

FACTORS SUPPORTING THE LEARNING OF ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AMONG SAUDI ARABIAN TERTIARY LEVEL STUDENTS

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Abstract

In this article the author focuses on the factors supporting Saudi Arabian tertiary level students in learning the English language. The article discusses government initiatives, parental support, classroom atmosphere, and teachers' encouragement at elementary and tertiary levels of English language learning. A questionnaire with close-ended questions on a four-point Likert scale was administered to collect data. The findings showed that, English should be taught from grade one at the elementary level, and qualified English teachers are required there. In terms of supporting factors, family awareness and support is essential. The findings also shows that parents should care about the language proficiency of their children rather than grades in examinations.

Key words: English as a foreign language, parental support, learning atmosphere, teachers' encouragement, language proficiency

Introduction

The education system in Saudi Arabia has been changing over the last decade as it focused on a "knowledge based economy" (Faruk 2014: 74), which is also reflected in their Vision 2030.

Vision 2030 is built around three themes: A vibrant society, a thriving economy and an ambitious nation. This first theme is vital to achieving the vision and a strong foundation for economic prosperity.

In the second theme, a thriving economy provides opportunities for all by building an education system aligned with market needs and creating economic opportunities for the entrepreneur, the small enterprise as well as the large corporation.

The third theme is built on an effective, transparent, accountable, enabling and high-performing government. (Al Arabiya 2016)

Therefore, briefly we can say that Vision 2030 of Saudi Arabia focuses on vocational training, innovative advanced technologies, entrepreneurship, market needs, and multi-faceted education in Saudi Arabia.

As it is mentioned in the first paragraph that Saudi Arabia is switching towards knowledge based economy, it is already proven that “knowledge is available only in English not in Arabic” (Faruk 2014: 177). The ninth development plan (2010-2014) of Saudi Arabia has also clearly stated that. At the policy level Saudi think tanks have already realized that the more “the state moves toward the core-zone of world economy, the more English is needed” (Faruk 2014: 177) as stated below:

This distinctive situation is seen as a result of the economic and political interdependence between the Arab countries and the other nations of the world, which necessitated the Arab countries to acquire a linguistic access to the Western World in order to enter into business alliances with most of the English speaking countries (Ebrahim & Awan 2015: 194).

Therefore, special attention has been given to English education from elementary to tertiary levels in Saudi Arabia. Many universities in Saudi Arabia and other agencies including the Ministry of Education have shown keen interest in providing opportunities to learn the English language (Ebrahim & Awan 2015: 194).

Though in terms of policy, budget allocation, and infrastructure development the changes are satisfactory, for instance, “[the] government is increasing the expenditure of the education market by an average 12% per year since 2007” (Euromonitor 2013), however, students expectation of and attitude towards English language learning are not up to the mark.

In spite of advancing day by day in the field of education, the level of achievement in learning English as a foreign language is far below the standards (Rahman & Alhaisoni 2013: 114) required by the government. It is found in the research that “Saudi learners of English see no link between their efforts and the desired goal” (Al-Seghayer 2014: 14). They learn English just to pass the final exams because it is a required subject (Al-Seghayer 2014: 14). At school students study English just to fulfill formalities. On top of that, students get “weak encouragement and support from parents” (Al-Seghayer 2014: 19). Most of the students at university think “English is a dry and boring subject” (Al-Seghayer 2014: 19). Therefore, in this article the author focuses on the support needed by Saudi Arabian students learning English as a foreign language. The author uses a questionnaire to gather students’ opinions and conducts the survey in five different colleges (two male and three female colleges) of King Khalid University and Bisha University.

Education System in Saudi Arabia

The late King Abdul Aziz had a vision since he had founded the kingdom, focusing on education as means to development (Mohammed 2013). He gave instructions to establish new schools and institutes and encouraged book publishing (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2015). Later on, formal education was started in 1922 (Alkhazim 2003: 480). The Ministry of Education was established in 1953 and the Ministry of Higher Education was established in 1975 (Rahman & Alhaisoni 2013: 112-113). Under the Ministry of Education there are now forty-two educational districts throughout the Kingdom (Oyaid 2009). The Saudi Arabian education system is divided into four stages. They are:

- six years elementary education
- three years intermediate education
- three years secondary education
- four or five years tertiary education

The academic year is divided into two semesters of eighteen weeks each. Sixteen weeks are for teaching and two weeks are for conducting examinations.

Education in Saudi Arabia is segregated by sex and divided into three separately administered systems: general education for boys, general education for girls, and traditional Islamic education for boys (Sedgwick 2001). Currently, there are a total of 34,749 schools and in total 5,187,498 students from KG (Kindergarten) to secondary level (Mohammed 2013); at the tertiary level there are 53 public and private universities in Saudi Arabia (Classbase 2016).

According to the Ministry of Higher Education, there were 757,770 students enrolled in Saudi universities in 2009-2010. Over 120,000 Saudi students are currently sponsored by the Saudi government to undertake higher education outside the Kingdom. Briefly, we can say that education in Saudi Arabia has four defining characteristics:

- A focus on teaching about Islam
- A centralized system of control and education support
- State funding
- A general policy for general segregation (Smith & Abouammoh 2013)

Learning English as a Foreign Language in Saudi Arabia

The teaching of English as a foreign language was introduced into the Saudi Arabian education system in 1924 (Faruk 2014: 176) and until today it is the only foreign language taught in Saudi Arabian public schools. It is taught as a compulsory subject from class six to university level. However, the Ministry of Education is planning to introduce it at class four level (Rahman & Alhaisoni 2013: 113).

At the university level English was introduced in 1949 in Mecca, and the first English department was introduced in King Saud University in 1957 (Faruk 2014: 176).

Intermediate and secondary students are taught English during four 45-minute class periods per week whereas sixth grade elementary students receive only two 90-minute class periods per week of English instruction (Al-Seghayer 2014: 19).

Teachers largely dominate classroom instruction; there is very little student response in English classes. The teacher focuses on the development of grammatical competency with marginal attention given to communicative competency and discourse (Al-Seghayer 2014:22).

Every year the government spends billions of dollars...on recruiting English teachers, language labs, curriculum development, and teachers' training (Rahman & Alhaisoni 2013: 114). They offer attractive packages along with all the fringe benefits to the employees to get maximum output from them (Shabbir & Bughio 2009: 75).

Objectives of Teaching English in Saudi Arabia

Article No. 50 of Saudi Arabian education policy has emphasized learning other languages in addition to Arabic. It says that students with the knowledge of at least one of the living languages, in addition to their own language, will be able to acquire knowledge from other communities and participate in the service of Islam and humanity (Liton 2012: 23). In terms of living languages, Saudi Arabia gives importance on English, and it is also stated by the English

department in the Directorate of Curriculum at the Ministry of Education in 2000 that “English education should foster students’ ability to comprehend and express basic English” (Nalliveettil 2014: 33).

In 2013, Amjaad in his writing mentions general objectives of teaching English of Saudi Arabian students. They are, developing the English language proficiency in all four skills in accordance with the intellectual development of all students. He also says that students will realize the importance of English and grow positive attitude towards learning English. This English knowledge will help students in explaining Islamic concepts also.

Students’ Motivations in Learning English

Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are important in second language learning. If the students are not motivated individually, socially and academically, whatever method or policy that is chosen for students will remain ineffective. Concerning motivation Al-Zubeiry (2012: 15) says that

... lack of motivation on the part of language learners may lead to a situation where learners do not show interest in learning the target language. Such a situation is likely to affect the learners' success in learning the language. A number of research scholars indicate that motivation is considered as a key factor that influences the rate and success of second/foreign language learning.

Second language learning is time consuming and involves hard work, and in Saudi Arabia it is much more challenging as there is little opportunity to use the second language. Ordinary people do not find any use of English in their day-to-day lives. Moreover, in the job sector, the Arabic language is still the dominant language; as all official documents are written in Arabic. In fact, some officials do not even know very simple English, as it is not useful for official purposes. Most of the time, they are reluctant to learn English as it is almost useless in their context.

We see the impact of this in tertiary education as well. At the tertiary level most of the students are not intrinsically motivated. They think that the teachers will always motivate them as they do not see any link between English and their desired jobs. Most of the time their efforts are devoted to acquiring the minimum competency needed to pass to the next grade level and pay no attention to other aspects of learning English (Al-Seghayer 2014: 18). There are some students that come to the exam hall just to get a passing grade and most of the time do not take English exams seriously.

In addition to this, a considerable number of Saudi students believe that learning English is beyond their reach (Al-Seghayer 2014: 19). It proves that most of the Saudi students are not motivated to learn English.

Parental Support in English Language Learning in Saudi Arabia

Parents are an important factor in children’s education and this is also applicable to learning a new language. Regarding parents’ roles, Al-Qahtani and Zumor (2016: 20) say that parents’ involvement in their children’s education is essential for successful proficiency in both their own language and a second language.

It is proven that children have a better foreign language achievement if their parents have an active attitude towards this foreign language even if these parents do not speak the language. Parents can show their positive attitudes towards the learning of a foreign language by being a part of their child's learning at home and at school (as cited in Alhussein & Milian 2004: 2).

In Saudi Arabia, most of the time parents show positive attitudes towards English language learning because they realize that their children should learn English as it is the language of prestige. In spite of such positivity, parents are merely concerned with whether their children pass and achieve good grades or not. They are not worried about their children's English language proficiency. They have a preconceived idea that passing in exams is equivalent to having good English language skills. Sometimes parents request that teachers help their children achieve the minimum grade in English courses.

Data Analysis

Design of the Survey

The study used in this research made use of quantitative data analysis and the results are intended to provide a numerical analysis. Data has been collected from the Department of English of King Khalid University and University of Bisha, and a total of 178 students participated in the study. The researcher used Microsoft Excel for analysis of the quantitative data. Findings of the quantitative study are summarized and interpreted according to the study results.

Format of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire has two parts – the first part is based on students' intentions of learning English language in relation to their social, academic and job perspectives; and twelve questions are used here. The second part consists of eight questions to determine how much time students spend in English language learning in different situations. The researcher tabulates the data and represents the data the findings section of the article to enable a clearer presentation and easier analysis.

Findings of the Survey

40% of the students said that they get enough exposure in learning English. However, in terms of the quality of English teachers only 22% of the students give positive responses. Therefore, we can say that English teaching and teachers' quality are sub-standard at the schools.

It is found that almost 53% of the students agree with the idea that English should be taught from class one because almost 61% of the students have an interest in learning English.

40% of the students said that English is not a difficult language in contrast to the 23% of the students that agree it is a difficult language. Here 75% of the students comprehend that they need more exposure and practice in increasing their English language proficiency. They (almost 58%) know that presently they need English to get a job in Saudi Arabia.

30% of students state that they get qualified teachers at university, however, only 14.6% of the students raised questions about the qualification of teachers. Here, almost 42% of students take the neutral position. Most of the English department teachers are foreigners and they speak in English. Since most of the students do not understand English perfectly, a communication gap

remains between teachers and students. For this reason, students could not come to a conclusion in the survey whether their teachers are good or bad in terms of knowledge and teaching.

It can be seen that at school only 26% of the teachers emphasize on writing skills development. However, at the tertiary level 40% of the teachers emphasize on writing skills proficiency. It proves that if teachers at school place importance on more writing in English, students can improve their English writing proficiency. It also indicates that the more time students spend in English language learning, the more quickly they will become proficient.

We see the same result in spoken English as well. Since most of the English teachers are foreigners at universities, they encourage students to speak in English. In the survey it is found that almost 61% of the teachers encourage students to speak in English. It proves that sometimes reinforcement and encouragement also force and motivate students in learning a language whether it is difficult or easy to learn.

It is found that 31% of the students like to watch English TV channels (mostly English movies). Here 32% give mixed opinions (neither agree or disagree). If we add both responses we can come to a conclusion that more or less 63% of students like to watch English TV channels or movies. On the other hand, in the case of reading books or newspapers in English only 29% of students say that they always read because they face difficulty in reading, though they do not face the same problem in watching English TV channels or movies. It demonstrates that Saudi students like visual materials more than book related materials in practicing English as they have poor English backgrounds.

36.5% of the students do not always like to speak in English in contrast to 32.6% of students who do. Though students have poor backgrounds in English, almost 41% of students try to speak in English inside and outside of the classroom as their teachers inspire them at university.

Parents also play a key role in learning a language, as 35% of the parents always encourage their children to learn English. Here 24% of the parents often do this. Only 14% of the parents never encourage their children to learn English. It shows the changing mentality of parents in learning English as a second language in Saudi Arabia.

We see a disappointing scenario in using English outside the classroom. Almost 34% of students do not use English outside of the classroom; only 17% of the students use English outside of the classroom. It indicates that outside of the classroom Saudi students get little opportunities to use and practice English. We see the same scenario at home, which is the best place to practice English outside the classroom. It shows that only 17% of the students always use English with their family members. Here the family background and awareness play crucial roles in using and learning English. We see almost the same result for using English in public places like restaurants, shopping malls, and other places. Here, only 22% of the students always like to use English in public places. However, a congenial outdoor atmosphere is crucial in learning English. Students should get more opportunities and spend more time to overcome the school level shortcomings at the tertiary level.

Recommendations

Recruitment of More Saudi Arabian Teachers

Motivation has a connection to culture, and societal needs. The motivation component is influenced to some extent by factors that affect an individual's willingness to accept foreign behavior patterns (Gardner & Lalonde 1985: 1). Saudi Arabian students get little mental support for accepting foreign behavior patterns. As most of the English department teachers are

foreigners, students and teachers do not fully understand each other as cultural and mental gaps always remain. Moreover, language differences deepen the complexity because most of the students enter university with little English; they cannot communicate with their teachers. As a result of this bitter experience, from the very first moment students lose their motivation and interest in learning English. They fear English, and they start believing that it is a difficult language. Regarding discomfort and fear of students, Garner (1985) in his socio-educational model says that "the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favorable attitudes toward learning the language" is important for second language learning. Therefore, the Saudi authority should recruit more Saudi Arabian teachers for English language teaching. They can at least understand the level of their students and the general problems of their students more than foreign teachers.

Culture Oriented Learning Materials

Saudi language experts should come up with their own English language learning materials. Most of the time it is found that students do not understand the context of a listening or reading extract as the topic is based on another culture. Culture oriented materials will spark students inspiration and interest in the English language.

Students Should Be Serious

According to Gardner's socio-educational model, for a student to be considered motivated, four elements of a goal – desire to achieve the goal, positive attitudes, and effort – are necessary (as cited in Taie & Afshari 2015: 607). Saudi students show a lack of desire and seriousness in learning English. They prioritize course completion rather than learning the language. Most of the students do not even show seriousness even in the exams. They think about getting the minimum grade in English courses.

Efficient English Teachers at Elementary and Secondary Levels

The Saudi government should recruit efficient English teachers for schools because a strong base and early learning are very important for second language learning.

Conclusion

Saudi Arabia is investing a lot in English education at tertiary levels, in hand with plans to be a developed country within a decade. However, it is revealed from the survey that the Saudi government should focus on English education at the school level. If they need to recruit teachers from other countries, they should employ trained English teachers – not just fluent native speakers – for elementary and secondary levels. Moreover, they should start English education from grade one.

It is unfortunate to see a student at the tertiary level without minimum English language proficiency. Students should get ample opportunities and experience to reduce their anxiety levels when it comes to English language learning.

We cannot expect English language proficiency from students at the tertiary level when they do not have adequate English education in their schooling years. The incentive to learn the English language has a connection to confidence and encouragement. The students will show greater

interest in learning the English language with the encouragement of the teachers and parental support which will spontaneously increase their confidence in their acquisition of the language.

Endnotes

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