



The Benefits Associated With Teaching Asian Literature in the Saudi Educational System

By

Mohammed Thafir Alqahtani

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Abstract:

As a result of the various impacts of globalization, there has been an increasing concern in teaching Asian literature in the Saudi educational system. The purpose of this study is to investigate the connection between the desire to improve the educational system in Saudi Arabia in the age of globalization and the rationale behind teaching Asian literature in Saudi Arabia. Using detailed analysis, this study analysed the different effects of globalization on education and the need to reform the educational system in Saudi Arabia since the inception of Saudi Arabia in 1932 despite the different challenges which faced the process of modernizing this system in Saudi Arabia. The study also highlighted how studying literature got less attention in the last few decades. This paper tackled the benefits of teaching Asian literature into the Saudi educational system at all levels as the reform focused on having global-minded students who are aware of cultural differences worldwide. It also discussed the benefits of teaching literature to students at all levels in a globalized world. The study definitively answers the question “Why should Saudi educational practices incorporate the teaching of Asian literature at all academic levels?”. It also discussed how teaching methods are affected accordingly. Teaching multicultural and Asian literature in Saudi Arabia may provide a solution to the challenges facing Saudi Arabia’s educational system through creating citizens who are aware of cultural differences and are also able to be an effective part of the world of globalization through the application of creative teaching approaches.

Globalization's paradoxes have impacted nearly every facet of the developing world; the issue of education reform representing a key example. The ubiquitous presence of globalized business and competition has placed developing nations into a situation in which producing information savvy and culturally aware global citizens is a requisite for national economic survival and success on the global stage. Education reform is thus viewed by these nations as an essential component of national economic success and technological development and advancement. Saudi Arabia is a case in point. Concerned with educational reform from its inception in 1932, the nation has long endeavored to create an educational system reflective of national and cultural values but equally attuned to the broader trends of education in a global and international sense. The literature devoted to educational reform in the nation typically focuses on improving math and science literacy skills and ensuring that Saudi youth are competent in areas of computer and internet technologies. The humanities—consisting of art, music, and literature and other areas of aesthetic production—typically receive less critical attention in this regard as topics in this area are typically viewed as only tangential to education reform and national development. However, emerging studies suggest that a humanities education develops a student's critical thinking skills even as they also improve their ability to empathize with other people and to view situations from a broadly multicultural point of view. Researchers view literature instruction as a crucial component in a student's ability to reason, think critically, and to develop the skills necessary for interactions with diverse people and cultures. This essay will focus on the benefits represented by integrating literature instruction inside the Saudi educational system; specifically, it will focus on the benefits provided by integrating the teaching of Asian literatures into educational curriculum at all levels. This

paper will begin by briefly discussing Saudi Arabia's history of education reform and detailing some of the present challenges that face educators, reformers, and students at all levels of education. It will then analyze the benefits associated with teaching Asian literature arguing, specifically, that this approach is necessary in context of globalization's broader economic and socioeconomic effects; that this curriculum would also benefit the Saudi student's broader sense of cultural awareness; and, ultimately, that teaching Asian literature could benefit collaboration-instruction models at all stages of education.

Saudi Arabia's History of Educational Reform

The history of educational reform in Saudi Arabia demonstrates how the concept of education has evolved from the nation's beginning in 1932 to present times. As in other Middle Eastern nations, early conceptions of education in Saudi culture were rooted in the broader experience of European colonization in the region. European colonial projects depended on some degree of educating Middle Eastern peoples; however, the broader concern of these projects also ensured that the scope of education only included those from wealthier and more notable families and backgrounds. Mullick (2013) contends that European colonizers and educators sought to educate this class of people despite the fact that they: "did not want indigenous people to surpass them [Europeans] in skills and knowledge" (p. 37). As Saudi Arabia gradually transitioned into a modern state in the early 20th Century, the nation followed the same trends in terms of education followed by surrounding nations following the nation's founding. Initial reform efforts in the 1930s and 1940s succeeded in making education more obtainable to the Saudi people. During this period: "social movements and the growing voice of civil rights influenced the way education was provided" (Alnhadi et al. 2013, p. 1). This trend was in keeping

with both national history and with similar reform movements within the region and on a worldwide scale.

Although education was more democratic in this era, discrepancies in terms of gender and class equality limited the overall impact of educational initiatives and delimited the numbers of people assisted by them (Ismail, 2013). Additional weaknesses in the educational system itself—failures to fully integrate education with other areas of national life, and a failure to create jobs for many the universities’ trained graduates—revealed the inherent inefficiencies of education in a broad national sense during this era. This situation led to the next phase of reform efforts in the 1970s and 1980s: a period characterized by the “centralization and standardization of educational goals” across the country (Alnahdi et al., 2014). These efforts dovetailed into the next set of reforms during the 1990s: the effort to broaden and professionalize education at all levels and to implement rigorous and specialized testing as a core component of instruction.

Beginning in the period following the 9/11 attacks in the United States in 2001, King Abdullah bin Abdul-Abiz instituted a new series of reforms explicitly designed to modernize Saudi Arabia towards a developed-nations paradigm and to connect Saudi cultural values with those of the larger world. In reforming the nation’s broader educational system, the Saudi king transformed the essential character of its organization. Alaymi (2014) characterizes this transformation as a movement: “from centralization to decentralization, from focusing on the individual to team learning” (p. 1424). The King’s efforts to change the structure of the educational system also coincided with simultaneous efforts to address its inequalities. In particular, reforms addressed the issues related to gender inequalities and equal access to education for both men and women (Elyas, 2013). This same wave of reforms likewise addressed the issues

associated with academic freedom at the university level: the student and the researcher's ability to research topics and to arrive at hypothesis at variance with broader Islamic cultural and ideological precepts (Elyas, 2013).

Despite the optimism associated with current educational reforms, however, certain challenges remain as barriers to both educational and national development. These include a general reluctance to initiate changes within the educational sector, the challenge of making education responsive and relevant to present national concerns and issues, and of ensuring that graduates have a basic sense of cultural awareness that will help orient them in context of an increasingly globalized culture. In terms of the first category, Alymi (2014) contends that certain features of Saudi educational practice are at odds with the principles of reform and innovation. As evidence, the author cites a school in which 70% of the school's administration expressed reluctance to implement recommended changes in terms of the school's curriculum (p. 1431). Gender inequalities still exist across the nation's universities in terms of educational access and equal opportunity while certain aspects of research and academic freedom are curtailed by larger concerns with preserving the nation's "identity as the cradle of Islam where changes are not encouraged per se" (Elyas 2013, p. 59). Similar problems exist in terms of making education directly relevant and transferable to the marketplace. Graduates still face the essential problem of being unable to locate jobs following graduation (Courington et al., 2011). Finally, the King's recent reforms still have not solved the essential problem of making Saudi students more globally minded and conscious of cultural differences beyond national borders.

World Literature Instruction As A Solution

The research devoted to the topic of globalization and education reform typically cites math, science and computer

technology instruction as the cornerstone solution to the dilemmas faced by countries in terms of their educational and cultural discrepancies in a global context. Courrington et al. (2013) cite the “rising power of tech savvy youth” as an implication for a further need of developing of technological infrastructure within Saudi Arabia and the training of experts in the technology field in that nation (p. 140). Alnahdi et al. (2014) content furthermore that: “Technology should become an essential aspect of education” (p. 11). Math, sciences and technology are undoubtedly connected to contemporary student success in the context of the 21st century and to overall national development and evolution. However, what goes unstated within this literature is the principle role that the humanities and literature in particular, can have in developing the minds of a nation’s young people and in preparing them for the unique demands of the globalized marketplace and environment.

Literature instruction, in this context, benefits students at all age and academic levels by helping to develop their critical reasoning faculties and skills; by enhancing their abilities to empathize with people from different and diverse backgrounds; and by creating a classroom environment in which the student is able to reflect not only about other cultures encountered in multicultural readings but also about the essential nature of his/her own culture (Gillespie, 2010). In this sense literature, and multicultural literature specifically, prepares the student for the demands of an increasingly globalized environment. Khatib et al. (2011) write: “literature deals with universal concepts. . . [that] are common to all languages and cultures. The similarities and differences between language and culture can further our [multicultural] understanding”(p. 215). This observation, that literature serves as a means by which young people are provided a framework in which they can contemplate the nuances and subtleties of cultural similarities and differences, is also

enhanced by the unique particularizes of contemporary Asian literatures.

These literatures, in their chronicling of Asian national development and in their broader observation about their role in the post-colonial world, provide essential insights for readers across the globe but especially for readers in developing nations immersed in the daily realities of the globalized world. Beauregard (2012) writes about Asian American literature's impact upon the developing world: "As literature or theory travels beyond its originator context, it is inevitably resituated and recoded to adapt to the local context" (p. 10). In essence, the broader themes associated with this literature—primarily the tensions between one's marginalized culture and that of a broader majority culture—have resonance beyond the domain of Asian nations or the pen of Asian American authors alone. They provide multicultural audiences around the globe with metaphors of global and transnational identity that are helpful in navigating through the complex realities of globalized culture. In the context of education, these works also help students understand themselves and their society through a multicultural and multinational lens (Damrosk et al., 2011).

Teaching Asian Literatures in a Saudi Cultural Context

The question of why Saudi educational practices should incorporate the teaching of Asian literatures at all academic levels, then, relates to the contemporary concerns with producing graduates who are both technically competent within their individual fields and broadly knowledgeable about the issue of cultural diversity across the globe. Producing globally conscious young professionals that are able to lead the nation and able to assert the nation's place on the world stage thus requires more than simply training them in math, sciences, and computer education. It also requires a humanities education that grounds them in a fundamental understanding of our: "new age of

transnational and supra-national, economic, political, social and cultural processes” (Dangnino 2013, p. 7). Multicultural literatures, Asian literatures specifically, are thus highly effective in providing students with a large sense of globalized realities, and an acute awareness of cultural distinctions. From a pedagogical perspective, Asian literature instruction also provides an effective platform for collaboration-based assignments and lesson plans.

Students immersed in learning literature from other cultures undergo a crucial process in terms of their personal cultural awareness. Khatib et al. (2011) write: “literature and culture are inexorably bound together. So, students come to understand cultural differences through diverse literary texts. Literature, moreover, promotes cultural and intercultural awareness” (p. 215). This process of broadening a student’s cultural awareness can begin at the elementary level; it can continue through the high school years; and it can culminate as students reach university-level instruction. (Colby et al., 2011; Kuo et al, 2010; Khatib et al., 2011). Students who begin learning about a culture from a younger age are that much more likely to continue a life-long process of learning more about diverse areas of the world (Smith, 2011). Promoting the study of Asian literature, and contemporary Asian literature specifically, among Saudi students can thus provide them with a perspective of how other cultures view the world and themselves within it and can also help them understand the specific nuances of Saudi culture. This feature specifically correlates with the government’s present dualistic aim of: “emphasizing Islamic values and principles [as articulated and understood by Saudi culture] and the spirit. . .of moderation and social coexistence” (Alnahdi et al., 2014). A Saudi student exposed to the ideas and concepts embodied by Asian literature thus possess key

advantages that will ultimately be transferable to a life and career embedded in the broader processes of globalization.

Educating Saudi students in the nuances of Asian culture and literature also has an implicit and potential socioeconomic value for both the individual student and the broader nation. In terms of globalized business and trade, the Asian region continues to be one of the strongest trading partners for both the Saudi nation as well as the broader Gulf region. Al-Tamimi (2013) writes: “Asia has become the GCC’s most important trading partner, accounting for nearly 60 percent of its total foreign trade” (p. 2). Given Asia’s critical importance to Saudi Arabia’s economic well being, then, it can be contended that raising a generation of students culturally aware of Asian society and its people can be of direct benefit to students seeking employment in global business and trade and for the nation that directly benefits from its citizen’s ability to interact meaningfully with one of its key economic partners. In this context, globalization not only promotes cultural understanding as a means for aesthetic or educational purposes; it also creates a situation in which cultural awareness represents a key economic benefit (Dangnino, 2013). Instruction in the topic of Asian literature can thus be viewed as crucial as instruction in the areas of math, science and computer technologies in terms of preparing Saudi students for the globalized marketplace.

But while instruction in the area of Asian literature might benefit the student in a long-term sense, it also has an essential function in a short-term educational and classroom context. By its very nature, the teaching of multicultural literature promotes corporate and collaborative learning strategies among the students. Lai (2012) defines collaborative learning strategies as those strategies that: “enable [classroom] participants to reach convergence [of learning] through the construction, monitoring and repairing of shared knowledge” (p. 5). Essentially, then,

collaboration is a teaching methodology that encourages students to work together in order to complete assignments and tasks, and in order to generate and share information within a small group setting. The promotion of collaborative strategies also represents one of the key strategic approaches championed by the present Saudi government (Alnahdi et al., 2014). Students often report feeling confused and bewildered when presented with multicultural literature. The essential “abstruse complexities and intricate obfuscations of [multicultural] literature” often intimidate the learner and cause them to react through various modes of resistance (Khatib et al., 2011). Teachers at all academic levels—but particularly primary and secondary levels—can anticipate this reaction by requiring students to work in groups and to participate in collaborative strategies. The complexities of Asian literature and thought can thus be viewed as an occasion for employing innovative teaching methodologies within the Saudi classroom.

Conclusion

Instruction in the areas of multicultural and Asian literatures in the Saudi classroom may represent a solution to the contemporary dilemmas facing the Saudi educational system. By promoting cultural knowledge and understanding about one of the nation’s most vital trading partners, educators and administrators can assist the government in making its educational goals and visions a reality. Promoting Asian literature instruction inside the Saudi classroom would assist the student in cultivating a deeper cultural awareness about nations in the region and would help them compete globally. It would also provide Saudi teachers with a platform for innovative and collaborative teaching methodologies and strategies.

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