

Studying English in the USA: A Study of Saudi Learners' Perceptions

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Abstract

This study explores the perceptions of Saudi EFL students on studying English at the American Universities. The study sample comprises 396 Saudi learners' whose classroom experience, social and academic interactions in a foreign learning environment, and the challenges that they encounter throughout their academic career form the dataset. The study uses an explanatory mixed-method design to gather the data through a survey and focused group discussion. Findings show that (i) Saudi learners have highly positive perceptions regarding course evaluation and the quantum of learning in the USA; (ii) there are no differences in perceptions according to gender; (iii) there are significant differences in the perceptions of the Master students compared to the other majors; (iv) no difference was reported in Saudis' perception on course evaluation attributed to different majors; (v) and, finally, that university-affiliated Saudi students outperformed those who were not-university affiliated in both course evaluation as well as language learning. This study is of significance to learners and teachers as they prepare to take up academic courses abroad.

Keywords: American university, gender, majors, (non)university-affiliated, Saudi learners.

1. Introduction

English during the twenty-first century has predominantly emerged as a global language. The British Council's estimate indicates that it is being spoken approximately by 1.75 billion people, which represents approximately 1/4th population of the world (British Council, 2013). This number has been increasing since year 2000, which is estimated at 1.5 billion and the next ten years are expected to witness an enormous rise in the number (Crystal, 2000). Bentley (2016), a member of TESOL, notes that this figure is attributed to the increasing number of English learners worldwide. It should be remembered that one of the key features of the TESOL-2014 was to showcase the enormous increase in the number of people who seek to learn the English language the world over, and this trend is rising with each coming day. The figure of international English learners is about 1.5 billion based on the British Council estimates, the leaders in developing English language curricula across the globe through nearly 3,000 full-time English language instructors. Resultantly, the institutions worldwide demand more and more English teachers who are qualified and competent, especially native speakers (Bentley, 2016).

In the same fashion, as any other language of the world manifests itself in variegated uses by the local speakers, English is no exception. Rather, it is astonishing that those who are not native speakers but using English in various parts of the world exhibit a long-range of variegation. English, as the predominant medium of communication among business people, IT communities, scientific domains, hospitals and hygiene, diplomatic quarters, and entertainment arenas, has turned into an "operating system" for global discussion and discourse (British Council, 2013). English as the most important language nowadays is taught everywhere in countries with non-native speakers, as well.

The kingdom of Saudi Arabia is one of those countries where English is taught at all levels of education. For example, English courses are taught in public schools beginning from the first grade. Also, in higher education, the English language plays an essential role in stating or selecting students' majors. Students who want to join four years of college mandatorily study English and Mathematics in the preparatory year. Students' admission to the desired college relies on the result of their performance in these. Besides Math, for example, the colleges of health sciences, and engineering require a high grade in English because it is the sole language of instruction in these colleges. Above all, thirty-four public and private universities offer a bachelor's degree in the English language. Because of the growing realization of the prospects of English among students who joined the above-mentioned programs and colleges, many of them tend to improve and strengthen their English language skills. So, some of them join private institutions that offer English language courses in Saudi Arabia and some prefer to go abroad, to countries such as the US, the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (during summer vacation).

A massive influx of Saudi students to the US occurred under the aegis of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP). Almost all Saudi students irrespective of their majors needed to attain English language proficiency to meet the requirements for admission to various American colleges and universities (Al-Ahdal & Algouzi, 2021; Alkaabi, 2016).

Since I am also majoring in teaching English, many of them always ask me about studying English Language or English for academics in

the United States. I see that answering this question individually is somewhat difficult. So, the research in hand aims to examine the attitude of Saudi learners who came to the United States to get various degrees in English, i.e., B.A. English, M.A. English/Linguistics, and even Ph.D. This examination will encompass their classroom experience, their socio-academic interactions in a foreign learning environment, and the challenges that they encounter throughout their academic career in the States. However, in many cases, the selection of educational programs was regulated by the government as in KASP and the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission (SACM). The overview regarding the studies conducted on Saudi students studying in the USA reveals various dimensions of perceptions, beliefs, and experiences that give an insight into the challenges and their remedial strategies. Although a few studies focus on English learning by the new Saudi enrollees in the formative phase, none of them offers an in-depth examination of their perceptions regarding the curriculum, books, teachers, efficacy of the offered English language skills courses, and the pedagogical process. Moreover, the previous studies leave a big gap in exploring the opinions of the students who have learned or are learning English in educational institutions of the United States for motivating those learners who intend to proceed there on scholarship or individually to avoid any misconceptions about studying English in a foreign land. The study answers the following research questions.

Research questions:

1. To what extent do Saudi students evaluate the English courses they study in American universities?
2. To what extent do Saudi students perceive learning English in the US English-speaking environment?
3. Do Saudi students in the American universities have different perceptions on course evaluation and language learning according to their gender?
4. Do Saudi students in American universities have different perceptions on course evaluation and language learning according to their affiliation?

2. Literature Review

Perceptions and beliefs on the part of a learner are expected to render a cardinal role in realizing the desired learning outcomes, and hence their importance in qualitative research is a well-established fact (Al-Ahdal & Almarshedi, 2021; Vereijken et al., 2018). Over the last two decades, the attitude of Saudi Arabian learners toward learning English has changed greatly because of globalization, the government's pro-English policies, and the revolutionary developments that occurred in the education system. Although the students could go to Britain, Canada, Australia, and many other European countries, the most favorite destination has been the United States of America for certain reasons, particularly, since the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP) opened up massive chances for Saudi Arabian learners to proceed to the US for higher education (Taylor & Albasri, 2014).

The Scholarship Program marked a change as it changed the situation drastically after 2010 with the renewal of KASP that encouraged the outflow of female students also on scholarships. So much so, female students were allowed a funded accompaniment of a male-relation to pave the way for educational development conveniently. Consequently, both male and female students got an equal opportunity to experience a mixed-gender culture that posed challenges in biological, psychosocial, and academic contexts. Young and Snead (2017) in their study titled, "Saudi Arabian International Graduate Students' Lived Experience at a U.S. University", probed the issues from two angles. The first one focused on how the level of proficiency in the English language impacted them during acculturation transition, and the second dealt with the problems arising out of prejudices and gender norms. In the concluding remarks, the study admits that it was limited to seven Saudi males and four Saudi females providing sketchy information. Besides, few studies give any clue to show how their cross-cultural experiences are manifested on their return to Saudi Arabia. Alkaabi's (2016) study primarily focused on the kinds of motivation that Saudi learners have during the time of their obtaining education in the USA. Explaining the purpose of the study she touched upon issues relating to learning English in a cross-cultural milieu. In her concluding remarks, she found that the Saudi students came to the USA with a weak background, and their priority was to enhance their communicative skills in English. The findings revealed that their success in learning English as ESL or EFL largely depended upon the factor of how motivated they were towards the target language as well as the native speakers who posed a big challenge to them. However, this investigation discovered that the female Saudi students in the States were more intrinsically motivated than the male ones. This study leaves a big gap for looking into the perceptions of the Saudi students traveling to American educational institutions to seek better careers after accomplishing their studies.

Perceptions can never be separated from identity issues. Cross-cultural experiences give rise to identity crises. Saudi students in the USA were no exception. Alruwaili, (2017) embarked upon this issue but exclusively for the female Saudi students who came to study in American colleges. In the conclusion of this study, the author expounded that Saudi women did experience identity changes during their stay in the US, but they retained formidable identities in terms of their religion, gender, and their native citizenship. However, this study evaluates the experience through social media which involved many limitations of privacy. The participants were said to have mixed views even about the use of social media for educational purposes. They admitted that interacting with faculty members and their counterparts tended to boost their learning experience in the US, but, at the same time, they felt uncomfortable when the faculty members asked for sharing their pictures or images. They tactfully apprised the teachers of their own cultural and religious constraints. On the whole, the Saudi female students who participated in the study ratified the fact that interaction in a classroom having cultural diversity, and using social media in a cross-cultural environment brought to bear a lot upon their identities. As such, this aspect needs a thorough examination in terms of the beliefs and perceptions of Saudi students during their educational interaction in the USA specifically relating to learning or refurbishing the English language.

Alzouwain and Lincoln (2018), making use of Positioning Theory, interviewed Saudi women who were studying ESL in the U.S.A. and found the Arab female learners pressurized socially and culturally because of certain restrictions. The main focal point of the ESL instructors was the linguistic needs. They did not give much importance to what they needed in terms of their social and cultural limitations. Conscious of their position in their societies, these female learners were eager to get their degrees to be seen as empowered on their return to their home country. Hence, positioning in various circumstances does affect students' learning experience as this study shows in the case of Arabic females.

However, Saudi students, irrespective of their gender do confront challenges while studying in US colleges and universities. Academically, there exists a big gulf between the writing capabilities of American and Saudi learners. This gap was sometimes frustrating when it resulted in receiving low grades (Bukhari & Denman, 2013). Dwelling upon linguistic issues exhaustively, Althobaiti and Obeidat (2020) conducted their study on the participants coming with diverse language and skills dexterity. Out of the sample population, a segment showed concern over being weak in reading skills whereas they saw it as a privilege to the US students. Some Saudi students admitted that they needed to spend comparatively more time formulating and delivering ideas. Specifically, oral expression of thoughts before the project mates and the supervisor was extremely challenging. The study contains many individual quotes from the Saudi students giving vent to their problems encountered while delivering their presentations as a part of their public speaking exercise. Still, most of the Saudi students were successful in managing their issues and accomplished their Experiential Language Programs (ELP) at US universities in a satisfactory manner.

Hudson (2019), however, examined the issues relating to academic writing of Saudi students at the university level while studying in Intensive English Programs (IEP) in the United States of America. He found certain cultural disparities in this context that thickened Krashen's affective filter. These were summarized as: I) The US universities laid great stress on "academic writing" whereas the Saudi culture promoted "beauty of writing" by reproducing ideas coming from the established scholars; II) Culturally, the westerners encourage "creative writing" for the individuality of thoughts but in Saudi culture "the beauty of calligraphy" is given more importance; III) The Quran is an "exemplary model" for the Saudis whereas no such model exists in western and American culture.

While reviewing the relevant literature, it was found that different kinds of stress affected Saudi learners' performance and perceptions in the U.S. The stresses arose out of a challenging environment fraught with differences in culture, barriers in language, and programs that offer insufficient orientation. Such issues, if not addressed properly, might lead to the discouragement of new enrollments to the American universities from abroad, particularly from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Alsharari & Teodorescu, 2019).

What are the factors that influence Saudi students' choices while deciding to study in universities in the USA? This is also a crucial question while evaluating their perceptions. In their qualitative research, Yakaboski et al. (2016) judged the matter on push-pull and transnational theories. Both these theories partially influenced the decision-making. For example, push-pull choices are based on the ranking of the universities, but many Saudis opted for middle-rank universities because they relied more on their contacts who made these recommendations rather than the high ranking and quality programs. In terms of transnational mobility, the Saudi students kept connections with their near and dear ones by keeping their family or guardian with them, and also, visiting their own country during vacation under their scholarship programs.

3. Methods

Research design

As this study aims to have an in-depth examination of the perceptions of ESL Saudi students in the United States of America, the appropriate theoretical framework envisions collecting and analyzing the data quantitatively and qualitatively. The current study takes a sequential explanatory mixed-method design. The model has been adapted from Creswell and Clerk (2017) to have a better insight into the problem singled out for this research. The efficacy of the framework of the mixed method in perceptive research is evident as it maximizes the strong points, reduces limitations, enables the researchers to have a deep understanding by comparing and contrasting the results quantitatively and qualitatively (Harwell, 2011).

Participants

This investigation comprises a sample of 396 Saudi EFL learners at various American Universities. The participants include a majority of males (M=310), and very few females (F=86). Table 1 shows the respondents' demographic profile. 78.4 % of the respondents were male, and 52.3 % were aged between 26 to 33 years, followed by 26 % who were aged between 18 to 25 years. 43.7 % of the respondents were studying an English learning course and an undergraduate degree, followed by 31.3 % who were studying for an English and master's degree. Further, Table 1 shows that 72.5% of the respondents were studying at university affiliated English learning institutions, and it shows that 19.2% of the English learning institutions are located in Illinois state, followed by 10.9% located in Texas.

Table 1. Participants' demographic profile

Sample Characteristics	396 Respondents	
	Distribution (N)	Distribution (%)
Gender:		
Male	310	78.3
Female	86	21.7
Age Group (years):		
18 – 25	103	26.0
26 – 33	207	52.3
34 – 40	61	15.4
41 – 55	20	5.1
More than 50	5	1.3
Institution Type:		
University affiliated	287	72.5
Non-university affiliated	109	27.5
Current Education:		
English	69	17.4
Bachelor	174	43.7
Master	124	31.3
English and PhD	30	7.6

Instruments

Questionnaire

This study administered a close-ended questionnaire with four point Likert Scale for responses. The questionnaire includes the demographic profiles of the participants, (see Table 1). The body of the questionnaire includes two axes. The first aims at exploring the participants' perceptions on 'course evaluation' under four items. The second dimension probes the students' perceptions on 'language learning'; this section encompasses five items. The questionnaire was refereed by three Saudi EFL professors in Applied Linguistics and TESOL. Reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha. It reached 0.72 which is considered a sufficient estimate of reliability.

Table 2. Reliability of the questionnaire.

N of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
9	.729

Focused group discussion

Focused group discussion (FGD) was also applied with 35 participants to get in depth information about the two variables of the study. Results of the FGD were processed, cleaned, and thematically analyzed.

Data analysis

The survey results were calculated using SPSS (Version, 23). Responses were numerically displayed with percentages, mean, and SD; accentuating these by themes threshed out in the Focused Group Discussion (FGD); and finally making a comparative interpretation of the findings derived from both the methods.

4. Findings

Table 3. Thematic analysis in FGD

Sr. No.	Themes	Sub-themes with coding
1.	The experiences in the USA	a) Motivation and demotivation (MD) b) Cultural challenges (CC) c) Identity Issues (II)
2.	Evaluation of pedagogy	a) Classroom environment (CE) b) Books and Teachers (BT)
3.	Opinion about the learning process	a) Teaching and Learning Strategies (TLS) b) Recommendations for fresh candidates (RFC)

RQ1: To what extent do Saudi students evaluate the English courses they study in American universities?

Table 4 shows the respondents' evaluations of the English courses they studied in the US institutions. Table 4 indicates that the English course was perceived positively with a mean score (M=3.95, Std =0.87). The highest item to be perceived positively was no. 3 with a mean score M=4.41, and standard deviation .827. On the contrary, the lowest item perceived was no. 2 with a moderate mean score of (M=3.50, Std=.985).

Table 4. Saudi EFL students' evaluation of English Courses

No	Statement	Mean	Standard deviation
1.	The books and other written materials we used in class were helpful.	3.81	.845
2.	I received feedback from my teacher that was helpful to me.	3.50	.985
3.	I know more about the language and culture that I was studying now than I did when I first started the ESL program	4.41	.827
4.	Learning a language at the current CESL center was a good experience.	4.11	.823
	Total	3.9575	0.87

RQ2: To what extent do Saudi students perceive learning English in the US English-speaking environment?

Table 5. Students' opinion on language learning in the USA

	Statement	Mean	Std. Deviation
5.	I enjoy learning foreign languages.	4.37	.786
6.	Learning a language at the current CESL center was a good experience.	4.11	.823
7.	Learning a new language will help me get a better job in the future	4.30	.721
8.	The USA is a good place for learning the English language	4.49	.784
9.	I enjoy meeting and listening to people who speak other languages.	4.33	.703
	Total	4.32	0.76

Table 5 shows the respondents' opinion about studying English in the US. Generally, both male and female respondents greatly enjoyed the learning experience in the US (M= 4.32; SD= 0.76). All the five items were perceived positively with high perceptions. Item 8 received the top mean score (M=4.49, Std=.784) whereas item 7 was the lowest with (M=4.11, Std=.823).

RQ3: Do Saudi students in the American universities have different perceptions on course evaluation and language learning according to their gender?

Table 6 shows that male students scored in the course evaluation (M=4.06, Std=.580) whereas female students scored slightly higher than their male counterparts (M=4.18, Std=.518), yet this difference is not significant due to the probability value which showed (Sig=.066). Table 6 also displays that female learners outperformed their male counterparts (Female=4.42, Std=.455, Male=4.41, Std=.478), hence the difference is not significant due to the probability score which computed to (Sig=.911).

Table 6. Students' perceptions and gender

Gender		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Course evaluation	Male	310	4.06	.580	394	.066
	Female	86	4.18	.518		
Language learning	Male	310	4.41	.478	394	.911
	Female	86	4.42	.455		

RQ4: Do Saudi students in the American universities have different perceptions on course evaluation and language learning according to their majors?

Table 7 displays the students' opinions according to their major regarding the course evaluation and language learning experience in the American universities. Table 7 indicates that no differences were seen in the students' majors regarding to the course evaluation. The total mean scores for the students' majors in the course evaluation amounted (M=4.08, Std=.569). One Way Anova was calculated to find the difference amongst the four majors. The F value scored .523 whereas the significant level scored (Sig=.667). Besides, Table 7 shows a significant difference in students' perceptions on language learning. The total mean score rated (M=4.41 Std=.473). Moreover, the probability valued showed (Sig=.020).

Table 7. Students' score according to their major

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation		Sum of Squares	df	F	Sig.
Course evaluation	English	69	4.03	.603	Between Groups	.510	3	.523	.667
	Bachelor	173	4.09	.528	Within Groups	127.539	392		
	Master	124	4.08	.630	Total	128.050	395		
	PhD	30	4.19	.448					
Language learning	English	69	4.27	.525	Between Groups	2.197	3	3.323	.020
	Bachelor	173	4.43	.491	Within Groups	86.392	392		
	Master	124	4.48	.408	Total	88.589	395		
	PhD	30	4.36	.431					

	Total	396	4.41	.473				
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RQ5: Do Saudi students in American universities have different perceptions on course evaluation and language learning according to their affiliation?

Table 8 shows that there are differences in Saudi students' perceptions on language learning and course evaluation for those who are enrolled in university affiliated institutions and those were in othr institutions. University affiliated students scored higher in the course evaluation (M=4.13, Std=.555) with a probability value at the level of significance (Sig.= .016). Table 8 indicates that university students also showed higher perceptions than non-university affiliated in language learning. They scored (M=4.44, Std=.443) within the probability significant level (Sig.= .033).

Table 8. Students' score according to their affiliation

	Institution	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Course evaluation	University-affiliated	287	4.13	.555	394	.016
	Non-university-affiliated	109	3.9771	.592		
language learning	University-affiliated	287	4.4495	.443	394	.033
	Non-university-affiliated	109	4.3358	.538		

5. Discussion

This study showed that Saudi learners at the American Universities positively perceive the course materials including books and other written materials that they took during ESL course finding them to be useful. Moreover, all students believed that their teachers' feedback were useful. In focused group interview, all students asserted that they always received good feedback on their participation and assignments and all their questions were always answered fully by their teachers. They added that their teachers were always ready to clarify any ambiguous points related to English language lessons. Similarly, students thought that their classmates' feedback were useful. In focused group interview, all students stated that while working in group, they found their classmates' answers to their questions to be useful and even though their comment were not as concrete as the teachers', they were still useful and helped them during lessons. One of the students specifically concluded that his classmates' assistance enhanced his English language leaning. Regarding knowledge on western culture, all Saudi students agreed that their knowledge in the western culture was escalating with every class they attended at the ESL center. In focused group interview, one of the students stated that he only knew about western culture from social media, news and movies so was not very familiar with it. He added that after joining the ESL program, he started identifying the principles of western culture. Another one confirmed that he is an intercultural competent after completing ESL course. These findings contradict Alsharari and Teodorescu, (2019) who reported that different kinds of stress affected Saudi learners' performance and perceptions in the U.S., and that the stresses arose out of a challenging environment fraught with differences in culture, barriers in language, and programs that offered insufficient orientation.

The study also indicated that the Saudi students' opinion about US English-Speaking environment were positive as they agreed that it was an enjoyable learning experience being in the USA. In focused group interview, females were asked why they were enjoying English learning lesser than male. They explained that they were not used to study with males in the same class given the system of gender segregation in their home country. Their very first experience of studying with male was in the ESL program. One of them said even though it was the first time, it was a good experience. Additionally, all students agreed that that they enjoyed meeting with and listening to English language native speakers. In focused group interviews, students asserted that socializing with American teachers and apartment mates helped them to improve their speaking proficiency. Such positive attitudes toward language learning can be explained with the development in the Saudi policy of openness to the world. Taylor and Albasri (2014) mentioned that the attitude of Saudi Arabian learners toward learning English has changed because of globalization, the government's pro-English policies, and the revolutionary developments that occurred in the education system.

Furthermore, the study differentiates between the Saudi students' perceptions in the course evaluation and language learning experience according to their gender. The study indicated that females scored slightly higher than the male learners, however, no significant difference was calculated. This comparability may stem from the background leaning they received in the Saudi context as well as the same heritage, and values that they shared. This finding is in line with Alkaabi (2016) which revealed that Saudi female students in the States were more intrinsically motivated than the male ones. Furthermore, this slightly better performance of females over males may have negative influences on females' identity. Alruwaili (2017) expounded that Saudi women did experience identity changes during their stay in the US, but they retained formidable identities in terms of their religion, gender, and their native citizenship

Similarly, the study dug into whether the students' major had impact their perceptions on the two dimensions, i.e., language learning and course evaluation. The study found a significant level of difference between students' perceptions regarding language learning attributed to their major. This difference is attributable to the students who studied for master degrees in the USA. This finding may be interpreted partially to mean that the level of major may not strongly affect the perceptions of students as Alkaabi (2016) indicated that almost all Saudi students irrespective of their majors needed to attain English language proficiency to meet the requirements for admission to various American universities.

Finally, the study found significant differences in Saudi perceptions attributed to those who are affiliated to university and those who are not. This finding indicates that being a university student, some of the positive learning disciplines grow the seeds of hope in students. On the contrary, students who join a university may feel with little hope from language learning. Alsharari and Teodorescu (2019) found that different kinds of stress affected Saudi learners' performance and perception in the U.S. The stresses arose out of a challenging environment fraught with differences in culture, barriers in language, and programs that offer insufficient orientation.

6. Conclusion

The findings of the current investigation will be a good predictor or indicator for future students who feel challenged while choosing the United States as a destination for their study. But consulting those who had prior experience will motivate them to go ahead. This study showed positive perceptions of Saudi students at the USA regarding the course evaluation as well as learning in the American sittings. It is not known to us how such students perform when they finish their studies abroad and come back to Saudi Arabia. Further studies are required to be held which investigate the degree of transforming some of the academic skills form the American learning context into the Saudi students. In the same vein, studies are required to measure the impact of American culture on Saudi undergraduate' speech while lecturing and communicating with their students.

7. Recommendations

It is natural for students, especially females in Saudi Arabia to be inhibited at eh idea of going abroad to study English. However, given the stated aim of the nation in Vision2030 to push the country to be better geared to meet the global challenges, this is a prerequisite as no nation can progress whose people do not progress equally. Hence it is recommended for the Saudi universities to set up special guidance cells to help their students choose American universities and courses that are suited to their ability and needs. Further, the local teacher community should form a resource for the students enrolled in American universities which the latter can use for academic support and guidance. Finally, prospective Saudi learners aiming for the USA for English learning should be actively counselled to not be inhibited by the challenge, rather to take it in their stride.

8. Limitations

Though this study had a large quantitative dataset, the qualitative data could not be made more exhaustive given the limited scope of the study. Moreover, it is felt that the number females being low, the results need to be replicated in future studies to establish their usability.

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