Thesis abstract

Diverging identities: a ‘contextualised’ exploration of the interplay of competing discourses in two Saudi university classrooms

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Abstract of a thesis for a Doctorate of Philosophy submitted to the University of Adelaide, Adelaide, Australia

There has been considerable debate in recent years and criticism levelled both from inside and outside sources at the English curriculum in Saudi Arabia. As the future English school teachers, Saudi University students studying English in Saudi higher institutions and the pedagogies employed by their lecturers are of particular interest in this regard. Some work has been done on Arabic students studying English in other Gulf countries on the social-cultural aspects of attitudes towards learning English as a language and the effect of English culture(s) on Saudi Arabian students and teachers. However, a detailed unpacking of the different cultural influences (both Islamic and Western), and how they are evidenced in policy documents, curriculum, textbooks and pedagogy, remains relatively unexplored. In addition, the effect of the various influences on the teachers’ professional identities, and the students’ learning identities has not been dealt with prior to this thesis.

The resulting case study described, analysed and interpreted the multi-layered complexities at play in the teaching and learning of English in two undergraduate English Major classrooms in one Kingdom of Saudi Arabia University. The data set comprised interviews with both of the teachers, focus groups with students, policy documents, curriculum documents and textbooks, surveys of student perceptions of English language and western culture, classroom observations and student written artefacts.

This thesis shows that, although the characterization of English teaching as operating with a “clash of civilizations” is perhaps too simplistic, a clear distinction can be made between opposing cultural forces which cause conflict in the Saudi Arabian University teaching and learning environment. This thesis provides a unique insight into the interplay of competing “Discourses” within this context.

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https://doi.org/10.5962/p.361658.

View This Item Online: https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/174344
DOI: https://doi.org/10.5962/p.361658
Permalink: https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/361658

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