Analysis of Underlying Reasons for Low Saudi EFL Performance

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ABSTRACT: This study aimed at investigating the underlying reasons of challenges that can cause Saudi EFL learners to have lower English performance. This study follows a qualitative method through interviewing three college students at Jouf University and one professor. The self-constructed interviews were basically targeted four items; 1) students' related issues, 2) teachers' related issues, 3) curricula- related issues, and 4) assessment related issues. The finding of this study have indicated that the primary challenges of Saudi EFL learners were due to their lower internal and intrinsic motivation. The conceptualized learning English as an academic course to pass, and not an actual language communication. The recommendations suggested by this study were trimmed into the following: increasing English language practice, shifting the focus from being examination- driven focus onto learning authentic communicative language.

KEY WORDS: Saudi EFL; English Language: Language Challenges; Improving EFL learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning a second language is a demand in most of the world countries. More specifically, increased number of country used to include English as a second language in their educational system. Saudi Arabia is not an exception. The Saudi ministry of education also included English in their educational system. However, Saudi EFL learners still encounter increased number of challenges and learning difficulties (Alkhaleefah, 2017; Alshammari, 2021; Elsayed & Puteh-Behak, 2017; Khan et al., 2020). Generally speaking, Saudi EFL learners even they exposed to English during more than six years, still they performed less than expected. More specifically, they face several language challenges when it comes to a single language skill such as reading, listening, speaking, and writing. Those language learners receive reading difficulties as it is highlighted in (Alkhaleefah, 2017; Elsayed & Puteh-Behak, 2017; Khan et al., 2020), and not only in reading, but they experience a low performance in the other language skills as it is claimed by (Abker, 2020; Ahmed, 2017; Alzinaidi & Latif, 2019). Most of the findings of the previous research were associated to the following; students-related; teachers-related; curricula and assessment-related issues. This current study tries to fill the gap in the research since it explores the language learning difficulties of Saudi EFL learners from teachers, students, faculty members' points of views.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW / BACKGROUND

This section presents studies that investigates the Saudi EFL challenges and problems that cause them to have poor language skills. However, we start with a study that explores reading problems of Saudi EFL learners. (Khan et al., 2020) investigated the reading problems of Saudi EFL learners at the elementary level. This study followed mixed method to collect its data. The participants were 290 Saudi elementary students and also there were nine teachers. The language learners n=290 received a test and the nine teachers recruited to interview. This study founded that the main reading problems of Saudi EFL learners were; "poor vocabulary, incorrect pronunciation, wrong spellings, slow reading pace and flawed grammar".

In (Younes & Albalawi, 2016) research, the main purpose is to find the reasons behind speaking difficulties that Saudi EFL learners have and the point of view from them and their teachers. The method used in this research is triangulation, the instruments that have been used are a classroom observation sheet and two questionnaires. The participants are 20 teachers and 350 Saudi female EFL learners. (Younes & Albalawi, 2016)and her colleges found that " conceptual knowledge, listening ability, motivation to speak, teachers' feedback during speaking activities, confidence, anxiety, mother tongue, law participation time allow to speak and time allowed for preparation. They also found that high level of anxiety, the inability to properly use the correct words to speak their ideas, the effect of their first language. The information collected from classroom observation proposed 4 reasons that affected students' speaking performance as follow": insufficient input, time for preparation, poor instructions and the unsatisfactory amount of practicing speaking."

In (Al-khresheh, 2020) research, he aimed on the problems and difficulties that Saudi EFL learners come across in listening comprehension, and to see if the cultural background affects their listening skill. The method used is triangulation, two instruments

were used, diagnostic test and a questionnaire. 31 Saudi EFL students and 8 EFL teachers participated in this research. Al-khresheh found that listening is the most challenging skill and the cultural background has a huge effect on Saudi EFL students listening skill, (Al-khresheh, 2020) also found " Saudi EFL students encounter substantial difficulty in the perception, parsing, and utilization phases of their listening comprehension for many reasons."

In this research Farooq (2012) and his colleges aimed on finding the reasons and difficulties in academic writing of Saudi EFL learners. They tried to find if there was any differences based on gender in academic writing difficulties but they did not find major differences, so the null hypotheses was taken. The researchers used quantitative method and a likert scale questionnaire was used. 194 samples participated in this research, 108 males and 86 females. They found that these 194 learners have some sever difficulties which are "weaknesses in using appropriate lexical items, organization of ideas and grammar. The other weaker areas include wrong use of prepositions, spellings, irregular verbs, articles, punctuation, suffixes and prefixes."

In this study (Alkubaidi, 2019) investigated the relying of Saudi EFL learners on their teachers in writing and the effects this reliance has on the students. An action group research and three main phases have been applied. The participants were Saudi EFL learners. The researcher found number of conclusions: "First is the spoon-feeding of Saudi learners throughout their educational years; therefore, they find it challenging to gain hold of their learning. Second, writing in English is a challenging task for Saudi students. Third, some of the students memorize writing passages to pass their English course. Fourthly, teaching to write was done by focusing on form, writing mechanics, rather than communicative aspects of writing and genre."

3. METHODOLOGY
3.1. Methods
This study adopts a qualitative research methodology through collecting interviews.

3.2. This research has two questions; one is primary PRQ and one is secondary research question SRQ as follow:
PRQ: What are the possible reasons that cause Saudi EFL learners to have low language skills?
SRQ: What recommendations can be given to help improving the language skills of Saudi EFL learners?

3.3. Participants/ Respondents/ Sample
There will be 4 participants recruited to collect data for this research. All of the assigned participants were divided into two primary groups as follow: 1 University professor and 3 Saudi EFL learners. All participants were male. All of the three EFL students participating in this research haven't joint any sort of private schools nor studied English abroad and they are currently study BA in English fifth semester at Jouf University.

3.4. Instrument
There are two instruments; 1) interviews, and 2) classroom observations. To demonstrate the internal construction of the interviews, look at the following table:

		Number of Questions
1.	Students' related issues	3
2.	Teachers' related issues	2
3.	Curricula related issues	2
4.	Assessment related issues	2

To know more about the internal construction, look at appendix (a).

4. RESULTS
This section presents the data collected from Saudi EFL learners as well as from the one university academic staff through constructing a sort of systematic themes. And we've done this sort of themes because we need to make the results readable concise and clear.

Table 1: Interview Responses for Question No. 1

Interview Question No. 1	Do you revise your language classroom lesson in home? if yes choose (1-2-3-4-more) hours per day
Participant 1	No. Sure not
Participant 2	No. I don't
Participant 3	No. I am not
Participant 4 (Professor)	No. Absolutely not

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Theme	All of the participants responded negatively by saying no. This indicates that they do not revise their language lessons at home. It is clearly stated that the response of the professor, was "Absolutely not", and this highlights that the professor insured that learners were less likely revising lessons at home.

Table 2: Interview Responses for Question No. 2

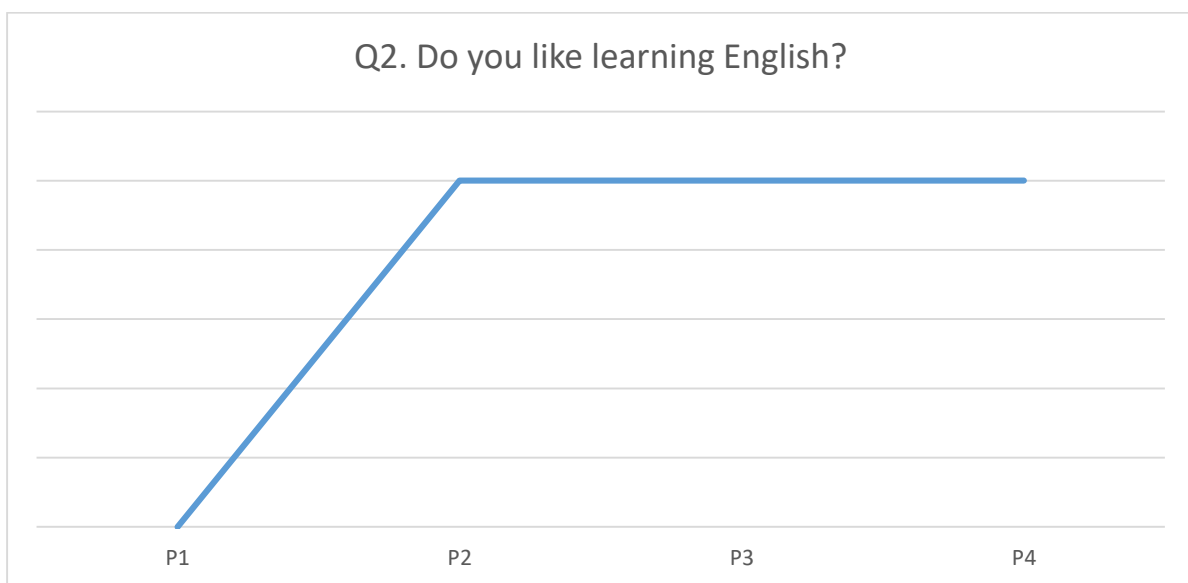| Interview Question No. 2	Do you like learning English?
Participant 1	No.
Participant 2	Yes, I want to communicate with the rest of the world.
Participant 3	Yes, I do.
Participant 4 (Professor)	Yes.
Theme	According to the responses gathered from the learners to this question, 1 student answered with no while the other two students said yes; "The thought of communicating with people around the world makes me enjoy learning English." Smilingly said by student 2.

Table 3: Interview Responses for Question No. 3

Interview Question No. 3	Do you think learning English is important?
Participant 1	Yes
Participant 2	Yes
Participant 3	Yes. English is a worldwide language.
Participant 4 (Professor)	Yes. Absolutely yes, in order to have a successful future
Theme	*Looking at the data collected from all participants they all agreed on the importance of learning English, The university professor ensured that learning English is highly important for Saudi EFL learners in order to have a successful future.*

Table 4: Interview Responses for Question No. 4

Interview Question No. 4	Do you think English teachers are responsible for the poor language skills of the Saudi EFL learners? How?
Participant 1	No
Participant 2	No
Participant 3	Yes, Absolutely.
Participant 4 (Professor)	Yes. Some teachers still use the traditional assessment which adds nothing to the learner.

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Theme	As we look at the responses gathered from this question, 2 students responded negatively while the other participants answered positively, student 3 said: "Some teachers don't care about if the student will pass his course with any valuable information or any development in his skills, some teachers are short tempered and don't give you any motivation to improve yourself."

Table 5: Interview Responses for Question No. 5

Interview Question No. 5	Do you think teachers can help improving the language skills of Saudi EFL learners? Explain?
Participant 1	Yes, teachers can help students to improve their language skills
Participant 2	Yes. Of course.
Participant 3	Yes.
Participant 4 (Professor)	Yes. Definitely.
Theme	Looking at the responses collecting from participants they all agreed that teachers can absolutely help with improving the language skills of Saudi EFL learners according to student 1: "Teachers play a very important role in improving the language skills, as a teacher you must look at these factors: fear of mistake and shyness, and make students feel safe to use their skills and improve them."

Table 6: Interview Responses for Question No. 6

Interview Question No. 6	Do you think the current English curricula is difficult for students to understand? How?
Participant 1	No. It is not difficult.
Participant 2	No. It is easy to understand.
Participant 3	No.
Participant 4 (Professor)	No. Sometimes it is about the person not the curricula.
Theme	According to the information collected from participants to this question they all agreed that the current English curricula wasn't difficult for students to understand, the professor made it very clear by saying: "sometimes curricula are just fine, but the person who teaches what is being apply in those curricula might be unaware of what he must deliver to the students at the end of the course."

Table 7: Interview Responses for Question No. 7

Interview Question No. 7	Do you think we could improve English curricula? How?
Participant 1	Yes.
Participant 2	Yes. Absolutely
Participant 3	Yes. Looking for improvement is always good.
Participant 4 (Professor)	Yes. Everything can be improved.
Theme	As we look at the responses gathered from this question, all participants responded positively: "Looking for improvement is always good, in my opinion I think we should focus more on practical learning rather than theoretical learning." Said by student 3.

Table 8: Interview Responses for Question No. 8

Interview Question No. 8	Do you think the current assessment practices in English classroom are valid?
Participant 1	Yes. For sure.
Participant 2	Yes.
Participant 3	Yes.
Participant 4 (Professor)	Yes. Absolutely
Theme	According to the information collected from participant to this question all participants agreed on the validity of assessment practices in English classroom.

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Table 9: Interview Responses for Question No. 9

Interview Question No. 9	How could we improve the assessment practices in order to help improving the Saudi EFL learners?
Participant 1	It's unfair to have 60 marks on tests.
Participant 2	By putting less grades on tests.
Participant 3	We should have the 60 marks on practical learning rather than the theoretical learning.
Participant 4 (Professor)	I think in order to help improving the Saudi EFL learners we must look at the anxiety level and the fear of tests, the fear of making mistakes and the shyness that students deal with.
Theme	Looking at the data collected from this question, the responses of the participants were all very similar to student 3, he stated that: "A lot of teachers and professors focus on mid-term tests and final test in assessment while turning a blind eye on what the learner could gain from the course, I think 60 marks out of 100 on tests is unfair and the learner will not focus on developing any skills."

4. DISCUSSION

This section discusses the results retrieved form the three Saudi EFL participants as well as the one university professor. For the purpose of clarity, we divided the discussion interpretations into four primary sections based on the internal construction of the instrument used to collect data as follows: 1) discussing questions related to Students (Questions numbers 1,2,3), b) discussing questions related to language teachers (Questions numbers 4,5), c) discussing questions related to curricula (Questions numbers 6, 7), and d) 1) discussing questions related to assessment (Questions numbers 8, 9).

It is clearly stated that responses collected toward answering the questions related to students highlighted some interesting points. Saudi EFL learners were less likely to revise or study English at home and they only expose to English materials inside classrooms. This can shed some light on the poor learning performance since they limited themselves to certain small portions of language material without any sort of further training nor practice. At the end, this can give an indication or a sign for one of the primary underlying reasons that could Saudi EFL learners to have poor English language skills. It is noted that even the university professor can insure the importance of exposing English learning to English more frequently inside and also outside classrooms to improve their language skills. This can mean that when learners did not revise English at home, then, they lost on the excellent language tool to be improved.

Through looking at questions two, we can find out that 75% of the participants had a positive responses regarding that they like learning English, and with a percentage of 100% regarding their perceptions toward the importance of learning English as a second language. More interestingly, the participants insured that learning English is important but they still lack the basic English language performance. This can be interpreted into two main categories: a) Saudi EFL learners prevented forcefully from improving their English performance due to some un-controllable factors. Those un-controllable factors can be associated to the socio-economic, cultural, religious, etc. along with internal factors as it is proposed by (Alkhaleefah, 2017; Elsayed & Puteh-Behak, 2017; Khan et al., 2020). All of the rest questions follow almost similar distribution of the former ones.

5. CONCLUSION

This study concluded indicating that most of the English EFL challenges were due to the internal motivation of the learners themselves. As it ensured in an increased body of literature that the internal motivation can help expedite L2 learning effectively. Hence, this study shed some light on the individual aptitude of learners, and not limited to this, but it also scrutinizes several outer elements such as the short time of practicing English inside classrooms. Yet, limited time of practicing English inside or even outside classrooms can decrease the motivation of Saudi EFL learners. The recommendations of this study can be listed as follows; 1) increase exposure time of authentic English material inside and outside classrooms, 2) increase the level of English actual practice through focusing on communicative skills and decrease the mere theoretical practice, 3) enriching students' knowledge about how to master searching skills through using the available technology and online sources, 4) lowing the examination focus rate and alternatively focusing on the actual language practice, 5) increase collaborative language learning.

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Appendix (a)

	Number of Questions	
1. Students' related issues	3	1) Do you revise your language classroom lesson in home? if yes choose (1-2-3-4-more) hours per day. 2) Do you like learning English? 3) Do you think learning English is important?
2. Teachers' related issues	2	1) Do you think English teachers are responsible for the poor language skills of the Saudi EFL learners? How? 2) Do you think teachers can help improving the language skills of Saudi EFL learners? Explain?
3. Curricula related issues	2	1) Do you think the current English curricula is difficult for students to understand? How? 2) do you think we could improve English curricula? How?
4. Assessment related issues	2	1) Do you think the current assessment practices in English classroom are valid? 2) How could we improve the assessment practices in order to help improving the Saudi EFL learners?

Appendix (b)

Interview questions

1) Do you revise your language classroom lesson in home? if yes choose (1-2-3-4-more) hours per day.

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2) Do you like learning English?

3) Do you think learning English is important?

4) Do you think English teachers are responsible for the poor language skills of the Saudi EFL learners? How?

5) Do you think teachers can help improving the language skills of Saudi EFL learners? Explain?

6) Do you think the current English curricula is difficult for students to understand? How?

7) do you think we could improve English curricula? How?

8) Do you think the current assessment practices in English classroom are valid?

9) How could we improve the assessment practices in order to help improving the Saudi EFL learners?