

Difficulties and Challenges Encountered by Saudi EFL learners: A Diagnostic Study

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Abstract

Saudi learners, like non-native learners in other non-English-speaking nations, face numerous difficulties and hurdles in their acquisition of the English language. This study aims to elucidate the difficulties and challenges Saudi EFL learners encounter in acquiring English. It also delineates the diverse learning strategies Saudi EFL learners utilize to address such issues and challenges. The study employs open-ended and unstructured interviews to gather qualitative data from selected Saudi EFL learners. The participants convey their experiences and perspectives regarding the obstacles and challenges encountered in language acquisition. The study's findings indicated that Saudi EFL learners face numerous challenges in terms of listening, reading, speaking, writing, grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, cultural and environmental factors, and interference from their native language. This study aims to provide significant insights for course designers, teacher trainers, policymakers, and aspiring EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia, while also enhancing the awareness of the broader TEFL/TESOL community regarding the issues discussed within its contents.

Keywords: English teaching, language learning, language, difficulties, challenges, EFL learners.

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INTRODUCTION

The demand for English language acquisition is rapidly escalating in this rapidly evolving world. This is due to a variety of reasons. English is a significant language, serving as the predominant international language, the official language of numerous countries, the medium for the Internet and international communication, a conduit for global trade, and a platform for worldwide conferences. All forms of engagement, particularly among nations, occur in English, primarily because it is the sole language in which non-native speakers can effectively communicate. It serves as the medium for education, science, technology, computing, medicine, finance, tourism, and commerce, in addition to its importance in political and diplomatic discourse. The English language has become a possession of all individuals in the professional field. Saudi Arabia is no exception (Crystal, 2012; Ahmad, 2016). Moreover, English conducts the majority of studies and research. English serves as the principal language in the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, and other Caribbean and Pacific island states. It serves as the official language of India,

the Philippines, and other sub-Saharan African nations. It is the most extensively studied foreign language. With 1.5 billion speakers worldwide, English is considered the most successful language due to its extensive teaching in over 100 nations (Crystal, 2012). Furthermore, it is the second most prevalent native language globally (British Council, 2013).

The Arab world, especially Saudi Arabia, teaches English as a foreign language, but the community lacks practical application. Learning English as a foreign language is consistently challenging. In areas where English has a limited utility, the necessity and difficulty of learning it intensify. Consequently, the Saudi education system has implemented numerous modifications, including the mandated adoption of communicative language teaching (CLT) in EFL classrooms. Nonetheless, numerous challenges continue to confront Saudi students in acquiring proficiency in English (Alshumaimeri, 2003; Fareh, 2010; Elyas & Al-Grigri, 2014; Alharbi, 2021). This study examines several challenges and strategies for overcoming them. This study examines two primary aspects: it underscores the limited understanding of the challenges encountered

by Saudi students in acquiring the English language and advocates for the necessity of conducting more rigorous empirical research to address these challenges. This study will significantly benefit EFL/ESL educators by facilitating effective student learning while simultaneously fulfilling institutional objectives and addressing the educational expectations and requirements of Saudi EFL learners.

Justification and Background

This proposed study's backdrop is both generic and personal. The researcher has consistently maintained an academic interest in ESL/EFL learning. Historically, many Arabic students perceived acquiring proficiency in the English language as a betrayal of their native tongue; however, the demands of free market globalization have sparked renewed enthusiasm among Arab colleges and students to achieve fluency in English.

I have often been concerned about the proficiency and capabilities of Saudi EFL learners in English. Examining these learners' English learning experiences will help us better understand the strategies that may assist Saudi students in achieving English proficiency and fulfilling their educational objectives. Simultaneously, it will also rectify the deficiency in literature that can guide governmental and institutional practices in Saudi Arabia to fulfill the needs and aspirations of Saudi EFL learners. By elucidating the experiences of Saudi students in language acquisition, we can formulate valuable conclusions, consequences, and recommendations to enhance foreign and second language competency.

The Objectives of the Study

This study examines the challenges Saudi EFL learners face in acquiring English as a foreign language. It assesses their attitudes towards these challenges and the extent to which they impact their language acquisition success. It suggests strategies and techniques for surmounting these challenges.

The Study's Importance

The study aims to identify the types and areas of challenges faced by Saudi EFL learners when acquiring English as a foreign language. Anyone aspiring to specialize in foreign language acquisition must consider the elements or factors involved in the learning process. It is crucial for individuals who study and explore English language education and learning to shed light on the challenges faced when acquiring English as a foreign language. The study is crucial for educators and curriculum developers to identify weaknesses, address them, and focus on curriculum design within the English department.

The Study Questions

This study seeks to address the primary inquiry:

What challenges and difficulties do Saudi EFL learners face while learning English? Two proposed sub-questions guide this study.

1. What difficulties do Saudi EFL students face in learning the English language?

The literature review indicates that the challenges faced by Arabic EFL students in acquiring the English language are complex and varied. The factors may include fundamental structural disparities between Arabic and English (Shabbir & Bughio, 2011), cultural considerations (Elyas and Picard, 2010), motivation and self-esteem (Al-Tamimi & Shuib, 2009), and social dynamics (Shammas, 2009).

2. What solutions can we offer to help them surmount the highlighted challenges and difficulties?

After identifying the challenges faced by Saudi EFL learners in English language acquisition, it is critical to elucidate the solutions that can be utilized to navigate these hurdles.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A preliminary literature study identifies notable themes about the challenges faced by Saudi overseas students in acquiring the English language.

The predominant challenge faced by Arab students in English language acquisition and proficiency stems from the fundamental structural disparities between their native language and the second language. For example, Arabic script does not employ capitalization and adheres to distinct punctuation conventions compared to English (Shabbir & Bughio 2011). Spelling poses a challenge, as Arabic employs a single letter for each phoneme, rendering English orthography significantly more complex. A study indicated that pupils encounter difficulties in spelling silent letters situated in the middle of English words, such as 'half' or 'knowledge'. The pronunciation of English words poses challenges, as Arabic speakers frequently apply Arabic phonetics in their articulation (Salebi 2004). As a result, Arabic speakers articulate the term 'stupid' as 'istobbid,' while they pronounce 'pregnant' as 'brignent' (Shabbir & Bughio 2011). The application of commas and conjunctions presents a challenge for Arabic students due to the differing conventions in Arabic and English contexts (Rabab'ah 2005). The same applies to the utilization of English prepositions; owing to their diverse nature and application, numerous Arabic students choose to translate each Arabic preposition into English (Shabbir & Bughio 2011). Kambal (1980) recorded significant syntactic errors in the works of Arab students at Sudanese University, particularly with verb formation, subject-verb agreement, and tense usage.

Culture significantly influences the process of learning the English language, particularly language education (Elyas & Picard 2010). Saudi Arabia conducts classroom instruction differently from Western schools. The classroom is an environment where the teacher assumes a leadership role, while the student's function is characterized by a disposition of attentive silence (Jamjoom 2009, cited in Elyas & Picard 2010). In Saudi Arabia, teacher-student relationships are hierarchical; educators have a superior position in the classroom, and 'student-centered' pedagogy is not prevalent (Gallagher 1989). This suggests that the majority of Saudi pupils are unaccustomed to participatory teaching methods that foster English language competency. Arabic students acquire English solely through formal instruction, as the classroom does not offer an environment for practicing their English conversation skills (Rabab'ah 2005). The process of classroom acculturation may provide challenges for English language acquisition at a UK university that employs classroom interaction as a prevalent pedagogical approach. Many Arabic students exhibit unsociable behavior in class, infrequently participate in recitation, and communicate in English solely when explicitly instructed (Ghaith & Diab 2008). Furthermore, teacher attitudes and behaviors toward Saudi students may harm English as a Foreign Language (EFL) outcomes. Research has demonstrated that cross-cultural disparities influence the classroom friendliness of Arabic pupils (Rabab'ah, 2005).

Studies have shown that the university environment's alienation negatively impacts the academic performance of Arabic international students in the USA, particularly after the eleventh of September terrorist attacks (Shammas 2009). Arabic students expressed similar alienation when the educational environment turned hostile at certain universities in the UK (Rich & Troudi 2006). The level of integration that Arabic overseas students experience at their universities enhances their motivation to learn the English language (Shammas 2009). The experience of isolation stemming from diminished social capital heightens sociability among Arabic overseas students, perhaps leading to a decline in self-esteem and motivation. Individuals who can rejuvenate their social capital by establishing connections with new acquaintances, regardless of their nationality, are more likely to achieve proficiency in the English language.

Literature extensively examines the challenges and barriers hindering learners' English ability. Barros (2003) conducted a study investigating the pronunciation difficulties in the 'Consonant System' encountered by Arabic speakers learning English. The study findings indicated that Arabic speakers face difficulties pronouncing eight English consonants. The findings indicated that the challenges faced by Arabic speakers may vary based on their country of origin. Ahmad (2011) conducted a case study examining pronunciation problems among Saudi EFL learners in the Preparatory

Year Program, at Najran University. The findings indicated that Saudi students encountered challenges articulating some English consonant phonemes, including /p/, /d/, /v/, /tʃ/, /z/, and /ŋ/. Ultimately, one proposed solution is that linguists believe that knowledge of linguistics, particularly phonology, would significantly assist teachers in addressing the majority of their students' pronunciation issues (Alfallaj, 2013)

The previous research's objectives focused on learning English as a second or foreign language. It also addresses the interplay among various factors, including motivation, culture, anxiety, intelligence, and English language acquisition. The instruments utilized in the previous studies include questionnaires and observational methods. The present study seeks to identify the difficulties and challenges encountered by students in learning English, utilizing face-to-face interviews as a means of data collection.

METHODOLOGY

The Study Sample

The study included 100 Saudi English learners in English language institutes and centers in Saudi Arabia. Their ages varied between 20 and 30 years.

The Study Approach

This study constitutes a naturalistic investigation. Consequently, we employed a qualitative method for data collection, specifically interviews. Merriam (1988, 3) states "Most case studies in education are qualitative and hypothesis-generating, rather than quantitative and hypothesis-testing, studies". Naturalistic research, which emphasizes contextual meaning, necessitates a data collection device that is attuned to the underlying significance during data "gathering and interpretation". When employing techniques, that utilize human senses, like "interviewing, observing, and analyzing", humans excel in this activity.

EFL learners participating in English classes at language institutions and centers in Riyadh, KSA, were the target audience for the uninstructed interviews. To achieve results, the researcher conducted open interviews regarding the challenges of acquiring English as a foreign language and strategies to mitigate those challenges. The interviews encompass the following elements:

- Learners encounter challenges and difficulties in the process of acquiring the English language.
- Learners' perceptions of those challenges and difficulties.
- To what extent do those challenges and difficulties impact learners' achievement?
- Strategies for learners to surmount challenges and impediments.
- Tactics and techniques that can be utilized to mitigate or surmount those challenges and impediments.

The interviews aimed to investigate the broader implications of the challenges and barriers Saudi EFL learners encounter in language acquisition. A qualitative interview comprises open-ended inquiries and yields qualitative data (Johnson & Christensen, 2008).

Procedures

The interviews utilized in this study were semi-structured and unstructured. The researcher had not devised a formal outline for his interviews. Although he believed the upcoming interviews lacked structure due to the absence of a pre-planned list of questions to ask systematically or chronologically, he possessed a broad understanding of the subjects he wanted to explore. Throughout the interviews, the researcher endeavored to create an environment that allowed participants to steer the discussions and introduce their topics, since this indicated their eagerness to engage and delve into matters comprehensively. This may align with Bogdan and Biklen's (1992: p. 97) concept of "good interviews," since the interviewers exhibit comfort and express their perspectives candidly. The interview the researcher conducted with the interviewees resembled a casual conversational exchange rather than a professional interview. The researcher typically guided the interviews as questions emerged organically. This facilitated an unthreatening dialogue with the interviewees, allowing for a seamless exchange akin to a genuine chat.

Arabic, the native language of the participants, served as the medium of communication during the interview sessions. The researcher conducted the interviews in Arabic to facilitate teachers' natural expression and alleviate any discomfort they could experience when communicating in English. A compact tape recorder was the primary method used by the researcher to document the interview moments. The researcher requested the EFL teachers' consent to audio record the interviews, clarifying that the material collected will be utilized for research reasons. We labeled and dated all tape recordings to improve the eventual organization and analysis of the data. The interviewees designated the times for all interviews. The researcher conducted the interviews in Arabic, the original language of the participants, transcribed them, and then translated them into English, verified by a third party. Each interview had a duration of around 30 minutes and was audio recorded. We safeguarded participants' identities by omitting names and assigning codes such as Participant 1, Participant 2, etc. to ensure anonymity.

Data Analysis

The objective of data analysis is to derive significance from unprocessed data (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). Simons (2009) says that analysis includes steps like categorizing, coding, idea mapping, and theme development. These steps help organize and understand the data so that you can come up with findings and a full theory of the case (p. 116). Following

Johnson & Christensen (2008) and Simons (2009), Creswell (2009, p.183) stated that analysis "involves preparing data for analysis, delving deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and interpreting the broader significance of the data,"

This study employed thematic analysis to find, analyze, and summarize themes within the data. The thematic analysis in this study followed the steps suggested by Creswell (2009) and Liamputtong (2009). These steps include:

- organizing and getting the data ready for analysis;
- going over all the data;
- starting a detailed analysis through coding;
- using the coding to describe the setting or people and come up with categories or themes for analysis;
- working on how to write about the description and themes in the qualitative narrative;
- and figuring out what the data means.

We thoroughly inspected and transcribed the captured recordings in their entirety. After transcribing and correcting the interview data, the researcher repeatedly reviewed the transcriptions to become acquainted with the material, a process referred to as "staying close to the data" (Radnor, 2002, p. 70). Upon analyzing the transcribed interviews, the researcher discovered that the majority of Saudi EFL learners recognized the significance of acquiring and mastering the language; however, they expressed a desire for enhancement. He also discovered that the learners held a consensus on some critical aspects that could directly or indirectly affect their learning process. This enabled him to construct a "thematic framework" from the data (Lynch, 1996, p. 139). He synthesized and categorized the data using codes, and then organized them into classifications. We subsequently analyzed the categories to uncover new correlations, which led to the identification of the following principal themes. The subsequent parts will concentrate on these issues.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This is a comprehensive analysis of the study findings based on the interview data collected from the participants.

Listening Challenges

Interview results indicate that learners may face numerous challenges in the listening comprehension process, with the objective being to recognize these issues and seek solutions. Here are some examples of these challenges:

Divergences in Cultural Practices

Students must possess a grasp of the cultural context of language, which profoundly influences their comprehension. Several interviewees experience significant comprehension challenges due to the

listening task incorporating entirely distinct cultural content. Teachers are responsible for providing background knowledge regarding listening activities beforehand (Azmi, Celik, Yidliz & Tugrul, 2014).

Dialect

Most participants indicated that they encounter excessive accented speech, resulting in a significant decline in their comprehension. Goh (2006) reported that 66% of learners identified a speaker's accent as a crucial element influencing listener understanding. Unfamiliar accents, whether native or non-native, can significantly hinder listening comprehension, while familiarity with an accent enhances learners' listening skills. According to Buck (2001), listeners who are exposed to an unusual accent, such as Indian English, for the first time after only learning American English will face significant comprehension challenges. This will undoubtedly disrupt the entire listening comprehension process, and at the same time, an unusual accent renders comprehension unattainable for the listeners.

Unknown Lexicon

Participants reported that listening materials with familiar vocabulary significantly facilitate comprehension. Understanding the meaning of words can spark their interest and motivation, positively influencing their listening comprehension skills. Many words have multiple meanings, and incorrect use in appropriate contexts can lead to confusion. This aligns with Azmi *et al.*, (2014) claim in this regard.

Duration and Velocity of Listening Processing

Interviews revealed that students' proficiency significantly influences their ability to retain material throughout lengthy listening presentations. In this regard, Azmi *et al.*, (2014) argue that lower-level students find it exceedingly challenging to listen for more than three minutes and perform the associated assignments. Concise listening segments facilitate comprehension for learners and mitigate fatigue. As stated by Underwood (1989), rapidity can complicate the understanding of hearing passages. If speakers articulate excessively rapidly, students may encounter significant difficulties comprehending vocabulary. In this scenario, listeners cannot regulate the pace of speakers, which may lead to significant issues with listening comprehension.

Speaking Challenges

The interviews with participants delineate the speaking issues and the elements influencing speaking performance. They also emphasize the factors that hinder students' ability to communicate in English and propose potential methods to mitigate these challenges. The interview data reveals that students have difficulties in speaking. What difficulties do Saudi EFL learners face when speaking? What are the appropriate solutions? The researcher observes that they are psychological. Following this notification, Elbashir (2023) contended that psychological factors contribute to students' lack of

desire to study English. The next sections elucidate each of these challenges.

Apprehension of Committing Errors

Interviewees exhibit apprehension about committing errors, fearing ridicule from others, and ultimately facing adverse evaluations for their English-speaking mistakes. They perceive making verbal errors in front of their peers as highly embarrassing, leading them to prefer silence to evade such circumstances. Numerous theorists, like Mithun and Manjula (2023), contend that the fear of making mistakes is a primary element contributing to students' hesitance to speak in the classroom. Anandari (2015) indicates that the majority of students concur that their heightened levels of fear and anxiety stem from the realization that they have not adequately mastered some subjects, despite having composed the speeches independently.

Timidity

Several participants articulate their reluctance to speak English, noting that their feelings of shyness also affect their failure to demonstrate their speaking proficiency. When questioned about the rationale for their reluctance, the majority indicated that their apprehension of making errors and fear of criticism were the primary factors contributing to their hesitancy in speaking English. This sense of shyness pertains to public performance, particularly in front of an audience such as a classroom. Students may experience increasing discomfort, ultimately leading to a state of mental disarray or blankness, which might result in forgetfulness regarding their speech (Baldwin, 2011).

Anxiety

Several participants articulate feelings of anxiety, apprehension, and anxiousness during the language acquisition process. Anxiety is a concern that can significantly impact learners' performance. In this instance, it affects the quality of sound production, resulting in decreased fluency compared to the original. The learner's discomfort within their environment manifests as anxiety. Prastiyo *et al.*, (2019) assert that anxiety is a prevalent psychological condition that arises during the teaching and learning process, particularly when students are uncertain about the material they expect to acquire.

Reading Difficulties

Reading is similar to acquiring information from the text. Reading entails the process of perceiving and comprehending written content, either orally or mentally, and articulating or repeating the text. This talent seeks to foster a connection between the reader and the text, as noted by Quarqez & Rashid (2017). The reading process necessitates understanding word meanings, which entails accurately comprehending the author's goal. Rivers, cited in Quarqez & Rashid (2017), asserts that reading is the paramount activity in language classrooms, serving not just as a source of information

and enjoyment but also as a method for integrating and enhancing linguistic understanding.

Reading is a critical competency that learners must acquire during the language acquisition process. The interview data indicates that Saudi EFL learners experience challenges in reading comprehension due to confusing terminology, unfamiliar vocabulary, and insufficient time for cognitive processing of the text. This aligns with Hezam *et al.*, (2022) study's findings regarding reading comprehension. Consequently, policymakers and educators must identify effective strategies to address this issue and foster a significant reading experience for learners.

Writing Challenges

The ability to write is defined as the process of articulating ideas from thoughts into written form. According to Richard & Renandya (2002), writing is undeniably a challenging skill for students, as it requires not only the processing of ideas but also the capacity to produce text that is coherent and comprehensible to the reader. Our interviewees have challenges regarding:

- Understanding the subject matter
- Lexicon
- Organization of paragraphs
- The utilization of suitable sentence constructions
- Providing punctuation
- Orthography
- Formations or composition

These factors induce confusion and hinder the acquisition of English writing skills.

Grammar Difficulties

English grammar is the most challenging to recall and use logically. Language institutes and centers teach grammatical rules and regulations, but students' proficiency determines their ability to use them in communication. (Ajaj, 2022). Grammar alters the meaning of communication, necessitating that learners adhere to basic grammatical standards. English grammar can be complex even for native speakers, making it significantly more difficult for non-native speakers. English language learners often have challenges in utilizing grammar; they understand the principles but struggle to apply them accurately.

The participants indicate that English grammar comprises numerous rules, each applicable in various contexts and circumstances. Consequently, learners must be cognizant of their grammatical accuracy during conversations, as improper language can result in misunderstandings. The English language possesses a complex set of grammatical rules. English grammar is characterized by several rules and exceptions. The intricacy of grammar complicates our ability to utilize and generate accurate grammatical tenses and sentences. Grammatically crafted statements can convey incorrect

messages to the recipient. The interviewees identify the following as the most challenging aspect for them.

Tenses

The interviewees indicated that various tense formulations in English do not exist in Arabic, their native language. The most significant of these is 'the verb to be.' Although Arabic uses it less frequently than English, Saudi EFL learners often omit it in their language production. This applies equally to the auxiliary 'do' and modal verbs. Mithun and Manjula (2023, 245) asserted that the employment of "numerous auxiliary" verbs instead of "verbal inflection" to convey tenses contributes to the complexity of English."

Furthermore, the participants assert that English possesses a considerable number of tenses, some of which are nuanced distinctions, including variations within the simple past tense. They say they struggle with the present perfect tense in English because it doesn't distinguish between past actions and those relevant to the present. Consequently, our participants indicate that they employ the past simple tense instead of the present perfect.

Articles

Participants express their difficulties with English articles. This aligns with Mithun and Manjula's (2023) claim who asserted that English articles occasionally perplex EFL learners. Our participants indicate that English has a significant number of articles, comprising the definite article "the" plus the indefinite articles "a" and "an." Sometimes, we use English nouns without an article, a phenomenon known as the zero article. Certain distinctions among the definite, indefinite, and zero articles are straightforward to comprehend, while others present challenges, especially if our home language employs articles differently from English. In Arabic, there is no indefinite article. Furthermore, Arabic does not employ the definite article in the same manner as English.

Lexical Challenges

Interviewees claim that English possesses an extensive vocabulary, making mastery of several vocabulary items challenging for them. Simultaneously, in English, a word possesses multiple meanings, with its interpretation varying based on context, a phenomenon that complicates the learning process further. In this context, Hezam *et. al.* (2022) and Hasan (2024) stated in their studies that vocabulary is one of the most significant challenges students face when attempting to comprehend a text's meaning and overarching concept. The abundance of English words with varying meanings across contexts may cause learners to become bored due to the necessity of mastering these definitions. Participants also articulate their challenges using the application of synonyms, prefixes, and suffixes.

Pronunciation Challenges

The pronunciation or phonetic system is the primary feature of the target language that poses challenges for learners (Mithun and Manjula, 2023; Hasan, 2024). The following are the specific aspects in which Saudi EFL learners encounter difficulties during the learning process.

The interview data indicates that Saudi EFL learners consistently encounter pronunciation challenges from the beginning. Furthermore, the varying sounds of the same letter confound their pronunciation. The participants provide the following combinations as examples: (bath – bathe), (South – Southern), (now – know), and (uncle – university). Furthermore, students pronounce certain verbs and nouns differently despite their identical spelling, such as desert (verb)/desert (noun). Mithun and Manjula (2023) identified this behavior in students.

Participants indicate that listening to someone speaking Arabic reveals the distinctiveness of its sounds compared to those used in English. English possesses around thrice the number of vowel sounds compared to Arabic, rendering English vowel sounds challenging for Arabic learners. This is particularly evident in the distinctions between long and short vowel sounds, as demonstrated by the words "ship" and "sheep." It poses a challenge in distinguishing words with short vowel sounds, such as 'pot,' 'pet,' and 'pat'.

There are difficulties with sounds that do not exist in Arabic. For instance, the sounds /p/ and /v/ are absent in Arabic, leading Arabic speakers to frequently articulate these phonemes as /b/ and /f/, respectively. Likewise, Arabic speakers may confuse /t/ and /d/.

Furthermore, English possesses a greater number of consonant clusters than Arabic. This results in pronunciation issues. For instance, Arabic lacks three-segment initial consonant clusters such as 'spr', 'skr', 'str', and 'spl'. As Arabic speakers, we frequently incorporate a brief vowel sound to facilitate pronunciation. Consequently, 'spring' may transform into 'sipring'. Consonant clusters are prevalent after words in English, unlike in Arabic. Once again, we, as Arabic speakers, shall incorporate an additional sound. For instance, 'months' becomes into 'monthiz'.

Environmental Issues

The environment encompasses the geographical context, cultural influences, and cognitive frameworks within which learners acquire the language. A secure setting and the liberty to engage are suitable and desirable methods of learning (Bingol, 2014).

The interview data indicates that Saudi EFL learners studying the language at home lack exposure to listening and speaking activities in their daily interactions, whether at home, in educational

institutions, or public spaces such as markets. Such environments inhibit motivation and impede the development of learners. Mithun and Manjula (2023) argue that this environmental constraint hindered students' prospects of acquiring proficiency in spoken English.

Culture is an additional challenge for Saudi EFL learners. Culture encompasses the feelings of belonging and alienation within a particular community characterized by its history, language, legacy, and mythology. Nearly every society possesses a distinct culture that sets them apart from others.

The interviewees assert that culture has a significant influence on language acquisition, as EFL learners may have extensive knowledge of vocabulary and other linguistic elements but struggle to accurately comprehend the meanings of sentences or expressions. Consequently, background knowledge regarding the culture and community is of paramount importance. Rhalmi (2014) argues that as English learners, we must discern which English culture we are referencing—whether it pertains to the United States, Britain, Canada, Australia, or South Africa. This distinction is crucial, as we often encounter vocabulary specific to particular communities. Comprehending these terms necessitates cultural awareness and familiarity. Consequently, cultural differences present an additional challenge for language learners.

The Interference of the Native Language

Most of our participants indicated a significant disparity between the phonetic sounds of Arabic, their home language, and English, the target foreign language. The phonemes in the Arabic alphabet significantly differ from those in English. Numerous phonemes associated with the English alphabet are challenging for Arabic speakers to articulate accurately. Arabic speakers articulate Arabic letters distinctly, separately, and independently, each possessing a distinct phonetic value. Conversely, in English, a letter may represent many phonemes or possess no phonetic value whatsoever, as exemplified by 'silent letters.' Researchers, for instance, Fareh, 2010, Khan, 2011, Hamad, 2013, Alrabai, 2014, and Abahussain, 2016, argue that most challenges faced were attributable to mother tongue interference and the presence of silent letters in English.

Mother tongue interference constitutes a significant obstacle for Arab learners of English. Arabic is the Arabs' primary language (L1) and mother tongue. We classify Arabic and English into two distinct language families. It is expected that they differ. Each language possesses its unique structure, and the structure of English differs from that of Arabic (Rhalmi, 2014), leading learners to attempt to apply their native language structure to the second language. This constitutes a negative transfer that impacts the achievement of EFL/ESL learners.

CONCLUSION

Numerous elements and domains influence the multifaceted process of acquiring English as a second or foreign language. The researcher has concluded that Saudi English language learners have several difficulties and challenges, particularly in the social, psychological, and linguistic domains. The learners' capabilities play a crucial role, contingent upon their intelligence and the extent of their efforts to surmount challenges.

In conclusion, the experiences and perspectives of the participants reveal several difficulties and challenges associated with the learning process in the Arab world. Moreover, English learners must devise an effective strategy and employ optimal approaches to surmount the challenges of acquiring the language, including practice, engaging with native speakers, maintaining a positive attitude, and extensive reading, among others. The findings of this study indicate that EFL learners encounter many challenges and difficulties while also suggesting essential materials and methods to address these hurdles.

This study examines the challenges encountered by learners from an Arabic language background in acquiring English. This domain presents both intriguing and formidable challenges for policymakers and curriculum developers, particularly in the Arab world and the Gulf region, as English emerges as an essential medium for global communication and the Arab world increases its investment in English education.

We anticipate that the study's findings and recommendations will assist educators in identifying ideal settings that facilitate student success. Despite being done in local and Western contexts, the study can be extrapolated to various locations and situations within the Arab world and in second language acquisition to compare experiences and findings that may inform curriculum design and teacher training resources.

Recommendations

The subsequent recommendations are based on the concerns and issues highlighted above.

Recommendations Regarding Listening Challenges:

Some recommendations can assist EFL learners in overcoming their listening comprehension challenges. They are enumerated as follows:

Concerning divergences in cultural practices

- Teachers should:
 - adapt listening activities to learners' needs and provide authentic listening resources and materials that improve comprehension of natural speech from native speakers.
 - create listening assignments that stimulate learner engagement and facilitate the acquisition of listening skills and strategies.

These exercises evaluate learners' listening comprehension while also encouraging the use of diverse listening styles to optimize their engagement in activities.

- provide learners with several forms of input, including lectures, radio broadcasts, films, television dramas, announcements, everyday conversations, and interviews.

Concerning dialect:

- Teachers should:
 - acquaint learners with pronunciation standards to enhance their ability to recognize various forms of rapid, natural speech and encourage and motivate them to imitate native speakers' pronunciation.
 - assist learners become acquainted with the accents of various native speakers. Considering that native speakers have distinct accents, learners must discern the differences between American and British accents.
 - receive enough training in verbal communication abilities. Effective listening correlates with proficient pronunciation; therefore, teachers should possess commendable and acceptable pronunciation to enhance learners' listening skills.

Concerning unknown lexicon

Teachers should:

- educate learners on contextual and linguistic comprehension, while engaging with various auditory materials.
- provide learners with critical feedback on their performance, as it can facilitate error correction, enhance motivation, and foster confidence in listening activities.
- assist learners in cultivating essential listening comprehension skills, such as discerning specific information, identifying main ideas, interpreting explanations and inferences, and comprehending intended meanings by offering a variety of tasks and activities at varying levels.
- employ nonverbal cues, such as gestures and facial expressions, to enhance verbal communication with learners.
- encourage learners to develop listening skills. Examples of strategies that enhance learners' listening comprehension include predicting, seeking clarification, and employing non-verbal clues.

Concerning duration and velocity of listening processing

- Teachers should:
 - organize listening activities according to complexity, starting with simple texts for lower-level learners and progressing to more

- complex authentic materials for advanced learners.
- provide opportunities for the enhancement of top-down and bottom-up processing skills, as top-down activities encourage learners to engage in discussions regarding their prior knowledge of a subject, while bottom-up tasks reinforce confidence in comprehending the fundamental elements of language, including phonetics, vocabulary, intonation, and grammatical structures.
- encourage learners to consistently listen to English documentaries, poems, and news broadcasts on radio and television, as well as converse with native speakers in person or online and engage with brief narratives and concise paragraphs, to develop and enhance effective listening and speaking skills.

Recommendations Regarding Speaking Challenges:

A variety of recommendations can alleviate learners' speaking challenges and difficulties. They are as follows:

Concerning apprehension of committing errors:

- Teachers should:
 - establish emotional connections between themselves and their students. Consequently, they anticipate that students will develop a sense of comfort with and trust their teachers to assist them in correcting mistakes.
 - enhance learners' concentration during English instruction. This can be accomplished by creating a conducive learning environment.
 - cultivate a conducive environment that alleviates learners' nervousness. This setting warrants a discussion on addressing errors in learners' conversational English, highlighting that mistakes in communication are essential for effective interaction (Mithun and Manjula, 2023).

Concerning timidity:

- Teachers should:
 - cultivate a congenial and transparent classroom atmosphere. By implementing this approach, timid learners will feel comfortable making errors in their learning process. This approach alleviates learners' concerns over their faulty speech and grammar. As a result, learners demonstrate the courage to express themselves during their speaking class.
 - convince their students to view shyness as a challenge to overcome and avoid prolonged silence to improve their speaking confidence.

Concerning anxiety:

- Teachers should:
 - exercise greater caution with the anxiety that can be profound in learners, and identify strategies that facilitate increased learner engagement in oral activities.

- offer learners positive reinforcement, inspire them, and cultivate a conducive classroom environment. These factors are crucial for teachers to recognize, as they can diminish learners' anxiety, enhance their confidence, and foster their readiness to communicate (Al-Hassani and Saalmi, 2022; Mithun and Manjula, 2023).
- mitigate learners' learning anxiety. To address reticent learners, teachers should embrace a diversity of responses. This approach enables learners to feel more assured in responding to the teacher's inquiries and engaging in all class activities.
- encourage learners to participate in English groups, clubs, and classes to enhance their speaking proficiency and fluency. Learners can rectify one another's errors without experiencing embarrassment.
- Encourage learners to deliver presentations and engage in debates in English.

Recommendations Regarding Reading Difficulties:

Some recommendations can assist EFL learners in surmounting their reading challenges. They are enumerated as follows:

- Learners should:
 - cultivate supplementary reading habits by allocating a sufficient number of periods each semester for library use.
 - obtain supplementary reading resources, periodicals, and newspapers of their choice. This is to improve their reading and comprehension skills.
 - employ a reading strategy to comprehend lengthy texts. They should engage with material beyond the classroom following the teacher's recommendations. Subsequently, they analyze the central concept of the text in the classroom to enhance their comprehension. This method is unique in that, the text learners read originates from their initiative. This method gives learners the freedom to choose texts they find appealing or engaging.
 - concentrate on new vocabulary as they begin reading.
 - engage with issues that are either intriguing or personally relevant to them.

Recommendations Regarding Writing Challenges:

Writing is a critical linguistic skill that influences language acquisition outcomes. It allows learners to select and employ precise vocabulary and idioms while avoiding redundancy and lengthy sentences. The subsequent techniques and strategies assist learners in enhancing and improving their writing proficiency:

- Learners should:
 - adhere to orthographic conventions.

- familiarize themselves with abbreviations in the English language.
- study and comprehend punctuation marks thoroughly as they are important in English because they alter meaning.
- engage in poetry and short story composition to enhance writing skills and mitigate challenges associated with writing capabilities.
- establish objectives, determine the purpose of their writing, and identify the intended audience for the essay. Subsequently, they must formulate an outline and compose essays in written form. They begin with a basic idea, which they then polish and painstakingly record on paper.

Recommendations Regarding Pronunciation Challenges:

To address the identified pronunciation challenges, the following techniques are recommended:

- Teachers should:
 - Encourage learners to engage with phonics straightforwardly from the initial stages of instruction.
 - create corrective pronunciation activities and encourage learners to conduct exercises on commonly confused words and engage in live English practice.
 - provide extensive practice and diverse activities utilizing a variety of strategies and methodologies for the acquisition of English as a foreign language.
 - encourage learners to interact with native speakers through English programs on television and radio to enhance listening skills which in turn lead to improved pronunciation.
 - record learners performing oral tasks, such as narrating a narrative in the target language, followed by feedback conversations based on the recordings.

Recommendations Regarding Grammar and Vocabulary Difficulties and Challenges:

The study recommends the following strategies for overcoming grammar and vocabulary challenges:

- Teachers should:
 - avoid pedagogical approaches that exclusively emphasize teaching grammar rules and vocabulary lists, as they inadequately equip learners for accurate and fluent language usage.
 - encourage learners to engage in English-language activities, including debate, elocution, storytelling, extemporaneous speaking, and essay writing, facilitated via PowerPoint presentations.
 - provide learners with co-curricular activities including quizzes, riddles, and word games to improve vocabulary and linguistic proficiency.

Recommendations Regarding Environmental Issues: Concerning environmental issues, the study asserts and recommends the following strategies:

- Learners should:
 - establish a conducive setting at home to maintain the formal studying atmosphere.
 - pursue opportunities to utilize the language for communicative purposes, focusing on both meaning and formal accuracy. This is to improve language proficiency.
 - consistently practice all skills, as practice familiarizes them with every part of the language. Practice significantly influences language learning outcomes.
 - interact with native speakers, as it is an exceptionally efficient method for enhancing and improving English proficiency. Although locating native speakers is challenging, learners can establish connections via online courses and social media platforms.
- Teachers should:
 - encourage interaction in English on campus as it is essential and crucial for cultivating extroversion among learners.
 - create a conducive and supportive setting as it yields favorable outcomes in language acquisition, considering that many learners experience shyness and anxiety when speaking, (Mithun and Manjula, 2023).

Recommendations Regarding the Interference of the Native Language

Negative transfer refers to the utilization of the source language's structure within the target language. The source language is the speaker's native language, whereas the target language is the secondary language. Each language possesses distinct structures. The study advises the following suggestions:

- English learners should:
 - avoid incorporating the structural elements of their native language into the second or foreign language.
 - be familiar with the structures of the second or foreign language upon starting their studies. This is due to the significant influence that language structure exerts on the learning process. Incorrect and improper use of structures can lead to negative transfer and ambiguity within the language.

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