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Addressing the Challenges and Complexities of Teaching English in Saudi Higher Education: Insights through a Sociocultural Lens

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Abstract

This study examines the challenges and possibilities of incorporating sociocultural theory (SCT) into English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching in Saudi higher education, drawing on findings from multiple empirical and theoretical studies focused on the Saudi context. The review identifies key themes, including current pedagogical practices, cultural and religious factors, limited teacher preparation for sociocultural approaches, and the impact of institutional policies. It also explores learner expectations, identity formation, and the role of technology and assessment. The study highlights tensions between traditional methods and socioculturally informed practices and stresses the importance of contextual adaptation. Findings emphasize the need for professional development, culturally relevant strategies, and policy support to enhance student engagement, motivation, and effective communication. The study concludes by offering recommendations for practice and future research to bridge the gap between theory and application in Saudi EFL classrooms.

Keywords: Sociocultural Theory, EFL, Saudi Arabia, Pedagogical Practices, Cultural Context, Teacher Preparation, Learner Identity, Institutional Policy, Assessment, Technology Integration, Cross-Cultural Communication, Student Motivation, Higher Education

1. Introduction

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education in Saudi Arabia has undergone significant expansion, particularly in higher education institutions, as English continues to serve as a key language for academic advancement, global communication, and professional development. Despite considerable investments in English education, many Saudi university students still face challenges in achieving communicative competence. Traditional, teacher-centered methods dominate classrooms, often overlooking the cultural, social, and cognitive dimensions of language learning emphasized in more contemporary approaches.

Sociocultural theory (SCT), grounded in the work of Vygotsky, provides a powerful lens for rethinking EFL pedagogy. It views language learning as a socially mediated process that occurs through interaction, collaboration, and participation within meaningful cultural contexts. SCT promotes learner agency, scaffolding, the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), and identity formation, all essential for creating responsive and inclusive EFL

classrooms. However, implementing SCT-informed practices in Saudi higher education is not without its challenges. The educational system is deeply influenced by cultural and religious norms, sociocultural approaches, and learners bring diverse expectations shaped by their sociocultural background. In addition, issues such as gender segregation, limited classroom interaction, and a heavy focus on grammar and memorization further complicate the integration of SCT.

Implementing sociocultural perspectives in English language teaching is important because it contributes to positive learning outcomes. Many studies stated that English is not the official language in Saudi Arabia. Iwai (2011) differentiated between English as a second language (ESL), and English as a foreign language (EFL) by stating that EFL refers to learning English in non-English speaking regions, while ESL refers to learning English in a country where it is used formally as a tool for communication. In addition, Alharbi (2022) indicated that English is a foreign language in Saudi Arabia, and all citizens do not need to communicate in English in their daily lives. Al-Tamimi (2019) stated that although Arabic remains the official language of Saudi Arabia, English is gaining traction as a lingua franca within the private sector, especially among Saudi citizens and the sizable foreign worker population. This reflects the increasing globalization of business and commerce, necessitating effective communication across diverse cultural backgrounds. For ESL learners, who are individuals learning English in a country where it is commonly spoken, the use of English as a lingua franca provides them with immersive opportunities to practice and improve their language skills. They engage in daily interactions in English, both formally and informally, which enhances their fluency and comprehension.

The need to learn English as a foreign language can be attributed to globalization, modernization, the language of research, and accessing global knowledge networks. English in Saudi Arabia is widely used in multiple fields, including business and government activities. Therefore, proficiency in English translates to an increased edge by the Saudi Arabian population to engage with the international community and engage with different communities and cultures that are transforming their culture (Al-Tamimi, 2019, p. 70). Polly et al. (2018) defined the sociocultural perspective of learning as using pedagogies founded on collaborative practice. They added that the sociocultural perspective entails perceiving learning as an undertaking that occurs through interaction and guided discussion. Learning also occurs through collaboration; experience and discourse are the core elements that impact and dictate learning outcomes. EFL educators adopt an approach and framework that simplifies their ability to successfully undertake intercultural communication. It is fair to postulate that learning English as a second language can be quite challenging due to the cultural divide and variation between this Arabic nation and the origin of the English language. However, as Ilkhamova (2022) postulated, sociocultural competence is beneficial in propagating communicative competence. Thus, higher education classrooms are bound to benefit from the ease of navigating multiple cultural settings. Using different languages entails deploying cross-cultural communication, and the role of sociocultural perspectives is that they simplify this undertaking. Hence, these dynamics rationalize the increasing integration of sociocultural perspectives.

Improving teaching methodologies in higher education is crucial to catering to individual students' needs effectively. Contrary to the misconception that higher education does not benefit from customized approaches, it is essential to acknowledge the influence of cultural differences among students and teachers, particularly in higher education settings. While students are expected to adapt easily to their learning environments, it is fair to simplify the learning process through intentional efforts.

Despite the evident benefits of tailored teaching methods, Takrouni and Assalahi (2022) pointed out various challenges faced by educators in implementing these approaches. For instance, they highlighted the resistance encountered when introducing self-assessment practices, despite their potential to enhance learning outcomes. This example underscores the inevitable challenges associated with integrating sociocultural perspectives into education. Recognizing and understanding these challenges is crucial to exploring the full potential of tailored teaching methods. By taking informed approaches and implementing evidence-based measures, educators can promote positive learning outcomes, particularly in higher education classrooms where English is taught as a foreign language.

This topic is both timely and significant in the context of global educational reform and rising interest in culturally responsive pedagogies. While much has been written about sociocultural theory in general, there is a notable gap in research focused on its application within Saudi Arabian EFL higher education settings. This study helps fill that gap by addressing an underexplored intersection: how sociocultural theory can be effectively localized within Saudi classrooms shaped by distinct linguistic, religious, and gendered frameworks. The urgency of this inquiry stems from the increasing demand for English proficiency in the Kingdom's Vision 2030 reform agenda, which positions English as essential for global engagement.

Moreover, this study is empirically grounded in a synthesis of existing literature, drawing on both international and regional research to critically examine pedagogical practices, teacher development, and learner experiences. It also responds to calls for more contextualized understandings of language learning that are aligned with learners' sociocultural realities. By linking theoretical insights with real-world classroom challenges, this investigation not only contributes to scholarly debates but also offers practical insights for EFL instructors and education policymakers.

This study investigates the challenges and possibilities of incorporating sociocultural perspectives into Saudi EFL classrooms by reviewing a wide range of research literature. The analysis explores themes such as current pedagogical practices, teacher preparation, cultural influences, learner identity, technology integration, assessment, and cross-cultural communication. By synthesizing these findings, the study aims to provide insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers seeking to foster more interactive, culturally relevant, and student-centered EFL environments in Saudi higher education.

In brief, this introduction sets the stage for exploring how integrating sociocultural perspectives enhances English language teaching in higher education, especially in Saudi Arabia. It addresses the hypothesis that such integration promotes positive learning outcomes and aims to identify the challenges and strategies for EFL educators. By drawing on sociocultural theory and existing literature, the study seeks to contribute to effective teaching practices in diverse cultural settings.

2. Theoretical Framework

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (SCT) strongly explains language learning as a cultural practice-based social activity. For Alanazi (2024), learning is a product of intentional interaction and collective activity rather than mental processes. At the forefront of this theory is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), or the area between what learners can do independently and what they can do with assistance from more competent practitioners. The ZPD explains how learners progress from supported to independent performance through appropriate scaffolding in language learning. Scaffolding involves temporary support that is gradually withdrawn as the learners internalize it. The principle of internalization also explores how external social interaction is transformed into internal psychological processes so that language learners can build linguistic knowledge and practices through real communication. Within the higher education context in Saudi Arabia, where traditional pedagogical methods are more likely to dominate, sociocultural theory offers a stimulating alternative focused on collective meaning and cultural-based learning activities.

By placing language learning in sociocultural interactions, SCT argues against the traditional focus on grammatical accuracy and memorization of rules typical in most Saudi EFL classrooms. Instead, it maintains that learners should view language processes as a developmental process of engaging in culturally meaningful activities and constructing identity through language. Furthermore, SCT suggests the importance of mediation through tools of culture, where the language plays a double role as both the medium and object of learning in EFL settings, as per Nouraldeen and Elyas (2014). The theory gives a framework through which the opportunity and limitation of integrating sociocultural views within Saudi higher education EFL settings can be analyzed concerning the intricate interdependence between global educational trends and local cultural values.

3. Historical Evolution of EFL Teaching in Saudi Arabia

How English is taught in Saudi Arabia shows societal and educational changes in the country. According to Al-Seghayer (2014), English was introduced into the Saudi curriculum in the mid-twentieth century due to oil discovery and technological links around the globe that required people to communicate in English. Moreover, English teaching initially focused on grammar and vocabulary translation with a focus on memorization and structure correctness without regard to whether the students could communicate. This approach aligned with the traditional Saudi Arabian educational philosophies, which preferred teacher dominance and knowledge transmission to student independence and critical thinking. Barnawi and Al-Hawsawi (2017) stated that the learning environment began to shift in the late twentieth century as economic globalization heightened the demand for English language skills. Pedagogical innovations, nevertheless, were confronted by entrenched educational practices that preferred the maintenance of cultural identity through traditional teaching methods.

Since the establishment of education expansion programs, universities have gradually incorporated more communicative approaches, with varied implementation from one institution to another. Alzhrani and Alkubaidi (2020) underscored that the beginning of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program in 2005 was an important reform. It allowed many Saudi students to learn Western education styles and helped develop a generation of graduates who understand multiple teaching approaches. In this regard, Khawaji (2022) observed that the Vision 2030 program has accelerated education reforms, emphasizing skills development and international competitiveness, which has raised interest in innovative pedagogies, including sociocultural approaches. Despite these developments, there is still tension between modernization imperatives and cultural preservation concerns, which presents a demanding environment for educational innovation.

4. Current Pedagogical Practices in Saudi Higher Education EFL Classrooms

Modern English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching in Saudi universities blends traditional practices with innovative ideas from around the world. According to Alrabai (2016), teacher-centered classes are largely used today, where the teacher assumes the central position of knowledge delivery instead of guiding the students' learning. Teaching largely occurs in the form of lectures, and not much chance is left for students to practice speaking the language or work with their peers. Alsaif (2016) noted that textbooks, potentially imported from Western publishers with insufficient cultural sensitivity, serve as the primary curricular materials, perhaps spanning gaps between instructional materials and students' lived experiences. The assessment practices also reflect traditional interests, with high-stakes testing emphasizing grammatical accuracy and vocabulary memorization at the expense of communicative proficiency or cultural understanding.

Where the students are included, it is more likely to be in the form of initiation-response-evaluation characteristic of traditional teaching instead of real communication. AlHarbi (2018) described that most classrooms have rows of desks facing the instructor, encouraging learners to be passive recipients. The use of technology also differs greatly from school to school, with some universities implementing digital learning platforms while others retain traditional teaching methods. Almohideb (2019) did a study that showed students do not participate much in class discussions. Teachers take up most of the time, and there is no room for students to use language productively. Though this is a common trend, Liton (2012) finds some enclaves of new concepts in the system, which is practically true for those teachers who studied abroad and have different approaches to teaching. Such teachers also apply some elements of communicative language teaching, task-based instruction, or sociocultural theory under their schools' policies.

5. Cultural Factors Influencing EFL Teaching and Learning in Saudi Context

The cultural context of Saudi Arabia greatly impacts the teaching and learning activities of EFL in the higher education setting. Educational philosophy is underpinned by Islamic values and principles that shape institutional policy and classroom practice, according to Elyas and Badawood (2016). Islamic values strongly emphasize respect for authority, which manifests in hierarchical teacher-student relationships that conflict with collaborative learning environments promoted through sociocultural approaches. Further, Alrahaili (2018) stated that collectivist

cultures influence individuals' interactions. Students tend to be loyal to the group and obey their community's rules. Such a group-oriented mentality can facilitate team-based learning and restrict individual expression and questioning, which are essential to language learning.

The integration of Western educational approaches in Saudi middle and high schools faces significant challenges due to the enduring influence of cultural and religious values. Alshammari (2016) indicated that even there were numerous government reforms and initiatives aimed at implementing a Western, problem-based learning approach in both Saudi middle schools and high schools, the textbooks used remain distinctly 'Middle Eastern' editions. The introduction of these texts is not an attempt to reject foreign culture but to make it more acceptable to the local population. Clearly, cultural, and religious elements profoundly influence the identity of education in Saudi Arabia. Yet, there is an acknowledgment of the crucial role of English and Westernization in efforts to modernize the society. This dichotomy creates ambiguity, leading teachers to err on the side of caution by limiting student exposure to English and associated cultures, resulting in a general lack of cultural and linguistic competence among young learners (p. 367).

At the university level in Saudi Arabia, the dominance of Western textbooks in English courses creates a stark contrast with local traditions and values, often leading to cultural and ideological conflicts for students. At the university level, the situation differs markedly, with a strong prevalence of Western perspectives. English courses rely almost entirely on U.S. textbooks, which typically overlook Arabic or Islamic culture and sharply contrast with Saudi traditions and values. For instance, first-year English students use "Interactions 1" by Kirn and Jack, published by McGraw-Hill Higher Education in 2002. This book contains many viewpoints that potentially conflict with core Islamic discourses, especially those focused on home and family. A striking example is found in the first chapter, "School Life Around the World," which features an image of a mixed-gender group sitting and conversing. Such depictions of student routines are seen as inappropriate and contradictory within the Saudi context, highlighting the cultural and ideological shocks that Saudi students often encounter (Alshammari, 2016).

Concepts of facial expression and honor influence students' class participation, making most of them afraid to make errors publicly in speaking a language for fear of embarrassment. Nouraldeen and Elyas (2014) stated that boys and girls are taught in most Saudi colleges in different locations, providing male and female students with various learning and interaction methods. Furthermore, Uddin (2017) pointed out that in Saudi culture, individuals tend to pay attention to concealed meanings and comprehend the context. This concept can be quite dissimilar to Western education's emphasis on explicit communication. Memorization and recitation, as part of Quranic learning traditions, are as important as some language learning methods but may conflict with communication- and culture-based approaches. Attitudes toward time and task completion also demonstrate cultural values that may be distinct from the linear study stages used in most Western teaching methodologies. Alghamdi (2014) added that the intergenerational differences are more marked, with younger Saudis tend to be more open to educational change while still holding on to fundamental cultural values. Understanding cultural dimensions is essential in embracing sociocultural pedagogy as appropriate rather than imposing foreign approaches without cultural sensitivity.

6. Teacher Preparation and Professional Development for Sociocultural Approaches

Teacher education courses and professional development activities are essential to facilitate EFL teachers' acquisition of knowledge and skills in using sociocultural approaches. Presently, Alkhairi (2023) argued that most Saudi EFL teachers undertake teacher education courses focusing on language knowledge and pedagogy without giving adequate attention to the sociocultural aspects of language teaching. Pre-service training emphasizes English language skills and grammar over knowledge or cultural awareness. If training is offered for teaching, Abahussain (2016) suggested that it typically provides teaching as technical practice instead of theory-informed practice. This knowledge prevents teachers from adapting their methods to suit their conditions. Furthermore, professional development activities for current teachers usually come in the form of short workshops that show new approaches but do not offer long-term support for using, reflecting on, or adapting them.

Teacher educators often lack experience with sociocultural approaches, further perpetuating traditional teaching by modeling them even when teaching new practices. Almuhammadi (2024) emphasized that this way of working distinguishes between learning about sociocultural perspectives in theory and applying them within the classroom. Furthermore, Massri (2017) reported limited sociocultural studies in Arabic, making it difficult for poorly English-speaking teachers to access theoretical concepts. Professional learning communities that help teachers work together on new teaching strategies are still rare in most Saudi universities. This limited support prevents teachers from getting help when they try new teaching methods. Despite these challenges, Alanazi (2024) showed areas of improvement. Greater numbers of Saudi teachers go abroad for master's degrees and come back with new ideas and methods of teaching. Where teachers do attempt to implement sociocultural practices, they may receive minimal institutional recognition or reward, as assessment systems work to reward standardized products rather than process-oriented teaching innovations.

7. Learner Characteristics and Expectations in Saudi Higher Education

Saudi university students bring distinct characteristics and expectations to their EFL learning experiences, influenced by past experiences of learning and overall sociocultural considerations. As Alrashidi and Phan (2015) noted, most students enter the university with intensive exposure to English instruction but limited communicative competence, reflecting the grammar-based and exam-oriented secondary education. As Abdelhalim and Alqubayshi (2020) explained, Saudi university students' motivational orientations are likely to be instrumental in securing career advantages rather than integrative in seeking to become members of English-speaking groups, influencing their engagement with culture-oriented language activities. Their past learning histories have typically emphasized teacher control and transmission of knowledge, which can foster resistance to the active participation and collaborative sense-making required in sociocultural approaches.

Further, the application of proper linguistic skills and competencies equips the learners with the right sociocultural proficiencies that help in shaping social orientation practices. According to Almuhammadi (2024), equipping students with the right sociocultural practices sharpens how they apply them in culturally diverse settings. Their study patterns likely encourage memorization approaches sufficient for examination success but not the meaning-negotiation approaches adequate for communicative development. Digital literacy levels also vary significantly among the learners, which affects their engagement in technology-facilitated sociocultural learning activities. Moreover, students will likely arrive with expectations of explicit instructional direction and obvious assessment standards that conflict with socio-culturally based pedagogy's more open-ended, process-oriented nature. Regional origin, tribal affiliation, and socioeconomic status create diverse positionalities in the classroom that influence patterns of participation and group dynamics. Despite the obstacles, Alshuraiaan and Alme fleh (2023) observed that contemporary Saudi university students increasingly exhibit evidence of exposure to global perspectives through social media and international entertainment; therefore, they may be more receptive to culture-oriented language teaching practices. Most of them also express dissatisfaction with conventional language learning that has not served to improve their communication skills despite years of study.

8. Institutional Policies and Support Structures

Institutional frameworks significantly influence the implementation of innovative pedagogical practice in Saudi higher education EFL contexts. As Barnawi and Al-Hawsawi (2017) stated, university regulations regarding curriculum design, evaluation processes, and teaching delivery will, by nature, reflect centralized decision-making that limits individual teacher autonomy. Curriculum documents typically specify content coverage and learning outcomes without referencing the pedagogical process, which may create disconnections between sociocultural teaching practices and mandated curricular requirements. Class schedules follow traditional patterns with few classes weekly, which lowers the potential for more interaction and group work needed in sociocultural approaches. Classrooms often have fixed seating aimed at lectures instead of flexible seating to allow different types of interactions.

Faculty evaluation systems also tend to emphasize student satisfaction and achievement scores that may not reflect the value of teaching approaches considering sociocultural issues. Alrashidi and Phan (2015) mentioned that

assessment policy emphasizes standardized testing of how well one performs in certain language tasks. Such emphasis can undermine collaborative learning and knowledge of language acquisition in a social setting. This strategy is particularly crucial when students adjust to new teaching approaches. Support for teaching innovations differs at each school. Some colleges are open to trying new things, while others are traditional in instructional methods. Resource allocations influence teachers' use of technology, physical materials, and professional development to use sociocultural practices effectively. Additionally, department culture and expectations from peers can exert informal pressures that support or limit innovations in breaking usual instructional practices.

9. Technology Integration in Socio-culturally Informed EFL Instruction

There is huge potential for digital technology to take language learning outside of the classroom. However, there are also challenges in Saudi higher education. Online systems, as Alanazi (2024) stated, can provide virtual communities through which EFL learners can interact with different English speakers. They can thus interact with people from all places and be exposed to other languages and cultures. Social media applications enable individuals to join actual conversation groups, allowing students to observe and gradually learn to speak like target language speakers. Collaboration tools enable individuals to collaboratively create language artifacts, supporting the mutual support valued in sociocultural approaches. Media using various forms of representation address multiple learning styles and make cultural material more accessible through images and sounds. Virtual reality and simulation technology deliver interactive cultural experiences that would otherwise be unavailable, perhaps expanding intercultural sensitivity and pragmatic ability. Asynchronous communication technologies permit greater processing time for language production, which is most beneficial for learners transitioning from traditional instruction.

However, technology integration has numerous challenges in Saudi contexts, including infrastructure constraints in certain institutions, uneven digital literacy among students and faculty, and concern over culturally insensitive content. Pedagogical hurdles to adoption include ensuring technology usage to fulfill useful communicative functions instead of digitizing traditional exercises. As AlHarbi (2018) noted, instructors' comfort and competence in utilizing educational technology are essentially disparate, influencing the quality of learning activities in the use of technology. Despite such challenges, Alzhrani and Alkubaidi (2020) explained that the strategic blending of appropriate technologies has abundant potential to lead sociocultural dimensions of language acquisition out of traditional classrooms' spatial and temporal constraints to more effective language development environments. Additionally, assessment of activity in online language learning challenges testing systems conventionally, potentially inducing disarticulation between innovation in practice and institutional mechanisms of accountability.

10. Assessment Practices and Sociocultural Perspectives

Saudi EFL tertiary testing practices present challenges to implementing sociocultural paradigms, as dominant testing practices go against some of the most widely used sociocultural principles of language development. Alrashidi and Phan (2015) discussed that typical Saudi university testing centers on isolated performance on decontextualized language tasks instead of sociocultural accounts of learning as being distributed among social interactions. Test tools prefer correct vocabulary and careful grammar over communication skills or cultural sensitivity. Test tools should not promote limiting notions of language capability. Scorable objective test structures like multiple-choice and true-false are drafted (Alkhairi, 2023). They do not adequately portray the sophistications of language performance in sociocultural contexts. Furthermore, assessment activities rarely incorporate real materials or contexts in which language is indeed utilized in usable cultural environments or community settings. Rather, existing linguistic standards are more commonly applied as the assessment measure, focusing on overall standards rather than advancement on an individual basis or quality of involvement within the learning community. Even where group work is being evaluated, tools face challenges in balancing individual responsibility and reward for group effort with a cultural bias towards collectivism. In addition, Massri (2017) explained that students' understanding of the assessment process is inclined towards getting a mark rather than developmental feedback as guided by education socialization that emphasizes products over learning processes. Almohideb (2019) noted that institutions have begun employing portfolio and project-based assessments according to sociocultural principles, although the quality of implementation varies extensively based on instructor training and institutional support.

Dynamic assessment practices that integrate assessment with teaching employing dialogic interaction are still rare despite having a good theoretical fit with sociocultural orientations.

11. Identity Formation and Language Learning in the Saudi Context

Construction of identity is relevant in language acquisition processes, particularly when viewed through sociocultural perspectives that site learning as engagement within communities of practice. Learning English for Saudi university students involves a multidimensional negotiation between international English identities and Saudi identities underpinned by Saudi culture and Islamic values, as per Nouraldeen and Elyas (2014). Students navigate tensions between global connectivity needs and concerns about cultural authenticity and develop hybrid identities that combine global engagement with local belonging. As emphasized by Elyas and Badawood (2016), gender identities strongly influence language learning experiences in the gender-segregated educational environment that is common in Saudi higher education because it reflects different possibilities for participation and anticipated future contexts for the use of language among male and female students. Professional identity aspirations shape motivational dispositions, with technical students often seeing English instrumentally and those in the humanities perhaps connecting more deeply to cultural aspects of language.

The exposure to English materials outside formal education is also influenced by social class, creating disparities in the starting points for learning English at the university. Alrahaili (2018) explained that the use of English in Saudi Arabia varies based on local identities, with students in cosmopolitan cities having different experiences compared to those in more traditional areas. Religious identity provides most students a framework to understand English acquisition, guiding their interests and cultural engagement. Sociocultural approaches in education acknowledge these identity aspects, providing students with opportunities to use language that aligns with their developing self-identity instead of enforcing standardized communication habits. Uddin (2017) suggested that teachers from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds use language activities that support and enhance students' various identities instead of tasks that temporarily set aside important aspects of identity. As such, virtual platforms are commonly chosen for identity expressions, except in classrooms, where there are other creative opportunities for exploring identity.

12. Cross-Cultural Communication Challenges in EFL Classrooms

English teaching and learning in Saudi higher education necessarily entail cross-cultural communication, offering and posing challenges to applying sociocultural approaches. For Aldosari (2013), cultural disparities in communication habits between Saudi cultural norms and those inherent in English language practices cause potential misunderstandings and adaptation issues. High-context communication patterns common in Saudi culture that rely heavily on shared knowledge and contextual cues are likely to counteract the lower-context communication emphasized in most English-speaking contexts. Differences in cultural norms for directness, politeness strategies, and subjects appropriate for discussion influence classroom interaction patterns and responses to instruction. As Alsamani (2014) reminds us, power distance orientations shape relations between students and teachers, and they are willing to engage in the egalitarian patterns of discourse often cultivated in communicative language teaching. Additionally, time-, task-based, and collaborative notions rooted in culture create diverse conceptions of learning activities and assessment requirements. Non-verbal communication differences involving eye contact, physical distance, and gestures also increase the complexities of cross-cultural classroom interaction.

Material references in global English market materials may not align with local culture or require extensive background knowledge beyond what Saudi learners can access. The metalanguage used to discuss culture during intercultural misunderstandings may hinder resolution and learn from arising scenarios. The effectiveness of sociocultural strategies relies heavily on the strong learning relationships established by foreign teachers in Saudi universities, which involve specific challenges in cultural adaptation and student relationships. In this case, Alghamdi (2014) illustrated that Saudi teachers may struggle with certain cultural aspects of English that they have not encountered or fully internalized yet. Moreover, cross-cultural interactions in EFL classrooms offer significant opportunities for developing intercultural competence when reflected upon.

13. Adaptation of Sociocultural Approaches to Saudi Educational Context

To effectively apply sociocultural approaches to Saudi higher education EFL classrooms, they must be adapted to suit the specific context rather than taken as it is. As Alanazi (2024) argued, successful adaptation requires focusing on significant sociocultural values with universal applicability across specific cultural settings and adapting implementation strategies to align with local education practices and values. It begins by recognizing elements of conventional Saudi teaching practices already infused with sociocultural sensitivity, such as conducting education within social settings and identifying the effects of culture on knowledge transfer. Phased implementation of collaborative learning models, along with providing stable instructional support according to student's needs during the transition to new pedagogy, forms the adaptation strategies of the program.

Similarly, scaffolding learners' engagement through organized interaction patterns assists in establishing confidence within communicative tasks without compromising the cultural norms of public performance and face management. As Alrahaili (2018) asserted, introducing artistic elements into learning materials for teaching English in actual Saudi contexts potentially bridges the gap between textbook teaching and students' day-to-day worlds—adaptation results from embedding sociocultural issues in cooperative elements within student and organizational tasks. Besides, students must engage in explicit discussions to understand the rationale for new pedagogies and their connection to meaningful learning outcomes. Furthermore, Barnawi and Al Hawsawi (2017) recommended incorporating Saudi scholarship in language education to support adaptation efforts based on internal cultural knowledge rather than solely relying on external perspectives. This balance in the adaptation strategy gives due attention to the integrity of sociocultural theory while at the same time paying due respect to educational cultures' diversity and the local ownership of pedagogical innovation.

14. Student Engagement and Motivation in Sociocultural EFL Classrooms

The main factors contributing to the success of sociocultural EFL education in Saudi universities are students' motivation and participation. Traditional learning experiences in the mentioned learning institutions often lead undergraduates to passively receive knowledge, resulting in resistance to active involvement, as expected in sociocultural contexts (Al-Seghayer, 2014). Suppose students are not strongly committed to teamwork due to their past focus on individual work, especially in competitive education systems. Abdelhalim and Alqubayshi (2020) also discussed how focusing on goals related to passing exams or advancing in a career can lead students to doubt the relevance of learning activities. However, students' perception of the future utility of English affects their motivation to engage in challenging language tasks and technical subjects. They often question the effectiveness of communicative methodology beyond basic competency. Cultural conceptions of what a teacher or student is or does may initially conflict with the more peer-focused relationships encouraged in much sociocultural classroom practice, requiring sensitive negotiation and frank discussion.

Despite these challenges, research by Massri (2017) indicated that well-implemented sociocultural practices can increase motivation by connecting language learning with rich contexts and communities important to Saudi learners' identity and future aspirations. Activities with real materials reflecting Saudi engagement with global English-speaking communities have more potential for eliciting investment than decontextualized language exercises. Similarly, Alzhrani and Alkubaidi (2020) suggested that technology-enabled projects that generate genuine audiences for students' work attract more effort and engagement than traditional assignments, with the teacher as the sole audience. Group activities that take advantage of pre-existing social connections while gradually adding interaction patterns respect collectivist cultural orientations while developing new participatory skills.

15. Future Directions for Research and Practice

Implementing sociocultural theories in Saudi EFL higher education settings is an emerging field that requires continued research and practice development. Barnawi and Al-Hawsawi (2017) suggested that future research must test the efficacy of some sociocultural theories implemented in Saudi settings beyond general advocacy to provide evidence-based recommendations on practice. Longitudinal learner development studies employing sociocultural pedagogies would inform a lack of evidence on the long-term impact on language capability and

learner identity. Action research by Saudi practitioners employing sociocultural pedagogies would offer specialist insider perspectives that are currently lacking in the literature. Comparative analysis of similar implementations can be compared to investigate contextual impacts on effectiveness across different Saudi institutions.

Observation of implementation practices in line with sociocultural values and institutional requirements will facilitate one of the principal hindrances of implementation. Alzhrani and Alkubaidi (2020) further suggested that extending research on utilizing technology to support sociocultural teaching methodologies in settings outside the classroom would be beneficial. Professional learning communities grounded in sociocultural practices enable teachers to experiment continuously instead of with occasional experiments. A key ingredient for practice development is the generation of teaching materials based on sociocultural principles appropriate to the Saudi context. Khawaji (2022) proposed that curriculum models incorporating sociocultural perspectives systematically into the institution's requirements would scale beyond individual enthusiasts. Second, pre-service teacher training courses will close the gap between theoretical assumptions and practical applications in Saudi contexts to equip future teachers with innovative pedagogical practices.

Thus, sociocultural approaches in Saudi EFL classrooms require a strategic balance between cultural sensitivity and innovation. In Saudi Arabia, the affective aspect of language learning is often neglected even though the possible impact of innovative teaching approaches on students' emotions and learning filters cannot be denied. Teachers must create psychologically safe spaces where students are secure and can express themselves freely without fear of being judged, encouraging them to experiment. In addition, the increasing presence of digital natives among Saudi university students offers a potentially lucrative arena for reconciling traditional values with international views through sympathetically designed virtual interactions. As Alkahtani (2023) pointed out, successfully incorporating sociocultural practices relies on the capability of EFL instructors to relate Western pedagogic ideas with Islamic culture and to modify these in the current Saudi context, termed as 'cultural bridging competence.' Here, effective pedagogical innovation is interpreted as combining the host country's foreign policy strategies with the sociocultural theoretical epistemology and drawing from the rich root of Saudi education history.

16. Conclusion

This study has explored the multifaceted challenges and complexities involved in teaching English in Saudi higher education through the lens of sociocultural theory. The findings, drawn from an in-depth analysis of relevant literature, reveal that while sociocultural approaches offer meaningful pathways for enhancing language teaching, their implementation in the Saudi context is hindered by several interconnected factors. These include rigid institutional structures, limited teacher training in sociocultural pedagogy, culturally rooted perceptions of language learning, and inconsistencies in assessment practices. Furthermore, cultural norms, gender segregation, and student expectations shape classroom dynamics in ways that can either support or obstruct sociocultural engagement.

Addressing these challenges requires a more context-sensitive adaptation of sociocultural principles, grounded in local realities and supported by institutional reform. Teacher development programs must be aligned with sociocultural pedagogies, and assessment methods need to reflect collaborative and communicative learning goals. Additionally, greater integration of technology and culturally responsive teaching practices can help bridge the gap between theory and classroom realities.

Future research should engage more deeply with classroom-based evidence and explore how sociocultural approaches can be meaningfully localized to support Saudi students' language development and identity formation. Ultimately, advancing English language teaching in Saudi higher education demands a holistic understanding of the cultural, pedagogical, and institutional forces at play, and a willingness to innovate within those complexities.

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