



## English Language Teaching in Saudi Public Schools: Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Teacher-Related Challenges

Dr. Amal Obaid Alnefaie\* 

[amal.obied55@gmail.com](mailto:amal.obied55@gmail.com)

### Abstract

This study presents a systematic review of research on English language teaching in Saudi public schools, examining the alignment between instructional practices and Communicative Language Teaching principles. Despite extensive national reform initiatives, curriculum modernization, and the earlier introduction of English across grade levels, concerns persist regarding classroom implementation and students' communicative proficiency. Using predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria, ten studies published between 2012 and 2023 were selected, including peer-reviewed journal articles, a doctoral dissertation, and a scholarly book chapter. Data were extracted through a structured analytical framework and examined using thematic synthesis combined with descriptive frequency analysis to identify recurring patterns in pedagogical approaches, assessment practices, classroom language use, and teacher-related structural constraints. The findings reveal the continued dominance of grammar-translation instruction and memorization-based assessment, while communicative reform is consistently recommended across the reviewed literature. Teacher preparation, professional autonomy, and systemic institutional limitations emerge as central factors shaping instructional practice. Although coherent patterns were identified, the limited number of available studies restricts broad generalization of the findings. The review therefore calls for rigorous classroom-based empirical and intervention research to evaluate communicative reform initiatives more systematically within the Saudi public school context. Future studies should incorporate longitudinal experimental designs and replication.

**Keywords:** English language teaching, Saudi public schools, Communicative Language Teaching, grammar-translation method, Teacher preparation.

---

\*Ph.D. Department of English, University of Hail, Saudi Arabia

**Cite this article as:** Alnefaie, A. O. (2026). English Language Teaching in Saudi Public Schools: Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Teacher-Related Challenges, *Journal of Arts*, 14(1), 864 -879 <https://doi.org/10.35696/bkbmmj52>

© This material is published under the license of Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0), which allows the user to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format. It also allows adapting, transforming or adding to the material for any purpose, even commercially, as long as such modifications are highlighted and the material is credited to its author.



## تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية في المدارس الحكومية السعودية: المنهج والممارسات التدريسية والتحديات المرتبطة بإعداد المعلم

د. أمل عبید النفیعی\*

[amal.obied55@gmail.com](mailto:amal.obied55@gmail.com)

### الملخص

تقدم هذه الدراسة مراجعة منهجية للأبحاث المتعلقة بتعليم اللغة الإنجليزية في المدارس الحكومية السعودية، مع فحص مدى اتساق الممارسات التدريسية مع مبادئ تعليم اللغة القائم على التواصل (CLT). وعلى الرغم من مبادرات الإصلاح الوطنية الواسعة، وتحديث المناهج، والتوسع في تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية عبر المراحل التعليمية، لا تزال هناك مخاوف بشأن التطبيق الصفي ومستوى الكفاءة التواصلية لدى الطلاب. وباستخدام معايير إدراج واستبعاد محددة مسبقاً، تم اختيار عشر دراسات منشورة بين عامي 2012 و2023، شملت مقالات علمية محكمة، وأطروحة دكتوراه، وفصلاً علمياً من كتاب أكاديمي. جرى استخراج البيانات من خلال إطار تحليلي منظم، وتحليلها باستخدام التحليل الموضوعي مدعوماً بالتحليل الوصفي للتكرارات لتحديد الأنماط المتكررة في الأساليب التدريسية، وممارسات التقويم، واستخدام اللغة داخل الصف، والعوامل البنوية المرتبطة بالمعلم. وتشير النتائج إلى استمرار هيمنة طريقة القواعد والترجمة وممارسات التقويم القائمة على الحفظ، في حين يجري التوصية باستمرار التحول نحو التعليم التواصلية. كما برز إعداد المعلم، والاستقلالية المهنية، والقيود النظامية بوصفها عوامل مركزية تؤثر في الممارسة التدريسية. وعلى الرغم من تحديد أنماط متسقة، فإن محدودية عدد الدراسات المتاحة تحد من إمكانية التعميم الواسع. وتؤكد المراجعة الحاجة إلى بحوث صافية تجريبية وتدخلية لتقييم مبادرات الإصلاح التواصلية بصورة أكثر صرامة في سياق المدارس الحكومية السعودية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية، المدارس الحكومية السعودية، تدريس اللغة التواصلية، طريقة القواعد والترجمة، إعداد المعلمين.

\* دكتوراه، قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، جامعة حائل، المملكة العربية السعودية.

للاقتباس: النفیعی، أ. ع. (2026). تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية في المدارس الحكومية السعودية: المنهج والممارسات التدريسية والتحديات المرتبطة بإعداد المعلم، مجلة الآداب، 14 (1)، 864-879 <https://doi.org/10.35696/bkbmmj52>

© نُشر هذا البحث وفقاً لشروط الرخصة Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0)، التي تسمح بنسخ البحث وتوزيعه ونقله بأي شكل من الأشكال، كما تسمح بتكييف البحث أو تحويله أو الإضافة إليه لأي غرض كان، بما في ذلك الأغراض التجارية، شريطة نسبة العمل إلى صاحبه مع بيان أي تعديلات أجريت عليه.



## Introduction

The acquisition of a second language is a multifaceted process shaped by pedagogical, institutional, and sociocultural influences. In foreign language contexts, where exposure to the target language is largely confined to classroom settings, instructional practices and learning environments play a decisive role in determining educational outcomes. Earlier scholarship has consistently highlighted the challenges facing Arab learners of English, particularly the limited opportunities for meaningful communicative interaction within educational institutions (Rabab'ah, 2002; Elyas, 2008). Rabab'ah (2002) argues that difficulties in target-language communication are closely associated with prevailing teaching methods and classroom environments and advocates greater use of English as the medium of instruction to strengthen communicative competence.

In Saudi Arabia, English is taught as a foreign language in public schools; however, concerns regarding students' proficiency levels remain persistent. Despite extended years of formal instruction, many students encounter difficulties when transitioning to higher education, where English is often required for academic success. Al-Nasser (2015) observes that although students may spend approximately nine years studying English during their school education, their communicative performance frequently remains limited. Similar concerns regarding structural and instructional constraints have been documented in broader analyses of the Saudi educational context (Al-Seghayer, 2011; Khan, 2011). This discrepancy between years of instruction and functional proficiency raises critical questions about the effectiveness of current pedagogical practices and curriculum implementation.

In response to global economic and educational transformations, Saudi Arabia introduced English as a compulsory subject at earlier grade levels. Following the King Abdullah Project for General Education Development (initiated in 2004), English instruction was gradually expanded to elementary schools. This reform sought to modernize curricula, enhance learning environments, and improve educational quality through the development of revised English programs across educational stages (Ministry of Education, 2012). Historical analyses describe these reforms as part of broader modernization and globalization efforts shaping English language education in the Kingdom (Zuhur, 2011; Al-Nafjan, 2012). While such initiatives reflect substantial institutional commitment, their classroom-level impact requires systematic examination.

Accordingly, this literature review examines English language teaching in Saudi public schools by exploring three interrelated dimensions: (1) the historical development of English instruction, (2) dominant pedagogical approaches and classroom practices, and (3) structural factors—including curriculum design, teacher preparation, and instructional materials—that influence learning outcomes. By synthesizing contemporary research, this review seeks to identify systemic patterns that may contribute to the persistent gap between reform-oriented policy discourse and students' communicative proficiency.



### Research Problem

Despite extensive national investment and multiple reform initiatives aimed at improving English language education in Saudi Arabia, students' communicative proficiency remains limited. Previous studies have examined curriculum design, teaching methodology, assessment practices, teacher preparation, and classroom language use. However, these investigations are fragmented and often focus on isolated aspects of the educational system. There remains a lack of systematic synthesis that integrates these findings to identify dominant instructional patterns, recurring structural constraints, and their collective impact on communicative language outcomes. Without such synthesis, reform efforts risk addressing symptoms rather than systemic causes.

### Research Questions

This study aims to:

1. Systematically review literature published between 2012 and 2023 on English language teaching in Saudi public schools.
2. Identify dominant pedagogical approaches and assessment practices reported across studies.
3. Examine structural, curricular, and teacher-related factors influencing students' communicative English proficiency.
4. Provide evidence-based implications for curriculum reform and teacher development in foreign language contexts

### Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) as its primary theoretical framework. CLT emerged as a response to traditional structural and grammar-focused methods of language instruction, emphasizing the development of communicative competence as the central goal of language learning. Rather than viewing language as a system of rules to be memorized, CLT conceptualizes language as a tool for meaningful communication. Communicative competence encompasses not only grammatical accuracy but also sociolinguistic appropriateness, discourse coherence, and strategic competence necessary for effective interaction in real-life contexts.

Within the CLT framework, learning occurs through authentic communication, task-based activities, learner engagement, and opportunities for interaction. Instructional approaches that prioritize memorization, translation, mechanical drills, and teacher-centered explanation are considered insufficient for developing communicative ability. Assessment practices that focus primarily on recall of grammatical rules or textbook content are likewise viewed as misaligned with communicative objectives.

In foreign language contexts such as Saudi Arabia—where exposure to English outside the classroom is limited—CLT underscores the critical importance of maximizing meaningful classroom interaction. When



instructional time is restricted and opportunities for authentic communication are scarce, classroom pedagogy becomes the primary site for communicative development. Therefore, the extent to which teaching practices promote interaction, reduce reliance on translation, and incorporate communicative tasks becomes central to evaluating instructional effectiveness.

CLT provides the analytical lens through which the patterns identified in this review are interpreted. The prevalence of grammar-translation practices, memorization-based assessment, and teacher-centered instruction can be critically examined in relation to communicative language learning principles. By grounding the analysis in CLT, this study evaluates whether reported classroom practices and structural constraints align with—or diverge from—the communicative goals emphasized in educational reform discourse.

## Method

### Research Design

This study employed a systematic literature review design to synthesize research on English language teaching in Saudi public schools. A systematic review approach was adopted to ensure methodological transparency, structured synthesis, and analytical rigor in examining existing scholarship. The review focused on studies published between 2012 and 2023 in order to capture contemporary pedagogical developments and educational reforms within the Saudi public school system.

### Search Strategy

A structured search was conducted across multiple academic databases, including ERIC, EBSCOhost, Education Source, Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and the Old Dominion University Library databases. These databases were selected due to their relevance to education and applied linguistics research. Search terms included combinations of “English language teaching,” “Saudi public schools,” “teaching methods,” “curriculum,” “assessment,” “teacher training,” “grammar-translation,” and “communicative approach.” Boolean operators (AND/OR) were used to refine and combine search terms to ensure comprehensive retrieval of relevant studies.

### Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Studies were included if they (1) focused on English language teaching in Saudi Arabia; (2) examined public school contexts at the elementary, intermediate, or secondary levels; (3) addressed pedagogical approaches, curriculum design, assessment practices, teacher preparation, or classroom language use; and (4) were published between 2012 and 2023 in peer-reviewed journals, dissertations, or scholarly book chapters. Studies were excluded if they focused exclusively on higher education without relevance to public schools, addressed English language policy without discussing instructional practices, or lacked empirical or analytical grounding. Opinion pieces and non-academic reports were also excluded.



### Study Quality Consideration

All included studies were appraised using consistent inclusion criteria focused on relevance to instructional practices in Saudi public schools rather than publication type alone. While source types differed—comprising peer-reviewed journal articles, a doctoral dissertation, and a scholarly book chapter—each was evaluated based on clarity of methodology, analytical depth, and relevance to the review questions. The synthesis did not assign equal epistemological weight to publication format; rather, thematic coding was based on reported findings and documented evidence within each source.

### Study Selection Process

The database search identified a range of potentially relevant studies. Titles and abstracts were screened to assess alignment with the inclusion criteria. Studies that did not meet the established criteria—such as those focusing exclusively on higher education, policy without instructional analysis, or contexts outside Saudi Arabia—were excluded during the initial screening stage. Full-text versions of the remaining studies were subsequently reviewed to confirm eligibility. Following this screening process, ten studies met all inclusion criteria and were included in the final analysis, consisting of eight peer-reviewed journal articles, one doctoral dissertation, and one scholarly book chapter.

### Quality Appraisal and Source Type Consideration

Although several included studies were review-based rather than primary empirical investigations, they were retained due to their analytical relevance to pedagogical practices and structural characteristics of English language teaching in Saudi public schools. However, the predominance of review-based sources limits direct access to primary classroom-level data and increases reliance on synthesized interpretations. This characteristic of the available literature reflects a broader methodological trend within the field rather than a selection bias of the present review. Consequently, findings should be interpreted as patterns reported within existing scholarship rather than as direct measurements of classroom practice.

### Data Extraction Procedure

A structured data extraction framework was developed to ensure consistency and systematic comparison across studies. For each study, key variables were recorded, including publication year, research design, educational level, identified teaching approach, assessment orientation, reported use of Arabic in the classroom, teacher preparation and autonomy issues, and challenges related to communicative competence. This extraction framework functioned as the analytical instrument guiding synthesis and thematic categorization.

### Data Analysis

The extracted data were analyzed using thematic synthesis combined with descriptive frequency analysis. Recurring patterns were identified and organized into broader analytical domains, including



dominant pedagogical approaches, assessment practices, teacher-related constraints, and structural limitations. Frequencies were calculated to determine the prevalence of specific instructional patterns and systemic challenges across the selected studies. This analytical approach enabled both qualitative interpretation and quantitative summarization of the literature.

**Table 1**

*Summary of Reviewed Studies on English Language Teaching in Saudi Public Schools*

Authors	Year	Source Type	Study Focus	Method
Al-Nasser	2015	Journal Article	Teaching methodologies and learning environment in Saudi public schools	Interviews (students, teachers, and administrators)
Almalki	2014	Dissertation	New pedagogical techniques and teacher training	Survey
NourAldeen and Elyas	2014	Journal Article	Factors influencing English learning in Saudi Arabia, including studying abroad, learners' purpose for learning English, and students' beliefs and attitudes	Mixed methods (questionnaire and interview)
Mitchell and Alfuraih	2017	Journal Article	Historical development of English language teaching in Saudi Arabia from the 1950s to the present.	Literature Review
Al-Seghayer	2014	Journal Article	Teacher training and changes in English teacher preparation programs.	Literature Review
Al-Seghayer	2015	Journal Article	Pedagogical approaches to English language teaching in Saudi Arabia.	comprehensive review
Alrashidi and Phan	2015	Journal Article	History of English language teaching in Saudi Arabia	Literature Review
Alrabai	2018	Book Chapter	Curriculum, teacher factors, and student skills in Saudi English education	



Alharbi	2015	Journal Article	Ministry of Education policies, recent educational reforms, development of critical thinking skills, and bilingual education initiatives
Alghamdi	2021	Journal Article	Teachers' pedagogical beliefs in Saudi English language classrooms. (Mixed methods (interviews, observations, and questionnaire)

## Result

### Historical and Structural Development of English Language Education

The development of English language education in Saudi Arabia reflects a gradual transition from traditional religious instruction to a centralized and reform-oriented educational system. Historical analyses within the reviewed studies describe the institutionalization of formal schooling and the progressive integration of English within national educational policy (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015; Mitchell & Alfuraih, 2017). English was formally introduced at the secondary level and later expanded across educational stages as part of broader modernization efforts.

Subsequent reform initiatives emphasized curriculum restructuring, teacher preparation programs, and the earlier introduction of English at the primary level (Almalki, 2014; Alrabai, 2018). These reforms aimed to enhance communicative competence and align English instruction with global educational developments. Despite these structural expansions, English continues to be taught primarily as a foreign language with limited use beyond classroom contexts (Al-Nasser, 2015). This structural condition places significant responsibility on classroom pedagogy to compensate for limited authentic exposure.

Although instructional time expanded and curriculum reform progressed through structured implementation phases (Almalki, 2014), the reviewed studies suggest that reform efforts have not consistently translated into measurable improvements in communicative proficiency outcomes (Al-Nasser, 2015; Alrabai, 2018). This pattern indicates a continuing tension between structural reform and pedagogical implementation.

### Classroom Practices and Pedagogical Orientation

Despite documented structural reform, classroom practices remain largely traditional in orientation. While the national curriculum integrates the four language skills and reflects modernization goals (Alrabai, 2018), instructional implementation frequently prioritizes textbook coverage and examination preparation over communicative interaction (Al-Nasser, 2015). The breadth of curricular content appears to encourage teachers to focus on completion of prescribed materials rather than depth of communicative engagement.



Assessment practices further reinforce memorization-based learning. Several reviewed studies report that high examination scores often mask limited communicative competence, as testing emphasizes recall of textbook content, model compositions, and rule-based grammatical knowledge (Alharbi, 2015; Alrabai, 2018; Alrashidi & Phan, 2015). The exam-driven culture influences both instructional strategies and learner behavior, contributing to dependence on teacher explanation and reduced learner autonomy (Alharbi, 2015; Alrabai, 2018).

Instructional practice is predominantly characterized by grammar-translation approaches. Multiple studies describe reliance on explicit grammar explanation, translation exercises, and teacher-centered instruction (Alghamdi, 2021; Alharbi, 2015; Al-Nasser, 2015; Al-Seghayer, 2015; Alrabai, 2018). Although communicative approaches are referenced within reform discourse, their classroom implementation appears limited or inconsistent. Interactive strategies such as group work, role-play, and task-based activities are reported as present but infrequent (Alghamdi, 2021; Alharbi, 2015), indicating partial rather than systemic adoption of communicative pedagogy.

The role of Arabic (L1) in the English classroom remains debated within the reviewed literature. Some evidence suggests that L1 use may facilitate comprehension and classroom management, particularly in lower proficiency contexts (Al-Seghayer, 2015). However, other findings highlight concerns that frequent reliance on Arabic may reduce opportunities for meaningful English interaction and communicative development (Alharbi, 2015). While L1 use is not uniformly reported as a dominant pattern across all studies, its presence reflects ongoing pedagogical tension between facilitation and immersion.

Overall, the reviewed studies indicate that classroom practices continue to emphasize grammatical competence and structural accuracy over communicative, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence. The consistency of these findings across different research designs—including interviews, surveys, mixed-methods studies, and analytical reviews—suggests that the identified patterns reflect systemic tendencies rather than isolated classroom phenomena. Collectively, the Results reveal a persistent misalignment between reform-oriented communicative objectives and classroom-level instructional implementation.

### **Teacher Preparation and Instructional Constraints**

Teacher preparation and professional autonomy emerge as central factors influencing instructional outcomes across the reviewed studies. Structural improvements in qualification requirements and teacher education programs have been documented (Al-Seghayer, 2014; Almalki, 2014). However, despite these institutional developments, concerns persist regarding teachers' communicative proficiency, pedagogical flexibility, and readiness to implement communicative approaches effectively (Alghamdi, 2021; Alharbi, 2015).



Several studies indicate that teacher preparedness is influenced not only by formal certification but also by the nature of pre-service preparation and ongoing professional development (Almalki, 2014; Al-Seghayer, 2015). While curriculum reform emphasizes communicative language teaching, professional development initiatives often continue to reflect traditional, form-focused methodologies. This misalignment may limit teachers' confidence and capacity to adopt communicative classroom practices.

Teachers also face systemic constraints that shape instructional implementation. Centralized curriculum structures and standardized assessment systems restrict teacher autonomy in lesson planning and evaluation design (Almalki, 2014; Alrabai, 2018). The exam-oriented educational culture further encourages emphasis on structural accuracy and textbook coverage rather than communicative experimentation (Alharbi, 2015; Alrabai, 2018).

Additionally, institutional expectations, workload demands, and limited instructional flexibility constrain pedagogical innovation (Alghamdi, 2021; Al-Seghayer, 2015). Internal factors such as teacher beliefs, instructional confidence, and language proficiency interact with external structural limitations to shape classroom practice. Collectively, these findings indicate that teacher-level variables and systemic conditions jointly influence the persistence of traditional instructional approaches despite reform initiatives.

#### **Methodological Characteristics of Included Studies**

The methodological distribution of the selected studies reveals a predominance of review-based research. As shown in Table 2, 40% of the included studies were literature or policy reviews, reflecting a strong emphasis on descriptive and evaluative analysis of the Saudi English language teaching system. Mixed-methods studies accounted for 20% of the sample, while purely qualitative and quantitative designs each represented 10% of the reviewed literature. Additionally, 20% of the sources consisted of analytical or conceptual works, including a scholarly book chapter and policy-focused analysis.

Notably, experimental or intervention-based studies were absent from the reviewed literature. This distribution indicates that much of the existing research focuses on describing systemic challenges and pedagogical orientations rather than empirically testing instructional reforms or measuring communicative outcomes through controlled or longitudinal designs. The predominance of review-based and conceptual studies suggests that current scholarship remains oriented toward analysis and critique rather than classroom-based empirical validation of communicative reform initiatives.

This methodological pattern highlights a significant research gap. The limited presence of classroom intervention studies restricts the ability to evaluate the effectiveness of communicative approaches in practice. Consequently, the literature provides substantial descriptive evidence of instructional trends but limited causal or outcome-based evidence regarding communicative proficiency development.

**Table 2**

*Distribution of Research Designs Among Included Studies (N = 10)*

Research Design Type	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Literature / Review-Based Studies	4	40%
Mixed Methods	2	20%
Qualitative	1	10%
Quantitative	1	10%
Analytical / Conceptual (Non-Empirical)	2	20%
<b>Total</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>100%</b>

The methodological distribution of the selected studies demonstrates a predominance of review-based research, which accounted for 40% of the included literature. Mixed-methods designs represented 20%, while purely qualitative and quantitative studies each constituted 10% of the sample. Additionally, 20% of the reviewed sources were analytical or conceptual works, including a scholarly book chapter and policy-oriented analysis. Notably, no experimental or intervention-based studies were identified within the selected timeframe. This pattern suggests that existing research has focused primarily on descriptive evaluation and systemic analysis rather than empirical testing of communicative instructional reforms within classroom settings.

### **Cross-Study Thematic Patterns in English Language Teaching Research**

The thematic analysis of the ten selected studies revealed consistent instructional patterns and systemic challenges within English language teaching in Saudi public schools. Using the predefined coding framework, five recurring themes were examined across the literature: grammar-translation dominance, memorization-based assessment practices, reliance on Arabic (L1) use, teacher autonomy and training issues, and recommendations for communicative reform.

**Table 3**

*Frequency of Recurring Themes Across Selected Studies (N = 10)*

Theme	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Grammar-Translation Dominance	6	60%
Memorization-Based Assessment	5	50%
Heavy L1 (Arabic) Use	2	20%
Teacher Autonomy / Training Issues	10	100%
Communicative Reform Suggested	10	100%



As shown in Table 3, grammar-translation dominance was identified in six of the ten studies (60%), indicating that traditional, form-focused instructional practices remain prevalent within Saudi public school classrooms. Although communicative approaches are frequently emphasized in reform discourse, classroom implementation often continues to prioritize explicit grammar instruction and teacher-centered practices.

Memorization-based assessment practices were reported in five studies (50%), suggesting that exam-oriented instructional culture continues to shape learning behaviors. These findings highlight reliance on recall-based testing, model compositions, and rule memorization rather than communicative performance assessment.

Heavy reliance on Arabic (L1) use was explicitly reported in only two studies (20%). While L1 use exists in certain instructional contexts, it was not consistently identified as a dominant theme across the reviewed literature.

Teacher-related structural constraints emerged as the most consistently reported issue. All ten studies (100%) identified concerns related to teacher preparation, professional development, instructional autonomy, or systemic limitations affecting pedagogical implementation. This consistency underscores the central role of teacher-level factors in shaping classroom practice.

Similarly, all ten studies (100%) recommended a shift toward communicative, learner-centered pedagogy aligned with Communicative Language Teaching principles. Despite variation in research design and educational level, the literature consistently emphasized the need for reform prioritizing communicative competence, classroom interaction, and authentic language use.

Collectively, these findings demonstrate a persistent gap between traditional instructional practices and the communicative objectives articulated in educational reform initiatives. The convergence of teacher-related concerns and calls for communicative reform suggests that structural and pedagogical transformation remains a critical priority for improving English language proficiency outcomes in Saudi public schools.

## Discussion

The findings of this systematic review reveal a persistent tension between educational reform efforts and classroom-level instructional practice in Saudi public schools. Although structural reforms have expanded access to English instruction and modernized curriculum frameworks, pedagogical implementation continues to reflect traditional, form-focused approaches.

### Alignment with Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Communicative Language Teaching emphasizes communicative competence, meaningful interaction, authentic language use, and learner-centered engagement. However, the present findings indicate that grammar-translation dominance remains prevalent in 60% of the reviewed studies, while memorization-



based assessment practices persist in 50% of the literature. These patterns suggest that instructional practice prioritizes structural accuracy over communicative fluency.

The consistent recommendation for communicative reform across all reviewed studies (100%) further highlights a recognized gap between policy aspirations and classroom reality. Although curriculum documents often reference communicative goals, implementation remains constrained by exam-oriented systems, centralized control, and teacher-centered instructional models.

This misalignment reflects what can be described as a structural–pedagogical disconnect: reform at the curricular level has not been matched by transformation in assessment systems, teacher preparation, or classroom interaction patterns. As CLT requires sustained interaction, authentic tasks, and reduced reliance on translation and rote memorization, its principles remain only partially realized within the current system.

### **Teacher-Centered Constraints and Structural Limitations**

The most consistent finding across the literature was the identification of teacher-related constraints (100%). These include limited professional autonomy, insufficient communicative training, weak assessment literacy, and systemic pressures to complete extensive curricula within limited instructional time.

This suggests that the challenge is not solely methodological but structural. Teachers operate within centralized systems that limit flexibility in materials selection, assessment design, and pedagogical innovation. Without sustained professional development focused on communicative competence, assessment reform, and classroom interaction strategies, reform efforts are unlikely to produce substantial improvements in student proficiency.

Importantly, the findings indicate that curriculum reform alone cannot drive meaningful change. Effective transformation requires coordinated reform across three interrelated domains: pedagogy, assessment, and teacher preparation.

### **Policy–Practice Gap**

The convergence of findings across the reviewed studies reveals a clear policy–practice gap. While reform initiatives promote communicative objectives and early English introduction, classroom practices remain influenced by traditional instructional norms and exam-oriented culture.

This gap suggests that reform initiatives must move beyond structural expansion toward deeper pedagogical transformation. Investment in communicative teacher training, assessment redesign, and classroom-level support mechanisms is essential for bridging this divide.

### **Limitations of the Study**

While this systematic review provides a structured synthesis of research on English language teaching in Saudi public schools, several methodological considerations should be acknowledged. First, the review included ten studies selected according to predefined criteria. Although consistent themes emerged across the



reviewed literature, the relatively limited number of available studies warrants cautious interpretation and does not permit universal generalization.

Second, the review relied exclusively on published academic sources. Institutional reports, unpublished data, and ministry-level documentation were not included, which may limit the range of perspectives represented.

Third, variation in research design across the selected studies—including review-based, qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods approaches—introduces differences in evidentiary depth. While this diversity enriches contextual understanding, it also reflects an imbalance in classroom-based experimental research.

The predominance of review-oriented and conceptual studies highlights a methodological gap in the field. Future research employing longitudinal and intervention-based classroom designs would strengthen empirical evaluation of communicative instructional effectiveness.

### Implications and Conclusion

The findings of this systematic review indicate that English language education in Saudi public schools continues to face structural and pedagogical constraints that limit the development of students' communicative competence. Although substantial national investment has expanded English instruction across educational levels, classroom-level implementation remains only partially aligned with Communicative Language Teaching principles.

From a structural perspective, limited instructional time and the foreign language context constrain opportunities for meaningful communicative practice (Al-Nasser, 2015; Alrabai, 2018). Given that English exposure outside the classroom remains limited, instructional design within the classroom becomes critically important for communicative development. Reform efforts must therefore prioritize strategies that maximize interactive engagement within existing instructional constraints.

Pedagogically, the continued reliance on grammar-translation practices and memorization-based assessment limits students' opportunities for authentic language use. While form-focused instruction may support grammatical accuracy, it does not consistently translate into communicative competence. The prevalence of exam-oriented assessment reinforces structural learning priorities, shaping both teaching strategies and learner behaviors.

The findings consistently identify teacher-related structural constraints as central to implementation challenges. Professional development initiatives should therefore prioritize communicative methodology, assessment literacy, and instructional autonomy in ways that directly address the constraints documented across the reviewed studies. Reform efforts must move beyond curriculum revision toward sustained support mechanisms that enable teachers to operationalize communicative principles effectively.



Importantly, the methodological characteristics of the reviewed literature reveal a significant research gap. The absence of experimental and classroom-based intervention studies limits the ability to evaluate the effectiveness of communicative reform initiatives empirically. Future research should prioritize longitudinal and classroom-based experimental designs to examine communicative implementation, instructional outcomes, and student proficiency development more rigorously.

In conclusion, while structural reforms in English language education have been substantial, meaningful improvement in student outcomes depends on aligning curriculum, assessment, teacher preparation, and classroom practice with communicative objectives. Addressing both pedagogical implementation and methodological research gaps remains essential for advancing functional English proficiency in Saudi public schools.

### References

- Almalki, M. (2014). *Teacher perception of a new English as a foreign language (EFL) curriculum in Saudi Arabia* (Doctoral dissertation, Old Dominion University).
- Alghamdi, A. (2021). The impact of EFL teachers' pedagogical beliefs and practices: Communicative language teaching in a Saudi university context. *English Language Teaching*, 14(12), 171–182. <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v14n12p17>
- Alharbi, A. (2015). Improving students' English speaking proficiency in Saudi public schools. *International Journal of Instruction*, 8(1), 105–116.
- Al-Nafjan, E. (2012). Teaching intolerance. *Foreign Policy*, (193), 103.
- Al-Nasser, S. (2015). Problems of English language acquisition in Saudi Arabia: An exploratory-cum-remedial study. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 5(8), 1612–1619. <https://doi.org/10.17507/tpls.0508.10>
- Alrabai, F. (2018). Learning English in Saudi Arabia. In *English as a foreign language in Saudi Arabia: New insights into teaching and learning English* (pp. 102–119). Routledge.
- Alrashidi, O., & Phan, H. (2015). Education context and English teaching and learning in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: An overview. *English Language Teaching*, 8(5), 33–44. <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v8n5p33>
- Al-Seghayer, K. (2011). *English teaching in Saudi Arabia: Status, issues, and challenges*. Hala Print Co.
- Al-Seghayer, K. S. (2014). The actuality, inefficiency, and needs of EFL teacher-preparation programs in Saudi Arabia. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, 3(1), 143–151. <https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.3n.1p.143>
- Al-Seghayer, K. (2015). Salient key features of actual English instructional practices in Saudi Arabia. *English Language Teaching*, 8(6), 89–99. <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v8n6p89>



- Elyas, T. (2008). The attitude and the impact of American English as a global language within the Saudi education system. *Novitas-ROYAL*, 2(1), 28–48.
- Khan, I. A. (2011). Learning difficulties in English: Diagnosis and pedagogy in Saudi Arabia. *Educational Research*, 2(7), 1248–1257.
- Mitchell, B., & Alfuraih, A. (2017). English language teaching in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Past, present and beyond. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 8(2), 317–325.  
<https://doi.org/10.5901/mjss.2017.v8n2p317>
- Ministry of Education. (2012). *Teaching English language course (No. 912/9-2)*.
- Nouraldeem, S., & Elyas, T. (2014). Learning English in Saudi Arabia: A socio-cultural perspective. *International Journal of English Language and Linguistics Research*, 2(3), 56–78.
- Rabab'ah, G. (2002). *Communication problems facing Arab learners of English*. *Journal of Language and Learning*, 3(1), 180–197.
- Zuhur, S. (2011). *Saudi Arabia*. ABC-CLIO.

