics associated with globalization and multiplicity.*

*(McCarthy et al., 2009.)*

## Theoretical Framework: Neoliberalism

According to McCarthy *et al.* (2009) one way of talking about neoliberalism as it has arisen in the social and political science literatures of the last two decades has been defined in its terms of universalisation of the enterprise ethic. This is to see its logics in the context of multinational capital's strategic translation of globalization and corresponding withdrawal and disengagement of the state in a broad range of economic and political affairs. Within this framework, neoliberalism can be broadly understood as a new form of liberalism which integrates eighteenth and nineteenth century notions of free market and laissez-faire into, potentially, all aspect of contemporary life.   However, neoliberalism has also come into wide use in "cultural studies to describe prevailing ideological paradigm that leads to social, cultural, and political practices and policies that use the language markets. …to shift risk from government and corporations onto individuals and to extend this kind of market logic into the realm of social and affective relationships" (Ong, 2006).

As we build upon Foucault's argument of the neoliberalism forms of government, Thomas Lemke  contends that neoliberalism is not merely an economic theory, but a political rationality that defines the true aspect of our educational practices and where does this lead us toward new mind-sets of our daily life. This exact notion of educational neoliberalism under the new political climate post 9/11 in the context of Saudi Arabia (hereafter KSA) is the main focus of this paper. This movement, we argue has opened Pandora's box of the Saudi society, and most importantly Saudi students' thirst  for  knowledge and the need to network in our modern times to expand our new demands economically and intellectually. In this context, a need of neoliberalism and glocalization of education to intertwine in order to form a new paradigm may prove a tool for neo-liberal education policy makers in KSA. This tendency of neoliberalism may possibly indeed, "comprise educational institutions and practices" (*McCarthy et al.,* 2009).

## Rethinking of the Educational Paradigm in Saudi Arabia post 9/11

Where did it start? In recent years, many authors in the West and East have claimed that the Saudi Educational system has been under scrutiny by different organizations and political spheres in the world after 9/11 (See Rugh, 2002; Karmani, 2005, Pennycook, 2007; Elyas, 2008).  This event has sparked a keen interest in the educational system in KSA and the ideological imbedded political and religious regimes which may single out its unique educational paradigm.  Many Arabic scholars have dealt with the different aspects of education, especially in higher education to investigate the different features which may spark a sharp unique framework of education in the context of KSA in comparison to the other different paradigms.

## Saudi Tertiary Education System

We will start this paper with describing the main contrast of education in KSA to the rest of the world. There are some essential features distinguishing the tertiary education system in KSA from other education systems around the world. One of these is that the tertiary" education in KSA is free for all students," (Alankary, 1998, p.4) and in some rare cases even the expatriates' family members. The government also assists students who are studying at private colleges by subsidizing half of their tuition fees. In contradistinction to many universities internationally, the tertiary education system in KSA provides free on-campus accommodation to students who come from remote areas, and as a further motivation to undertake tertiary studies, the government awards all students a small monthly allowance.

Another difference is that the tertiary education system in KSA is strictly segregated between males and females, with different campuses for each, except for the new King Abdullah Science Co-ed University which just opened recently in 2009 under a heat of social and political debates. This vision of the loved king of KSA has sparked a great hope for the country's future and a first step towards an actual globalization.

In different to King Abdullah Science University, these benefits notwithstanding, KSA exercises its power as a theocracy to make compulsory the dissemination among students the tenets of Islamic faith, culture and history. However, the KSA educational policy has come under much more intense and critical scrutiny by critics, who observe that "In the aftermath of 11th September, 2001, KSA's religious education system has become the target of widespread criticism" (Prokop, 2003, p.77). The fact that 15 of the 19 terrorists involved in 9/11 were from KSA has "sparked a fundamental debate both in the West and within the Muslim world regarding the link between these acts and the teaching of Islam" (Bar, 2004, cited in Elyas, 2008, p. 7). Also, Elyas (2008) claims that the Saudi education system has been viewed as partly responsible for producing Islamic extremists; therefore, "the relationship between the US and Riyadh has been fraught with tension since 9/11and with Muslims representing 22% of the world's population" (p.8).

## Education and Embracing  Neoliberalism Needs

Since these above controversial accusations of the Educational system in KSA, a need to reform the curriculum and lessen the international pressure on KSA government became an imperative decision. The political implications of 9/11 notwithstanding, curriculum reform in KSA is considered essential by many experts in order  "to meet demands of the employment market, reform initiatives so far have largely shied away from controversial issues such as reducing the overall percentage of religious education" (Aarts & Nonneman, 2005, p79). Curriculum reform advocates, many from abroad, but mostly from within KSA, such as  (Al-Attas, 1979; Al-Ajroush,1980; Zaid, 1994; Al-Hazmi, 2003; Elyas, 2008, Elyas & Picard 2010; Almziny, 2010) have advocated for an urgent action to reform the education before it is too late.  For example, Alessa (BBC) argues that "the education system in the Kingdom needs to be encouraged to implement a new educational philosophy based on the balance between faith and ethics" (p104).  This issue of the "save harbors" and

of the legitimacy of education lead to questioning the philosophy and policy of education in KSA which have encountered some opposition from intellectuals in KSA. Elyas & Picard (2010) for example, has criticized the education system in KSA where he argues for the necessity to amend the philosophical approach and education policy in KSA. Almziny also claims that "the Saudi methods of education inculcate in students a culture of death for which they have little use in their daily lives," (p.50) a hollow cry which has been called for many years in the past.

In fact, in order to benefit Saudi students and concomitantly, society in general, Al-Essa (2009) advocates a reform of the curricula which would "incorporate the teaching of human rights," (p.104) and respect for diverse opinions (Aarts & Nonneman, 2005, .p79) where these issues have never been introduced to any extent before in the curricula; as well as an emphasis on critical and creative thinking-a term that is foreign in the KSA curricula. In addition, Rugh (2002) demands rooting out any "pedagogical approach such as rote learning , memorisation as well as the centralised control of the government over classroom materials and the very few textbooks that traditionally characterise Saudi education in practice" (p. 50). Others have made similar criticisms of the Saudi education system, citing the inordinate amount of the curriculum devoted the study of religion (Aarts & Nonneman, 2005; Weston, 2008, Elyas; Elyas & Picard, 2010 Almziny, 2010). These elements are cited as impediments to creativity and independent thinking, which is important for economic prosperity of the country.

This latter aspect is of paramount concern as the lack of necessary skills and training in Saudi students fails to meet the demands of a rapidly expanding work-force sector, in both qualitative and quantitative terms (Al-Hazmi, 2003). Citing unemployment and the needs of industry as a rationale for reforms, Alkhazim (2003) notes that "unemployment rates among Saudi nationals is between 13-15%, which he claims "raises the question of how confident the labour market is in the output of local higher education institutions" (p.483). In the same vein, Syed (2003, cited in Al-Hazmi, 2003) calls for "a need shift from this quantitative to the qualitative development of teacher who can better serve changing student's needs," (p. 350) where students are seeking an alternative method to gain knowledge outside the classroom. In another study on the students' motivation to gain knowledge outside the classroom Elyas & Picard (2010) notice that the students were seeking help from outside the controlled walls of their own educational institutions and ideological constraints they are facing (see Fig 1.) Clearly, the students were tired of the old-fashioned way of teaching by controlling who knows what and what is being taught in the classroom. This new trend have has helped feeding new emerging scholars to shed some light on the new phenomena in KSA educational system.

Indeed, education as Molnar points out, has been colonized by marketization; school reforms are being discussed in commercial terms such as "future consumers," "future technology," "future sciences" are being used in reference to children and school youth. Nowadays, Arts & Nonneman (2005) stresse that education is seen "as a product to be evaluated for its economic utility and as a commodity to be bought and

sold like anything else in the 'free market'" (p.111). Positively, neoliberalism in the labour market has a critical cultural agenda: "It involves radically changing how we think of ourselves and what the goals of schooling should be" (Apple, 2006, p.23). As has been demonstrated in (Fig. 1), new streams of students are being created to re-introduce themselves as new human capitals. Indeed, in the neoliberal culture, "individuals are encouraged to behave according to the ideal of the entrepreneur, a person capable of rationally choosing the optimal course of action to maximize his/her interests. That is under neoliberalism the individual is no longer merely a rational optimizer but conceived as an autonomous entrepreneur responsible for his or her own self, progress, or position" (McCarthy *et al.* 2009, p. 40). Under liberalism, theretofore, educational institutions in Saudi Arabia are expected to cater for the new market and to create a more competitive market for the students to flourish their creativity.
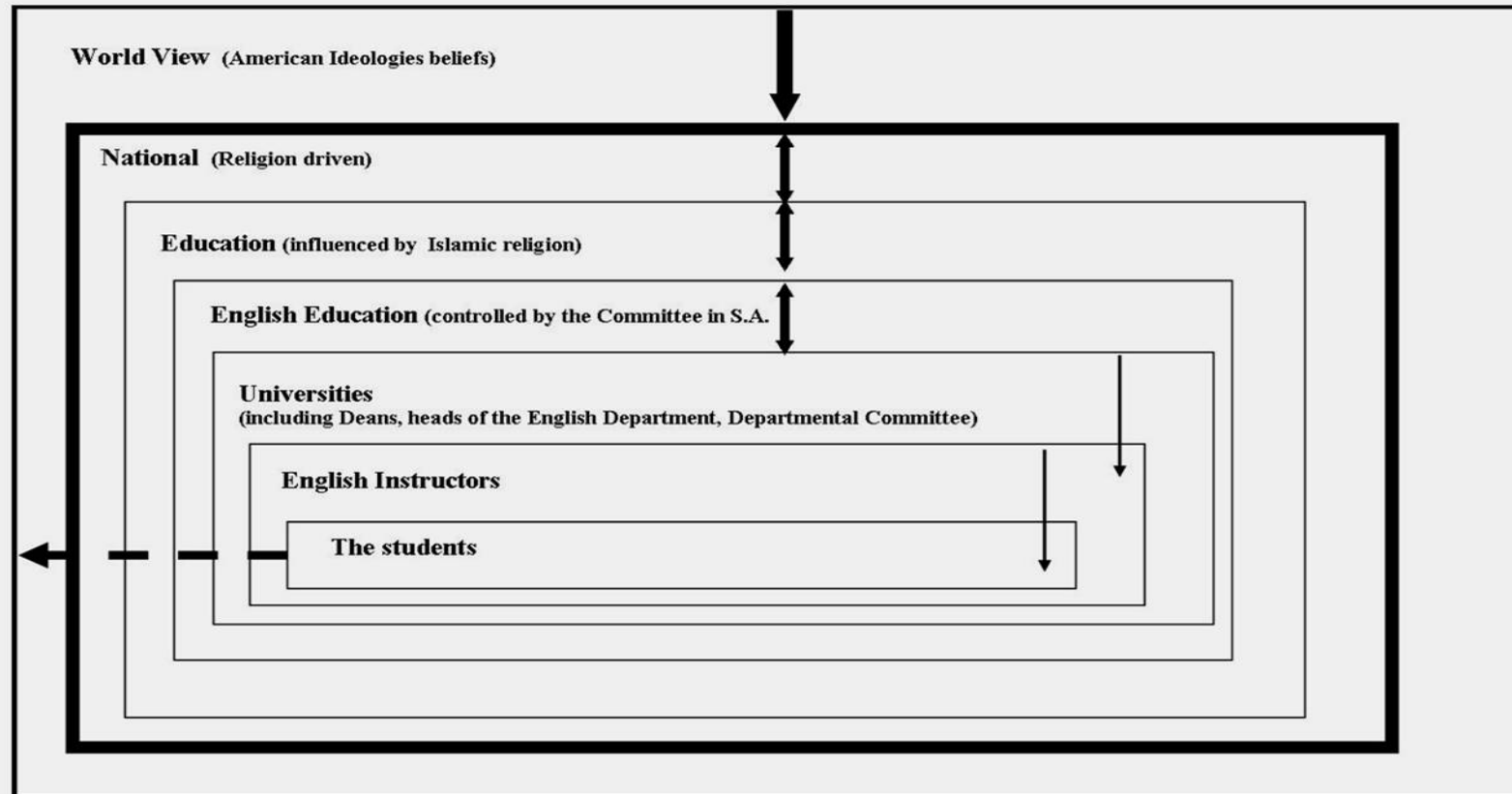
**Figure 1 Elyas (2010) concept of power and Knowledge.**

**The Need to Reform the Curricula**

These issues of lack of critical thinking and qualitative development of the education stems from the fact that the education systems promote more drills and repetition based on the rote learning due to the ideological underpinning of the base of the Islamic education in early KSA where the form of *Kuttabs* and *Medrassas* where the only methods of teaching. This methods of teaching still echoes in modern education as Alkhazim (2003) argues that "the higher education system in Saudi overproduces in some areas such as the social and religious studies, but it is far from producing similar numbers in areas critically needed by the country such as the health and engineering professions" (p.483). Although that the higher education in the country did not reflect the development in early history of KSA, there are traces of these rooted pedagogy in modern day KSA, and in this case even in the higher education (Elyas & Picard, 2010).

Hence, KSA's tertiary education system has been the subject of much debate and discussion regarding its competitiveness in the global economy as well as "its ability to meet the needs of contemporary society" (Alotabi, 2005, p.22). Some aspects of the Saudi tertiary education system attracting criticism include the government's control, through the Ministry of Higher education, of the tertiary curricula which its main task is ensuring that the universities function according to the country's laws and ideology (see Fig.1). The problem with assuming such control over the curricula is that students' freedom to conduct out research is circumscribed, thereby limiting the purview of inquiry. The main issue rely on the mere fact of the scrutiny of control the flow of information and the source of the knowledge in order for the country to protect its national and Islamic identity as the cradle of Islam where changes are not encouraged per se. Here, in this case changes are regarded as a threat to the security of the notion of unity and strength in controlled way of thinking. Hence, the "save harbour" concept of education has been served to be the country's shield towards unfamiliar territory.

**Educational Reform in Saudi Arabia: The beginning**

Hence, these above issues attributes to the idea of reform to bring the country into the wheel of modernization and into the 21st century have been welcome by many scholars. Some scholars such as Bremmer (2004) and Elyas & Picard (2010) advocate that reforms are necessary to counter the bigotry, intolerance and extremism which are the outcome of a centrally controlled rigid, and narrow curriculum. Bremmer (2004) states that "a new Saudi curriculum should strengthen critical thinking skills that are plainly not encouraged by a system that re-lies on rote memorization of religious texts and authoritarian teaching methods" (p.28). These limitations imposed on academic inquiry raise the question of why such control is necessary and whether it is, in effect, antithetical to the needs of contemporary Saudi Arabian society which is its own identity is rooted heavily into the early stages of education practices. Nevertheless, these reforms are indubitable, yet the paradox of educating and training students in disciplines that have been hitherto inaccessible and in some cases, antithetical to the requirements of a theocratic and insular society is fraught with tension. For example, on the one hand, many economics and scholars

have indicated   these reforms are necessary for Saudi's economy in a more globalized world, yet on the other hand, the subversive potential of introducing critical and independent thought into Saudi classrooms that will impact upon generations to come is a factor that has not gone unnoticed.

In the same line of thinking, Gharba-former president of the American University of Kuwait and the author of 'Studying the American Way: An Assessment of American-Style Higher Education in Arab Countries, equates a 'culture of openness' with elevated educational standards and says of the reforms "they won't be able to limit this new state of mind to the classroom. … KSA is one of the places where people are starting to question more, particularly under a reform-oriented king, so reforming their education system will be like opening a Pandora's box"  (Krieger, 2007, p.6).

These criticisms have been considered by the Saudi government which has recently launched the project 'Tatweer'[1] for the development of general education in the Saudi kingdom. This ambitious project, which began in 2007 and is forecast to end in 2013 "has been allocated $293 million," (Al-Degether, 2009, p.112) to bring the wheel of modernization into the country and take it forward. This project is comprised of four targets: 1) enhancing teachers' skills; 2) improving curricula; 3) developing school activities; and 4) improving school facilities and infrastructure. The primary objective of this program will be to focus on the quality of education to ensure that students of public education in the Saudi Kingdom are equipped with the necessary skills to participate in an increasingly globalised society and engage with the complex and myriad problems that globalisation brings while simultaneously preserving the values and ideology underpinning Saudi society (Tatweer, 2010) [2]

One of the important functions  of  this project, as stated by Al-Degether (2009)  is in the field of pedagogy, he calls for  "the instruction of teachers to increase their knowledge of critical thinking through providing workshops on how to teach critical thinking to student" (p.112). The mere idea of critical thinking has been dealt with (after being buried under the sands) by the more demands of the country's economical needs and non-applicable traditional way of education. This giant step has promoted the country to establish a link with The National Centre for Teaching and Thinking (NCTT)[3] organisation to undertake this formidable task.

Although the projects' objectives and perspectives are highly practical and useful, three years after its implementation there has not been much evident improvement in the Saudi education system. According to Al-Essa (2010) "the main reasons for the projects failure to get under way are:  1) the lack of political vision will;  2) lack of

---

[1] Tatweer is Arabic expression that means the 'the development of oneself'.
[2] King Abdullah Project for developing education, 2010." Tatweer"
http://www.tatweer.edu.sa/Pages/home.aspx
[3] NCTT is a US organisation and is led by critical thinking theorist Robert Swarts

new policy for education; 3) too much bureaucracy for the development of education" (pp.72-91).

## The other Spectrum of the Issue

Although, the previous paragraphs have dealt with some of the problems and disadvantages of the influence of the early practices of pedagogy in the Education in KSA, there are some advantages as well. For, instance, the philosophy and policy in education in KSA has some useful aspects such as the teaching of ethics and Islamic values and culture as well as Arabic language. However, these aspects of education need to be revaluated in order to equip students to keep abreast of accelerating technological changes, scientific discoveries, globalised production and economy, and an increasingly integrated. In other words, there is a need to co-exist or interlink between the old and the new. That a step toward the glocalization of education is KSA has become an impetrative action to be taken critically by the different educational institutions in the country. In fact, global society, all of which serve to undermine the tenets of the Saudi education system. As Rugh notes it is difficult to provide a workforce capable of assimilating and adapting to the rapid change of global developments when there are virtually no educational institutions that teach business or political science. Another notable aspect of the Saudi education system is the lack of colleges that teach the art of critical thinking. These disciplines are where critical and independent thought are encouraged and the absence of a citizenry educated in these fields is also believed to have broader implications for the Saudi economy.

## Conclusion

As we have shown above, Saudi Arabian educational philosophy and policy needs to be amended to take advantage of, and benefit from global developments and should strive to raise the level of scientific research and development as well as the level of professionalism in all spheres of education. Al-Essa, (2010) argues that "an essential component of thes reforms should be the encouragement of democratic rights and a culture of dialogue and openness, which are not necessarily incompatible with Islamic faith and philosophy" (pp104-105). As have been argued previously, in order to accomplish and complement these objectives, the teaching of critical thinking and problem solving is a vital and essential aspect of education reforms in KSA. However, it is very clear that the country needs to look critically in its own education system if it needs to accompany other nations in such globalized world and to improve the well-being of its citizens to lead them into a more creative world that produces critical thinkers and worldly educators. Thus, neoliberal efforts in education aim at reorganizing schooling so the needs of the local and global economy are met by producing human capitals. Also, new definition of neoliberalism to transform the educational institutions to merge with the political, economical, cultural need may be served as a new template for higher education in more modern KSA. Therefore, our need to more beyond conventionalism and the "safe *harbors*" approach of institutional practices are our only hope for better well-equipped society.

References

Aarts, P., & Nonneman, G. (2005). *Saudi Arabia in the Balance : Political Economy, Society, Foreign Affairs*. New York: New York University Press.

Al-Ankary, K. (2002, March 13). *Sponsored confernce on Arab education*. Paper presented at the AMIDEAST.

AL-Ajroush, H. (1980). *A Historical Development of the Public Secondary School Curriculum in Saudi Arabia from 1930 To The Present*. University of Oklahoma.

Al-Degether, R. (2009). *Teacher educators' opinion and knowledge about critical thinking and the methods they use to encourage critical thinking skills in five female teacher colleges in Saudi Arabia*. Unpublished PhD, University of Kansas, Kansas.

Al-Essa, A. (2009). *Education Reform in Saudi Arabia between Absence of Political Vision, Apprehesion of the Religious Culture and Disability of Educatinal Managment-* اصلاح التعليم في السعودية بين غياب الرؤية السياسية وتوجس الثقافة الدينية وعجز الادارة التربوية. (First ed.). Beirut: Dar AlSakee.

Al-Hazmi, S. (2003). EFL teacher preparation programs in Saudi Arabia: Trends and challenges. *TESOL Quarterly, 37*(2), 341-351.

Al-Miziny, H. (2010). *The Abducting of Education in Saudi Arabia -* أختطاف التعليم في السعودية. (First ed.). Beirut: Arab Diffusion Company

AL-Otabi, K. (2005). *Saudi Higher Education Response to Globalization Challenges* استجابة التعليم العالي السعودي لتحديات العولمة. Unpublished Ph.D, Umm Al Qura University macca.

Alkhazim, M. (2003). Higher education in Saudi Arabia : challenges, solutions , and opportunities missed. *Higher Education Policy*(16), 7.

Bar, S. (2006). *Warrant for Terror: Fatwas of Radical Islam and the Duty of Jihad*. Lanham, MD: Roman & Littlefield.

BBC. (2008). Saudis Launch Islamic unity drive. Retrieved from http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/7436212.stm

Bremmer, I. (2004). The Saudi Paradox. *World Policy Journal, 21*(3), 23-30.

Cordesman, A. H. (2003). *Saudi Arabia Enters the Twenty-First Century: The Political, Foreign Policy, Economic and Energy Dimensions*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.

Elyas, T. (2008). The Attitude and the Impact of American English as a Global Language within the Saudi Education System. *Novitas-ROYAL (Research on Youth and Language), 2*(1).

Elyas, T., & Picard, M. (2010). Saudi Arabian Educational History: Impacts on English Language Teaching. *Education, Business and Society: Contemporary Middle Eastern Issues, 3*(2), 136-145.

Karmani, S. (2005). English, 'Terror' and Islam. *Applied Linguistics, 26*(2), 262-267.

Krieger, Z. (2007). Saudi Arabia Puts its Billions Behind Western-Style Higher Education. *The Chronicle of Higher Education,* pp. 1-6.

McCarthy, C., PittonI, V., Kim, S. & Monje, D. 2009. Movement and stasis in the Neoliberal reorientation of schooling. *In:* APPLE, M. W., AU, W. & GANDIN, L. A. (eds.) *The Routledge International Handbook of Critical Education.* Hoboken: Routledge.

Miller, T., & Emel, L. (1988). *Modern methodology or cultural imperialism*. Paper presented at the TESOL convention.

Mukherjee, T. S. (1986). ESL: An imported new empire? *Journal of Moral Education, 15*(1), 43-49.

Ong, A. (2006)Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty. Durham, NC:          Duke University Press

Pennycook, A. (2007). *Global Englishes and Transcultural Flows*. London ; New York: Routledge.

Prokop, M. (2003a). Saudi Arabia:  The Politics of Education. *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-), 79*(1), 77-89.

Prokop, M. (2003b). Saudi Arabia: The Politics of Education. *International Affairs, 79*, 77-89.

Rugh, W. (2002). Arab education: Tradition, growth and reform. *The Middle East Journal, 56*(3), 396-414.

Sampson, G. P. (1984). Exporting language teaching methods from Canada to China. *TESL Canada Journal, 1*, 19-31.

Syeed, S. M. 1986. Islamization of  linguistics. *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences,* 3**,** 77-89.

Zaid, M. A. (1994). *Comprehensive Analysis of the Current System of Teaching English as a Foreign Language in the Saudi Arabia Intermediate Schools.* PhD, University of Colorado, Boulder.