

Saudi Vision 2030 and Aligned ELT Policies and Planning: A Critical Review of Contemporary Developments and Practices for Future Directions

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Abstract

Vision 2030, inaugurated in Saudi Arabia in 2016, seeks to diversify the national economy and raise the quality of education, among other strategic objectives. Acknowledging the pivotal role of English language proficiency in realizing these ambitions, the government has enacted a series of reforms targeting English language teaching (ELT) policy and planning. Nevertheless, the efficacy of these policy initiatives over the past decade—particularly their coherence with the overarching aims of Vision 2030—has been insufficiently examined in the ELT context. This review critically analyzed contemporary developments in ELT policy, their implementation, and their effectiveness in furthering Vision 2030's objectives. Employing a semi-systematic review of policy documents, instructional frameworks, and recent scholarly studies, the analysis synthesizes the current ELT landscape in the Kingdom. The findings reveal persistent fragmentation in ELT policy, with many academic departments operating under implicit, self-formulated guidelines rather than cohesive national directives. This has resulted in a sustained disconnect between policy aspirations and pedagogical realities. At the instructional level, the field is experiencing a gradual, albeit uneven, transition from teacher-centered, assessment-driven practices to student-centered, communicative, technologically mediated, and translanguaging approaches. However, progress is impeded by inadequate teacher preparation, oversized classrooms, and assessment regimes that continue to prioritize rote recall over productive language use. The study proposes five interrelated reform imperatives to align ELT practices with Vision 2030 goals: formalizing context-responsive language policies; revising curricula and assessments to enhance communicative and labor-market relevance; investing in sustained professional development and teacher induction; strategically adopting bilingual, translanguaging, and culturally responsive pedagogies; and embedding technology within a robust pedagogical framework.

Keywords: Saudi Vision 2030, English language teaching, policy and planning, ELT reforms, teacher development, translanguaging, technology integration in language education

1. Introduction

English has shifted from a conventional school subject in Saudi Arabia to a strategic national resource vital to achieving Vision 2030's goals of economic diversification, global competitiveness, and human capital development (Albiladi, 2022; Alfahadi, 2019; Al-Seghayer, 2023). As Saudi Arabia expands its participation in international business ventures, higher education, tourism, and technology-driven sectors, English proficiency has become increasingly crucial for academic mobility, workplace readiness, and cross-cultural communication (Al-Malki et al., 2022; Banafi, 2025).

This tactical elevation of English, however, has not eliminated long-standing challenges in Saudi ELT scenarios. The literature shows that English language policies in higher education are often implicit, self-derived, or unevenly applied, creating uncertainty about language use, institutional identity, and pedagogical consistency (Alnasser, 2022; Alnasser & Almoaily, 2022; Alomaim, 2024). At the same time, policy discourse continues to negotiate the relationship between English modernization and Arabic preservation, indicating the broader cultural balancing act embedded in Vision 2030 reform agendas (Almesaar, 2024; Elyas & Badawood, 2016).

At the ground level, the pedagogical literature indicates a need to shift from conventional, teacher-centered instruction toward more communicative, learner-centered, and technologically mediated practices. Studies increasingly advocate authentic materials, cooperative learning, translanguaging, corpus-informed teaching, AI-assisted learning, and culturally responsive approaches as ways to improve engagement and language use in real contexts (Albiladi, 2022; AlFares, 2024; Alharbi, 2024; Alhazmi, 2025; Almayez, 2022; Al-wossabi, 2023). However, the same literature makes clear that innovation alone is insufficient, as classroom change is still constrained by large class sizes, limited instructional time, rigid textbooks, weak assessment practices, and uneven teacher preparation (Ahmed, 2018; AlFares, 2024; Alotaibi, 2019; Al-wossabi, 2023).

A further recurring concern is the gap between policy intent and classroom reality. Teachers may recognize the value of reform, but

implementation often falters due to limited professional development, unstable staffing, and monolingual language ideologies that undermine flexible practice (Almayez, 2022; Alnasser, 2022; Jabeen, 2023; Pacino & Qureshi, 2021). These problems are exacerbated by learner-side challenges, such as low motivation, anxiety, and limited exposure to meaningful use of English, which further slow the development of linguistic and communicative competence (Al-Mohanna, 2024; Shaalan, 2024).

Taken together, these studies show that Saudi ELT is at a transitional stage. Earlier work mainly documented deficiencies in proficiency, curriculum design, assessment, and teacher preparation, while more recent studies have shifted toward policy clarification, translanguaging, ESP, digital innovation, and culturally responsive reform (Albiladi, 2022; Alrwele, 2018; Almergren, 2025; Al-Tamimi, 2019; Khawaji, 2022; Yusuf, 2017). This trajectory implies that the field is gradually moving from diagnosis to redesign. However, the success of that redesign depends on whether policy, pedagogy, teacher development, and classroom realities are aligned coherently.

Given the ambitious goals of Saudi Vision 2030 for educational reforms, an extensive assessment of ELT policies, planning, implementation, and practices is necessary to assess the effectiveness of these reforms in achieving their objectives. Despite significant investment in education, both in general and in English proficiency in particular, a gap in alignment between ELT practices and the Vision is evident, as reflected in the discussion above. This raises a key concern about the efficacy of ELT policies and their context-based implementation. Therefore, this study examined the current state of ELT policies in Saudi Arabia and their relevance to English teaching and learning; analyzed current developments in ELT pedagogical practices; identified factors that obstruct effective ELT implementation; and proposed implementable strategies and best practices aligned with the goals of Saudi Vision 2030.

1.1 Research Objectives

- The key objectives of this research will be as follows:
- To examine the contemporary state of ELT policies in KSA and their relevance to English teaching and learning.
- To analyze the current developments in ELT pedagogical practices.
- To identify the factors hindering effective ELT practices.
- To propose actionable strategies and best practices for teaching English in alignment with the Vision 2030 objectives.

2. Literature Review

The announcement of Saudi Vision 2030 in 2016 marked a pivotal moment for English language teaching (ELT) in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Vision 2030, a comprehensive national transformation plan, repositions English from a peripheral subject to a strategic national resource (Albiladi, 2022; Alfahadi, 2019; Al-Seghayer, 2023). This reimagining of English has led to sweeping policy reforms, curriculum changes, and pedagogical innovations across Saudi Arabia's education system. However, the translation of these ambitious reforms into consistent classroom practice remains uneven, as evidenced by a growing body of research. This systematic literature review synthesizes findings from 50 studies on Saudi ELT conducted between 2017 and 2026, critically examining the evolution of ELT policies, pedagogical practices, implementation barriers, and the persistent gap between policy rhetoric and classroom reality.

2.1 The Evolution of ELT Policy in Saudi Arabia under Vision 2030

The English-language policy in Saudi Arabia has fundamentally transformed since Vision 2030. Historically, English was gradually introduced—first as a limited subject in the 1950s, expanding during the oil boom of the 1970s and 1980s, and formalized from grade six in 2004 (Al-Seghayer, 2024; Almesaar, 2024). The most significant shift occurred in 2021, with English instruction introduced from grade one, signaling a commitment to earlier exposure and higher proficiency (Jabeen, 2023). Vision 2030 reframed English as a form of human capital essential for employability, internationalization, tourism, academic mobility, and cross-cultural communication (Al-Malki et al., 2022; Banafi, 2025; Yusuf, 2017). English is now viewed not merely as a foreign language but as a developmental tool and a vehicle for modernization (Althobaiti, 2025; Alqahtani & Albidewi, 2022).

Despite this strategic elevation, policy formalization has been inconsistent. Many Saudi English departments operate on implicit practices rather than institution-wide language policies (Alnasser, 2022; Alnasser & Almoaily, 2022; Alomaim, 2024). Alnasser (2022) found that most departments lack formal policies, relying instead on informal arrangements. This fragmentation creates significant variation and weakens accountability, particularly in distance learning and out-of-classroom contexts (Alomaim, 2024). The literature suggests the main issue is not an absence of policy but an absence of policy coherence—aspirational national goals coexist with fragmented institutional implementation.

A parallel discourse involves the tension between English modernization and Arabic identity. Scholars such as Almesaar (2024) and Elyas and Badawood (2024) highlight the symbolic balancing act between promoting English for economic purposes and preserving Arabic as a marker of religious and national authenticity. Recent scholarship advocates for an additive bilingual model: Arabic retains its religious-cultural primacy, while English expands its functional role in education, business, and international engagement (Al-Seghayer, 2023, 2024). This additive approach is increasingly recognized as the most viable pathway for Saudi ELT policy.

2.2 Current Developments in ELT Pedagogical Practices

The literature documents a shift away from teacher-centered, grammar-focused instruction toward more communicative, learner-centered, and context-responsive methods. Albiladi (2022) proposed a comprehensive pedagogical framework emphasizing authentic materials, digital integration, cooperative learning, cultural openness, and labor-market alignment. Al-wossabi (2023) and Alomaireeni (2024) similarly

advocate for task-based learning, experiential methods, and pedagogies that develop learner autonomy and practical language use.

The integration of digital technology is a major pedagogical trend. Almuhammadi (2024) reports that 67% of university instructors use platforms like Padlet and Microsoft Teams, but only 32% have received formal training in integrating 21st-century skills. Alharbi (2024), Alrashidi (2022), and Elmahdi et al. (2025) document increasing interest in AI-assisted learning, corpus-based instruction, and data-driven methods. However, all these studies warn that technology's impact depends on teacher training and institutional infrastructure. Technology is thus seen as an enabler, not a reform in itself.

Translanguaging and bilingual classroom practices are also prominent. Research by Almayez (2022), Alqahtani (2022), and Abdulmonem and Alanazi (2025) shows teachers and learners recognize the practical value of Arabic in scaffolding comprehension and participation. However, Almayez (2024) notes that although teachers may support translanguaging, they often avoid it in practice because institutional policies and professional norms lag behind learners' needs. Translanguaging tends to be used selectively and informally rather than as a planned strategy, highlighting the need for clearer guidance and systematic teacher preparation.

The expansion of intercultural and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instruction is a further trend. Al-Malki et al. (2022) conducted a nationwide survey of English-language needs in the Saudi tourism workforce, proposing an ESP model that integrates needs analysis, motivation, and learning styles. Almegren (2025) found that university EFL students struggle with pragmatics and speech acts, suggesting that contextualized, student-centered interventions combining technology and authentic materials can improve both proficiency and intercultural skills. Rehaieem and Hussain (2022) found that almost 80% of students want more content on foreign cultures in English classes. Collectively, these studies argue against a one-size-fits-all ELT model, instead advocating for multiple Englishes—general, academic, and ESP—aligned to institutional and labor-market needs.

2.3 Factors Hindering Effective ELT Practices

Despite reforms, significant barriers remain. System-level constraints include overcrowded classrooms, limited instructional time, rigid textbooks, and assessment systems that reward recall over communication (AlFares, 2024; Ahmed & Alotaibi, 2019; Al-wossabi, 2023). AlFares (2024) reports that 67.9% of teachers cite overcrowded classrooms as a barrier, 58.9% report insufficient class time, and 61.6% note that classrooms are unsuitable for communicative teaching. These are systemic design failures that block innovation regardless of teacher effort.

Teacher preparation is another critical barrier. Jabeen (2023) found that most Saudi EFL teachers lack prior EFL training, post-service training, EFL certificates, or access to workshops. Alrwele (2018) and Al-Seghayer (2014) argue that teacher preparation programs are inadequate, particularly in technological and communicative pedagogy. Available training is often brief and fragmented, underpreparing teachers for the demands of communicative, technology-integrated instruction (Ahmad, 2025; Khawaji, 2022; Pacino & Qureshi, 2021).

Saudi EFL learners face low motivation, anxiety, and negative attitudes toward English, reducing participation and achievement (AlFares, 2024; Al-wossabi, 2023). Limited exposure to English outside the classroom means it remains a subject to pass rather than a language to use (Alnasser & Almoaily, 2022). Mother tongue interference is also a barrier, as students transfer Arabic structures into English and struggle with pronunciation, vocabulary, and pragmatics (Al-Mohanna, 2024). Almohaimeed and Alnasser (2022) found that female learners, in particular, lack opportunities to practice English. Importantly, these learner weaknesses are shaped by environment and pedagogy, and are thus amenable to reform.

2.4 The Research Gap

Despite a growing body of literature, several important gaps remain in Saudi ELT research. Most studies focus on isolated areas, such as higher education, individual universities, or specific teaching methods like technology integration or translanguaging, rather than providing comprehensive, cross-sectoral assessments. A persistent gap exists between policy ambitions and classroom realities, including issues like curriculum misalignment with labor market needs, regional and socioeconomic inequalities, and cultural preferences for rote learning over communicative or critical approaches (Allmnakrah & Evers, 2020; Alshahrani, 2020; Alshahrani & Ally, 2023). Furthermore, the perspectives and experiences of teachers and learners themselves are seldom the focus of systematic research (Ndiaye et al., 2024). Most importantly, existing studies rarely examine how key reform elements—policy, curriculum, teacher development, translanguaging, and technology—interact within a unified educational system.

2.5 Rationale for the Present Study

The rationale for this systematic review stems from persistent gaps in Saudi ELT research, particularly the lack of integrated analyses that connect policy intentions, pedagogical practices, implementation realities, and learner outcomes within a unified framework. Although Vision 2030 has been in place for a decade, comprehensive evaluations of ELT policy alignment and reform coherence remain rare (Ndiaye et al., 2024). While existing studies address specific issues such as policy informality, pedagogical change, technology use, translanguaging, and structural barriers, no review has synthesized these dimensions to evaluate the overall effectiveness of Saudi ELT reform. By examining 50 studies conducted between 2017 and 2026, this review aims to fill that gap, offering a holistic assessment of progress, challenges, and actionable strategies, and highlighting the importance of treating policy, curriculum, professional development, bilingual pedagogy, and technology integration as interconnected elements of a reform ecosystem as Saudi Arabia approaches its 2030 goals.

3. Research Design

There are established methods for conducting review research, such as narrative, systematic, and meta-analyses, each following different research and analysis approaches and procedures (Davis et al., 2014; Palmatier, 2018; Snyder, 2019). In this study, a systematic review methodology was chosen because it best aligned with the research objectives, as "...a way to synthesize research findings in a systematic, transparent, and reproducible manner" and is referred to as the gold standard among reviews (Davis et al., in Snyder, 2019). Following the systematic review methodology, the data were accessed, screened, and reviewed using the PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) checklist and guidelines to identify the most relevant and established studies for critical review. For analysis, a qualitative paradigm primarily focused on thematic stance was used to thoroughly and critically review the articles.

3.1 Data Search Process

A rigorous, systematic approach was utilized to ensure that the literature reviewed was both comprehensive and relevant to the research aims. The process involved several distinct, research-oriented steps to maximize the quality and applicability of selected studies.

3.1.1 Keyword Identification

The identification of keywords was informed by a preliminary review of the literature and the research objectives. This phase involved brainstorming and refining a list of targeted search terms such as "Saudi Vision 2030," "English language policies and planning," "language education," "curriculum development," "ELT (English Language Teaching) practices," "pedagogy," "pedagogical issues and hindrances," and "future directions." Synonyms and related terms were also considered to broaden the search scope, for example, including "language policy implementation" and "educational reform in Saudi Arabia." Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT) and truncation were utilized to combine search terms effectively and capture a wider range of relevant literature.

3.1.2 Database Selection

A multi-database search strategy was employed to capture a broad spectrum of scholarly work. Research articles were retrieved from established academic databases including Google Scholar, Scopus, ERIC, PDF Drive, and ProQuest. In addition, targeted searches were conducted in high-impact, peer-reviewed journals pertinent to language education and policy, as well as in government documents and conference proceedings, to supplement the academic literature with policy-oriented and emerging research. The search was further refined by applying database-specific filters for publication type, language, and subject area to ensure the relevancy and scholarly quality of the results.

3.1.3 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

A set of rigorous inclusion and exclusion criteria guided the selection process. Studies published within the last ten years (2017-2026) were prioritized to ensure an up-to-date understanding of current trends, policies, and challenges. Only articles published in peer-reviewed journals, or official government and institutional reports, were included to guarantee scholarly credibility. The studies were also required to directly address one or more of the identified keywords and align with the objectives of the research. Exclusion criteria eliminated works that were outside the defined time frame, not peer-reviewed, not focused on the Saudi context or English language education, or that failed to contribute empirical or theoretical insights relevant to the study's aims. A two-stage screening process—first at the abstract/title level, then through full-text review—was conducted to ensure only the most pertinent and high-quality studies were included.

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion criteria
• Peer-reviewed research articles • Saudi context focused • English language policies and developments • EFL/ESL teaching and learning practices • EFL/ESL future directions • Year of publication: 2017-2026	• Not peer-reviewed • Non-Saudi context • Not relevant to formulated keywords • Published prior to 2017

The PRISMA flow chart below presents the process of identifying, screening, and selecting studies for inclusion in this systematic review (Page et al., 2021). It shows the number of records identified through database searches and other sources; the number of records after duplicates are removed; the number of records screened; the number of records excluded; the number of full-text articles assessed for eligibility; and the final number of studies included in the review. This chart helps guarantee transparency and reproducibility by providing a clear summary of how studies were filtered and selected throughout the review process.

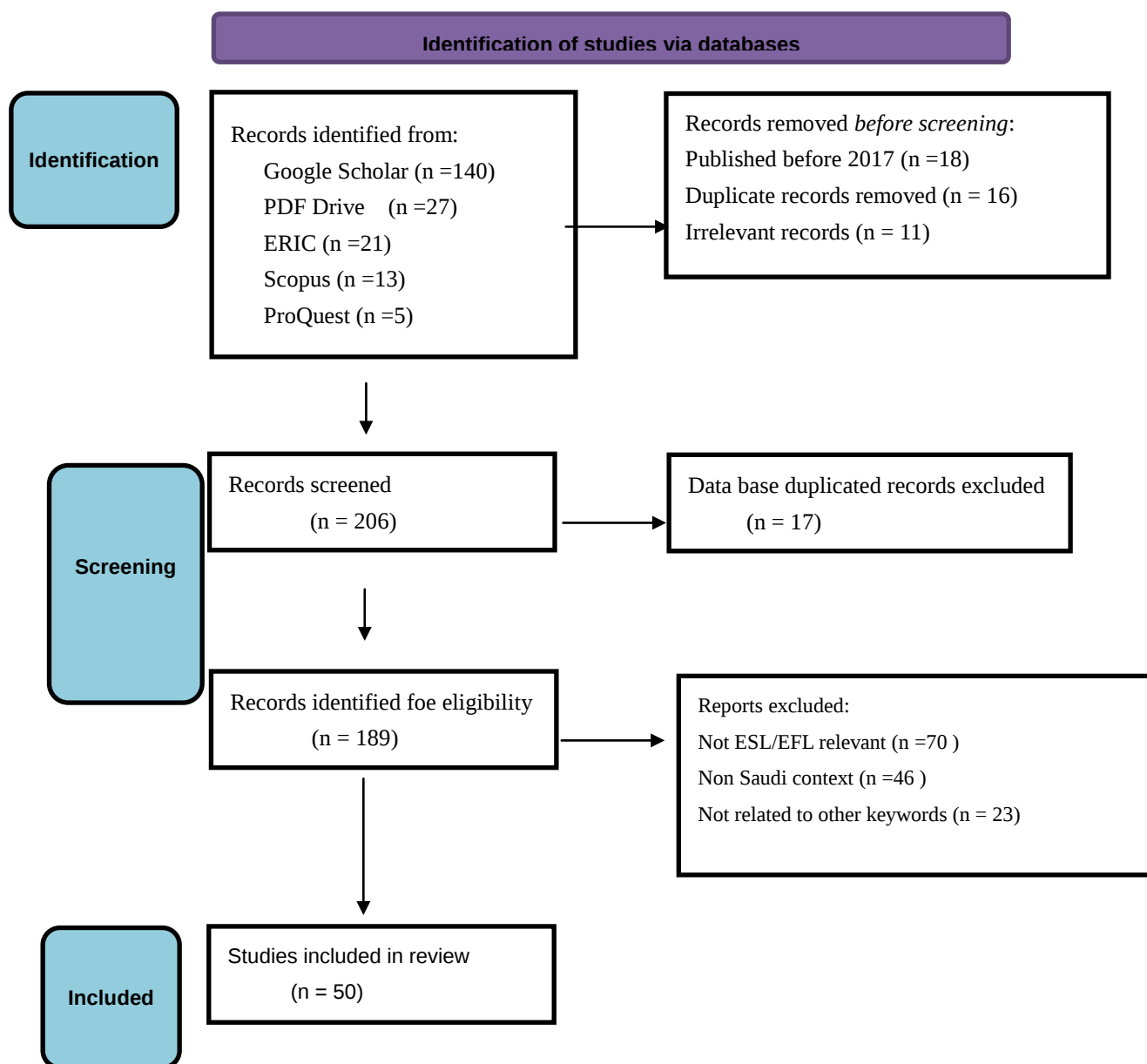


Figure 1. PRISMA diagram for identification, screening, and inclusion of selected data

3.2 Data Extraction from the Selected Articles

Once 50 articles were screened and selected for review, their credentials and contents were reviewed, including basic referencing information of the study (author(s) names, publication year, and journal/source of publication); the key information such as research aim(s), context, methodology, major findings and interpretations; and recommendations.

3.3 Thematic Analysis

Following a rigorous initial review, a coding framework was developed and applied to identify recurring topics and themes for each study objective. These themes were further analyzed to identify sub-themes, providing deeper, more systematic insights.

3.4 Limitations of the Study

As a semi-systematic review, this study is confined to synthesizing existing published research and does not include primary data collection, which limits its capacity to capture real-time classroom practices or stakeholder perspectives directly. The inclusion criteria restricted the search to peer-reviewed articles published between 2017 and 2026, potentially excluding earlier foundational work and relevant grey literature, such as institutional reports or unpublished theses that may contain valuable implementation data. The database search was limited to Google Scholar, Scopus, ERIC, PDF Drive, and ProQuest, which may have omitted studies indexed in other repositories. The qualitative thematic analysis approach, while appropriate for synthesis, involves interpretive decisions that may

introduce the researcher's unconscious subjectivity. The exclusive focus on the Saudi EFL/ESL context limits the generalizability of the findings to other regional or global ELT settings. Finally, the exclusion of non-English studies and those not directly aligned with the formulated keywords may have narrowed the scope of pedagogical insights captured.

4. Results and Descriptive Analysis

The study set out to meet carefully formulated objectives, including documenting and synthesizing contemporary ELT policies in KSA and their relevance to English teaching and learning, current developments in ELT pedagogical practices, and factors hindering effective ELT practices. Finally, following a detailed review of the literature, actionable strategies and best practices aligned with Vision 2030 were proposed.

To achieve this, the 50 screened studies were grouped by stated objectives during the preliminary review stage. Each group was then meticulously reviewed to identify recurring topics, which were classified as sub-themes. The following table presents the identified sub-themes.

Table 2. Sub-themes identified

	Main theme	Sub-themes
1	Contemporary ELT policies in KSA and their relevance to ELT	• Policy formalization, governance, and policy absence. • Language, identity, and Arabic preservation • English as human capital for Vision 2030 • Quality assurance and standards alignment
2	Current developments in ELT pedagogical practices	• Student-centered and communicative pedagogy • Digital, AI, corpus, and data-driven ELT • Translanguaging and bilingual practice • Intercultural and ESP-oriented instruction
3	Factors hindering effective ELT practices	• Structural and institutional constraints • Teacher preparation and professional development • Learner centered intrinsic and extrinsic constraints

4.1 Contemporary ELT Policies in KSA and Relevance to English Teaching and Learning

The current section presents the chronological developments in ELT policy in Saudi Arabia and the relevant issues: language, identity, and Arabic preservation; English as a driver of human capital for economic development; workforce readiness; and quality assurance and alignment of standards across curricula, assessment, and teacher preparation.

4.1.1 Policy Formalization and Governance

As indicated in the critical review, over time, English language policy in Saudi Arabia has shifted from a limited, grammar-focused subject to a strategically promoted national resource. Early ELT was introduced without a fully established curriculum in the pre-1960s period, then became more formalized in the 1950s and expanded with the oil-driven growth of the 1970s and 1980s, when English-medium instruction began to appear in higher education, especially in science and professional fields (Al-Seghayer, 2024; Almesaar, 2024). Later reforms widened English provision from grade six in 2004 to grade one in 2021, indicating a clear policy shift toward earlier exposure and a stronger national emphasis on English (Jabeen, 2023). With Vision 2030, English was reframed from a foreign school subject into a strategic asset for economic diversification, workforce readiness, tourism, and international competitiveness, which also explains the growing focus on teacher training, curriculum modernization, and digital integration (Albiladi, 2022; Alfahadi, 2019; Al-Seghayer, 2023).

However, the recent policy cluster shows that, although English is widely used across Saudi higher education, governance remains largely informal, fragmented, or self-driven. The main reason this policy development remains uneven is that many English departments still rely on informal or self-derived language policies rather than coherent national guidance, creating a continuous gap between reform ambition and classroom implementation (Alnasser, 2022; Alnasser & Almoailly, 2022; Alomaim, 2024). Critically, this means the “policy problem” is not simply the absence of policy, but the absence of policy coherence. When rules are verbal, flexible, or inconsistent, they can support local adaptation, but they also normalize ambiguity and weaken accountability. That tension is especially visible in distance learning and out-of-classroom communication, where language use becomes even harder to regulate.

4.1.2 Language, Identity, and Arabic Preservation

Another recurring theme is the symbolic tension between English modernization and Arabic identity. Elyas and Badawood, Almesaar (2024), show that English is increasingly valued as an economic and educational resource, yet policy discourse continues to protect Arabic as a marker of religious and national authenticity.

The critical issue here is that identity is often treated as a zero-sum concern, as if stronger English automatically means weaker Arabic. The

newer studies are more subtle (Al-Seghayer, 2023, 2024): they imply that the real challenge is not English itself but the absence of an additive bilingual framework that can protect Arabic while still giving English functional power in education and work.

4.1.3 English as Human Capital for Vision 2030

A third policy subtheme is the reframing of English as a form of human capital. Albiladi (2022), Al-Malki et al. (2024), Alfahadi (2019), Banafi (2025), Yusuf (2017), and Alqahtani and Albidewi (2022) all position English as essential to employability, internationalization, tourism, higher education, and economic diversification. The policy implication is thus clear: English is no longer treated only as a school subject but as part of the human capital logic of Vision 2030.

The critical point is that this human-capital framing is both persuasive and instrumental. It bolsters the case for English reform, yet it can narrow the purpose of language learning to economic utility alone. Several studies implicitly resist that reduction by linking policy to intercultural competence, cultural openness, and social participation rather than to labor-market outcomes alone.

4.1.4. Quality Assurance and Standards Alignment

A dearth of critical analysis was observed in this area, as only a few studies examined key policy strands and assessed whether ELT programs actually meet the declared standards and regulations. Alrwele (2018), Alotaibi (2019), and Aben Ahmed (2025) show that policy relevance depends not only on declarations but also on whether program standards, accreditation, and teacher-preparation systems are aligned with classroom practice. These studies consistently expose a discrepancy between policy aspirations and operational quality assurance.

This theme is critical because it exposes a recurring weakness in reform discourse: policy success is frequently assumed upon its issuance. These studies show that without implementation monitoring, accreditation alone does not guarantee the envisioned improvements in pedagogy or stronger learner outcomes.

4.2 Current Developments in ELT Pedagogical Practices

The current section reviews the main developments in ELT pedagogical practices in Saudi Arabia and their related issues: the move toward student-centered and communicative teaching; the growing use of digital, AI, corpus-based, and data-oriented tools; the increasing acceptance of translanguaging and bilingual practice; and the expansion of intercultural and ESP-oriented instruction.

4.2.1 Shift from Teacher-Centered to Student-Centered and Communicative Instruction

Across the corpus, one of the clearest pedagogical shifts is away from teacher-centered, exam-driven instruction toward interactive and learner-centered teaching. Task-based learning, experiential learning, and methods that support autonomy, engagement, and practical use are argued against previously held traditional focuses (Ahmed, 2018; Abdulmughni, 2019; Alomaireeni, 2024; Al-wossabi, 2023). The deeper implication is that Saudi ELT is moving from “knowing about English” to “using English for communication.”

However, the literature also shows that this shift remains mostly unattained and uneven, as classroom practice is still shaped by older assessment logics and institutional expectations that reward coverage over interaction. The realization of this shift is only possible if pedagogy becomes more experiential, task-based, and supportive of learner autonomy. At the same time, the literature suggests that pedagogical innovation is effective only when supported by teacher training, institutional readiness, and curriculum design that reflect local multilingual realities and Vision 2030 priorities (Almayez, 2022; Alharbi, 2024; Almegren, 2025; Al-Malki et al., 2022).

4.2.2 Digital, AI, Corpus, and Data-Driven ELT

A second development is the rising enthusiasm for technology, particularly over the past decade, which aligns with the ELT policy and the objectives of Saudi Vision 2030. Several studies point to digital tools, AI, corpus-based learning, and data-informed methods as ways to improve engagement, vocabulary retention, and individualized learning. Albiladi (2022), AlFares (2024), Alhazmi (2022), Jalaluddin (2025), Alharbi (2024), Alrashidi (2022), and Elmahdi et al. (2025) present a strong move toward digital, AI-assisted, corpus-based, and data-driven instruction. This pedagogical trend advocates personalization, engagement, and authentic language use.

But all of these studies warn that technology succeeds only when teachers are trained, and the infrastructure is adequate. It is consistently noted that training, infrastructure, digital literacy, and pedagogical integration matter more than the tool itself, so technology is best understood as an enabler rather than a reform in itself.

4.2.3 Translanguaging and Bilingual Classroom Practices

Another pedagogical theme that emerged through the literature review is the progressive acceptance of translanguaging and bilingual flexibility. The analysis shows that many teachers and learners recognize the practical value of Arabic in scaffolding understanding, even when institutional ideology still leans toward English-only practice. These researchers believe that translanguaging and bilingual flexibility can boost comprehension, confidence, and participation, especially in policy contexts where learners already use Arabic as a learning resource (Abdulmonem & Alanazi, 2025; Almayez, 2022; Alomaim, 2024; Alqahtani, 2022; Masrahi, 2023).

This theme is related to one of the most interesting tensions in the history of ELT methods, approaches, and beliefs. Translanguaging is not simply a classroom technique; it challenges monolingual ideology. The studies show that teachers may support it in principle but still avoid it in practice because policy and professional norms have not caught up with what learners actually need. In a nutshell, the critical review

establishes that both teachers and students viewed translanguaging positively, especially for comprehension, participation, and vocabulary learning, but teachers used it only selectively and informally rather than as a planned pedagogical strategy. This pattern suggests that Saudi EFL classrooms need clearer guidance on translanguaging, stronger teacher preparation, and more structured bilingual practice.

4.2.4 Intercultural and ESP-Oriented Instruction

The fourth pedagogical subtheme that emerged is contextualized and needs-based teaching. A number of studies (Al-Malki et al., 2022; Almegren, 2025; Rehaieem & Hussain, 2022) show that culture, pragmatics, and sector-specific English are essential for Saudi learners to function in tourism, university, and global communication settings. Almegren (2025) adds that Saudi university EFL programs still show a gap between support for intercultural communicative competence and its actual classroom implementation, especially in pragmatics, politeness strategies, and speech acts. The review also shows that contextualized student-centered interventions, authentic intercultural exposure, telecollaboration, and explicit pragmatic teaching improve both language development and intercultural understanding (Albiladi, 2022).

The critical point is that these studies reject the one-size-fits-all approach to ELT. They suggest that a national Vision 2030 agenda requires multiple Englishes in practice, meaning that general English, academic English, and ESP should be aligned with actual institutional and labor-market needs rather than forced into a single, uniform curriculum model. It is argued that English teaching in Saudi Arabia should combine authentic materials, digital learning, cooperative work, cultural openness, and labor-market alignment. In that framework, Vision 2030 is far more than a policy slogan; it is a practical rationale for preparing learners for university study, occupational communication, and cross-cultural participation.

4.3 Factors Impeding Effective ELT Practices

This section discusses the real-world obstacles that stop English language teaching from moving from policy plans to actual classroom practice. It focuses on four main areas: overcrowded classes and insufficient teaching time; insufficient teacher training and limited chances for professional development; student problems such as low motivation, anxiety, and the influence of Arabic; and, finally, the gap between policy and practice, including unstable staffing and informal language management.

4.3.1 Structural and Institutional Constraints

When the real context of ESL/EFL teaching and learning practices is considered, many structural and institutional constraints are brought to discussion in KSA context-based studies. Major obstacles emphasized include packed classrooms, limited contact hours, rigid textbooks, and assessment systems that reward recall over communication. Researchers also noted that the textbook's size and the pressure to cover its content pushed them toward rapid coverage rather than meaningful interaction, diminishing their capacity to use supplementary materials or adapt instruction to learners' needs. The studies (Ahmed & Alotaibi, 2019; AlFares, 2024; Al-wossabi, 2023) consistently show that even good pedagogy is hard to sustain when the timetable, classroom size, and test format all work against it. These are not isolated classroom problems, but system-level constraints that block communicative teaching.

This position is critical because it shifts the blame away from individual teachers. The literature makes clear that poor outcomes are often the result of system design, not teacher effort alone.

4.3.2 Teacher Preparation and Professional Development

Given contextual constraints, teacher preparation and professional development emerge as other major barriers, as ELT reforms cannot succeed when teachers are expected to implement communicative, student-centered, and policy-driven practices without adequate training (Ahmad, 2025; Jabeen, 2023; Pacino & Qureshi, 2021). The problem is not only the absence of workshops but also their limited depth and duration. Many of the available sessions were short, while teachers still reported the need for specific skills. Earlier historical evidence also suggests that teacher preparation has often relied on short-term courses rather than sustained professional development, leaving teachers underprepared for current reform demands (Ahmad, 2025; Al-Seghayer, 2024; Pacino & Qureshi, 2021).

As a result, ELT implementation remains uneven, with teachers often unable to translate policy goals into efficient classroom practice. Professional development is therefore not a peripheral support; it is a core condition for successful ELT reform.

4.3.3 Learner-Centered Intrinsic and Extrinsic Constraints

Another issue raised concerns learner-centered intrinsic and extrinsic constraints, which refer to personal and environmental factors that limit students' willingness and opportunities to engage meaningfully with English. Saudi studies show that many learners face low motivation, anxiety, stress, and negative attitudes toward English, which reduce classroom participation and weaken overall achievement (AlFares, 2024; Al-wossabi, 2023). Learners also have limited exposure to English outside the classroom, so English often is still a subject to pass rather than a language to use, which weakens spontaneous practice and confidence (Alnasser & Almoaily, 2022; Al-wossabi, 2023). Native-language interference adds another barrier, because students frequently transfer Arabic structures into English and struggle with pronunciation, vocabulary, and pragmatic use (Al-Mohanna, 2024).

At the same time, the evidence suggests that these constraints are not purely internal to learners. Institutional conditions, such as limited opportunities to use English, minimal out-of-class practice, and weak policy support, intensify learners' reluctance and make English feel disconnected from real communication. For this reason, effective ELT must address both learner psychology and the learning environment, building motivation, reducing anxiety, and creating more authentic chances to use English (Almohaimeed & Nasser, 2022). The critical

implication is that learner weaknesses should not be treated as fixed deficits. Several studies point toward environment, pedagogy, and expectation as the real levers for change, which means motivational reform has to be designed, not assumed. As long as policy ideology remains detached from learner needs and teacher practice, reform will remain partial.

4.4 Critical Discussion and Recommended Actionable Strategies

The discussion that follows brings together three interconnected strands of evidence: contemporary ELT policies in Saudi Arabia and their significance to current instructional goals; emerging pedagogical practices reshaping classroom delivery; and the structural and learner-level factors that continue to limit effective implementation. Policy studies reviewed show that Saudi English departments often operate through implicit or self-derived language practices, yet they also indicate a growing readiness to formalize English-language use in ways that support internationalization, consistency, and a clearer institutional identity. At the pedagogical level, the evidence points to more learner-centered and context-responsive approaches, including the use of authentic materials, digital integration, cooperative learning, translanguaging, and curricular alignment with labor-market needs. At the same time, the findings make it clear that overcrowded classes, limited instructional time, weak professional preparation, low learner motivation, anxiety, native-language interference, and unstable staffing continue to obstruct meaningful ELT reform. Taken together, these themes lay the groundwork for the concluding discussion of proposed actionable strategies and best practices.

4.4.1 Actionable Strategies and Reforms Aligned with Vision 2030

Grounded in the study's critical review, analysis, and findings, a set of context-appropriate actions and best practices is offered to make English teaching more practical, responsive, and nationally relevant. These actionable strategies are closely aligned with the key themes identified from the contextual analysis of ESL/EFL education in Saudi Arabia, spanning from policy development to its practical implementation and every aspect deemed crucial in between. These strategies are categorized into specific reform areas: policy, curriculum, professional development, pedagogy, and technology, as outlined in the following table:

Table 3. Proposed strategies and the responsible stakeholders

	Reform areas	Recommended reformations
Proposed actionable strategies and best practices	Policy	Formalize policy, but make it context-sensitive
	Curriculum	Reform curriculum, assessment, and materials
	Professional development	Invest in sustained professional development and teacher induction
	Pedagogy	Employ bilingual, translanguaging, and culturally responsive pedagogy strategically
	Technology	Implement technology integration, but pair it with pedagogy

As evident from the table above, the reforms and strategies exhibit intricate interrelationships and interdependence among multiple stakeholders. Hierarchically, the Ministry of Education (MoE) is the supreme authority responsible for forming national ELT policies for public and private education. It determines the curriculum, study plans, and teaching methods, including the 2021 initiative to introduce English in the first grade. Then, there are a number of government bodies that are involved in the implementation and evaluation of ELT policies, including but not limited to the Education Policy and Planning Department, National Center for Assessment (Qiyas), National Center for Curriculum Development, Agency of General Education, Education and Training Evaluation Commission (ETEC), Higher Education Institutions, all the way down to schools, teachers, educationists, and researchers. The following recommendations for more productive, context-appropriate ELT practices address the pivotal role each stakeholder plays.

4.4.1.1 Formalize Policy, but Make It Context-Sensitive

Firstly, developing explicit English language policies (ELPs) at the national and institutional levels is imperative to address the complex realities of bilingualism and institutional diversity. Research underscores that effective language policy should move beyond aspirational statements to provide actionable guidance for practice. A well-designed ELP should delineate the contexts in which English is to be foregrounded, identify situations in which Arabic serves as a pedagogical scaffold, and establish mechanisms for consistently applying language expectations and practices across each level of English and across teaching and learning contexts. An additive, contextually responsive policy—one that articulates clear parameters for English use while enabling strategic multilingual support, translanguaging, and context-specific adaptation—constitutes a more empirically defensible approach to enhancing educational access and learning outcomes (Almohaimeed & Alnasser, 2022). The formalization of such policies is particularly salient in the Saudi context, where empirical evidence indicates that English teaching and learning often rely on implicit, self-formulated practices, leading to notable inconsistencies in language use and instructional approaches (Alnasser, 2022; Alnasser & Almoaily, 2022). Thus, the establishment and rigorous implementation of explicit, institution-wide ELPs is essential for minimizing institutional variation and achieving greater coherence in English language practice and pedagogy.

4.4.1.2 Reform Curriculum, Assessment, and Materials

Secondly, in the process of reforming English language policies (ELPs), it is critical to ensure that the curriculum, assessment, and instructional materials are systematically aligned with both linguistic and communicative objectives and labor-market demands. Research identifies the integration of authentic materials, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) design, practical assessment modalities, and task-based content as the most effective avenues for reform (Albiladi, 2022; AlFares, 2024; Al-Malki et al., 2022; Al-wossabi, 2023). The prevailing

consensus advocates calibrating English instruction to address labor-market requirements rather than adhering to abstract, textbook-driven coverage. Further, revising curriculum, assessment practices, and materials is imperative, as empirical evidence indicates that many extant ELT frameworks continue to emphasize coverage, rote memorization, and grammar-centric instruction at the expense of communicative competence, authenticity, and learner development. Analyses of Saudi coursebooks reveal that, despite the inclusion of more multicultural and communicative tasks in recent materials, educators continue to report persistent misalignments between textbook content, instructional time, and learners' actual needs. Assessment practices likewise require a paradigmatic shift from exam-oriented recall to more holistic measures, such as portfolios, presentations, and task-based performance assessments, all supported by materials that are localized, authentic, and attuned to the cultural and professional realities of Saudi learners. These measures will motivate learners, both directly and indirectly, to engage in meaningful EFL/ESL learning, thereby minimizing the intrinsic and extrinsic constraints they generally face. Ultimately, curriculum reform must be substantive rather than superficial; curriculum, instructional materials, pedagogical approaches, and assessment strategies should function as a coherent and integrated system that facilitates meaningful language learning, rather than as isolated technical components.

4.4.1.3 Invest in Sustained Professional Development and Teacher Induction

Reforms in English language policies (ELPs), curriculum, and instructional materials cannot be fully actualized without a highly qualified, well-trained, and adequately supported teaching workforce. Empirical research emphasizes that sustained professional development and robust teacher induction are essential, as ELT initiatives frequently falter when educators are expected to implement innovative methodologies without sufficient training, confidence, or continuity. Saudi evidence reveals significant deficiencies in both pre-service and in-service teacher preparation; many instructors report a lack of prior EFL/ESL training, absence of professional development workshops, and no relevant certification, while others receive only brief, fragmented sessions (Alqahtani & Albidewi, 2022; Jabeen, 2023; Khawaji, 2022; Pacino & Qureshi, 2021). These challenges are compounded by weak induction processes and unstable staffing patterns, with high attrition rates exacerbated by inadequate cultural orientation and limited institutional support, thereby undermining the sustainability of reform. The policy implication is unequivocal: teacher development must be conceptualized as a continuous, systemic process rather than a sporadic, one-off intervention. To realize Vision 2030 EFL/ESL targets, ongoing professional learning, specialized ELT preparation, and induction programs are necessary to equip teachers with practical pedagogical skills, effective classroom management, and context-sensitive strategies. Crucially, professional development should be directly aligned with institutional policy objectives—whether translanguaging, digital pedagogies, ESP, or critical thinking—so that training is transformative rather than merely symbolic.

4.4.1.4 Employ Bilingual, Translanguaging, and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy Strategically

Consistent with the aforementioned reforms, bilingual and translanguaging pedagogies must not be construed as unregulated allowances for L1 usage, but rather as principled, scaffolded instructional strategies. Empirical evidence indicated that while many faculty members endorse translanguaging in theory, they are frequently constrained by institutional English-only policies, prevailing cultural sensitivities, and a lack of systematic pedagogical guidance or training on the strategic deployment of Arabic (Almayez, 2024). Proposed approaches to bilingual integration continue to encounter resistance from entrenched monolingual paradigms and thus warrant further empirical investigation and formalization prior to large-scale implementation. Concurrently, curriculum and materials reform should embed culturally responsive tasks that bridge English-language content with Saudi students' cultural and societal schemas, thereby enhancing learner engagement and contextual relevance (Albiladi, 2022; Almegren, 2025). Crucially, the advancement of Saudi ELT requires transcending dichotomous ideological debates over English-only versus Arabic-only orientations. The more robust position is additive bilingualism: sustaining Arabic, expanding the functional reach of English, and leveraging both languages as assets for participation in a globalized yet locally anchored society. Accordingly, it is recommended that translanguaging and culturally responsive pedagogies be institutionalized within ELT practice, contingent upon comprehensive teacher training, explicit instructional frameworks, and an additive approach that safeguards Arabic identity while fostering English proficiency.

4.4.1.5 Implement Technology Integration, but Pair it with Pedagogy

In response to rapid technological advancement, educational paradigms must continually adapt to meet contemporary demands and prepare learners to participate effectively in a globalized environment. This imperative is particularly salient for EFL and ESL teaching and learning. The extant literature on educational technology emphasizes a critical principle: digital tools yield meaningful impact only when integrated within robust pedagogical frameworks (Elmahdi et al., 2025). While innovations such as artificial intelligence, corpus-based tools, data-driven learning, and digital platforms have the potential to enhance learner engagement and linguistic competence, their efficacy depends on the availability of appropriate curricula, resources, and sustained institutional support. Equally important is educators' capacity to use these technologies effectively, which requires targeted professional development and institutional endorsement. For Saudi ELT, the priority is not merely the proliferation of technological resources but the strategic alignment of technology, curriculum, teacher competencies, and localized educational objectives (Almuhammadi, 2024). In the absence of such alignment, technological adoption risks becoming superficial modernization rather than substantive reform. Moreover, system-level barriers—including rote-based assessment models, oversized classes, and inconsistent digital infrastructure—must be addressed by implementing performance-based assessments, manageable class sizes, and equitable infrastructure support. These reforms should be underpinned by deploying well-trained, responsive teachers to ensure that technological integration meaningfully supports language learning outcomes.

5. Conclusion

This review critically examined the current state of English language teaching (ELT) in Saudi Arabia within the context of Vision 2030, synthesizing evidence from 50 studies via the PRISMA 2020 framework. Four core objectives guided the analysis: evaluating the relevance of ELT policy, analyzing pedagogical developments, identifying obstacles to effective implementation, and proposing actionable, Vision 2030-aligned strategies.

The findings reveal substantial progress in repositioning English as a foundational element for economic and global engagement, reflected in expanded provision, curricular modernization, and investment in teacher training. However, a persistent gap remains between policy aspirations and classroom realities. Many institutions lack coherent, explicit language policies, leading to inconsistency and tension between modernizing English and preserving Arabic. Pedagogically, there is momentum toward communicative, learner-centered, and context-responsive approaches—such as task-based learning, digital integration, translanguaging, and ESP instruction—but these reforms are unevenly adopted and frequently undermined by entrenched assessment systems and inadequate teacher preparation. The study identified system-level design flaws—overcrowded classrooms, rigid textbooks, and assessment regimes that prioritize memorization over communication—as key inhibitors of reform. Teacher development remains fragmented and insufficiently aligned with evolving pedagogical and policy goals. Learner motivation and achievement are further constrained by institutional and environmental factors, rather than solely by individual deficits.

To address these challenges, the actionable strategies recommended for major stakeholders are:

- For policy and planning at the government level: (1) formalize explicit, context-sensitive English language policies at both national and institutional levels to ensure coherence and minimize inconsistencies in practice, leading to more uniform and equitable English language instruction across institutions; (2) systematically align curriculum, assessment, and instructional materials with communicative objectives and labor-market needs through integrated and authentic approaches, resulting in more relevant and practical language learning experiences that better prepare students for real-world demands; (3) establish continuous, policy-aligned professional development and induction to support effective implementation of ELT reforms, thereby enhancing teacher competence, confidence, and sustained engagement with innovative pedagogies; (4) institutionalize additive bilingual and translanguaging pedagogies, embedding culturally responsive strategies that leverage both Arabic and English for meaningful learning, which will increase learner engagement and support both linguistic proficiency and cultural identity; and (5) ensure technology integration that is pedagogically driven, supported by robust infrastructure and sustained teacher training, enabling effective and equitable access to digital resources and improved language learning outcomes.
- For practice at the institutional level: (6) curriculum designers and educators should adopt an integrated system of authentic materials, ESP-aligned content, task-based instruction, and technology integration that is pedagogically grounded. (7) Translanguaging must be institutionalized as a planned, scaffolded strategy rather than an informal concession, supported by explicit instructional frameworks and teacher training. (8) Teachers should be provided with continuous professional development that is directly aligned with institutional policy objectives, including digital pedagogy, translanguaging, and critical thinking instruction.

These interconnected reforms must be implemented as a cohesive ecosystem; isolated interventions are unlikely to yield a sustainable impact.

In conclusion, the advancement of Saudi ELT under Vision 2030 hinges on achieving systemic coherence across policy, pedagogy, teacher development, assessment, and classroom realities. The review emphasizes that genuine, sustainable reform requires interdependence among these elements, with each reinforcing the others. Ultimately, the success of Saudi ELT will depend on the nation's capacity to implement these recommendations holistically, ensuring that English language education becomes a true engine for individual empowerment and national development in a rapidly changing global landscape.

For future research, longitudinal studies are needed to track the long-term impact of policy formalization and pedagogical reforms on learner outcomes. Empirical investigations should examine the effectiveness of additive bilingual frameworks, the scalability of technology-pedagogy integration across diverse institutional contexts, and stakeholder-driven accounts of how top-down policy reforms are mediated at the classroom level.

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