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CHINESE AND SAUDI ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION POLICIES: A WORLD SYSTEM PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract: *The paper contends that the English Language Education Policies (ELEP) of a state depend largely on its movement in Wallerstein's world system. To test the hypothesis, ELEPs of China and Saudi Arabia are compared and found to be similar due to the states' parallel journey in the world system.*

Key words: *China, English Language Education Policies, Saudi Arabia, World System*

1. Introduction

The People's Republic of China and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia are poles apart in terms of politics, culture, religion, and language, but they had to adopt almost the same kind of English Language Education Policies (ELEP) being goaded on by a common urge to move from the *periphery* to the *core* zone of Wallerstein's modern *world system* as quickly as possible. To find out the similarities between the Chinese English Language Education Policies (CELEP) and the Saudi English Language Education Policies (SELEP), the paper draws a comparison between them in terms of the "status of English", the "objectives of English language teaching (ELT)", and the "preferred variety of English". The paper also traces different phases of symbiotic relationship between these states and their ELEPs to find out whether the ELEPs have emerged in response to the states' integration with and movement inside the capitalist *world system*. To this end, the history of both China and Saudi Arabia are discussed in the framework of Wallerstein's analysis of the *world system*.

Modern *world system* is a large geographical area divided into *core*, *semi-peripheral*, and *peripheral* zones. In these zones, a number of unequally powerful competing political units who might be different from each other in terms of the political system, culture, religion and language, are "knitted together by the skein of economic interdependencies" (Wallerstein 2006).

To be in the *core* zone or to move towards it, the states have to have developed technology and higher skill to produce more capital-intensive, complex and sophisticated products than the countries at the *periphery* and *semi-periphery* zones so that they can take advantage of monopolizing the world market. On the other hand, the economies of the *periphery* or *semi-periphery* states depend either on their raw materials or the erstwhile monopolistic leading industries "relocated" from the *core* zone. However, the *world system* is dynamic. The European states and North America (the states where the core-like processes tend to group themselves) which have managed to be in the *core* zone since the beginning of the world system

in the 17th century are now being challenged by states like India, China, Brazil, etc. (Wallerstein 2006).

2. ELEPs and the states in the *world system*

In this section I will draw a comparison between CELEP and SELEP in order to find out the similarities between the language policies and trace them back to their respective states' integration with and movement inside the *world system*.

2.1 A comparison between CELEP and SELEP

CELEP and SELEP are compared to each other in terms of “status ascribed to English”, “objectives of ELT”, and the “preferred variety of English”.

2.1.1 Status of English in China and Saudi Arabia

Status planning is usually defined as the planning of a national government regarding the recognition of one language in relation to others. The status of English in China is indeed very high as the Chinese foreign language education policies have had ELT at the center, in the last three decades (Lam 2005). Similarly, Saudi foreign language policies revolve around only one language—English (Alamri 2008:1). The reason why English has occupied such a central position in both the foreign language policies is somewhat political in the case of China and religious/political in the case of Saudi Arabia. In China, teaching/learning English was encouraged by the state as a means of checking imperialism in the late 19th century (Pan 2011:253) while in Saudi Arabia, since the inception of Islam, English or any other foreign language has been encouraged by Hadith, a spiritual guide for the Muslims, to check the foreign aggressors (Elyas and Picard 2010:141).

Notwithstanding this major role assigned to English by these states, it could not win the hearts and minds of the Chinese and Saudi peoples before and long after their integration with the *world system*. In spite of the political and religious support mentioned above, large sections of people in both the countries were apprehensive of the impact of English language learning. However, in China, since the middle of the 1980s, the issue of the so-called negative influence has been “shelved” (Pan 2011:256) while in Saudi Arabia, though in the overt language policy the issue of negative influence has not been ignored (Alamri 2008: 11-12), in the covert policy, more often than not, it is overlooked.

At present, in both the foreign language policies, English has become an important language for informatization of social life and economic globalization as English is considered to be the most widely used language in different sectors of human activity. For example, in China, in *English Curriculum Requirements at Compulsory Education Stage* (for students aged 7-16), the status ascribed to English is the following:

The informatization of social life and economic globalization have increased the importance of English. As one of the most important carriers of information, English has become the most widely used language in various sectors of human life (Pan 2011:249)

At the next level of education, in *English Curriculum Requirements at Senior High Education Stage* (for students aged 16-18), the status of English is laid out in a similar vein:

Language is the most important tool for human beings to think and to communicate; it is also the prerequisite for people's social activities and it is significant for people's all-around development. With the globalization of social and economic activities, foreign language competence has already become a basic requirement for people around the world. Therefore, learning and mastering foreign languages, especially English, is of critical importance (Pan 2011:249).

On the other hand, "The Educational policy in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia" (The Ministry of Education 2004:6) states that the students should be provided with:

...proficiency in another modern language [English] as a means of acquiring knowledge in the fields of sciences, arts and new inventions, and of transferring knowledge and the sciences to other communities, and in an effort to contribute to the spread of the faith of Islam and service to humanity.

In this and many other documents, English is given a very prestigious status: it can be used to spread "the faith of Islam" and to serve all mankind. English is also seen as a means of "acquiring knowledge in the fields of sciences, arts and new inventions", and as a means of "transferring knowledge and the sciences to other communities." Similarly, English is eulogized as "one of the most widely used languages in the world" or as an "international language of communication" in the Minister of Education's address to English language teachers printed on the second page of the elementary, intermediate, and secondary schools English textbooks (Alamri 2008:11). Hence, enhancement of ELT has become one of the development strategies in Saudi Arabia (Faruk 2013: 77-78).

The kind of ideologies mentioned above—English is the language of "critical importance" in the age of globalization (CELEP)/ an important "means of international communication (SELEP), or English is "one of the most important carriers of information" (CELEP)/ the means of "acquiring [and transferring] knowledge in the fields of sciences, arts and new inventions" (SELEP)—is usually promoted by a *peripheral* or *semi-peripheral* state to "reinforce the long term linkage" with the English speaking world hegemons—UK and US (Wallerstein 2006: 55).

2.1.2 Objectives of ELT in China and Saudi Arabia

As I have already mentioned, large sections of Chinese and Saudis were apprehensive of the socio-cultural values that English could bring. This is the reason why English was taught as a foreign language rather than as a means of communication till 1986 in China (Hu 2005; Wang and Lam 2009) and until the 1970s in Saudi Arabia (Al-Abed Al-Haq and Smadi 1996). After that with the advent of new socio-economic challenges, some new objectives were set for ELT in both these countries. Now English is seen as a tool to bolster economy, improve education, facilitate communication, raise cultural awareness, and to speed up the process of modernization.

Both CELEP and SELEP emphasize the development of students' competence in comprehensive language use. For example, in *English Curriculum Requirements at Compulsory Education Stage* and at *Senior High Education Stage*, the overall objective for English education is stated below:

The overall objective for English education at the basic education stage is to cultivate students' comprehensive comprehension in language use. This comprehensive language use competence is formed on the overall development of students' language skills, language knowledge, a positive attitude, study strategies and cultural awareness. Language knowledge and skills are the basis for developing comprehensive competence in language use, cultural awareness will guarantee the appropriate use of

language; a positive attitude is a crucial factor for students' study and development; and study strategies can improve students' study efficiency and develop their competence in self-study (Pan 2011:251).

At the college level, the objectives are slightly different. According to *English Curriculum Requirements for University Students (non-English majors)*:

The objective of College English is to develop students' ability to use English in a well-rounded way, especially in listening and speaking, so that in their future studies and careers as well as social interactions they will be able to communicate effectively, and at the same time enhance their ability to study independently and improve their general cultural awareness so as to meet the needs of China's social development and international exchanges (Pan 2011:251).

On the other hand, in Saudi Arabia, according to the curriculum document published in 2001, the overall objectives of teaching English are:

Students should be able to:

1. develop their intellectual, personal and professional abilities.
2. acquire basic language skills in order to communicate with the speakers of [the] English language.
3. acquire the linguistic competence necessarily required in various life situations.
4. acquire the linguistic competence required in different professions.
5. develop their awareness of the importance of English as a means of international communication.
6. develop positive attitudes towards learning English.
7. develop the linguistic competence that enables them to be aware of the cultural, economical and social issues of their society in order to contribute in giving solutions.
8. develop the linguistic competence that enables them, in the future, to present and explain the Islamic concepts and issues and participate in spreading Islam.
9. develop the linguistic competence that enables them, in the future, to present the culture and civilization of their nation.
10. benefit from English –speaking nations, in order to enhance the concepts of international cooperation that develop understanding and respect of cultural differences among nations.
11. acquire the linguistic bases that enable them to participate in transferring the scientific and technological advances of other nations to their nation.
12. develop the linguistic basis that enables them to present and explain the Islamic concepts and issues and participate in the dissemination of them.

(Alamri 2008:12)

In both the ELEPs “comprehensive language use competence” is based on English language skills and knowledge. However, the two ELEPs have slightly different approaches to “cultural awareness” and “positive attitude” towards English. In CELEP the “cultural awareness” and “positive attitude” towards English are the necessary preconditions for effective English language learning. On the other hand, in SELEP, this is simply the other way round: students' competence in English is supposed to raise and grow “cultural awareness” and “positive attitude” towards English. Here, SELEP's handling of the “culture issue” is obviously more delicate than CELEP's.

To sum up, in both countries, the students are learning English in order to fulfill their intellectual and emotional needs, get jobs, enhance their further education, spread their culture (CELEP), spread the faith of Islam (SELEP), and develop their countries in terms of technology

and economy. It is to be noted here that all the objectives, except spreading the culture and faith of Islam, are set to push the states harder along the trajectory towards the *world system*.

2.1.3 Preferred variety of English

Both CELEP and SELEP distance themselves from any particular variety of English. By “English”, they mean “the language in English speaking countries”. The students are supposed to be able to use “correct, natural, appropriate fluent pronunciation and intonation”, but it is not clear which pronunciation and intonation are considered to be correct or standard. For example, CELEP set the following objectives for Senior High Education Stage (pp. 13-22) without specifying any particular variety:

Band 4: have correct pronunciation and intonation

Band 5: have natural, appropriate pronunciation and intonation within proper context

Band 6: can use appropriate pronunciation and intonation to express ideas and intentions

Band 8: can use appropriate intonation and correct rhythm in speech

Band 9: can read general English newspapers and magazines—read general English literary works in their original form (Pan 2011:254)

Similarly, no variety of English is privileged in SELEP. It seems the teachers/students can choose any variety they like. For example by the end of the secondary stage the students should master the following skills:

- Listening with understanding to spoken English [sic];
- Speaking current English correctly with the proper stress and intonation;
- Reading with understanding English texts that vary in difficulty from adapted and simplified material to the original in an abridged form;
- Writing a connected passage of up to a full page on a subject of a descriptive or a discursive nature

It is probably in order to gain the consent of the people who considered English to be a “spiritual polluter” in China (An 1984; Yue 1983) or the “language of the infidels” in Saudi Arabia (Al-Brashi 2003 quoted in Elyas and Picard 2010:141), the ELEPs neutralize English by presenting it as a language to be used only for practical purposes. In both these language policies, English is only a tool for international communication, education, employment and socio-economic development. To establish the neutrality of English, the policies even ignore the existence of “China English” or “Arab English”, although they do exist and are defined and discussed by scholars (McKay and Bokhorst-Heng 2008; Atwell *et al* 2009). According to Adamson (quoted in McKay and Bokhorst-Heng 2008:112), in the case of China, this is an “ideological politicking around English” because, he argues, “accepting China English officially would be an open acknowledgment that English has expanded into non-pragmatic and social-cultural spheres”.

However, in spite of this willful avoidance of any particular variety in the written documents, the education authorities of both countries clearly believe that the native speakers of English are the best teachers and either USA or UK sets the standards (Pan 2011:254).

2.2 ELEPs and the states’ trajectory in the *world system*

In the following, I will show how both CELEP and SELEP surfaced in response to the states’ evolutionary change from the *peripheral* towards a *core* country.

2.2.1 China

At the end of the dynastic rules i.e. at the end of the Qing Dynasty (from the mid-1800s to 1911), when China came closer to the modern *world system* headed by the then world hegemon—United Kingdom, ELT was introduced. However, it was introduced only for a utilitarian purpose, being divorced from any cultural and ideological implications (Pan 2011:256). Between 1912 and the mid-1980s China experienced some significant turns of political events—foundation of the Republic of China under Sun Yat Sen in 1912; foundation of the People’s Republic of China under Mao Zedong in 1949; and the beginning of enactment of the Reform and Opening policy in the late 1970s and the 1980s. However, China’s attitude towards English remained the same: though English was no longer seen as an immediate threat, it was still regarded as a potential source of spiritual pollution (Yue 1983).

In the mid-1980s China embraced rapid modernization and internationalization, which were accelerated in the late 1990s and at the beginning of 21st century, when the country witnessed a further integration of interstate relations in the *world system* through the massive expansion of “relocated” industries. The booming economy and integration with the modern *world system* brought forth a substantial growth in ELT (Yue 1983). English was introduced in primary schools and regarded as a separate compulsory subject from class 3 in 2001 (Pan 2011:258) and considered as the better language of instruction for selected subjects in higher education (Mok 2007:445), shelving the negative attitude towards English and placing it in the background (Hu 2007). Now China is trying to build a “knowledge-based economy”, which badly needs further expansion of ELT, in order to move to the core of the *core* zone very quickly by 2016 (Weisbort 2011).

In short, the more China moved towards the *core* zone of the world economy the more English it needed, and so did its citizens. From around 1911 to the mid-1980s, China had to introduce ELT in its formal education system to make a space for itself in the *periphery* zone of the capitalist world economy; in the period between the mid-1980s and 2001, China had to expand ELT to enter into the *semi-periphery* zone and sustain its status of a middle-income country attained through the establishments of relocated industries and from 2001 onwards, the state has further expanded ELT to achieve its ambition of building up the knowledge-based economy enabling it to move to the center of the *core* zone of the modern world system by 2016.

2.2.2 Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia’s formal integration with the *world system* began by a 1915 treaty between King Abdul Aziz and the UK. In 1926, Britain recognized King Abdul Aziz as the king of Hijaz and Najd and English was introduced in Saudi public schools in 1924, nine years after the treaty and two years before Britain’s recognition of King Abdul Aziz. Later on, after the Second World War, Britain was replaced by the US in Saudi foreign policy as a consequence of change of power in the world system. However, ELT did not lose momentum as the new world hegemon was also an English speaking country. On the contrary, it picked up steam in the 1960s, as during 1960-2004 Saudi Arabia went through a remarkable change: the erstwhile *peripheral* country dramatically moved towards the *semi-peripheral* zone as a consequence of three factors: a) windfall huge oil revenue; b) massive legal and administrative reformations; and c) institutional expansion. The striking transformation from a *peripheral* to a *semi-peripheral* state had an immense impact on ELT. During 1960-2004, English was given more importance through: a) the curricula of public and private education; b) English TV channel KSA-2; c) three English daily

newspapers; and d) its use as the only means of communication between Arabs and the huge number of non-Arab migrant workers and pilgrims (Niblock 2006; Al-Abed Al-Haq and Smadi 1996: 457-84).

During 2004-2012, Saudi Arabia took a new turn in terms of economy and ELT. At present, to be a *core* country by 2024, it is trying to lift its dependence on oil revenue and build a “knowledge-based economy” (The Ministry of Economy and Planning 2006:87-105). This is the reason why the education sector has been massively expanded during this period (2004-2013) with a concomitant effect on ELT. English has spread its wings over almost all levels of education: on the one hand, English has been introduced from Grade 4 since 2012 (The Ministry of Education 2011) and, on the other, it has become the medium of instruction in almost all the science colleges in Saudi Arabia defying the state’s overt language policy which states that Arabic should be the medium of instruction at all levels of education in Saudi Arabia (The Ministry of Education 2004:6).

In brief, Saudi Arabia’s ELT expanded as it gathered pace in its journey towards the *core* zone of the *world system*. In 1924, the state had to introduce ELT in its formal education system to enter into the *periphery* zone of the capitalist world economy; during 1960-2004, it had to expand ELT to sustain its status of a middle income country attained suddenly by the huge oil revenue; and from 2004 onwards, Saudi Arabia has further expanded ELT to achieve its ambition of building up the knowledge-based economy enabling it to be a “developed state” by 2024.

3. Conclusion

Both China and Saudi Arabia adopted the top-down approach in formulating CELEP and SELEP but not without gaining the people’s consent. As they entered the *world system* at around the same time, as they have the same ambition of moving towards the core of the *core* zone as soon as possible, and as they had to deal with similar antipathetic attitudes towards English, they needed similar ELEP to realize their aspiration.

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