Saudi EFL Learners' Difficulties in Learning English:

A Case of Secondary School Students

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Abstract

The difficulties of English language acquisition facing the secondary school for boys in Almuthneb are very important to be studied. Nowadays, all types of interactions between nations are done through English, as it is the only language in which non-native users can possibly communicate. It is the language of science, technology and business apart from being significant in political or diplomatic dialogues. Almost eighty years of teaching English in Saudi schools, colleges and universities, still, just like non-native learners in other non-English speaking countries, Saudi learners also confront many difficulties learning English. This study is an effort to bring out the major barriers and difficulties that Saudi students face while learning English. It proposes remedial measures for the barriers and problems. Particularly, the researcher tried to focus on the teaching methodologies and learning atmosphere prevalent in Saudi English classrooms.

Keywords: Pedagogy, English Language Teaching, Communicative Approach to Language Teaching (CALT), globalisation, information and communication technology

INTRODUCTION

Highlighting the present status of English Education in Saudi Arabia Sayegh (2009) said that after the establishment of Ministry of Education in 1953, in which General Presidency of Females' Education was merged in 1959, the educational scenario became vibrant in Saudi Arabia. The Higher Committee for Education Policy in Saudi Arabia, as cited in Al Shumaimeri (2003), has assured that the ultimate aim of education in Saudi Arabia is to make students understand Islam in a correct and comprehensive manner; to implant in them the Islamic creed; to imbibe in them the Islamic values, teachings and Ideal; and, above all, to spread Islam as well as to develop the society economically, socially and culturally, and, more importantly, to prepare the individual to make meaningful contribution to the strengths of his community. English was taught as a foreign language in Saudi Arabia from class seven onwards, but; now it is taught from class six as a compulsory subject. If any classified job advert is examined, one would clearly see it announces the demand for English knowing people, this is true even for engineering and medical fields. Frankly, the kingdom of English spans practically all fields whether it is science, technology, business, computers or commerce. It is a veritable

window to the outside world: one that allows Saudis to explore the world around them. Being an aware society and fully realizing the significance of English skills, the Ministry of Education included English into the Saudi education system as one of the major subjects, making its study compulsory from class four to university level. The question that comes up is why the performance of an average educated Saudi user of English is not even passable? In the course of this study it was found that there are many challenges before a teacher of English in Saudi Arabia. These are catalogued here:

1. Mother tongue interference is a major barrier for the Arab learner of English. The first language (L1) as well as the mother tongue of Arabs is Arabic. Arabic and English belong to two diverse language groups. It is natural that they might be different. The sounds in the Arabic alphabet are very different from those of English. There are many sounds corresponding to characters/letters in the English alphabet which cannot conveniently be pronounced by the Arabic speaking people. Arabic letters are pronounced distinctly; separately and independently of each other i.e. each letter has an independent sound. In English on the other hand, an alphabet may have more than one sound or even no sound at all (as in the case of 'silent letters'). So, the Arab students flounder at the very nascent stage of alphabet learning in English.

2. Albeit with the aim of culture preservation, the education system (policy, curriculum and course-syllabi) is deeply anchored in Islamic values, propagation of Islamic concepts and living according to Islamic precepts. With such a strong anchoring in this ethos, there is natural resistance to learning other languages like English, which may be seen as agents of cultural dilution. The Government of Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has taken concrete steps to motivate the people (with greater thrust at the students and teachers) to see the writing on the wall and learn English for a better and beneficial future in the international arena. Taking timely cue, educational institutions are also contributing positively and with enthusiasm to improve the standard of English in the country. 3. The teachers of English are generally not trained in linguistics. Their focus is mainly on getting the students to pass the exam. Further, they not incorporate modern teaching aids or pedagogies LCD Projectors, videos, labs etc. into their teaching regime. In fact, they are not even updated on the latest happenings in the field that could ensure better output. 4. The curriculum and syllabus are not revised as per modern teaching approach. Grammar translation or other methodologies relying heavily on L1 are passé and need to be discarded at the earliest. Teaching has to be in the real world by full exposure. For that, students should be taught by creating real-life situations that provide opportunity for language use. Wherever is possible teaching should be extended beyond the classroom and the necessity of knowing English proven to the de motivated learners. 5. Methods of teaching in Saudi Arabia are outmoded. First and foremost, it should be drilled into the teaching community that English is not a mere subject that needs passing marks, but a life skill much like swimming. It is a language to be learnt and what better way than learning it by use. Resort to L1 should be strictly discouraged even amongst the teaching community while they are on campus as we all know that students are keen observers and learnt the most by looking at people and situations around them. Statement of the problem after studying English for about 9 years, school leavers are, in most cases, unable

to speak or write a single flawless sentence in English. This raises many questions about the soundness of teachers and suitability of methods employed. Without a doubt there is a major problem confronting English education in Saudi Arabia.

II. Survey of current literature: A Bird's eye view Fageeh (2011) revealed in his study that EFL learners heavily rely on writing as skill integral to language learning. This contention is supported by much research conducted in the Arab world. The results state that EFL learners' listening, speaking and reading skills mainly depend upon their writing competence (Hefferman, 2006; Hinkel, 2004; Al Ghamari, 2004; Cyer & Sacks, 1979). Decided encore the fact that writing skill is considered extremely important in all situations of learning, studies have proved that in Institutions where English learning courses are given in the Arab world, Saudi Arabia included, writing is given more attention. So, EFL students studying in Institutions that use English as medium of instruction face severe problems in writing skills, and that factor hinders their academic progress. (Tahaineh, 2010; Rababah, 2003; Bacha, 2002; Kharma & Hijaj, 1997). In fact, Tahaineh (2010, p.79) re-assured and stressed that the writing skill " ...... is needed for taking notes, describing objects or devices and writing essays, answering written questions, writing their compositions, writing experimental reports, etc ". Javid (2011) managed a study to find out the status of ELT in Saudi Arabia, particularly aimed at identifying difficulties/problems in ELT and the reasons for the Saudi Students' low proficiency level in English. He recommended strict admission policy, increase in language courses, developing tailor-made activities, providing increased practice in academic writing, exploiting modern teaching techniques, and equipping the class rooms with modern teaching aids to improve Saudi EFL learners' academic writing. Al Shumaimeri (2003) gotten that "Teachers have pointed out that students leave the secondary stage without the ability to carry out a short conversation". This expression indicates that the students are not proficient in English language even after studying the subject for many years. It goes to the credit of Fareh (2010) to take to light some of the challenges of English as Foreign Language (EFL) programme in the Arab world, Saudi Arabia included; these are briefly mentioned below:

1. The teachers of English are not properly trained inasmuch as teaching methodology is concerned.

2. Activities carried out in schools, colleges and universities are not student-centred.

3. No serious effort is made to develop students' aptitude, initiative to promote initial preparedness and instil motivation through environmental sensitivity and highlighting role of each citizen to create human capital with worldwide view of society.

4. There is lack of whole language approach; there is compartmentalized approach to teaching English.

5. Limited effort is directed towards developing skills; emphasis is given to 'rote learning'.

6. Lack rather near absence of modern teaching materials.

7. Outmoded assessment methods are still in vogue.

8. Initiatives are lacking to bring about total exposure to English language with literature ethos. Any amount of crying over spilt milk is not going to rectify the problem. The need of the hour is careful planning with long term objectives and the political will to implement these.

1. Learning divorced from needs is certain to fall flat on the face. We have to identify student needs and objectives as far as English learning is concerned.

2. Curriculum has to be developed in consonance with these. Richards, Platt, J. and Platt, H (2013) stated that Need Assessment (NA) is "the process of determining the needs for which a learner or group of learners requires a language and arranging the needs according to priorities".

3. Text books and teaching materials have to be evaluated and their efficacy to meet the needs of the learners assessed by experts. As the situation stands, old and outdate text books are used in Saudi Arabia. Subject matter and related material need urgent overhauling. This is where the role of syllabus designers and policy makers comes in.

4. Any educational plan cannot succeed unless the 'executors' (ie teachers) of it are well equipped. It is an age-old belief that language acquisition starts only when learners begin to 'think' in that language. Then again language is a microcosm representing the ethos and value system of its native users. It is, in other words, a culture specific entity. Not just words and phrases, even paralinguistic features of language convey meaning. Consequently, a teacher may have high credentials or educational qualifications but as far as ELT is concerned this is not enough.

5. There are three core areas in which an English teacher has to be proficient. These are: (i) Deep knowledge of subject matter (both language and literature); (ii) Awareness of new pedagogical trends; and (iii) An understanding of how best the students will learn English. 6. Motivation plays a pivotal role in language learning situations. It is observed that needs, wants and desires are inter-related in the language learning class rooms; these are the driving forces to learn and become proficient in English. Motivation has to be continuous and the teacher plays a major role in ensuring the students are not let down.

7. The last important issue is whether the students receive enough exposure for using English. Ismail (1991) mentioned that "If children are exposed to the L-2 in the same way as they are exposed to L-1, greater success will be achieved". Dulay et al cited in Ismail (1991) assured that language exposure …… 'Encompasses everything the learner hears and sees in the new language'. The students hardly use English, except a little in classroom, though there are many opportunities available like English Newspaper, TV Programme, Radio Programme, and expatriates available in the kingdom.

Summary

Shumaimeri's Study showed that there is need that all partners like policy makers, teachers, colleges/universities and students in the ELT programme must join hands and complement each other. Having gone through the above difficulties/blocks in the teaching of English as 2nd and foreign language, Al Shumaimeri   makes the following

recommendations: 1. Needs Assessment (NA) must be done before undertaking the language teaching programme to avoid dissatisfaction in achieving its aims and objectives. Language proficiency at the pre-determined level will result if NA is properly done. 2. Pre-service and in-service training of teachers will make the teaching effective and learning smooth and interesting. In this connection, we may quote Britten (cited in Murdoch, 1994) who states that novice teachers must be fully equipped through proper training. They must be trained in using audio-visual aids, and introducing grammatical structures, asking questions and handling students' responses, apart from using teaching dialogues, organizing group work activities and other innovative devices. 3. English language text-books with modern approach and concept of teaching and well planned and properly graded learner-friendly teaching material may be made available and periodically reviewed for changes or additions. The teachers may undertake one-to-one discussion with the prospective students to find out their needs on the basis of their learning style, learning assets, learning goals, and particularly the students' perceptions in these respects. 4. It is observed that learning of English at higher levels by the students aims at being able to use it in real life communications. In such cases, two teaching methods have to be given 'go by' – dictating notes and giving lectures by the teachers. Here, the students require proficiency in the four skills – speaking, listening, reading and writing; engaged students in activities to develop critical thinking, using language in meaningful contexts and in new and complex ways. 5. Educational technology may be profitably used to impart communicative skills in class rooms. Devices like tape recorders, CDs, Pre-recorded Cassettes, and Videos can and must be used to improve students' proficiency in English language by listening, speaking and conversing accurately. Happily for us, Saudi Arabia is one of the few countries in the world where all modern technologies are provided in English teaching class rooms. 6. Teachers must be taught to use the modern technologies in teaching of English, and then they should be encouraged to use those technologies. 7. It must be ensured that the students use English language in class rooms, on the campus and in daily communications. After all, practice makes a man perfect. Khan (2011) conducted a study to find out the difficulties faced by the students in Saudi Arabia in learning English. He mentioned two approaches adopted by the teachers teaching English - Translation Method and CALT (Communicative Approach to Language Teaching). However, he also said that bilingual approach could also be adopted as alternate strategy. Khan (2011) said that although there is sound planning, purposive curriculum, suitable text books, qualified teachers and effective administration yet teaching and learning process of English language seems to be ineffective, especially in the area of skill development. Al-Samadani (2010, p.53) stated that ELT "is a complex, challenging and difficult process" because, according to him, it includes multiple skills such as identification of thesis statement, writing the supporting details, reviewing and editing. Therefore, this complex process makes it rather difficult to reach it. The difficulty in teaching/learning of this skill is due to the fact that it involves a comprehensive knowledge of grammar, suitable vocabulary, writing mechanics (e.g. punctuation, & capitalization), organizational skill, style, imagination etc. Al-Samadani (2010, p.53) has classified problems as: vocabulary, spelling, articles, pronouns, prefixes and suffixes, irregular verbs, Question words, etc. Many studies containing this problem-

theme were conducted by different scholars. In most of those studies, mention of a few of them may be relevant here. Mukuttash (1983), Suleiman (1983), Zughoul (1983, 1984, 1987) and Ibrahim (1983) taken to the fore that the Arab students have problems regarding learning of English and cited the following reasons: (i) The students who graduated from the schools had no information regarding the college or university in which they enrolled themselves. (ii) Deficiency was observed in the curricula of English language offered by some schools and universities. (iii) Methodology of teaching was dreadful to the students. (iv)There was problem about proper English language environment. (v) The students lacked in giving personal inputs during classes. Suleiman (1983) thought that there was general discontentment with regard to the overall output of the Arab students learning English in the subject. The causes were traced to poor essential principles in the conception and design of curriculum as well as insufficient approaches to teaching followed in the class rooms, tardy development in the communication skills of the students, among other drawbacks and shortcomings. The above types of problems were also pointed out in various studies in other Arab countries. For example, Zughoul (1983) led another study in which he agreed with the findings of Abdul Haq and asserted that most Jordanian students enrolled in Classes held for English as Foreign Language (EFL) had poor oral communication skill, and the students usually committed gross lexical errors. Kambal (1980) led another study in Sudan in which he noted that most students pursuing English language course/subject were weak in the following areas: tenses, verb structure and subject verb agreement. Kambal (1980) also believed that there were difficulties with students' use of tenses like tense substitution, time sequence, tense-marker, and uncertainty of perfect tenses. III. DISCUSSION Problems/Difficulties of English Language Acquisition in Saudi Arabia Contrary to the situation in the last millennium, the researcher, a product of the current educational system in Saudi Arabia can say with pride that both the authorities and educational institutions have actively taken up the cause of English propagation in Saudi Arabia. Not that the other subjects are receiving less attention but the point here is that English language teaching and learning has been brought to the centre-stage in KSA's educational system because of its importance in the modern world. In other words and precisely, it is because English is not only a matter of local interest but also a global need. The realization has dawned upon the common people in all the third world countries including Saudi Arabia that English language proficiency is necessary to gain knowledge from sources within and outside the country. With greater globalization the numbers of L2 users will increase exponentially. English language would be increasingly used as the medium to accomplish economic, social and humanitarian goals. From this perspective, the aims of teaching English in Saudi Arabia have been stated clearly in the government policy. It is amply pronounced by the authorities that there is nothing wrong in teaching-learning English because the reality itself is revealing the subtle change in outlook and now more stress is placed on global interaction and participation in activities having common humanitarian interest and international ramifications. However, the problem is to know whether these goals are being achieved or not and how much is the chasm between the two, and more importantly, what the status of the ELT situation is. Assessment of the current situation vis a vis the pedagogical inputs, need based syllabi, motivation level of

the learners, and the learning barriers can get us to the root of the problem of poor proficiency. Except in U. K. and USA, English is the second language in other countries. Non-English-speaking countries encounter many problems in acquiring it; the problems/difficulties that are experienced in the process are (i) the influence of the mother tongue; (ii) accent; (iii) pronunciation; and (iv) vocabulary, and so on. Let us frankly admit that people in KSA as well suffer from these problems/difficulties and, unfortunately, in larger dimensions. The foregoing observations are based on the conditions prevalent in public schools. The private schools were not taken up for gathering observed data. Private schools might be somewhat more responsive to the students' needs as they are subject to competition. Even so the difference is only marginal and not vast as may be expected. Targeting the problems and difficulties more specifically, we have firmed up two basic facts: there are problems and difficulties in teaching/learning English language (L-2), and there have to be resolution of those difficulties and problems. The researcher reiterates that, like all other languages, English language is a skill-based subject. This takes the researcher to suggest that the core skills namely Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing should be given particular and separate attention. Any deprivation in any of these skills could cause a far reaching impact on the acquisition of the language as no skill can be learned or used in isolation of the others. The researcher discussed this aspect informally with a few teachers and selected students individually. So, the above truth has been brought into focus for appropriate deliberation and decision for planning.

OBJECTIVES

1. To find out the present status of English learning in schools in Saudi Arabia;

2. To find out the difficulties faced by the Saudi students in learning English language;

3. To find out whether teachers are well trained in teaching English in Saudi School.

4. To find out whether adequate teaching material and modern ITC tools are available in schools;

5. To suggest measures to make English teaching interesting, effective and easy for the students

METHOD

The present study, considered significant in the emerging global conditions, is aimed at finding out the school students' language learning difficulties. Data for the study has been collected from 7 students presently studying English at the school level. Unstructured Interviews were also conducted with teachers and headmasters for the purpose.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Primary data was collected based on direct interviews. Aversion to English was a feature common to all of the students. However, one group was able to tide over the problems in a natural way as they would in any other subject, while the other group considered their situation hopeless. The experience in Primary Schools was quite different from that in the Intermediate schools. With the former, creating a communication channel itself was a

challenge. The students appeared intimidated and unwilling to reveal their reservations. Much coaxing and cajoling however, brought out painful facts: the students were mortally scared of their teachers and avoided saying anything at all in the English classes. The researcher is of firm belief (based upon innumerable studies conducted in other countries) that communication which is a prerequisite to learning being absent from the Saudi ELT classroom acted as a barrier to learning. Saleh from grade 6 had studied in Elementary School in Australia for about 6 months. He stated though with some reservation, about the benefits of student-friendly atmosphere there. The very mention of his experience brought out his happiness and he expressed fear of reprisal by school authorities if they so much as got a breath of his views. Interviews with Jehad and Omer were quite different: they were unexpectedly frank and forthright. They honestly stated that they faced problems with their teacher: it was hard to ask him a question or raise a query while he taught and, they said, that all the students felt stressed out in his class. They added that the teacher did not even explain the meaning of difficult words. The teacher was clearly 'autocratic': he took class tests and did not ever disclose the specific chapter that he had selected for the tests. In this dismal situation it was heartening to see that they were aware that English language was and would continue to be an important language for doing work or business. But they were sad that with all those problems persisting, they would not be able to master the language which they dearly wanted to. Interviews with high school students were very enlightening. They were well informed about the capability and potential of Information Technology. They suggested that modern teaching methods and electronic devices should be used for teaching English language for better understanding, learning with least intervention of the teacher and promoting interest for the language. They were specific when they mentioned that teaching should be done using online games, watching movies and social communication programs. The majority opinion suggested change in approach, methodology and material for teaching. All were in favour of initiating open culture and being student-centred and tech-savvy. The major problem observed by the researcher that includes all other sub-problems was that the outcomes (in the form of language proficiency) were painfully dissatisfying. Imagine a student graduating from High School, and having attended language classes four hours a week in English for full six academic years and yet be unable to produce a single error free utterance.

Summary

English learning by school students in Saudi Arabia is full of difficulties. The difficulties emanate from policy making and its implementation regarding English as an elective subject in school. The problems also relate to teachers' training, syllabus/curriculum content, methodology and tools of teaching as well as use of modern technology and modern infrastructure. The specific problems are (i) introduction of English at a late stage by which time the students have had sense of discrimination, choices, likes and dislikes; the need to acquire the new language is not as intense as it is in childhood; (ii) the teachers are not well trained, neither as language teachers nor as behavioural science teachers; (iii) Curriculum is outmoded; (iv) Information and communication technology (ICT) is not used for teaching English; (v) ICT and electronic devices are not used to make

learning interesting and more effective to the students; (vi) Direct teaching approach is not followed L-2 and so, in its absence, learning and teaching takes place by translation through the first language (L-1); (vii) There is fear of learning in the students' minds as classroom atmosphere is intimidating and discourages student participation of any sort, viewing it as an unnecessary interruption.

SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introducing that is English from the Early Stages: As of now, teaching of English language in Saudi Arabia is done from only the fourth grade while in advanced countries, it is taught right from the pupil's entry into play-way/Montessori stage. Talking about Saudi Arabia, it should be taught from the first grade since, as per many research studies, and especially the Critical Age Hypothesis, it has become clear that the second language acquisition works better in the earlier stages of life along with learning of the first language. A child acquires language as a natural instinct to learn. The best time for students in school should be the English language time among the other subjects. It may be ensured that no textbook for English should be used at this time of school that is the Elementary Stage. The lessons should be packed as much with fun as possible and as much practical as feasible. We know that words and pictures speak; a picture is worth a thousand words, as the Chinese saying goes. Teaching English at this tender age using real-life situations, should be a trip to the world outside and not telling stories about it. The teacher should be able to ignite the students' love for the language. At this point, children are curious to know more and more, relevant or irrelevant, at this age. The teacher can afford to be quite friendly and not behave authoritatively. The children will open up and ask questions thereby ensuring better learning. 2) Ensuring and concentrating on quality not quantity: Curriculum is a big problem that we face in our English teaching class rooms. The curricula are too fat and wide for teachers to cover and too much for students to handle. What we do now is concentrating on finishing the curricula in time and in whatever possible way regardless of any benefits we get from doing this. Simply, we need to reconsider our curricula putting in mind the quality that ensures achieving the goals not the quantity that is to be finished because the student will not be asked how many pages or units did he study but, instead, he will be judged on his/her use of the language and this is the only thing that matters; it is the qualitative aspect. What is being done now, as we witness, is the opposite! 3) Attention should be paid to Evaluation Not Examination: It may be understood very clearly that English is a language! It should not be treated like any other school subject; it has to be dealt with in a way that suits its nature as a language; it may be taught like an art with its craft (or skill). The more natural we are in teaching English the more natural results shall we get. Studies have proven that the emotional state of the learner, either positive or negative, is reflected in the speed and quality of the learning process. Examinations are the unseen monsters most feared by the students. The only way they know of to be spared by it is by mugging up the syllabus just before the exam. While this may yield temporary result if any, the long term output can well be predicted to be failure. Instead of testing the students for skills that may be 'learned' they should be tested also for the practical skills, viz, speaking and listening. 4) No class should encompass more than 20 students: It is a simple equation: If you want better results, do

what needs to be done! One of the important requirements of getting better outcomes in English language teaching, and languages in general, is restricting the number of students in each class, not huddle them like cattle. Each student must have an elbow room, not in physical terms only but in terms of space or territory to feel free to interact with the teachers in a good environment. Many schools suffer from the problem of crowding, not only in English classrooms but also in the other subject-class rooms. Since teaching English is the subject matter here, crowding the class room is a relevant and very critical problem to be solved. In English class room, each student really matters – not as a counting unit but as a human being to be treated as such. Interaction with every student is really a prerequisite for a successful English lesson. The ideal language classroom is in fact, the noisiest one with each learner being free to speak and be heard. 5) Audio Visual Aids Should Be Used in Instruction: We hardly bear in mind that language is the most important factor in the socialization process. Seen in this background, we feel that one of the problems we have is introducing the language theoretically as dead matter rather than using it practically as living with civilisation. Language means acquisition, imitation and practice. Every attempt by a student needs reinforcement – facilitating process carried on by the teacher – and then repeating by the student (by practice). This is how we learn and should learn and yet use the language to communicate. It is most probably communication that the Cro-Magnons survived and lack of it annihilated the Neanderthals. Language is not information to be studied and examined in; it is much more than that: it has to be used. Many schools lack the modern technology devices and equipment that help learning English well in a more enjoyable and effective way. The learners should see and hear how language is exactly used in real situations. They should watch, hear and imitate the language through short films, stories, dramas, poetry-recitations and discussions. They cannot effectively learn a language by looking at textbooks talking about the language, for instance, courses like GIL which stands for Guide Independent Learning, teaches how to find the information by you. This is what we call induction via reading, listening or watching in an optional way. 6) Increasing the number of English class hours: The researcher holds the opinion that four hours a week are not enough for language teaching as it requires regular practice. It came to light that once out of school or college, students tap resources such as Language Institutes to manage their proficiency issues. The point is, what they could not achieve with almost ten years of exposure cannot possibly be taught better by these agencies in two- or three-months courses. English learning hours in our schools should be increased to at least come at par with Math or Science. English classes should, therefore, be held for at least six hours a week.

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