

# The Elephant in the Room: Is a Nationwide English Language Policy Needed in EFL Contexts? A Study on English Departments in Saudi Arabian Universities

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## Abstract

Both English and Arabic are used in Saudi higher education institutions. Research on English language policies (ELPs) in the Saudi context is limited, highlighting the need for further examination of their implementation and nature. This study investigates the need to introduce a top-down ELP in the Saudi higher education context and the best way to apply this policy from the perspectives of instructors and administrators. A mixed-method approach to data collection was employed: official documentation was analyzed and an online survey, with an open-ended section for faculty members affiliated with Saudi higher education English departments across the country ( $n=210$ ), was employed. Thereafter, semi-structured interviews were conducted with chairpersons and vice-chairs of university English departments ( $n=8$ ). The findings suggest that although the majority of English departments recognize the importance of using ELPs, they have either not introduced them or have practiced them implicitly, with a high degree of flexibility that has led to these policies playing a marginal role in academia. The study concludes by encouraging policymakers to design a unified framework for ELPs with the involvement of representatives from university English departments. Other implications are also discussed.

**Keywords:** language policy, Saudi context, higher education, language use, EFL

## 1. Introduction

Teaching English in an EFL context can be a challenging experience, often because learners have limited exposure to the target language and very few venues to practice English in real-life situations (Alnasser, 2022). Indeed, students' L1 is predominantly used in out-of-classroom interactions and even infiltrates the L2 classroom. This is especially true when the L2 instructors and EFL students share the same first language; in this case, the L1 is mostly used as a tool to facilitate L2 instruction, limiting L2 students' exposure to the target language. There can be many ways to mitigate this problem, one of which is creating an atmosphere in which EFL students practice English both inside and outside the classroom. Since this cannot be achieved solely through the efforts of individuals, such as teachers, school principals, or English department heads, this study calls for the creation of a top-down English policy that is practiced on a large scale by English departments across Saudi Arabia. Although the absence of such policy has led to other problems in academia beyond limited exposure to English, such as the marginalization of non-Arabic speaking staff and poor learning outcomes, very little research has addressed this problem in the local context. Hence, the idiom "the elephant in the room" in this paper's title describes the negligence of this policy to date.

Although creating English-only language policies (ELPs) within English departments in Saudi universities can be challenging since top-down policies are susceptible to resistance by stakeholders (e.g., teachers, students, and parents), taking the initiative and encouraging EFL students to practice English in out-of-class interactions may increase their exposure to English and, in turn, enhance their L2 acquisition. Taking this step would hopefully contribute to solving other challenges encountered by English departments in Saudi Arabia.

The importance of this research stems from its attempt to contribute to improving the overall quality of English departments in EFL contexts and solving the decades-long problem of poor learning outcomes in English teaching in Saudi Arabia. Solving this problem by revising the current language policies has been rarely addressed in the literature. Hence, this study attempts to bridge this gap by answering the following research questions:

Are there statutes governing English language use in higher education in Saudi Arabia? Are instructors aware of their existence?

Should ELPs be enforced in the Saudi higher education system?

What characteristics should the ELPs practiced in the Saudi higher education system have?

Who should be involved in developing these policies?

### *1.1 Literature Review*

In this section, a review the literature of relevance to the current study is provided. First, the section discusses the status of the English language in Saudi Arabia, along with a review of several studies on the language policy in the country. This is followed by a review of the different types of language policies and an exploration of the various language policy processes.

#### *1.1.1 Status of English in Saudi Arabia*

Although the Saudi Constitution states that Arabic is the nation's official language and does not give official status to any other language, English has a seemingly implicit official status as it is used in many domains, such as education, the media, and the linguistic landscape (Al-Asmari & Khan, 2014; Almoaily & Alnasser, 2019; Elyas & Badawood, 2016). Since it was first introduced into the educational system in Saudi Arabia in the 1920s (Elyas & Picard, 2018), the status of English has been ever advancing. The implicit high status of English in Saudi Arabia was supported by the country's openness to the outer world and its economic boom amid the discovery of oil in the twentieth century (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014). Though both the world and Saudi Arabia are becoming less dependent on oil as an energy source and a product for international trade, it seems that English is securing an even higher status in the country. Many arguments support this claim. For instance, the Saudi 2030 Vision website is bilingual, with English serving as a language to introduce Saudi Arabia to the outer world. This is particularly important since the 2030 Vision seeks to exploit tourism as a source of revenue. In addition, most of the recently announced mega projects in Saudi Arabia have been given English names (e.g., Neom, The Line, Oxagon, etc.), highlighting the importance of English, as a global language, to the country's economy. This could be the main reason for the recent Saudi Ministry of Education's decision to start teaching English from Level 1 in public primary schools from the academic year 2021–2022. It should be noted, however, that the increase of the status of English has not been to the detriment of the Arabic language, which the Saudi government is taking practical steps to preserve, both in the educational system and the linguistic landscape (Hudhayri, 2021).

Although English is taught at an early age in Saudi Arabia, English instruction in Saudi public schools and universities needs improvement: Many studies have reported difficulties in achieving the intended learning outcomes of English language teaching in Saudi Arabia (Al-Nasser, 2015; Al-Seghayer, 2014; Al-Shumaimeri, 2003; Almubarak, 2016; Ashraf, 2018). Nevertheless, though the problem of ineffective EFL teaching in Saudi Arabia has been discussed in the literature over the past two decades, and ways to improve students' English learning experience have been suggested, the issue remains today. One possible reason for the persistence of these challenges is that previous solutions have focused more on course design [see Al-Tamimi (2019) and Rahman & Alhaisoni (2013)] and in-class instruction (Al-Seghayer, 2014). Certainly, overlooking the need to create a setting in which students can practice the English language naturally could be a contributing factor to the inability to overcome most of the issues encountered by Saudi EFL instructors and learners. The challenges faced by Saudi EFL learners in public schools become even greater when they join tertiary education, given that Saudi universities place significant importance on English as a communicative language (Elyas & Badawood, 2016) and that most of the scientific programs in Saudi universities use English as a medium of instruction (Rahman & Alhaisoni, 2013). Some Saudi universities, for example, King Saud University, even have minimum English language requirements for all graduate courses. Hence, there is a need for clearer and more carefully planned ELPs in the Saudi educational system that can help achieve the goal of better preparing Saudi students for the job market. The absence of ELPs governing language use in out-of-class teacher-student interactions (Almoaily & Alnasser, 2019) could exacerbate the challenges faced by students in higher education and limit their opportunities to practice English in natural settings. Previous research on ELPs in EFL contexts has suggested that such policies would maximize the opportunities EFL learners have to practice their L2 [see Yang & Jang (2022)].

#### *1.1.2 Types of Language Policies*

Language policies can take many forms, depending on who creates them, what goals they serve, and their documentation. This section briefly defines the types of language policies relevant to the current study, following Johnson's (2013) report on language policy types, which classified language policies into specific dichotomies

(top-down vs. bottom-up, implicit vs. explicit, overt vs. covert, and de jure vs. de facto). The dichotomies relevant to the current study are discussed below.

The first category defines a distinction between top-down and bottom-up language policies. Top-down language policies are created by an authoritative body, and individuals are expected to implement these policies. An example of a top-down policy is Canada's recognition of two official languages, English and French, in federal institutions (Gaspard, 2019). Bottom-up language policies, on the other hand, originate from within communities or institutions, or among activists. Such policies mostly emerge as a form of resistance to top-down policies. An example of a bottom-up language policy is the Sorbian language speakers' language maintenance practices (Dołowy-Rybińska & Ratajczak, 2021). It should be noted that the terms "top-down" and "bottom-up" are, as Johnson (2013) put it, relative, denoting the direction of the policy rather than who created it. Hence, in the current study, a language policy created by the Saudi Ministry of Education and "passed down" to English departments at Saudi universities would be a top-down language policy. By the same token, a language policy created by an English department and passed down to its language instructors would also be considered a top-down language policy.

Another useful way of classifying different types of language policies is by distinguishing between *overt* and *covert* language policies. Overt language policies are explicitly expressed in language policy texts, such as constitutions, official documents, and media discourses. Covert language policies, on the other hand, are implicit—or "intentionally concealed" in Johnson's (2013) words—and can be inferred by officials' or individuals' linguistic practices. An example of a covert language policy is that reported by Gonçalves and Schluter (2017), where an entrepreneur used language policy as a means of limiting interaction between English-speaking US locals and her Spanish-speaking employees. This distinction between overt and covert language policies is relevant to the current study since the overt policy in Saudi Arabia suggests that Arabic is the only official language in the country, while the inferred covert language policy suggests that English also has an official implicit status.

### 1.1.3 Language Policy Layers

Since language policies are created, interpreted, implemented, and appropriated by multiple agents within a community, Hornberger and Johnson (2007) suggested a multi-layered model to understand how the different agents of language policy influence one another. The model was based on an analogy of a sliced onion, in which the outer layers represent government officials, governmental institutions, and state-level decisions. The inner layers of the onion symbolize local institutions where a language policy is practiced. At the center of the onion would be the individuals who put the policy into practice, such as teachers and students. This model, which is widely accepted in the field (Saarinen & Ihalainen, 2018; Wedin, Ros n, & Straszer, 2021) (see also Ricento & Hornberger, 1996), is useful for our understanding of the different forms and processes of various language policies in different settings, especially in cases where the language policies are not documented, for example, the policy investigated in this study. Our understanding of the nature of language policies in English departments in Saudi institutions is informed by the layers model, which researchers use to investigate the interaction of these departments with the staff members, their respective universities, the Ministry of Education, and the different agents in the community. As Hult (2012) posited, studies on micro-level language policies and how such policies are impacted by macro-level policies are the "new wave" of language planning and policy research.

Hornberger and Johnson's (2007) multiple-layers model is also useful when accounting for language policy processes; namely creation, implementation, interpretation, appropriation, and instantiation (Johnson, 2013; Wedin, Ros n, & Straszer, 2021). The need for distinguishing between these various processes stems from the fact that a top-down language policy is not always put into practice in the way it was intended. Sometimes, the intention of the policy creators is open to different interpretations, leading to different practices by the agents impacted by the language policy [see Chang-Bacon (2022), for instance, who reported teachers' different interpretations of language policy in the US]. A top-down language policy may also be resisted by some agents, such as teachers or school principals, leading to either the creation of a new language policy at the classroom or institutional level or appropriating the top-down language policy (Freire, Delavan, & Valdez, 2021).

## 2. Methods

This study was conducted in the Saudi higher education context across the country's five main regions. During data collection, qualitative and quantitative data were gathered by analyzing documentary evidence and employing a survey and semi-structured interviews with eight English language department heads and vice heads.

The survey was built by the authors on an online platform and revised by experts in the field. It was then distributed across the English departments in the regions (by adopting the convenience sampling approach), targeting faculty

with academic ranks ranging from teaching assistants to full professors. Excluding those that were invalid, 210 responses were received. The survey targeted the academic communities of these departments regardless of their demographic background (e.g., nationality, gender, age) in order to obtain a representative sample to address the study's areas of investigation. The survey included three sections: the first explained the purpose of the study, described the research ethics, and inquired about the participants' demographic background; the second introduced the six items of inquiry; and the third was an open-ended section that allowed participants to add any further comments that they wished to. The interviews were conducted in person and via telephone. They included two questions about the importance of ELPs and the authority(s) that should be responsible for their design. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study, how the data will be used, that no risks would be associated with their participation, and that their anonymity was assured. Also, documentary evidence relevant to higher education statutes and decrees is discussed in detail later in this article.

### 3. Results

Before analyzing the data, demographic analysis of the 210 participants was undertaken to determine their various experiences and knowledge in academia and, therefore, confirm that the obtained data provides a global picture of the investigated phenomenon.

#### 3.1 Demographic Background

The majority of the participants (68.8%) were female; 31.3% were male. This result was expected since the official websites of the English departments in Saudi Arabia show that there are more women than men working in these roles. The respondents' ages ranged from 25 to over 60 years old, with the majority being between 36 and 45 years (47.6%) and the second-largest proportion between 25 and 35 yrs. (33.7%). The respondents were of different academic ranks: The majority were lecturers (44.2%), while the sample also included language instructors (32.7%) and assistant professors (17.3%), as well as associate and full professors. Their specialisms were naturally related to the English language, including English literature (40.4%), applied linguistics (31.7%), theoretical linguistics (7.1%), and other interdisciplinary fields related to English (20.8%). The data further showed that the respondents were affiliated with institutions from the five main regions: southern (42.3%), central (31.3%), northern (13.5%), eastern (8.6%), and western (4.3%) Saudi Arabia. In brief, the analysis indicated that the data were obtained from faculty with different traits and from different regions, allowing us to capture the overall status of the current ELPs and generalize the study's findings.

#### 3.2 Analysis of Documentary Evidence

To investigate the language use planning and policies of the higher authority in Saudi Arabia, the Saudi Royal Court, relevant statutes governing higher education in the country were analyzed. The only relevant statute available was approved by the Court in 1993 and titled the "Law of the Council of Higher Education and Universities." There is only one mention of language use in Saudi universities within this statute; specifically, Article 11 states that the "Arabic language is the language of teaching in the universities, and when necessary, it is permissible to teach in another language after obtaining a decree from the relevant council." In 2019, the statute was revised to improve the quality of education and allow for more flexibility in self-government. Again, in this revision, the statute only mentions language policies in Article 54, which is similar to the previous article and states that "the language of teaching in universities is Arabic, and it is permissible—upon the approval of the university's council—to teach in other languages."

In addition, officials in the Ministry of Education and in a few Saudi universities were approached to inquire about any macro implicit/explicit policies and/or written memos concerning ELPs. Additionally, the websites of the legislative authorities governing education in Saudi Arabia were surveyed to find any indications of the existence of English language planning and/or policies. Our investigations revealed that there are no macro policies governing language use in higher education English departments or departments of other disciplines. These findings suggest that Saudi Arabia's higher authorities have no interest in making these policies, or that policymakers prefer to give universities flexibility to devise their own policies. Alternatively, these authorities may have been occupied with other educational policies and, thus, have neglected this issue. It can be argued here that implementing ELPs in English departments may lead to more quality education by regulating language use, which is in line with the new Statute.

#### 3.3 Survey Items

##### 3.3.1 Institutional Expectations for ELPs

The majority of the survey respondents (69%) reported that their departments are expected to have ELPs (either

written or verbal), with a smaller proportion (23%) reporting being unsure of such an expectation, and an even smaller proportion (8%) reporting not being aware of the existence of this expectation at all (Figure 1). It can be speculated here that the majority believe that their departments should have and practice ELPs but that such policies are not officially enforced by the institution (i.e., they are not explicit top-down policies). This is supported by the finding that an important proportion of participants (31%) were either unsure about or disagreed with this notion. It is also possible that some institutions expect their English departments to have ELPs and other institutions do not, which supports the insight that there is a lack of nationwide unified language planning on how the English language should be used in Saudi higher education institutions.

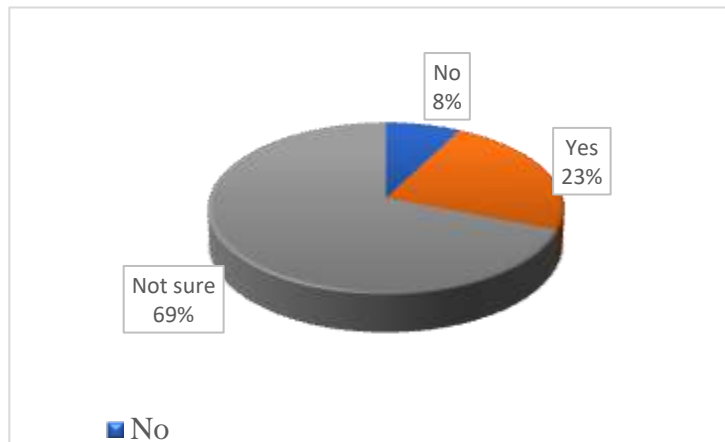


Figure 1. Institutions’ expectations regarding departmental English language policies (ELPs)

### 3.3.2 Departmental Policies Regarding English Language Use outside the Classroom

In response to whether or not their English departments had ELPs to govern its use outside the classroom, the majority (56.2%) reported either that no such policy existed (33.3%) or that they were unsure if it existed (22.9%) (Figure 2). However, a significant proportion (43.8%) reported that their departments did have relevant ELPs. This finding may indicate that some institutions have their own policies that have not been approved by higher governmental authorities, and that other institutions have not considered setting policies governing language use in their departments. Since the findings suggest the existence of such policies in a significant number of English departments, it can be speculated that officially introducing ELPs into these departments may not encounter resistance, and may even be advocated. Moreover, enforcing LPs (such as English-only policies) in these departments may hasten the internationalization of education in Saudi Arabia, in that English departments may become ready to invite international students and faculty on a larger scale.

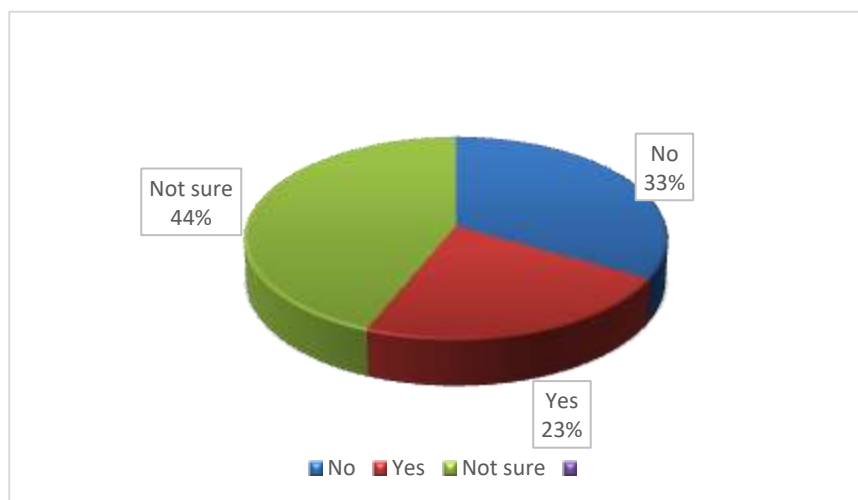


Figure 2. Existence of ELPs outside the classroom

### 3.3.3 Types of Out-of-Class Language Policies

The majority of the respondents reported that their departments had non-documented policies that were agreed upon verbally (28.09%), with a small proportion (14.76%) reporting that their departments had written policies. Many participants (56.19%) opted not to answer this question, possibly indicating the lack of such policies (as suggested by the previous findings; Figure 3). Thus, the dominant type of policy was verbal, suggesting their implicitly un-governed nature. It can also be said that spoken policies are expected to change over time and possibly diminish due to absence of documents governing such policies. It is further possible that written policies are not preferred by certain faculty to allow for flexibility in language use.

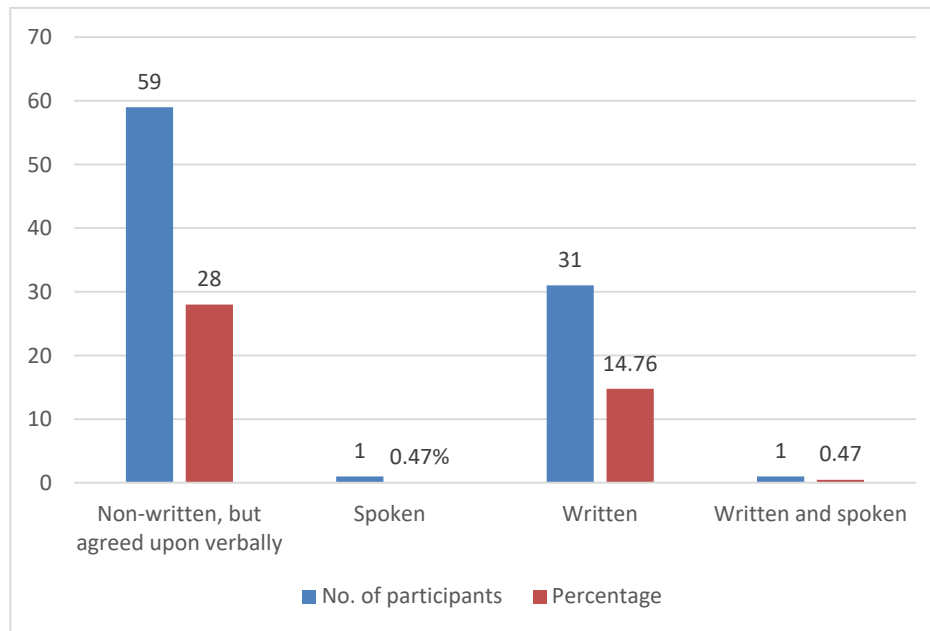


Figure 3. Types of language policies

### 3.3.4 Authorities Responsible for Devising Department Language Policies

In response to which authority/authorities should be developing English language policies, the participants held different views (Figure 4). Specifically, they selected the following options: the department (36.9%); the university and the department jointly (18.2%); the Ministry of Education, the university, and the department (16.7%); the university (13.9%); the Ministry of Education and the university jointly (8.1%); and the Ministry of Education alone (4.3%). The data showed that 73.1% of the participants believed their department “should be involved” in devising the policies that will affect them. Although the Ministry is the highest educational authority in Saudi Arabia, the participants opined that its involvement in devising ELPs should be limited or even excluded. It can be speculated that the participants held that they are the language experts and, therefore, should decide on the form of the policies they will practice. However, the earlier results show that the flexibility in having ELPs led to inconsistent implicit policies or even no policies at all (see Figure 3).

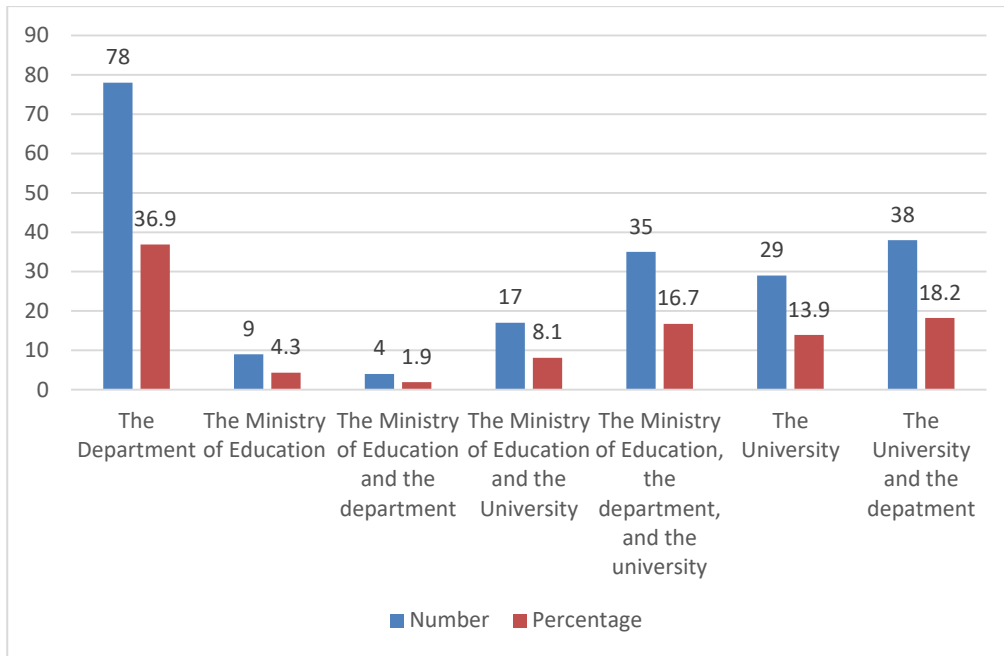


Figure 4. Authorities that should be responsible for devising ELPs

### 3.3.5 The Need for Departmental Language Policies on When to Use English

The vast majority of the participants (91.9%) either strongly agreed (55.9%) or agreed (36%) that English departments in Saudi universities should have ELPs that dictate when English should be used; only 8.1% were either unsure or disagreed with the idea (Figure 5). Interestingly, none of the respondents strongly disagreed with the idea. The results suggest that faculty members recognize the importance of having such policies and seem to be ready to accept them officially. Additionally, the extensive acceptance of these policies may indicate the participants’ desire for clear-cut rules to abide by, rather than “misplaced diligence,” which may lead to conflicts in opinion or a poor working environment.

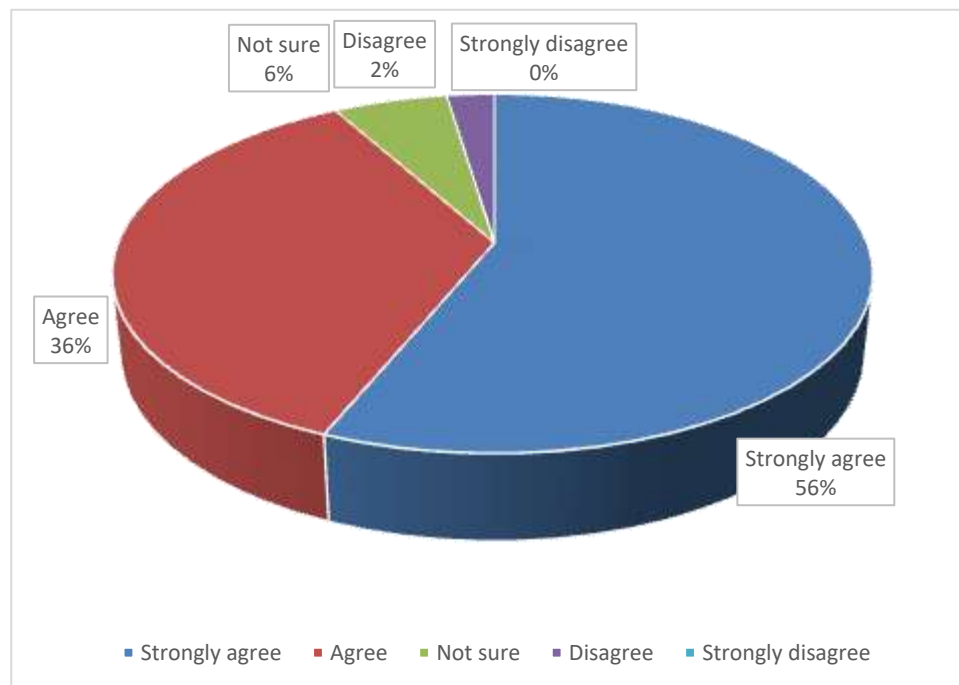


Figure 5. Respondents’ views on whether ELPs are essential

### 3.3.6 Respondents' Views on Whether Institutions Should Require Departments to Have ELPs

In line with the previous results, the vast majority of the participants (90.2%) either strongly agreed (56.6%) or agreed (33.6%) with the idea that English departments should have clear ELPs. A minority (9.8%) was unsure or disagreed that ELPs were necessary, although none of the respondents strongly disagreed with the idea. The results indicate that English department faculty are in need official policies governing language use.

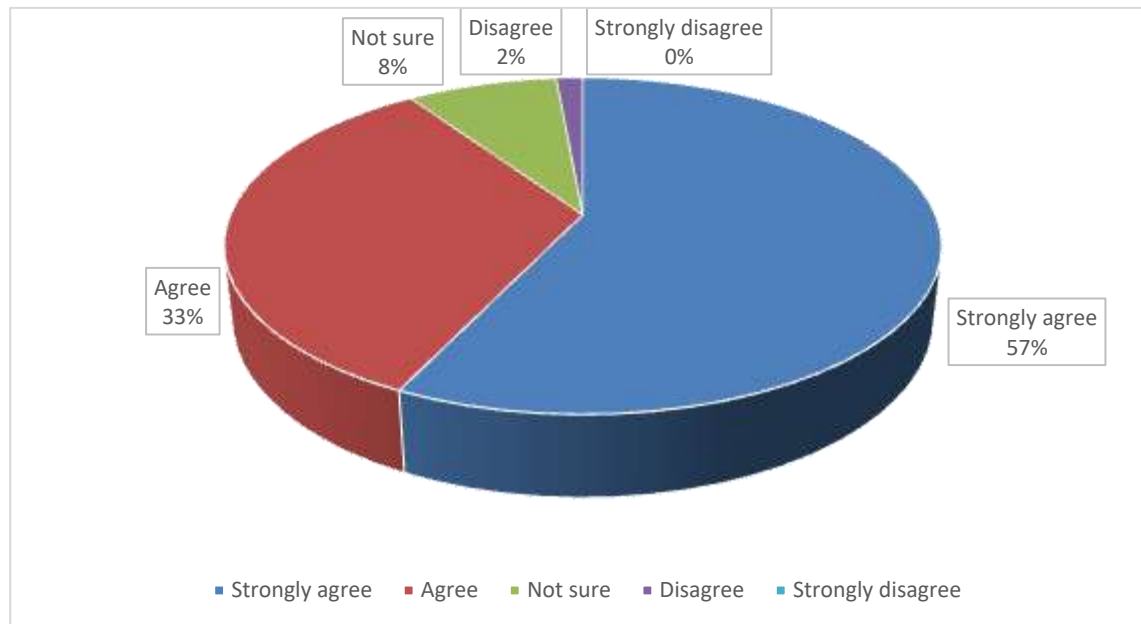


Figure 6. Respondents' views on whether institutions should require departments to have ELPs

### 3.4 Open-ended Section

In this section, participants were given the opportunity to share additional views they had on ELPs in their departments. Ninety-seven participants shared their views; interestingly, all the respondents advocated (directly or implicitly) the importance of ELPs. Approximately half of the comments provided explained that the existence of ELPs is particularly important because they can “create a complete English-language learning environment” that helps in “achieving educational goals.” Several comments posited that ELPs allow for more English language practice for both faculty and students, which explains how they contribute to meeting program learning outcomes. Additionally, a considerable proportion of the comments (around 40%) explained that the respondents' departments include non-Arabic speakers who need to use English to communicate. For example, the participants stated that “English is a must as for ex-pats to communicate” and that “for better comprehension among non-Saudi staff,” English use is necessary to ensure a “clear understanding of academic affairs by non-Arabic speakers.” One more in-depth comment explained, “The department consists of academic staff from diverse language backgrounds, so English as a lingua franca must be there in order to include everyone.” In brief, the findings from this section suggest that faculty in English departments recognize the importance of ELPs for two main reasons: first, to achieve better communication and second, to achieve the department's educational goals.

### 3.5 Interview Results

Chairpersons and vice-chairs were interviewed owing to their administrative roles in running English departments, which provided them with sufficient knowledge and expertise to contribute to our investigation. The eight interviewees were asked to answer the following two questions and elaborate upon them:

1. What is the importance of having language policies in English departments?
2. Which authority should be responsible for designing language policies in English departments?

In answering the first question, all interviewees asserted the importance of ELPs in English departments. Additionally, in response to the second question, all interviewees believed that the English department should be the only authority involved in creating such policies. The interviewees' responses clearly suggest their recognition of the importance of ELPs, and their responses to the second question signaled their dislike of interference by other



authorities in this regard. The interview results are in line with those obtained from the survey. In justifying these responses, some of the interviewees suggested that they know better when it comes to these policies than any other entity and that their deep involvement in creating such policies can ensure the policies' continuing successful development. Moreover, half of the interviewees explained that the application of ELPs can create a suitable working environment for both faculty and students and can ensure the consistency of the practiced policies. The vivid vision the interviewees held regarding ELPs likely pertains to the nature of the administrative positions they occupy, leading them to express authoritative views on the investigated phenomenon.

#### 4. Discussion

In the Saudi context, English is being afforded a higher status each year, leading to increased engagement with the language by different individuals and institutions. This has led to the emergence of ELPs in the Saudi educational context. These policies can play significant roles within an educational setting. This study explored academic faculty members' views on the ELPs in their English departments in order to confirm the need to introduce a unified framework for ELPs to be practiced in both the institutional domain and outside the classroom.

The study analyzed official documentation from the main Saudi legislative authority and found that issues concerning ELPs in the educational system have not been addressed. The survey findings further revealed that the current ELPs in Saudi English departments are unofficial and practiced implicitly, suggesting their arbitrary and flexible nature. Therefore, faculty are unlikely to fully abide by the policies since they are undocumented and have not been officially approved by a higher authority. In different contexts, practicing ELPs is necessary to achieve different purposes; for instance, English departments at Saudi institutions employ non-Arabic-speaking staff who frequently communicate with the majority of other Arabic-speaking members. During different encounters, such as council and committee meetings, this majority may tend to communicate in Arabic, leading to the negligence of non-Arabic speakers. This may not only "marginalize" non-Arabic speakers but can be considered unethical and inconsiderate. Another purpose ELPs can serve is contributing to creating an academic environment in which English can be used professionally and, therefore, encouraging students to practice English freely and in authentic situations, which would, in turn, improve their linguistic skills [e.g., (Ill & Akcan, 2017; Waring, 2013)]. This is particularly important since Saudi higher education is an EFL context, which, consequently, offers insufficient opportunities for language learners to practice English. In fact, the literature has suggested that English learning in the Saudi educational setting is somewhat limited to the classroom and that many language instructors frequently employ the L1 while teaching English (Benson, 2005; Coleman, 2010; Trudell, 2009). Such a lack of opportunities to practice their L2 may hinder individuals' linguistic development.

The findings show that the majority of the surveyed participants view that their departments are expected to have ELPs to regulate language use in their territories. Although this reflects their understanding of the importance of practicing language policies, the participants' departments have not yet officially approved any policies, a scenario that has continued for decades. Consequently, it can be argued that since the English departments have not taken the initiative to enforce their own official policies while recognizing their importance and maintaining the necessary authority, the involvement of higher authorities appears logical. In this regard, 73.1% of the surveyed participants clearly indicated the importance of involving their departments in making ELPs, with 36.9% opining that the English department should be the only authority to develop the policies with which they will be in contact. Such strong views may cause resistance to the involvement of higher authorities in decision-making; however, since official policies have not yet been enforced, their involvement may be critical.

Overall, the study's findings call for policymaker intervention to introduce a unified ELP to be practiced in Saudi higher education English departments. These unified official policies can alleviate stress in the workplace and foster academic environments that can positively impact both faculty members and students. The findings strongly suggest that involving representatives from these departments is critical to ensure the success of the unified framework: Collaboration between policymakers and representatives may yield more suitable and accepted policies. Moreover, the success of ELPs in English departments can be the starting point for transferring their application to departments of other disciplines, which, in turn, may advocate the internationalization of Saudi higher education.

In terms of its limitations, this study did not interview policymakers from the Ministry of Education and Saudi universities (chancellors and vice-chancellors) on their stances regarding the plausibility of officially enforcing ELPs since it was not possible to gain access to them during the data collection period. Future studies are encouraged to seek the views of these policymakers in this regard, as well as their views on the concept of internationalizing Saudi higher education.

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None

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