

## REVIEWS

***CREATIVITY AND INNOVATIONS IN ELT MATERIALS DEVELOPMENT: LOOKING BEYOND THE CURRENT DESIGN, DAT BAO (ED.) (2018), 1ST ED.***

Bristol: Multilingual Matters, 256 pp.,

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*Creativity and Innovations in ELT Materials Development: Looking Beyond the Current Design* edited by Dat Bao situates itself in the midst of an exciting and long-standing debate in curriculum design – between satisfying institutional expectations and learners' needs for learning enjoyment, between fulfilling the prescribed syllabus and enhancing learners' experience in language learning, between doing what is required and what seems exciting. Being the primary front liners in the education system, and it is educators, along with the choices that they make and how well they experiment with materials, are highlighted as pivotal agents of change in the entirety of this book.

In my reading, I can identify three favourite arguments from the book, strategically addressed in the three sections. The first one argues that although ELT materials are provided by institutions for use by practitioners, there are ways to work creatively around materials that may seem inflexible for the purpose of bringing lessons to life. The first section, in particular, reiterates educators' ability to connect coursebook content with who students are as individuals. It proposes principles, strategies and frameworks to implement materials in 'creative' and motivating ways. This discussion also toys with the idea of turning *constraints* into creative opportunities, and connecting learner autonomy with learning preferences. Along this line, educators are encouraged to develop professionally through observation and experimentation with tasks. Learners are encouraged to resort to any means possible to engage as fully as possible to tasks.

The second argument is the inclusion of resources for further improvement of ELT materials. This section spotlights the merits of additional materials including arts and ICT. One of the chapters brings together some principles of language material development and the cornerstones of process drama. Literary texts were also proposed as additional language learning materials as the definition of 'literature' is expanded to include pop culture, such as song lyrics, which serves not only to increase the engagement of students, but also to enhance the beauty and impact of language use. The integration of ICT takes into consideration the era in which we live, connect that with innovative pedagogy, institutional requirements and learning needs. Within this discussion, one significant idea is the timely acknowledgement that efficiency would come from teachers who are committed to the creative use of technology.

The third main argument of the book highlights the significant role of teachers in improving ELT materials. Although this ideology is subtly addressed throughout the book, it is this section that emphasizes the role of educators as being pivotal. Particularly, the training of educators through a genre-based approach has proven to increase their creative ability. The section also discusses the inherently restrictive nature of materials prescribed by many state-owned institutions, and it is pertinent that educators implement and, where possible, adapt them with an open mind to individualize the learning content. This philosophy somehow echoes the call for the creative utility of constraint in an earlier chapter. The section also demonstrates the roles of educators in producing low-cost but highly efficient materials for a pro-active learning mode.

Overall, the book is far from a prescriptive resource. Instead, through proposed principles it inspires material developers, institutional leaders and practitioners to move to the front line of ELT materials development and act as agents of change. This would be a fresh stance that moves beyond the requirement of adequate learning tools and knowledge, institutional restrictions, product-oriented expectations and uninspiring materials. While there are chapters in the book that requires facility advancement (such as extensive knowledge of the arts in language classrooms and the implementation of ICT during lessons), most recommendations invite materials users to rethink and adapt many seemingly mundane materials provided by their respective institutions.

I would like to close this review by highlighting three appeals from the book that I find both inspiring and applicable to my role as an educator. First, educators who are agents of change in their own education system can take responsibility in creating space for professional development through purposeful engagement with material design in conjunction with learner needs and preferences, while simultaneously adhering to institutional requirements. Second, it is through responding to constraints that we might be able bring to the forefront many creative and exploratory learning opportunities to students. The process of learning, thus, is made meaningful by us sensitively acknowledging learners' ability to resort to any means possible to complete a given task. Finally, the major foundational work by material developers can call for more thoughtful integration of ICT in pedagogy in innovative ways that have not been utilized before. In a nutshell, I would say the process of materials delivery, adaptation and development needs to be well aligned to bring out the optimal learning impact. Along this line, the reviewed book represents a good source of support for these meaningful endeavours. I would highly recommend it to academic scholars and classroom practitioners alike.

## CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

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### **NEOLIBERALISM AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION POLICIES IN THE ARABIAN GULF, OSMAN Z. BARNAWI (2018)**

Abingdon and London: Routledge, 222 pp., ISBN-13 978-1-13824-465-8, h/bk, \$129.27

*Reviewed by Mirza Muhammad Zubair Baig, Royal Commission Colleges and Institutes, Yanbu, Saudi Arabia*

Driven by cultural and economic globalization, neo-liberalism has led to global mobility that creates differing needs of individuals, such as obtaining quality education, pursuing a secured career and safeguarding individualized self-interests. After the exploration of oil, the Arabian Gulf countries have witnessed a rapid flow of transnational workers in the region. These workers, low-skilled labourers and high-skilled professionals, were employed to build the country's infrastructure. Since the epistemic logic of neo-liberalism is to commodify education and human labour, these countries were prescribed to invest in and develop their human capital for the sake of increasing productivity and profitability. It is undeniable that English-language education policies are the manifest of neo-liberalism. To develop human capital for the global market economy and privatized public corporations in the recently liberalized economy, the governments incorporated and promoted English-language education since English language emerged as a lingua franca of workplace communication. In line with this, Barnawi critically unpacks the connection between globalized neo-liberal economic policies and English-language education policies in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Specifically, in the context of mobility of knowledge, ideas, languages, cultures and practices, Barnawi reveals that the governments' attempts to accelerate the transformation and reconcile the local sociocultural and religious values with the western neo-liberal policies have led to fierce debates 'within and between religious clerks, officials, scholars, language educators, policymakers, families, learners and the society at large' (22).

In the Introduction, the author sets forth to define the term neo-liberalism and study its impacts on English-language education policies across the six GCC countries: Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait and Bahrain. The author contends that the neo-liberal policies have negatively affected the cost of living for the residents of erstwhile tax-free economy. Recently, the

governments have levied taxes and removed subsidies from the key public goods and services such as domestic energy, education and social services. The people are now ever more concerned about their financial security and the future of their generations. In education, declining number of scholarships and the process of privatization that involves ‘Englishisation, internationalisation, privatisation and “mallification” of universities’ have increased the economic hardship and financial distress of common masses (22).

Chapter 2 explores the historical formation of GCC in 1981. Under the auspices of United States, the six Arab countries with the exception of Iraq agreed to integrate the Gulf region economically, politically, socially, legally and geographically. The author notes that the region witnessed massive transformation from nomadic desert life to heavy industrialization and huge construction in the post-oil discovery era that earned the governments high oil revenues. In a sharp contrast to the western nation states, most of the state-owned firms and corporations in the GCC rentier states have dominated the private sector in terms of capital growth and employability. The sluggish growth of global economy, regional conflicts and falling prices in the international oil market pressurized the governments to impose the fiscal straitjacket on the social services and public utilities. The author further relates that the initiatives to deradicalize the curricula in the post-9/11 world, modernize and internationalize education in the neo-liberal economy were taken, and the Arabic-based traditional curriculum and pedagogical practices were replaced with the western-style educational systems, prescribed content and teaching philosophies.

Chapter 3 addresses the question of the compatibility of western-rationalized modern concept of neo-liberal globalized economy with Islam and GCC rentier state economy. The western modernity foregrounds itself as an ideal totalizing model that rules out the possibility of diverse local societies. While appealing to the scholarship of Gayatri Spivak, Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, Barnawi observes how globalization as a new form of colonialism aims to penetrate and homogenize the non-European cultures, languages and values without achieving and sustaining socio-economic development. In contrast with Christianity, democracy is totally a foreign idea to Islam that as a religion is ironically acceptable to the western powers only if the Muslim countries safeguard their vested interests. However, the author notes that the Islamic belief system propagates many universal values like equality, justice, basic human rights, tolerance, forgiveness and fair trade that are equally prized by democracy. He explores the possibility that the neo-liberal economic policies and western education systems may be adapted to compatibilize with Islam and Islamic societies. Resistance to jump on the bandwagon of globalization and neo-liberal model of economy that have already weakened the bond between the society and nation states, may have serious implications for the rentier states in the Arabian Peninsula and result into brain drain, outflow of skilled workforce and flight of capital. The international western educational institutes have designed different academic programmes keeping in view the high-fee paying and lower-income international students, and have widened the opportunity gaps between the poor and rich by offering high-quality and relevant education to the affluent class. Resultantly, the higher and technical education is now far from the reach of the poor working class that is lagging well behind and worse off.

Chapter 4 discusses the intersectionality between the neo-liberalism and English-language education. It encourages readers to investigate the impli-

cations of regional and international language education policies devised under the influence of neo-liberal discourses. The west, North America, Latin America, East and Southeast Asia have critiqued how the neo-liberalism has quite recently transformed English-language learning and teaching specifically for the immigrants and students from the former colonies. At the same time, the neo-liberal agenda has posed national, cultural, political, economic and ideological challenges to the nation states. After 9/11 attacks, the Gulf region succumbed to international pressures and replaced 'doctrines of violence' by the English curricula. The new policy shift shaped by the discourses of globalization, internationalization and neo-liberalism inspired the author to evaluate the perceived and actual impact of current reforms.

In the following five chapters, the author looks into the connection between globalized neo-liberal economic policies and English-language education policies across the six GCC countries. He critically evaluates the implementation of neo-liberal economic policies by the governments with the plans to diversify their economies, shift from oil-based economy to knowledge-based economy, invest in the human capital and education, and tighten their belt on their expenditures and services. Since the discovery of oil, the governments hired skilled workforce from western countries and low-paid foreign workers from Asia in the absence of local skilled workers. Resultantly, English evolved as lingua-franca at the workplace and public places. The author notes that Englishization of education in the post 9/11 scenario burdened the parents with an additional responsibility to equip their youngsters with English-language skill to cope with the demands of the job market and make them more competitive for winning government scholarships to pursue their qualifications in the world-class western universities.

To begin with, the author finds in Chapter 5 that the Saudis have been compelled to learn English language in order to achieve higher status in the knowledge-based economy. The learners faced the incongruent sociocultural values, norms and practices that a foreign language embodies. In certain cases, when they adopted western lifestyle and dressing as a means to learn English, the students were confronted by the moral police. The recent oil crisis, regional conflicts and the high rate of unemployed Saudi youth destabilized the economy. To address the current socio-economic crisis, the government introduced the National Transformation Program 2020 and Saudi Vision 2030 in 2016, and took strict measures to transform the economy, reduce the widening fiscal deficit gap, attract foreign investment, impose taxes, cut down subsidies, create jobs for the nationals and harmonize neo-liberal economy with the Islamic teachings. In this context, the ministry of education introduced English as a foreign language at early levels, adopted it as a medium of instruction and internationalized higher education to the disadvantage of many public sector teachers who had to take intensive English-learning programmes to professionally grow, and meet the conditions set out by the government agencies.

In the pursuit to provide globalized quality education to its nationals, expatriates and international students, and generate revenues, the author observes the mushroom growth of world-class international branch campuses (IBCs), schools systems and private higher education institutions (HEIs) in the next chapter. He apprises how English-language education, a key determinant and cornerstone of marketability, employability and knowledge-based globalized economy, has forced the Emirati parents to seek private tutoring. To the author's surprise, the parents have been even hiring English-speaking

nannies to enhance their kids' proficiency. He further disputes that the hackneyed desire to study in an international branch campus and pass local university entrance tests has made English-language education a profitable upskill and an enterprise at the cost of othering Arabic language, compromising cultural values and challenging traditional identity. However, the rising number of unemployed low-skilled and poor English-language-proficient Emiratis rang a warning bell for the government to find the ways to resolve inbuilt paradoxes found in the neo-liberal English policy, and revisit the misaligned education policy with their strategic and economic targets. The UAE government has been recently warned by the expert economists to promote entrepreneurship instead of offering secured public sector jobs to the citizens in order to sustain the pace of economy. Barnawi reviews the 'Vision 2021' and contends that the neo-liberal concepts of individualism, deregulation of market and privatization incorporated in the envisaged reformist agenda blatantly challenge the ingrained Islamic values like 'hospitality', 'collectivity', 'generosity', 'public goods', 'loyalty', 'tolerance' (78).

Chapter 6 investigates the restructured market-driven national English curriculum and education in Qatar National Vision 2030 spearheaded by RAND and Pearson Education to the condescension of the west and to the dismay of Qataris who found their cultural values, Islamic beliefs and identity compromised. The national education policy includes the independence of national university, implementation of 'Independent School Model', opening up of community schools, the introduction of mandatory annual Qatar Comprehensive Education Assessment, strengthening Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programme, and launching generously government-funded international branch campuses. Despite record investment made by the government, the education sector failed to yield the desired results when the students underachieved in math, IT, science and English language, and the teachers still required development. The abrupt shift to Arabic from English as a medium of instruction proved counterproductive when the Qataris' poor English skills significantly limited their chances of getting hired in the job market.

To upscale the quality and level of education, and enhance employment opportunities in the private sector, the next chapter reviews how the Omani National Education Strategy 2040 adopted the new outcome-based approach to develop job skills of disgruntled unemployed Omani youth. The outcome-based reformist agenda aimed at optimizing efficiency, ensuring quality, maximizing the capacity to run, manage and administer the educational institutions, increasing students' enrollment at all levels, meeting standards set by Oman Academic Accreditation Authority, ensuring productive research, funding education through the Education Council, and internationalizing and benchmarking their market-oriented academic courses and programmes in collaboration with the UK-based universities and institutions. Although learning of English language helps the students in pursuing their studies in higher education institutions and career advancement, it, at the same time, bars and disappoints many other low achievers. In addition to the rising long-term cost involved in the process of teaching and learning the foreign language for the government and parents alike, the English-language education offers social, ideological and economic challenges to Omani society.

Chapter 9 discusses the aggressive educational and economic reforms taken under Kuwait Development Plan (KDP) and 'Kuwait Vision 2035' to reduce its widening budget deficit and develop human capital. The author

investigates the role of English-language industry in the stratification of workforce in the job market that led to the social and economic sufferings of the masses. Kuwaitis, required by the market forces to demonstrate excellent English communication skills in order to flourish and compete the expatriates for jobs in the private sector, have no choice but to resort to self-study online language courses, and add to the client base of the international investor companies and organizations. Inspired by the glamorized rhetorical advertisements, they got themselves enrolled in the prepackaged crash courses of prestigious institutions affiliated with the western universities. Barnawi finds that Kuwaitis' unwillingness to join the rigorous private sector jobs, and the preconditioned requirement of intensive language programmes set by the international as well as private universities prior to the public sector graduates' admission exposed the empty promises made in the neo-liberal policy agenda.

The 2011 Bahraini Uprisings and 2014 oil crisis led to the flight of capital, inflation, unemployment, social unrest and budget deficit. Chapter 10 delineates how Bahrain 'Economic Vision 2030' abrogated 'Kafala' (sponsorship) system and equalized the candidature of citizens and expatriates in private job market. Bahrain with its limited oil reserves has been apprised for its efforts to promote literacy rate through its education policies. It implemented the idea of free education for all citizens and residents up to secondary school level. It focused on skill development and quality enhancement by integrating technology in education, promoting entrepreneurship, Englishizing education and opening up the western branch campuses of HEIs. The author warns us against the HEIs relentlessly delivering the western pre-packaged academic courses and using the rhetorical discourse to portray themselves as 'saviors' and solution providers for the contemporary socio-economic challenges. The HEIs have been completely displacing and ignoring the local language, cultural norms, social values, historical facts and heritage of the country. The author criticizes how the government compromised the autonomy of the HEIs by getting them constantly monitored and evaluated by the hegemonizing private sector companies and organizations.

The last two chapters foresee the future of English education in the region by presenting a contrastive study of the role of neo-liberal education policies in general and neo-liberal English-language education policies in particular. The slump in oil prices and economic jolts experienced by the region forced the governments to import and adopt the neo-liberal economic policy agenda under the umbrella of international financial institutions with the intent to liberalize and diversify the economy by shifting it to knowledge-based economy, and introducing internationally accredited technical and vocational institutions and programmes for producing the local skilled workforce to replace the outnumbering foreign expatriates and restore the demographic balance of the region. The book invites the researchers, local experts, educators and policymakers to intervene, critically challenge the centrality of English-language education that determines the wages and right to obtain the international education for the Arab citizens, find homegrown solutions and alternatives to the prevalent linguistic hegemony of English, and review the falsely promised neo-liberal model of economy in the backdrop of the historical, social, political, religious and cultural realities of the region.

Globalization and neo-liberal economic agenda in the Gulf region has affected both the nationals and residents in many ways. The current book unpacks the existing intricate relationship among the demand, spread and



dominance of English language, rise of English-language teaching industry, arising social inequalities, conflicting cultural beliefs, preference for English language during recruitment process, and hierarchization of educational programmes and institutions, and other phenomena of transnational mobility. Prioritizing English-language education has marginalized Arabic language, challenged local lifestyle and posed threats to the sociocultural values, religious beliefs and unique local human knowledge. Informed by the present research findings, it can be argued that the valorization and uncritical acceptance of English-language education and its embodied cultural capital in the backdrop of neo-liberal economic reforms has detrimental consequences for the GCC countries. It can expand the gaps between the haves and haves-not; neo-colonize Arabic language; distort and obliterate distinct collective Arab identity and nationalism; misplace social prestige; grant unequal access to international education and endanger traditional cultural practices. The author as an inside voice has aptly challenged the subservience of Arabic language to English language; deconstructed the neo-liberal economic policies; problematized the 'reformist' visions and disclosed their multipronged impacts on the region.

### **CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS**

Mirza Muhammad Zubair Baig (Ph.D.) is serving as assistant professor of English in Royal Commission Yanbu Colleges and Institutes, Saudi Arabia. His research work has deconstructed the erasures in the western canonical texts and their contemporary rewritings. His research interests lie in the areas of postcolonial feminism, multiculturalism, discourse analysis, SLA and digital literacy.

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