

Interwoven Factors that Influence EFL Learning at Tertiary Level in the Saudi Context: A Case Study

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Abstract

It is undoubtedly true that some factors influence students' learning of the English language. This research examines factors that influence Saudi students' learning, studying in second language acquisition (ENG 466) course, at the English and Translation Department, Qasim University. This qualitative study included 13 Saudi EFL learners using an open-ended three feedback questions to collect the data that explored linguistic, social, and psychological factors that influence their L2 learning. Using the content analysis procedures, the study found: some students considered they were average- or weak second language (L2) learners, more than half of the students believed that they were proficient L2 learners. Additionally, the results showed that all three (linguistic, social, and psychological) factors were significant in either encouraging or discouraging learners in the progression of their L2, for instance, a teacher may be a source of inspiration for students or a source of discouragement. The response also revealed that having a companion to practise the language who is interested in the subjects you are learning with, is among the key elements that define successful language learners. The research advises EFL teachers to exercise caution and address the various elements that influence their students' acquisition of a second language. The present paper's conclusion included a few comments, instructional implications, and suggestions.

Keywords: second language learning, linguistic factors, psychological factors, social factors, L2 learning, EFL; Saudi Arab context

1. Introduction

In the present times, English is a major international language that is used everywhere. Surprisingly, English is a subject that is required at all educational levels in the Saudi setting. The Saudi Arabian government have carried out many educational changes because of the significance of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). However, the outcomes after these changes have fallen short of expectations (Nguyen, 2013; Pham & Bui, 2019; Tran & Marginson, 2018; Le & Nguyen, 2017). The context of the student's linguistics, social and psychological factors and other aspects have all been mentioned as grounds for the treatments' unsatisfactory results. These elements are similar in that they all have an impact on students' attitudes about learning English. It should be noted that several other research (Getie, 2020; Chalak & Kassaian, 2010; Abidin et al., 2012; Choy & Troudi, 2006) suggested that students' unfavourable perceptions about learning English are also the primary cause of lower learning results. Studies addressing the variables influencing EFL students' learning English have been conducted (Getie, 2020; Chalak & Kassaian, 2010; Choy & Troudi, 2006; Abidin et al., 2012), however, only a few them examined social, and psychological factors affecting Saudi university students. To ascertain the elements influencing Saudi students' learning L2, the investigators chose the current study. Following the study, various factors were discovered that had an impact on students' L2 learning, including those that were specific to social, linguistics and psychology. Significantly, the researcher picked Qasim university in Saudi Arabia. The higher education facility is anticipated to rise to prominence as one of the top institutions in the Saudi Arab. As a result, local educators have given the quality of teaching and learning a lot of attention. In total, thirteen EFL students consented to take part in the study. The findings of this research offer a glimmer of hope for EFL teachers by assisting them in minimizing the barriers to their students' English acquisition and improving the quality of instruction in the Saudi Arab setting.

The study of educational linguistics often includes linguistic aspects of learning. This topic includes studies on multilingualism, language policies and contexts, such as the medium of instruction, how linguistic practises and

variables might inform effective pedagogy, and discourse analysis in the classroom for teaching and learning. Additionally, more recent theories on language variables and learning (dis)abilities are included in the category of linguistic factors in learning.

The role of linguistics and language in learning has often been associated with second language pedagogy. As noted by Spolsky (1978) the intersection between language studies and education has not always been clear. The application of linguistic theorising and descriptions, or "applied linguistics" in the past has narrowly been associated with language teaching and language pedagogy. However, it is also important to examine how linguistic aspects affect learning from a broader perspective, particularly from the standpoint of learning and theory of learning, much as educational psychology examines the multiple psychological elements in teaching and learning contexts. The functional viewpoint of linguistic theories, which holds that a theory's value depends on how it will be implemented, such as in translation or language acquisition, is emphasised by Stubbs (1986), who builds on Halliday's work. As a result, there will be several linguistic descriptions and model approaches for various objectives. According to this theoretical pluralism, language is too complex and rich to be adequately explained by a single theory. But according to Halliday, there is agreement on the definition of linguistics and a comprehension of its "core" subjects. The main areas of discussion include ", syntax, phonology, phonetics, morphology and semantics; the relationships between these levels of linguistic description; and the relationship between a language as so defined and its usage by either individual speakers or by society" (Stubbs 1986, p. 4). On the other side, there is a pervasive mistrust of linguistics' contribution to learning in the field of education. The idea that linguistics is not useful to teachers because it is overly theoretical is one that is frequently held in the educational community. Stubbs gives a linguistic perspective on conversation in order to give educators understanding of language that they can employ. Constructivist approach is used in teacher education under Stubbs' proposed linguistic strategy, which begins with an examination of written and oral communications in the class.

Language is frequently used in earlier research on language in education to support educational claims.

These studies make social-psychological claims that are relevant to educational theory and practise using language data as "markers," "indices," "indicators," or "evidence" (Stubbs 1986, p. 233).

The majority of elements that influence second language learning, it would seem, are the learner's attitudes about the second language (Alfallaj, F & Al-Ahdal, 2017). Success in second language learning is closely correlated with learners' attitudes about the target language. A set of values known as attitude are crucial to the acquisition process. A fundamental prerequisite for success in second language learning is the psychological formation, which calls for a favourable attitude toward the EFL. Positive attitudes among the students inspire them to work hard to learn the language. Negative attitudes, on the other hand, prevent learning. The different attitudes that learners have toward learning a language are shaped by their impressions of their target culture, teachers and the curriculum. When a person can communicate continuously in a second language, they are said to be proficient in that language. The learner's perspective of the second community will determine how frequently they are in contact. In his article "Motivation and Attitude: Two Important Non-Intelligence Factors to Stir up Students' Potentials in Learning English," Yi Liu (2014) of Yangtze University in China argues that a student of a second language must be psychologically equipped to pick up the second language.

2. Method

Research design

Content analysis of students' responses was performed. Qualitative research was followed due to the nature of the research questions. The study was conducted on Sep. 30, 2022), at the English Department, Qassim University.

Participants

The study analyzed the responses of 13 Saudi EFL students out of 20 students who enrolled in the tenth level. Students enrolled in the course of Second Language Acquisition, (ENG 466). They were at level 10 (third year). All students are Saudis. They voluntarily showed their interest to answer the questionnaire. They were asked for consent to participate in the study, their identities were hidden and their answers were anonymously displayed in the results section. The author got approval to held the study from the deanship of higher studies committee at Qassim University, (Eng. Sep. 28, 2022).

Instrument

As an assignment to check students' perceptions of studying the course (ENG 466), they were requested to answer three questions " Do you think you are (or would be) a "good", or "poor" L2 learner?; Why do you think so?, and

"What factors impact your level of success as a language learner?". Students wrote their answers and submitted them to the instructors.

Data analysis

Content analysis of students' answers was obtained. The researcher coded the students' answers using (student no) and classified them according to the three research questions. The researcher then read each response under each question and checked its suitability to answer that question. Furthermore, the researcher went back to the raw answers to check that no data were missed or omitted. For a third time, the researcher checked every single answer to the questions.

3. Results

Research Question 1: Do you think you are (or would be) a "good", or "poor" L2 learner?

More than half of the students believed they are good L2 learners. **Student 1**, stated, "I think I am a good learner". **Another Student reported**, "I think I am a good second language learner" (**Student 2**). **Student 3 confirmed**, "I think I am a good L2 learner." **Student 5, added**, "Yes, I think I am a good L2 learner." Furthermore, **Student 11**, "I'm good [learner]." **Student 12 affirmed**, "I think I am a good learner." **Student 10 announced**, "Everyone is a good learner unless something is stopping them from using their full potential." On the contrary, some students reported clearly, they were not good L2 learners or they were not good nor poor L2 learners. **Student 4 mentioned**, "I think that I am not very good." **Student 7 was not sure about his level of English reporting**, "I'm not saying I'm that good or that bad at English, it's just I can't tell if I'm good or bad." **Student 8 mentioned**, "I think that I am weak in learning the language because of the environment surrounding me." **Student 9 opined**, "I think that I am a little poor [language learner] for many reasons." **To finish up, another stated**, "For me, I think I'm between mid and good L2 learner," (**Student 13**).

Research Question 2 : Why do you think so?

Students justified their positive and negative beliefs of what makes them good or poor L2 learners and defended them. **Student 2 confirmed**, "I am a good second language learner because my English base is more than great I can understand almost everything and speak whatever is in my mind." **Student 6 added**, "I am a good language learner because I learn from my mistakes, and I learned a second language at a very young age. I found the second language very interesting on the internet I learned how to speak the language and how to write it a little bit and I kept getting interested in it and keep that interest on that language and I am now taking course's on it but I have a bit of a problem in writing". **Another participant said**, "I'm good because since I started learning I didn't know how it works. But now everything changed in a good way." (**Student 11**). **Furthermore, Student 12 justified**, "I am a good learner because I try my best to learn new words and try to use them and try to speak to people who speak English as a first language."

On the contrary, those participants who believed they were poor L2 learners reported their justification alike. To begin with **Student 4**, "I am not very good, for many reasons, because I did not learn the second language from the beginning. When I was in high school, I only knew the alphabet. When I entered college, I found it difficult to learn. I failed the intensive course twice. I learned a lot from it, in our country they do not speak a second language, and it is difficult to speak the language well, now I can talk to anyone and understand them, but I get a little nervous when I talk with a doctor and a group of students." **Student 8 stated**, "I am weak in learning the English language because of the environment surrounding me. Some of the reasons may be that I am a little shy." Another added, "I think ... I do not speak a lot and my lack of vocabulary in the second language. I also think that shyness is a problem in learning as well," (**Student 9**).

A third neutral perception is reported by **Student 13 & Student 14**. **Student 13 stated**, "I'm between mid and good L2 learner due to the fact that English is my major but the more important than that is that even if English wasn't my major I would still study it because I have passion and motivation to learn English as a second language." Similarly, **Student 7 indicated**, "I'm not saying I'm that good or that bad at English, it's just I can't tell if I'm good or bad, I can understand, speak, and write well I guess but, my problem with practicing the language, like unfortunately I only speak English in classes and even in classes there's not that much of a talk."

Research Question 3: What factors affect your level of success as a language learner?

Students' good or poor levels of success were associated with linguistic, psychological and social factors. Some students indicated the impact of the three factors on their second language learning. **Student 1 showed**, "What impacts my L2 level is not because being a genius or anything but actually from the wonderful teacher that I have

been taught under science class one in elementary school, and another factor is also receiving a lot of vocabulary terms from certain video games since I was a kid, and the ability to understand what are the tasks in a certain level was giving me the satisfaction and motivation to improve and learn more about the language." **Student 3 added**, "One, I believe my good Arabic did help me linguistically. Two, psychologically I feel comfortable, my father has encouraged me and my elder brother too. My father paid me to go abroad the country twice, so I can study and improve my English skills. Three, the instructions of teachers, of course, did help me, when teachers give their experience, effort and knowledge, we should get some none. Four, I was surrounding myself with English .. my phone language, my PC language etc."

Other students indicated the integration of two factors in the development of their L2 development. **Student 5 stated that psychological and social factors developed his L2**, "I am a good L2 learner because of a lot of things like first to be self-confident and a good teacher who motivates the students to learn and speak." **Student 12 mentioned**, "I have to speak to people through the internet and try to improve myself....my teachers in college were excellent teachers, and they improve my second language." **Student 13** indicated that linguistic and social factors were the reason behind his L2 development. **He elaborated**, "The first spark that made me start learning English was when I was probably 13-15 years old when I played video games and got stuck in some parts of the game because I didn't understand the quest they have been given to me, the second ... I have been taught by amazing English teachers in intermediate and high schools that made me love the subject I'm studying because they uniquely taught us in my opinion." Others believed that one of the above-mentioned factors encourages them while the other demotivates them. **Student 2 reported that** his psychological factor motivates him while the social factor disturbs him. **He stated**, "I reached my current level in English because I am interested in the language since I was a kid. So it is a psychological factor. Of course, my language is not perfect and I still need to do a lot of work. The community around me is one of the biggest problems I face with my language because I don't practice". Social factor was also confirmed, **Student 11 reported**, "The instructions were nice. Doctors helped me to get to the right point. The context of learning was smooth because the areas of learning weren't that hard with lovely doctors. Being good or poor doesn't make a difference the good learner would be faster than the poor L2 learning."

However, a few students showed the demotivating factors that hindered them from progressing good level in L2 and how they get rid of such barriers. **Student 4**, "I failed the intensive course twice. I learned a lot from it, in our country they do not speak a second language, and it is difficult to speak the language well, now I can talk to anyone and understand them, but I get a little nervous when I talk with a doctor and a group of students." **Student 8 added**, "I have not developed myself but a little. One of the reasons is that I only paid attention recently because I was busy studying during my secondary and middle school studies. I have a passion for that, unfortunately, and language development was not among my interests, I was accepted in the language department in college, and recently I started to develop day after day better than before." **Student 9 criticized some demotivational teachers**, "One of the negative factors in education is that some teachers did not encourage me to speak and participate, not all of them, but some of them were, but I started to skip this habit because I began to believe in a famous sentence, which is that shyness is the graveyard of opportunities".

Research Question 4: What makes good language learners?

Students indicated some of their experiences which help in making them good language learners. Having a partner to converse with plays important role in improving English language skills in someones. **Student 5 confirmed**, "I think if you have someone close to you who speaks good language will make you a good L2 learner.". Interest is another factor. **Student 7 added**, "I'm sure if I practice the language more I'll be much better than my current level, and the other reason I guess will be that in the first place it wasn't even my intention to be in the English and translation department so this may be another reason why I'm not that good at the language.". In the same vein, **Student 10 opined**, "You'll become a good learner in my own opinion if you are interested in the topic. Also, you will become a poor learner, if you will not give yourself a chance to understand the subject more." Another participant indicated that documentation of what has been learnt is of good importance for developing someone's competency in L2. "For the types of instructions sometimes we wrote in a notebook, so we cannot forget and sometimes we have to share our answers in class just to keep it in mind. All I have learned was a step forward," (**Student 11 added**).

4. Discussion

The first research question is related to the psychological factor. The study found that more than half of the students perceived themselves as good language learners whereas the remaining believed they are average L2 learners. This finding indicates the psychological dimension of what students were going through, briefly explained by one of them, when some of the students got less grades in English language courses that demotivated them. This psychological

understanding of their learning stage affects other factors consequently. In addition to this, they discussed how teachers' behaviour has discouraged them. According to the response, it was analysed that instructional pedagogy plays a significant role that may have an impact on L2 learning. Some students elaborated on the idea of motivation as a psychological factor; they stated that self-motivation has also a primary role in improving learning if the student does not have any interest in L2 learning he can not progress. Here, the instructor must play role in improving learner level of interest or motivation. Noticeably, the low grade was also considered a discouraging psychological factor that greatly hinder the process of L2 learning. Another point was raised that related to the lack of confidence among the learners. Shyness in language learning stops the learner to participate in class activities. Further, emphasis was also given to the learning environment. The environment also influences L2 learning as suggested by participants of the study. One important point was also highlighted about the learning styles of the learner. Some participants said they retain more when whatever is taught to them is to be written in note books , copies means everything should be documented. Whereas, other Saudi students desired to have full English exposure through multimedia and other video aids for their speaking skill.

The second research question was related to their linguistic problems and solution along with other factors that influence L2 learning. The participants of the study explained various issues that hinder their learning. Some stated the fact that their learning level suddenly change at the tertiary level. They do not learn from the beginning of their age that is the reason they face difficulties. There were participants who said they lack in terms of lexical devices. They do not have enough vocabulary to converse in English. Many of the students opined that they need different activities that can boost our speaking skills. Some suggested that they need comprehensive input to understand their writing mistakes. Basically, in EFL context, instructor role is paramount in making them excellent EFL learner. The problem lies according to Al-Ahdal and Almarshedi (2022), in the fact that one factor influence the other and create overall issues in Saudi EFL context. For many, types of instruction have profoundly affected their learning. Encouraging teachers and encouraging family members boost their competencies in language skills. Games as linguistic activity for EFL context would be a great idea as Saudi participants have shared how their vocabulary increase when they play games.

The other crucial factor that greatly influences L2 learning is the social dimension. The social factor has a huge impact on learning according to the feedback received from the respondents; it was revealed that class activities and people around you also act as a driving force for learning. For instance, learners should peer with good language learners who have a keen interest in it, if a student has been paired with low motivation or has less interest in L2 how can he be found beneficial for another partner? Moreover, social networking sites, mobile phones, television, precisely, all digital technologies have impacted the L2 learning. Some responses highlighted this aspect. They said they can have English exposure from digital media, which easily helps them in improving English as a second language (Al-Ahdal & Al-Awaid, 2018). Which makes them confident and boosts their level of motivation, confidence level and interest.

Furthermore, the study showed all the factors are interwoven and participate in shaping L2 competency. Some students reported that all the factors played a major role in their L2 development. Others mentioned the integration of just two of the three factors, i.e., social and psychological have positively affected their L2 learning. On the contrary, some of the students who perceived themselves as poor L2 learners reported that psychological factors such as loss of interest in the topic, social factors such as a demotivating environment, and discouraging teachers were among the reason for their low level of language learning.

Finally, the study showed that good learners are the product of some psychological factors like having an interest in language learning, and self-trust in the ability of learning or social factor like having a person to practice the language with or good teachers who assist the learners and shorten the path of language learning. Not to ignore linguistic factor which is fundamental in any language learning context. Consequently, EFL teacher cannot stress on one factor leaving the other one. Resultantly, It would affect overall learning progress of the learner.

5. Conclusion

The objective of the current qualitative study was to identify the variables that affected Saudi EFL students' language learning. Several social psychological and linguistic factors were discovered to have an impact on thirteen Saudi EFL students on their English learning. The main factors were the students' zeal, self-assurance, lexical expertise, anxiety, willingness to take chances, curiosity, and grasp of the English role. A challenging curriculum, lesson subjects, teaching and learning materials, and teacher-related variables all had a significant influence on the students' perceptions of their English abilities.

The contribution of this recent study benefits several stakeholders. First and foremost, EFL teachers must be reminded

of their impact on students' learning English and overall students' achievement. They should refrain from negative conduct both inside and outside the EFL classrooms, such as being late, taking unjustified absences, and using unsubtle humour. In addition, they must improve their zeal, friendliness, knowledge of and proficiency in teaching, professionalism, interactional strategies, attitudes toward students and the profession, behaviours, and teaching obligations. Second, educators get a chance to comprehend students' motivation for language learning and the factors that influence this interest. As a consequence, they are better able to organize future professional development training for EFL teachers, assist teachers to become more effective teachers, and prevent issues that negatively affect students' attitudes about studying English. Additionally, they need to address the students' complaints about the lengthy curriculum and improper teaching and learning resources. As a result, they can alter these elements to meet the skills of their learners. Finally, based on the current findings, researchers who are interested in examining the factors impacting EFL students' views regarding their language learning can gain a comprehensive understanding of the Saudi educational system. The current study also offers some additional improvements. First, further research should be carried out at both public and private educational institutions, including learners and instructors from all grade levels. Second, to ensure that the results are as meaningful as possible, volunteers should be chosen from every province and city in Saudi Arabia. Lastly, the cross-cultural study could be used to contrast the learning environment in Saudi Arabia with that in other nations.

Practitioner notes

What is already known about this topic

- 1- Previous studies have elaborated that several factors affect second language learning.
- 2- Some research studies have investigated social, linguistic and psychological variables that play significant roles in language learning.
- 3- ELT practitioners are trying to learn these factors and related issues for high-level L2 learning.

What this paper adds

- 1- To build a thorough understanding of the issues involved in integrating social, linguistics and psychological factors in the Saudi L2 learning context considering the need of Saudi EFL learners.
- 2- This study fills a research gap about the issues associated with Saudi EFL learners' social, linguistic and psychological issues in their L2 learning settings.
- 3- Previous literature has not adequately examined the influence of these factors on Saudi EFL learners. This research provides a detailed examination of the perception and views of Saudi EFL learners on their L2 learning by stating the fact that there are both negative and positive impacts of these factors on the learner.

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