

Challenges Saudi EFL Learners Face Developing Communication Skills: A Conceptual Study

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Abstract

Recent technological and business advances have brought people across states to work together on the shared platform. This study was meant to investigate the major challenges that EFL learners encounter in evolving English language proficiency. Developing learners' English language proficiency has an inimitable and essential influence in addressing multiple barriers globally and is therefore central to realizing self-dreams. The article reports on how students often meet multiple challenges in attaining language proficiency, which include curriculum, instructional, assessment and evaluation, motivation, environmental strategies, natural adversities, and other related problems. Teachers teaching English as a foreign language hold a key position and have a powerful role to mitigate learners' problems. Even though the colossus task might appear 'impractical' or 'impossible', the success of addressing these challenges and achieving language proficiency is built in the classroom and later beyond. All stakeholders should unitedly fight the serious issues, teachers predominantly help ensure learners' access to quality language learning, catering to their learning needs through even-handed access to the right education, and promoting all features of the excellence of EFL learning. Addressing the concerns, the EFL learners become good communicators making their dreams of global professionals happen.

Keywords: EFL learners, curriculum, assessment, instructional strategies, motivation, English as a Lingua franca

1. Introduction

One of the most crucial challenges facing academia today is the growing number of some foreign language learners who are excluded from meaningful participation in global activities in global communities. To counteract, English in non-native countries and academia is seen as key to enhancing people's communicative competence, know-how, and opportunities in order to enjoy the autonomies, which, in fact, make them engaged in global interactions making life meaningful and useful. Kachru (1992) declared that the role of English could be used in non-English speaking countries for academic purposes, especially in the process of learning English. The abrupt changes in the broad field of economy, business, science, technology, and education have triggered the youth and future generations to improve their communication skills (Sharma, 2021). Thus, students should attain English language proficiency to be able to listen, read, write, and speak in factual situations. The English language as a lingua franca (ELF) may add more positive features to their personal and business life since ELF has a great role in empowering EFL learners to partake in academic, social, and commercial activities. Also, real communication involves linguistic and socio-cultural practices of language, which would indubitably empower the youth to participate and stand at par with the international community in diverse milieus (Ibid). Thus, gaining adequate language proficiency empowers students to take accountability, ownership, and attain autonomy in performing various tasks in real settings. Better communication skills are a vital ingredient to students' accomplishments since it facilitates smooth interaction with confidence and accuracy.

EFL learners take up the English course either for career enhancement or just obligatory to pass as a compulsory subject to attain their degree. In the journey, they meet difficulties in learning the requisite literacy skills. Learning becomes more complex when students have diverse learning needs, multiple intelligences, different levels of language proficiency, motivation, and a homogenous group (but heterogeneous in reality). Thompson (2014) found that the learners' ability, motivation, environment, practices, and previous knowledge of learning foreign languages as the main challenges in language learning; Gan (2013) cited numerous challenges endorsed a dearth in language proficiency, spoken practice, abilities to converse, emphatic effect, weak opportunities to speak and converse in English, and error recognition and correction; Tappendorf (2014) added the linguistic differences as another factor that caused the problem, such as the difference of phonology, word order, phrases, and verbal system.

Alike, teachers do face problems teaching students with varied cognitive abilities, interests, learning styles, attitudes, and aptitudes toward learning English. Similarly, all students are grouped together in one group and teachers teach students at the same time, which eventually forces teachers to prepare customized content and study materials to make lessons stimulating. Teachers usually feel that students have learned the taught topic; however, in reality, a few grasp it completely, while others try, struggle, and are unable to learn entirely. Teachers, like students, do need a good teaching-learning environment. With the brief introduction, we will try to underscore a few studies that illustrated the potential factors affecting students' learning.

2. Materials and Methods

A descriptive study design with a qualitative analysis element is used in this investigation. For this study, the researcher studied journal articles, edited books, previous research, theoretical stances, and resources on the difficulties language learners encounter when trying to improve their communication skills. The researcher also critically studied the literature on students' issues to evaluate problems from several perspectives and provide solutions that make the essay worthwhile to read. Additionally, the researcher also looked at other studies on a variety of concerns regarding students' challenges that are thoroughly examined further in this study.

3. Previous Works

Several studies have taken up challenges Saudi students encounter in developing different communication skills like Hannon (2011) and Perfetti and Adlof (2012) explored more on lower-level reading processes; Javid and Umer (2014) and Al-Mudhi (2019) underscored challenges students face in effective writing, writing strategies, and organizing ideas coherently, also Al-Mehmadi (2012) and Younes & Al-Balawi (2015) found Saudi EFL learners unfamiliar with certain stylistic and textual features of written English discourse. Khalid (2019) stated that Saudi EFL learners encounter additional reading barriers attributable to social and cultural forces, whereas Mohammed & Ab Rashid (2019) described a lack of reading motivation and little interest in reading English texts as the challenging factors that affect students' language learning.

Adding on, students especially in countries where English is learned as a foreign language, fail to attain the intended learning outcomes, which isn't a novel issue, but, today, an academically recognized academic failure, which needs absolute attention to what obstacles and challenges do students encounter, which, in fact, can't be overlooked by the stakeholders. Ali et al. (2019) revealed that lack of environment, interest, and motivation are the most critical factors that affect learners' speaking skills. Key factors that affect speaking abilities, according to Yen and Mohamad (2020), include a lack of motivation and self-assurance, nervousness, inhibition, and a lack of vocabulary knowledge. However, according to Alike, Syafiq et. al (2021), these learners lack sufficient vocabulary and practice, which makes it challenging for them to speak English fluently. This study moves beyond the challenges that have hardly been undertaken together by the researchers and try to cover varied aspects from formal to informal, classroom to beyond, teacher-student to social-economic-cultural factors, and winds up to natural upheavals. Thereon, addressing the students' challenges and issues, this discussion will outline and underscore the key challenges EFL learners meet that obliterate their language learning, gain proficiency and create conducive learning conditions to suggest some mediations alongside.

4. Discussion

The following discussion summarizes the primary concerns we have with relation to the difficulties faced by EFL learners as well as issues related to their language proficiency.

Major Challenges

Students' life is full of stress and strain if their concerns are not addressed timely and appropriately. As we explore and dive deep into the live teaching and learning process, there are multiple reasons (internal and external) that contribute to learners' academic failures. Avoidable challenges related to the institution level, if timely identified, can be tackled effectively through teachers' teaching strategies, reflection on the teaching practices, problem-solving, teaching materials, assessment, lesson plans, teaching schedules, etc., which may help learners understand the content taught in the class (Holbah & Sharma, 2022). Nevertheless, there are avoidable-turning into-unavoidable situations that are detrimental to students' success, reflected in figure 1, which have been explained in the succeeding headings.



Figure 1. Major Challenges EFL learners Face in Language Learning

Curriculum Differentiation

Taking into account the cognitive abilities, language proficiency level, and learning environments of students, the first challenge that strikes mind is the curriculum. Every program or course has an approved curriculum that teachers and students follow in learning to attain the course learning objectives. The curriculum provides content and a road map to reach the destination of getting grades. It comprises the context, teaching-learning methods, assessment criteria, and reference materials to study the course. Furthermore, it directs students and teachers about the topic taught and learned, its delivery in the classroom using the required teaching and study materials, and assessing the performance of students about how far they attained the intended learning outcomes. Puskurbuk (2012) affirmed that the curriculum is expected to generate productive, creative, innovative, and effective human resources through competence strengthening in the domain of attitude (spiritual and social), knowledge, and skills.

The effectiveness of the curriculum depends on how far it draws students' attention and invites engagement to the topic, supports their learning abilities, meets their diverse needs, and provides the required resources. Conversely, a rigid curriculum with obsolete content beyond students' proficiency level creates complex situations not only for students but for teachers as well. Students are unable to cope with the content and context of materials, and teachers are in a fixed situation having no option of altering or modifying the curriculum. The curriculum not meeting the needs of students and existing market demands keep expectations at bay, which demotivates and bring discontentment skipping students away from learning the topics.

Academic leaders always expect an excellent performance from students in exams grades, which, in fact, doesn't reflect the true picture of students' accomplishments (of listening and speaking skills). The assessment is based on the theoretical based given from the typical curriculum, in which students anxiously prepare to enhance their knowledge of the English language in reading and writing, but only to pass the compulsory exam. Therefore, students' performance in grades decides the capabilities and potentiality of the teacher. The present scenario differs from the past that never focused on communication and life skills. Today, teachers and students left behind these dogmas and adopted learning by introducing live activities either in class or in extra-curricular activities in literary or English clubs. These activities invite, engage, energize and motivate EFL learners to enhance their education outside the classroom.

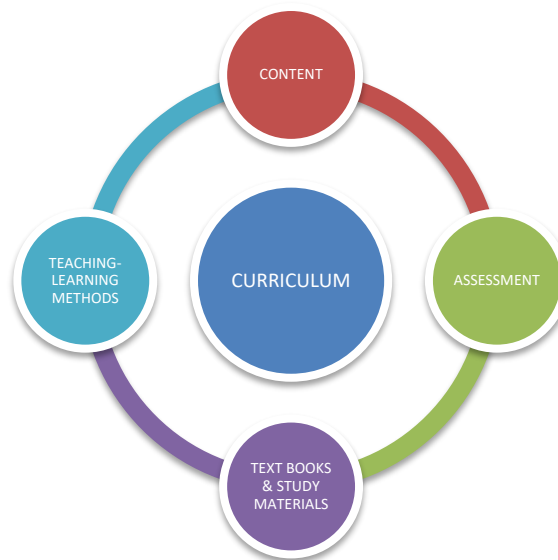


Figure 2. Curriculum

The remedial measures to overcome the cumbersome curriculum are to consider business sector demands and needs analysis of students. This would help to revise, alter, or modify the existing curriculum so it bridges the gap between students' prior knowledge and the desired learning. This helps teachers differentiate the curriculum by customizing the content, altering their methods for teaching, and assessing students according to the topics taught in the class. Therefore, curriculum not only is a vital organ in students' learning but motivation is also considered equally important to encourage and enhance students' interest in gaining language proficiency.

Motivation

After modifying and illustrating the curriculum, motivation is another challenging factor that affects students' interest, attitude, passion, and tenacity to develop communication skills. Motivation consists of the individual's attitudes, desires, and efforts to learn the language (Gardner, 2007). Students' motivation, indubitably, is a vital part of learning any language. It is considered one of the most important factors in second language acquisition (Sun, 2010; Holbah & Sharma, 2021) because it is thought to determine the level of active personal involvement in second language (L2) learning (Warden & Lin, 2000). Even the few motivated students, because of some reasons, lose interest and fail to develop their language skills. It's a dynamic and consistent process to ensure and keep students motivated throughout the learning process. Also, motivation is needed to make students ready to participate in classroom activities to get adequate knowledge and to

increase their capacity to read, comprehend, write, and speak the L2. Sometimes, lack of motivation, anxiety, and phobia to learn English can be due to the English curriculum, schooling practices (obsolete), and content-overloaded examination component.

Students have excessive workloads, assignments, taxing schedules, and personal constraints that obliterate them from consistent learning. Motivation controls and keeps anxieties away affecting the learning processes. Equally, Schunk, Pintrich, and Meece (2008) defined motivation as a process whereby goal-directed activity is instigated and sustained. Motivation provides the required spark in students igniting their minds to focus and concentrate on the topic in any patchy situation. Consequently, motivated students partake in classroom activities better that helps them accomplish the learning objectives through better reflections.

Since the pandemic, most of the learning takes place online using multiple available virtual platforms, we feel that positive motivation creates better learning opportunities and a healthy environment for the learners. Emphasizing the phenomenon, a few studies stated that the success or failure of students in learning environments is explained by motivation (Fryer & Bovee, 2016; Giesbers, Rienties, Tempelaar, & Gijsselaers, 2014; Sharma, 2021a). Similarly, highly motivated students meet challenges happily contrary to unmotivated students who fail to attain knowledge on the given topic. In open and distance learning, motivation impacts what, how, and when students learn (Barak, Watted, & Haick, 2016; Deimann & Bastiaens, 2010). Considering intrinsic motivation from an online learning perspective, Firat, et.al (2020) stated that it triggers and sustains the interest of open and distance education students when it comes to learning on their own in e-learning environments. However, despite the given factors, many other challenges technical glitches, power supply failure, lack of digital literacy, etc., affect more or fewer students' motivation in the learning environment. Litt and Moore (2013) considered technology, content, and lack of communication as potential factors affecting students' motivation in open and distance learning environments. Motivation drives learners to endorse, involve and evolve in learning activities which may be hindered by unfitting teaching strategies. The subsequent heading sheds light on them to illustrate what teaching practices challenge EFL learners in learning development.

Instructional Strategies

Students face several problems of de-coding, poor reading, and inadequate knowledge of grammar or word recognition making language learning clumsy, challenging, and annoying. The aforesaid explanation gives due credit to the motivation in the learning process; therefore, it's equally important for the teachers to motivate, inspire and help students to keep their momentum to be on the right track to achieve the intended goals in language development. Teachers should feel and empathize with students' situations especially in today's dreadful virus threatening human lives. The traditional approach to teaching may be ineffective and students may not learn as expected. A positive approach after analyzing the students' prior knowledge and skills, setting realistic goals, selecting the appropriate instructions (explicit or differentiating instructions), customizing the course study materials integrating all four language skills, and activities on the approved curriculum that meet students' interests may be incorporated. If it somehow doesn't work well, then, altering or modifying the teaching strategy may help to invite, encourage, and participate in peer, group, or individualized learning. Thus, the teacher has to travel the extra mile with a better teaching strategy to assist and motivate students to complete the assigned tasks that require unflinching attention.

A few effective teaching strategies that support the diverse needs of students in the classroom, include: changing or modifying-ineffective teaching practices keeping curriculum differentiation, environmental factors, multiple intelligences of students, varied levels of language proficiency, socio-economic background, and diverse learning goals. These insights provide ample sets of evidence for teachers to plan instruction, study materials and develop a good classroom environment. Besides, Sharma (2021) opines that a well-planned and right instructional strategy and delivery should cater to students' needs accommodating their language skills, learning styles, and making them comfortable to involve in planned activities. Students when provided opportunities to practice and learn in different ways usually develop interest and perform better. The planned activities develop a conducive classroom environment where learners participate, interact, discuss and support each other. It is noteworthy to mention that explicit instruction and differentiated instruction if exercised well in the class may lessen most of the problems like; students' inability to understand, lack of interest, scared to meet head-on with a problem that requires critical thinking skills, no interest in doing homework or writing assignments because of poor inferences, over-dependence on the teacher, and frequently the strong student/s dominating the class are just a few to name.

Whatever appropriate teaching strategies teachers may apply in classrooms to help students gain knowledge effectively, the ineffective, inappropriate and traditional assessment methods jeopardize the students' expectations resulting in low motivation and bad scores or grades.

Student Assessment

All measures taken, so far, to motivate and develop students' language knowledge and skills by adopting a needs-based curriculum, go ineffective if they aren't assessed properly because assessment is an essential fragment of instruction and learning. We get to know assessment's effects on what and how students study, how much they study, and how effectively they study. Essentially, assessment refers to a gathering of information about learners and the language course. The key objective of the assessment is to uncover the issues that, when addressed, will lead to improvements. Students, today, face several problems in assessment, such as inappropriate methods for assessment, changes in grading and examination patterns, lack of pre-assessment strategies, technological problems, selection of form, non-familiarization of questions and topics, questions using ambiguous language, lengthy questions making reading tiresome, non-coverage of productive (writing and speaking) and receptive skills (listening and reading), types and sequence of questions, selection of the type of assessment- formative, diagnostic, process, direct-indirect, and summative, lack of teachers' capability to administer the assessment, etc. Similarly, Eraslan (2013) confirmed a lack of sufficient knowledge on using alternative assessments; and Lumadi (2013) found assessment planning, implementation of assessment, the use of a variety of methods in assessment, and time for assessment as great constraints that

affect students' learning.

The aforementioned challenges students encounter in assessment create huge problems for teachers to identify and take remedial action to enable smooth and uninterrupted learning. Regarding the language assessment, Baily (2003) stated that the main purpose of assessment, [...], is to help teachers gain information about their student's abilities and to do so in a manner that is appropriate and conducive to learning. But we see students with varied perceptions, attitudes, and knowledge usually struggle to learn a certain topic from the curriculum; conversely, teachers, sometimes, don't understand which teaching strategy they should adopt to answer students' diverse problems. This increases the gap when students take their exams since the written exam is the major tool used for student assessment. The problem becomes worse while examining students for their speaking skills. Moreover, traditional assessment methods aren't appropriate to students' interests, needs, prior experiences, learning styles, socioeconomic, and family backgrounds. Also, the results obtained don't give an unambiguous understanding of students' academic progress, performance, and proficiencies. These academic exams do not take into account students' wellbeing, diverse needs, learning styles, and their individual experiences. The rationality, accuracy, validity, and reliability of assessment methods brought academicians, researchers, and practicing teachers to evolve assessment methods that address all concerns and meet students' diversity. Additionally, it is essential for teachers to select assessment methods wisely and ensure that they are good assessors of the effectiveness of the specific program. It helps identify students' needs and choose the appropriate content, teaching methods, study materials, and activities integrating all four language skills. Good assessments shed light on students' strengths, weaknesses, and capabilities, which make teachers devise a concrete plan to provide adequate learning opportunities that engage and encourage students to enhance their language proficiency.

Personal Challenges

Students' academic performance is not only affected by the above-explained challenges but is greatly impacted by personal factors. All students don't reflect similar features but differ in age, students schooling, parental social-economic status, low enthusiasm for learning, study habits, lack of interest in learning, low or unwillingness to learn, lack of sleep, excessive engagement on social media networks, health issues, low cognitive abilities, medium of instructions in schools, perceptions, attitude, beliefs, societal values, cultural barriers, etc. Likewise, there is a strong connection between language and culture and is established that a good understanding of the cultural aspects of language learning helps teachers use teaching methods more effectively (Harmer, 2003). Students usually don't participate, feel shy, hesitate and resist responding to the teacher's questions. This collectively or singularly has a profound impact on students' learning. Teachers need to dive deep using their own knowledge, experience, and skills to involve and evolve sound and constructive strategies that create a positive impact on students' minds. In addition, students prior knowledge, talent, and strengths can be explored and exploited by creating easy, varied, and comprehensive materials based on differential curricula, adopting different teaching strategies first to invite, encourage and engage in the class, to teach, and assess them accordingly. Every student has some good silent features and creating a healthy classroom environment and positive behavior toward students forms a robust bonding between classmates and teacher. Students eventually start developing interest and try to share their thoughts and concerns. Teachers through group-pair-individual activities develop interpersonal relationships. The judicious preparation and selection of study material and activities focusing on foreign language skills create opportunities for students to work in groups multiplying their abilities and helping solve problems on the assigned topic. Students, during the process of active involvement, develop their cognitive, affective, and psychomotor skills, which are reflected in their language use in and outside the classroom. Making good use of vocabulary, good pronunciation and flawless sentences in English make them confident, self-regulating, autonomous, and finally effective communicators. Also, this inculcates a sense of belonging, responsibility, and leadership development. Contrariwise, we should accept the bitter fact that forming groups for specific students have different features such as attitude, interests, motivation, societal values, leadership abilities, and varied prior knowledge and experiences. But, truly, by sensibly doing so, and putting all facts together, teachers and students both learn, unlearn and relearn the creative, and innovative ideas, which they were missing before. Students and teachers in the learning process are not only entangled with personal challenges but also impacted profoundly by environmental factors mandatory for healthy, communicative, democratic, and participatory classes.

Environmental Factors

The learning environment is one of the major detrimental factors affecting students' language learning outcomes significantly. It includes noisy classrooms, inadequate light, packed classes, unfitting temperatures, inadequate light, lack of teaching aids, societal and family environments, etc. are a few that could be baffling variables creating unreceptive and disturbing for students learning in class. Some may affect them directly and others may affect their language learning indirectly. Also, learners have diverse learning styles and planned tasks should have a communicative and strategic element. Therefore, students need a conducive and welcoming learning condition in the class to get students on board and achieve the intended learning goals and objectives. The teacher should leap a step forward to get students' feelings, beliefs, perceptions, and expectations to devise creative (to come up with the language and own ideas), cognitive (to help organize and learn easier), interpersonal (to know how different students use language differently), linguistic (to comprehend and produce language better), and affective strategies making the learning process more personal and get the student thinking about his learning. Furthermore, this instills a feeling of support, cooperation, and coordination to work as a team to make learning inclusive. Teachers do have taxing schedules, extra workload, over expectations, less time for syllabus completion, research work, etc., but their timely action, planning, rich experiences, and appropriate teaching strategies bring a respite in order to create students' interest and participation in the class; consequently, students learn the importance of involvement, working together, helping, respecting and appreciating all despite many differences in behavior, character, and personality. The inclusiveness in classroom practices brings harmony, togetherness, collaboration, and camaraderie, which are essential

to developing a sense of community. Besides, it creates opportunities for students and teachers to plan, work, communicate, and support one another. Students through this enhance their listening and speaking competencies. They will be able to read long texts and write paragraphs with correct grammatical structures. Developing good communication skills make communication effective, allowing plans execution smoothly and effectively within the stipulated time; however, the efforts become futile and floating when bordered by the unexpected occurrence of natural tragedies.

Natural Tragedies

Many studies, so far, dealt with different challenges students face in their academic life, but natural disasters have never been given due attention. Admittedly, this is not a typical occurrence, but we must be prepared for any catastrophe in order to ensure that the students continue to learn. The world is facing an unprecedented and unexpected pandemic due to a dreadful virus creating havoc of severe illness and death resulting in emotional and physical health problems. The ongoing extension of a pandemic for twenty months now has initially shut down and later destabilized the institutions, disrupting services and resulting in huge losses to human and material resources. The subsequent lockdowns, novel virus 'Omicron', new stressors, and regular disruptions have added fuel to the people's sufferings. The prolonged interference, disruption, and social disorder add to the ordeal of the original event reducing mental health and well-being for years afterward (Bonanno, et.al, 2010; Bryant et al., 2014; Bryant et al., 2017). Also, the direct threats of disaster experienced by people, children and students can experience certain challenges related to different stages of physical, mental, emotional, cognitive, and social stages of development (Anderson, 2005; Bonanno et al., 2010; Peek, 2008; Sharma, 2021).

5. Conclusion

'Practice makes a man perfect', an old adage becomes a panacea to rationale that leads to poor communication skills. The aforesaid explanation has clearly stated that sound planning, preparing good lesson plans, activities meeting students learning styles, interests, diverse needs, adopting explicit instruction and differentiated instruction through involving students in developing, implementing, and evaluating strategies, if exercised prudently in the class, may lessen most of the problems like; students' inability to communicate in English, lack of interest and motivation, multiple intelligences, students' very quiet-shy nature, unwelcoming classroom environment, taking up the course just to pass, and over-dependence on teacher are just a few to name. It is promising that the critical appreciation indicates there are opportunities to mitigate major challenges affecting students' language proficiency and academic achievements through positive teaching and learning strategies. This provides direction for research, policy, and college-level planning and response to different demanding situations.

In this article, we have looked at major challenges EFL learners face during language learning and concluded that the knowledge gained may help teachers to evolve their teaching strategies according to the learners' needs, interests, language proficiency, and socio-economic and personal situations. Furthermore, this conclusion is very important for educators, researchers, and practitioners because it provides opportunities to share research outcomes and practices across disciplines, states, and nationalities rather than limiting them to their own context. Also, this study may also be used to guide future research studies into the evolving dynamics likely to be underlying the postponed impacts on communication skills, and academic achievement specifically relating to language learning, teaching, and linguistic competence. Finally, timely recognizing the challenges that hinder learners' language learning and academic success is certainly needed at different levels in order to share good practices in language learning and educational research.

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