

Teaching English in Saudi Arabia

Teaching English: Overview

English teachers are in demand in Saudi Arabia as English remains important in obtaining scholarships and employment.

The U.S. Embassy and Consulates in Saudi Arabia do not maintain a database, either formal or anecdotal, of English schools or recruiting agencies in Saudi Arabia. Nor do we maintain lists of websites offering feedback on individual teaching experiences, although many of these do exist and can be found online.

Anyone considering accepting a job teaching English in Saudi Arabia is strongly advised to carefully review the terms of the contract regarding working and living conditions; see more details in the section on contracts below. In the event of any contract dispute, Saudi authorities refer to what is written in the contract. Any modification to the contract should be made as a written amendment. Verbal and unofficial agreements may not be enforceable.

It is highly recommended that you seek out references from persons familiar with the institution, especially former American employees. We further advise Americans to seek employment with a reputable institution, achieve a clear understanding of their visa classification, and negotiate a well-written contract before leaving the United States. American citizens should also read and become familiar with the Country Specific Information for Saudi Arabia:

<https://travel.state.gov/content/passports/en/country/saudi-arabia.html>

Different Expectations

Many types of people teach English in Saudi Arabia. Some are professionally trained, with degrees, others are members of TESOL. Some hold graduate degrees in other disciplines and teach English in Saudi Arabia because they want to experience another culture. Different teachers have different expectations. They bring their own unique perspectives to their jobs and their own reactions to new circumstances. Make sure your prospective employer understands your expectations, and anticipate there may be cultural differences in how these items are defined.

Types of English Teaching Positions Available

Recruitment processes in Saudi Arabia vary. Many teachers are hired directly by universities or other educational entities, but English teachers in particular are often hired through recruitment agencies. Some employers may initially bring in a teacher for a specific position or location, and later want to change the assignment.

English teachers are assigned to work for a wide variety of institutions including:

- Private elementary and secondary schools
- Public Universities
- Private Universities
- Industrial Colleges
- Private Language Centers
- Technical and Vocational Training Colleges

Some of the institutions are located in large metropolitan areas such as Riyadh or Jeddah, while others may be located in remote, traditional, and conservative towns or villages. Teachers are advised to find out or otherwise consider possible locations to which they may be assigned prior to accepting an employment offer.

Learning Environment and Classroom Experience

Classrooms and education in Saudi Arabia carry their own cultural norms, some of which differ from those of U.S. learning institutions. Some schools will have policies against music or certain subjects within the school. Lectures are a common method of instruction, whereas group projects are not as commonly used. Prospective teachers may want to inquire about the local employer's policies on cheating and plagiarism by students before accepting a teaching position, as norms in that area may also differ. In some schools, attendance will heavily influence final grades, whereas in other cases, a teacher's grade to a student is subject to review and modification by management. Teachers should exercise caution when taking photographs or video of female students, as this can be a legal issue. Some female students and teachers are not allowed to bring camera phones into the classroom.

At the university level, many foreign faculty members either teach or do research, making it challenging for those who try to both teach and do research while working in Saudi Arabia. Some universities have consultancy units, through which faculty members, in collaboration with a local national faculty member, can also provide consultancy services in their areas of expertise to government and private organizations.

Visas, "Iqama" Residency Cards, and Sponsors

English teachers in Saudi Arabia receive a wide variety of visas, which largely depend on the request made by the employer. Three of the most common visa scenarios are listed below. It is important for prospective employees to have a clear understanding of their visa classification prior to travelling to the Kingdom.

1. Many teachers receive a 90-day temporary work visa at the time of initial hire, which permits them to enter Saudi Arabia and begin teaching. Some work/visit visas only allow one entry; others permit multiple entries. You are restricted to the limits listed on the

visa, and must obtain a new visa or a residency permit before it expires. Holders of single-entry visas must obtain a new visa to return to Saudi Arabia after a trip abroad, including brief visits to neighboring countries. This has caused complications for some teachers when delays in the visa renewal process have prevented them from returning to their positions.

Note: If the visitor visa has been annotated “not permitted to work,” and the individual takes up work anyway, **there would be no legal grounds to pursue a case against an employer should a dispute arise**. Labor cases in Saudi Arabia are not uncommon and not all employers follow Saudi labor law.

2. Some teachers receive a residence/work visa prior to arrival, which is followed by an “Iqama” or residence card after arrival. This permit is now officially known as a “Muqem”, but the old term persists. The Iqama in combination with a valid exit/reentry visa allows an individual to travel freely to and from Saudi Arabia during the stated validity periods of the two documents. Nevertheless, travel can still be restricted as a result of legal processes or as a consequence of a dispute with an employer.
3. Other teachers receive a work/visit visa to begin teaching, but are later given the option to pursue a residence/work visa. Because holders of work/visit visas cannot transfer to residence/work visas inside the Kingdom, they must leave the country -- often to their home country -- and re-enter to change visa status.

While Saudi law no longer permits employers to keep employees passports, some teachers claim that their passports were retained, which essentially requires them to seek advance permission in order to travel abroad.

The iqama application process may take anywhere from two weeks to two months, during which time the teachers give their passports to the school. In the meantime, the teacher would not be able to leave the country until the iqama has been issued. If an emergency should arise during this process, it is extremely difficult to make arrangements to leave. While the iqama is being processed, the teacher should ask for a letter from the school which explains their status in country should the police stop them for any reason.

Many of your initial errands after moving to Saudi Arabia will require an iqama, such as applying for a local driver’s license (available for men only), setting up a bank account, procuring a mobile phone SIM card, internet, etc. Later, you will need an iqama to receive medical care. Should you decide to stay longer in Saudi Arabia and need to renew your iqama, you will note that your local bank account is tied to your iqama and that you cannot withdraw funds until you notify the bank of the iqama’s renewal.

Saudi labor law and employment practices are vastly different from those in the United States. It is your responsibility to understand local laws and obey them. The Saudi Ministry of Labor provides information for foreign workers on their website. Some Americans have run into

serious legal problems with Saudi Immigration because they take up a teaching position on a visa annotated “not permitted to work”, or overstay their visas based on promises from their employer. Other teachers have stayed in Saudi Arabia after being dismissed by their employers, in an effort to seek other employment. Without the consent and transfer-of-sponsorship by the initial employer, however, these individuals are unable to take up a new assignment before leaving the Kingdom. Furthermore, an individual’s sponsor has the ability to report a teacher as an absconder—a crime that can result in a heavy monetary fine, detention, deportation and a five-year ban on returning to Saudi Arabia. Once a final exit visa has been issued, the employee must depart the country within 60 days or less.

Contracts

Prospective English teachers are advised to negotiate a clear, detailed contract prior to accepting a position in Saudi Arabia; one that addresses specific key issues such as:

- Terms of payment;
- Compensation, check that it reflects the years of experience you bring to the position;
- Paid travel arrangements for you and your accompanying family, if applicable or required by Saudi law;
- Living conditions, whether accommodations are furnished or not, shared or single, and how reimbursement works if applicable; whether the cost of utilities are covered by the employer or the occupant;
- Specifically how many courses you will be teaching and how many hours are included in each course;
- Terms of resignation and/or dismissal;
- Calendar-specified vacation days for which the employee will receive compensation;
- Whether the company will issue a residence or temporary work visa;
- Whether the visa is single or multiple entry;
- Whether the employee will be permitted to retain his / her passport in Saudi Arabia; note: it is illegal under Saudi law for an employer to indefinitely retain your passport; and
- Assignment location and the possibility of being relocated to another part of the country after hiring.

The written Arabic text of a contract governs employment and business arrangements under Saudi law. Before signing a contract, you should obtain an independent translation to ensure a full understanding of the contract’s terms, limits, and agreements. No U.S. citizen should come to work in Saudi Arabia or make a business arrangement without having read and understood the full written contract. Verbal assurances or side letters are not binding under Saudi law. In the event of any contract dispute, Saudi authorities refer to the contract.

Since the Saudi sponsor controls the issuance of exit visas, U.S. citizens cannot always leave Saudi Arabia in the event of a labor or business dispute. A U.S. citizen who breaks an employment or business contract may have to pay substantial penalties before being allowed to

leave Saudi Arabia. To change employers in Saudi Arabia requires the written permission of the original sponsoring employer in most cases, which the sponsor may choose to grant or not. It is extremely rare for the Saudi authorities to intervene in cases where the sponsor will not grant an exit visa.

Saudi courts take their responsibility to adjudicate disputes seriously. This process, which is performed in accordance with Saudi law and customs, should not be entered into without an Arabic translator, can take several months or even years, and may require hiring legal counsel at your personal expense. Persons involved in legal cases are often not permitted to leave the Kingdom until the case has been resolved.

The U.S. Embassy and Consulates cannot adjudicate labor or business disputes or provide translation or legal services. Ultimately, responsibility for the resolution of disputes through the Saudi legal system lies with the parties involved. U.S. consular officers can provide lists of local attorneys who speak English and Arabic to help U.S. citizens settle business disputes. There are also local branches of multi-national law firms handling corporate legal issues in Saudi Arabia, some including attorneys who speak English and Arabic. For additional information on Saudi labor law, please refer to the Saudi Ministry of Labor's information on related regulations.

Most employers promise to provide tickets home upon completion of a contract; however, in the case of a labor dispute, termination or failure to complete a contract, this commitment may not be honored and any travel would then take place at personal expense.

Some teachers are not aware that they may be assigned to work outside Riyadh or Jeddah to a remote location where the local residents are ultra conservative and there are limited opportunities for movement outside the classroom and residence compound.

The 90-day Probation Period

According to several recruiting companies, incoming English teachers usually have a 90-day probation window during which time the employee or employer can freely end the working relationship. The initial visa is typically valid through this period, facilitating departure for most workers. After the 90 day period elapses, an employee who wishes to quit usually must provide 30 days' notice, but check your contract. If the employer wishes to dismiss the teacher, they typically provide 30 days' payment and a flight home. If the teacher quits, s/he may be responsible for his/her own ticket home. Many U.S. citizens are unaware that a probationary period exists and claim this information was not stated in their employment contract.

Housing

While some employers provide a housing allowance, most schools and institutes provide housing for teachers. This can be an apartment (furnished or unfurnished) or as rudimentary as dormitory accommodations, common at some universities, or in remote villages. Before

accepting a job, some have found it helpful to request photos of the interior of the housing accommodation, including all rooms of a personal unit and common/shared facilities for the community. It should be noted that in the case of contract dispute or termination, an employee may be quickly evicted from employer-provided housing.

Working Hours

Most schools/institutes require foreign instructors to teach a minimum of six hours per day or longer, five to six days per week. Some English language teachers have complained that expatriate teachers are often required to work longer hours than local national teachers.

Cultural Differences

Cultural norms in Saudi Arabia differ vastly from those of the United States. Conservative dress codes are strictly enforced (including wearing of an abaya and head cover for women), alcohol and pork products are illegal, as is gender mixing among individuals who are not immediate relatives. Religious police, commonly known as the “mutawwa” often patrol locations frequented by westerners in an effort to enforce cultural norms. Women, in particular, can find their freedom of movement and freedom to pursue everyday activities limited. They may also face harassment in public.

Special Considerations for Women

Housing accommodations may be gender segregated. Single women usually cannot live outside the employer-provided housing. In a rare case, one employer housed single women together in shared apartments.

Women, even foreign women, in Saudi Arabia are not issued driver’s licenses. Women may find themselves isolated and unable to move about freely, depending on taxi or employer-provided transportation to travel or shop. For women living outside of compounds or large cities, this can be even more challenging.

Some employers require that women wear full-body, loose fitting abayas, with some also requiring that their hair be covered; whether this is required while teaching or at any time outside personal quarters may vary based on the particular circumstances of that employer and its campus and housing arrangements. While generally there is a more relaxed dress code in women-only settings, foreign women may still be asked to wear long skirts and long-sleeved tops. At times, some students may complain to school administrators about perceived dress code violations. Many teachers refrain from wearing outwardly visible religious symbols.

Errands, leisure activities, and social interactions are also different than in the United States. Restaurants, banks, utility offices, and other public establishments often have specific sections

for women or families. Facilities without “family” sections are often restricted only to single men. If gym access and sports are important to you, inquire about possibilities with your employer before arriving. Some people have found it helpful to get their employer’s written permission for such activities in advance. Women may not be allowed to wear workout clothes that show their arms or legs if men are present. Membership fees may provide access to female-only gyms on the local economy, depending on the location of employment. Much of the local social interaction is gender segregated; requests from men seeking “English lessons” may actually be attempts to meet foreign women.

Single women, or women not residing in Saudi Arabia with their husbands, should be aware that a senior male at their company may be considered their legal guardian in emergencies or similar cases.

Depending on their visa classification, married women working in Saudi Arabia may not be able to sponsor their non-Saudi husbands. Some married women have found that when their husband joined them in Saudi Arabia and they were moved to his sponsorship, their status changed, and she was listed on his iqama from that point forward.

A married woman should also be aware that she must have her husband's permission for her and their children to depart Saudi Arabia. This is true even if the woman and/or her children are U.S. citizens and even if her husband does not have Saudi nationality. The U.S. Embassy cannot obtain exit visas for the departure of minor children without their father's permission (See Entry/Exit Requirements section in the Country Specific Information on Saudi Arabia).

How the Embassy in Riyadh and Consulates in Dhahran and Jeddah Can Help

The U.S. Embassy and Consulates, by regulation, cannot enter into any civil case, conduct any investigation, or act as a lawyer for any personal mishap or employment dispute experienced by a U.S. citizen. We cannot investigate, certify, or vouch for employers. It is up to each individual to evaluate an employer before signing a contract, and to use common sense when traveling this far, including keeping sufficient funds available to return home should the situation become untenable.

If you find yourself in need of legal help, the Embassy can provide a list of attorneys; however, we are unable to recommend any specific lawyer from this list.

We encourage all U.S. citizens to register and maintain updated accounts with the Embassy and Consulates via the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP), which is accessible at <https://travel.state.gov>. Registration allows us to contact you in the event of an emergency.

We hope that this information has been useful. If you have any problems, please contact the American Citizen Services branch at the U.S. Embassy, Diplomatic Quarters, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia or the Consulates General in Dhahran or Jeddah.

U.S. Embassy Riyadh

Website: <https://sa.usembassy.gov/>

Telephone: (966) (1) 488-3800

Fax: (966) (1) 483-0773

Email: RiyadhACS@state.gov

US Consulate General Dhahran

Website: <https://sa.usembassy.gov/embassy-consulates/dhahran/>

Telephone: (966) (3) 330-3200

Fax: (966)(3) 330-6816

Email: DhahranACS@state.gov

U.S. Consulate General Jeddah

Website: <https://sa.usembassy.gov/embassy-consulates/jeddah/>

Telephone: (966) (2) 667-0080

Fax: (966)(2) 669-3098

Email: JeddahACS@state.gov

Please visit the nearest U.S. Consulate or Embassy's website for appointment information and public service hours.

Other Sources of Information

These links are intended for general informational purposes only; the information on these web sites does not reflect the views of the U.S. government, nor is it an endorsement of any organization listed or views expressed therein.

<http://www.saudiembassy.net/>

http://www.1001arabian.net/saudi_arabia/saudi_arabia_info.htm

<http://www.teachaway.com/teaching-english-saudi-arabia/>