Learning English in Saudi Arabia

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Literature review

Many factors shape the nature of EFL learning in Saudi Arabia, such as the community, culture, religion, teaching and learning practices, and the learners' primary language – Arabic. A key factor is the Saudi community which, according to Alrahaili (2014) is a collective and religious tribal community with strong conservative tribal traditions, tribal alliances, and family ties. Al-Saraj (2014) pointed out that the strong conservative and religious traditions of the Saudi community have made Saudi culture resistant to changing or adopting new ways of life including learning English – despite the increasing need for Saudi individuals to learn this language. Previous research that has investigated this issue (Al-Seghayer 2014; Al Dameg 2011; Elyas & Picard 2010; Mahboob & Elyas 2014) has confirmed a widely held misconception that learning English may affect the learning of Arabic – especially at younger ages – or may undermine local Saudi culture, customs, and identity. Despite the widely recognised benefits of early exposure to language instruction, Saudi public elementary schools do not introduce English until the fourth grade (at age nine), not in the first grade (at age six), because of community concerns that English language instruction will affect the Islamic or Arabic identity of young students (Elyas 2008). As Al-Seghayer (2014) emphasised, the fear that English will impact Arabic use and may erode Arabic culture, customs, and identity demotivates some Saudi learners from attempting to learn English and in turn affects their L2 academic achievement.

Nouraldeen and Elyas (2014) acknowledged that culture is one of several factors that affect EFL learning in Saudi Arabia. They argued that, because Saudi Arabia has never been under colonial rule, Saudi culture has not been affected by European cultures. Lack of influence by foreign European cultures resulted in the Saudi community's public refusal to accept the English language when it was first introduced in the country.

Islam, the official religion in Saudi Arabia, is deeply rooted in the Saudi community and culture. The rules and regulations that govern the educational system in Saudi Arabia are based on Islam. Saudi Arabia is one of just a few countries with a segregated school system (Al-Zarah 2008) which is legally mandated because of the Islamic principle that places of study and work for women must be completely

separate from those for men. Wiseman (2010) attributed single-sex schooling in Saudi Arabia to Islamic beliefs that remain at the core of the educational system and to other cultural, social, and traditional values.

A range of classroom-related teaching and learning practices have been found to play a role in EFL learning in Saudi Arabia. One of them concerns the use of Arabic, the learners' first language (L1), alongside or even in place of English – a phenomenon often referred to as code-switching (Alhawsawi 2013; Almutairi 2008; Alrashidi & Phan 2015; Fareh 2010). In Alshammari's (2011) study, 60% of Saudi EFL teachers claimed that using Arabic is necessary to reduce the time needed for instruction. Nearly 69% of those teachers explained that they use Arabic in English language classrooms to clarify difficult concepts or explain new vocabulary and grammatical points to their students. Alhawsawi (2013) and Rabab'ah (2005) attributed the use of the Arabic language in Saudi EFL classes either to teachers' low competence and confidence in using English or to their desire to make their own jobs easier.

Using the mother tongue as the language of instruction in EFL classes has a distinctly negative impact on learning English. It undermines learners' communicative competence by minimising their exposure to English and giving them little or no opportunity to practise and communicate in the target language (but see the review of Saudi EFL research in Chapter 1 for alternative views). Alharbi (2015) claimed that using the L1 in language classrooms decreases students' motivation to practise speaking English in the classroom; classroom practice is crucial in an EFL context where opportunities to speak English outside the classroom are very limited.

Saudi EFL learners lack sufficient exposure to English both inside and outside the classroom. Khan (2011) emphasised this fact stating that English in Saudi Arabia is regarded only as an academic subject since most Saudis communicate in their native language, Arabic, with their family, peers, friends, and classmates resulting in few opportunities for students to speak English through daily interactions. Alharbi (2015) acknowledged that Saudi learners lack authentic situations for practising English communication skills outside the classroom. One reason for the lack of suitable exposure to English in Saudi Arabia is the dominance of Arabic as the Kingdom's official language and as the principal medium of communication among Saudis. The dominance of the Arabic language has been found to undermine the value of English among Saudi students. Alqahtani (2011) and Alharbi (2015) believed that, due to the dominance of Arabic, Saudi students are insufficiently motivated to advance their English language proficiency, and may not understand why they need English. According to those studies, the perceived domination of Arabic has in turn resulted in learners' assumption that English is worthless in both their academic and social life contributing to their poor performance in English. Another factor that has been found to undermine Saudi learners' exposure to English in the classroom are the typically overcrowded EFL classes – with obvious consequences for learning outcomes (Al-Mohanna 2010; Bahanshal 2013).

Another typical feature of the EFL classroom in Saudi Arabia is the teacher's dominance over the learning process. According to Alshahrani (2016), the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is characterised by a rich and traditional Islamic culture and a high level of *power distance* between teachers and learners. He added that in the classroom learning environment in Saudi Arabia the teacher's authority is accepted and respected with high reverence, and student–teacher relationships are highly formal – with classroom discourse typically occurring unidirectionally, from the teacher to students. Alshahrani attributed this to the teacher-centred culture which is generally devoid of independence and individualism in learning. Alharbi (2015) has likewise recognised the central role teachers in Saudi Arabia play, emphasising that they control everything that happens in the classroom. This teacher-centred rather than student-centred learning environment has been blamed by some for Saudi EFL learners' widespread underachievement (Ahmad 2014; Alkubaidi 2014; Alrabai 2014a; Alrashidi & Phan 2015; Fareh 2010; Rajab 2013). In this context learners assume a passive role in the learning process because they regularly depend on their teachers as the main source of knowledge (Alkubaidi 2014), and are often content to remain passive observers and recipients of knowledge rather than be active participants in the learning process.

In Saudi Arabia, as in many EFL contexts around the world (see, e.g., Batra & Nawani 2010), the textbook has become the de facto curriculum. The Ministry of Education (MOE) in Saudi Arabia provides a ready-made English curriculum in the form of English language textbooks that are commonly referred to as *English for Saudi Arabia*. This package includes three materials: A textbook and a workbook for students and a teaching manual for the teacher. This curriculum is specifically designed to reflect the beliefs, customs, values, and traditions of the Saudi Arabian community, and is identical at each grade level throughout the country. The textbooks integrate all language skills (i.e., reading, writing, listening, and speaking) with functional grammar and vocabulary.

This curriculum is imposed on practically all Saudi EFL learners at public institutions – even at the tertiary level (Al-Seghayer 2014) although its design seems to be more a reflection of its designers' personal perceptions and intuitions rather than on students' actual needs, goals, desires, and real-life concerns (Al-Subahi 1991). Saudi students' classroom activities are limited in number and range to those which are encoded in the curriculum; neither teachers, nor students can choose to engage in any activities beyond the ones specified in the curriculum. According to Almalki (2014), Saudi EFL teachers only have a minimal role in planning the curriculum; besides, they are inadequately trained on how to implement the new EFL curriculum. This marginalisation of Saudi EFL teachers from the curriculum development process is well-established in Alnefaie and Gritter's (2016) research. (For a critical discussion of other EFL teaching-related issues in Saudi Arabia, please see Chapter 5 of this book.)

Saudi EFL teachers' lack of control/autonomy over what they do in the language classroom and how they do it has implications for learner autonomy. Indeed, as revealed by research quite recently, Saudis generally tend to be non-autonomous learners. Using a sample of 630 Saudi students, Alrabai (2017a) investigated

learners' level of autonomy and its relationship with academic achievement in EFL. The learners in Alrabai's research manifested very low autonomy – with a mean score of just 2.35 out of 5; their language achievement was quite low, too (M = 66 out of 100). The study attributed the lack of autonomy of Saudi learners to a variety of reasons, such as over-reliance on teachers and the spoon-feeding nature of instruction prevalent in this context; the absence of learner involvement in decision-making policies; the lack of teacher training on up-to-date teaching methods; and the lack of learner training on certain skills that contribute to the development of learner autonomy, such as self-management, self-monitoring, and self-assessment.

In a related study, Alrabai (2017b) attempted to assess the readiness of Saudi students for independent/autonomous learning – with a focus on EFL learning. Using a sample of 319 Saudi EFL learners (aged 15–24) the study deployed a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews to tap into the participants' perceptions of their responsibilities, decision-making abilities, motivation, involvement in autonomy-related activities, and capacity to take charge of their own learning. Learners demonstrated low responsibility levels – with only about 17% prepared to accept sole responsibility for their EFL learning. A considerable percentage of participants (27.29%) reported rarely being involved in self-directed activities; these learners demonstrated high levels of teacher dependency and low levels of learner independence. The overall mean score of 3.06 indicated a rather low readiness for autonomous EFL learning among participating students. The author explained this as a kind of survival strategy in which learners in this context seek to achieve little beyond the bare minimum requirements for passing the course.

In a similar study, Tamer (2013) aimed to assess the readiness of 121 Saudi university students in a preparatory English program to engage in autonomous EFL learning; the study sought to examine their perceptions of responsibilities, abilities, motivation, and self-directed activities inside and outside class. The results, similar to the findings of Farahani (2014), showed that the reported high levels of motivation and self-confidence were inconsistent with the lack of voluntary learning activities coupled with students' reluctance to assume responsibility for their own learning.

Alrabai (2017c) investigated Saudi EFL teachers' perceptions of the challenges they encounter in promoting learners' autonomy. The teachers identified some deeply entrenched cultural attitudes among Saudi EFL learners which hindered the promotion of learner autonomy, in particular learners' focus on passing exams rather than on actual learning. This focus is a well-documented trait of Saudi EFL learners. Alhammad (2010) claimed that the academic approaches at Saudi schools encourage students to develop a system of ineffective memorisation and a superficial understanding of facts for the sole purpose of passing exams rather than achieving deep and meaningful learning. Further support to this claim comes from Al Alhareth and Al Dighrir's (2014) research revealing that the Saudi education system focusses on subjects that do not appeal to students, and that the reliance on rote learning leads to memorisation rather than understanding.

The teachers participating in Alrabai's study identified learners' over-reliance on the teacher to be another barrier to learner autonomy. They also believed that low learner autonomy can also be attributed to Saudi EFL learners' attitudes towards the English language and learners' lack of previous experience with autonomous learning. Notably, participating teachers admitted they had not received proper training on how to advance their learners' autonomy. Additionally, a staggering 82% of them acknowledged their rather limited expectations of what their learners could achieve, and recognised this as another serious obstacle to learner autonomy.

The interviewees also identified institutional barriers that they encountered in the promotion of learner autonomy, such as the density of the prescribed curriculum, the insufficient time allotted to English classes, the activities and tasks in the curriculum, the overcrowded classes, the arbitrary norms imposed by academic institutions, the lack of teacher autonomy, and the major impact of the traditional teaching environment. In addition, learner-related factors were perceived as contributing to low learner autonomy, such as low learner motivation, low level of English language proficiency, lack of self-confidence, unwillingness to take part in discussion, and reluctance to perform learning tasks on their own.

The results of an earlier study, Al Asmari (2013), reinforce Alrabai's findings above. The participating 60 EFL teachers from Taif University in Saudi Arabia regarded their learners' ability to learn autonomously as very low, and recommended various strategies for improving this situation including continuous professional development and reflection on teaching and learning practices.

Very few studies have examined the role of Saudi learners' self-esteem in learning English. A thorough search of literature was only able to find two studies on EFL learner self-esteem in the Saudi context. AlHattab (2006) examined how writing achievement was related to the global self-esteem, situational self-esteem, and task self-esteem of 81 Saudi EFL students in the Al-Madinah Al-Munawwarah region. The study's results revealed a positive correlation between learners' situational and task self-esteem and their EFL writing performance, but only found a nonsignificant relationship between the learners' global self-esteem and their writing achievement. The second study was that of Alrabai (2017d) who examined the concept of language self-esteem among 263 Saudi EFL learners and its relationship with language achievement. Questionnaire data were subjected to various descriptive and inferential statistical analyses demonstrating low levels of learner self-esteem (M = 2.94 [out of 5]) and low language achievement (M = 62.80 [out of 100]). The study revealed a strong positive correlation (r = 0.414) between learners' self-esteem and their EFL achievement. No significant differences were established between male and female learners – either in self-esteem or in EFL achievement. These findings reinforce the importance of learner self-esteem as a determinant of EFL achievement and the need to find practical solutions for promoting Saudi learners' self-esteem. (See also Alrabai and Moskovsky (2016) for their findings in relation to the role of self-esteem relative to other affective factors.)

Notwithstanding claims in government EFL learning/teaching policy documents about the use of technology and developing learners' information literacy skills, it seems that the Saudi educational system has largely failed to take full advantage of modern technologies despite plenty of available evidence of their benefits for the delivery of language education. Almutairi (2008) claimed that most Saudi schools lack English learning facilities, such as language labs, educational films, or tape recorders; even where such resources are available, they are usually out of order because of poor maintenance and a lack of training in their correct use. Alharbi (2015) highlighted this further pointing out that common educational technology, such as computers, recorders, and projectors, is often completely missing from Saudi schools. Fareh (2010), in turn, claimed that schools in Saudi Arabia are rarely provided with relevant resources including wall charts, flash cards, posters, audio and visual aids, language software, e-learning resources, suitably equipped language computer laboratories, and other teaching/learning facilities. According to Al-Seghayer (2014), because adequate teaching resources are unavailable, Saudi English teachers often do not even consider using teaching aids in their classroom. Instead, they rely heavily (and, often, solely) on textbooks and blackboards during class, often delivering a listening segment by reading it out themselves to the students rather than using a play-back device. According to this study, Saudi EFL teachers tend to produce their own teaching aid materials which are often unprofessionally designed and prepared, and because of that are not particularly effective in the classroom. Al-Seghayer concluded that the absence of truly authentic reading and listening materials is at least in part responsible for the learners' low motivation and lack of interest in learning English.

In those relatively infrequent cases when technology was incorporated into EFL delivery its use usually produced enhanced learning outcomes. Morris (2011) found that creating ways to allow learners to use their laptops and cellular phones constructively can help lower these learners' anxiety and aid their learning. Participants in Alkhatnai's (2011) study emphasised the effectiveness of online activities using technology versus a traditional classroom setting. They reported being able to overcome some of the problems associated with face-to-face classroom dynamics when interacting online, such as speaking up, speaking out, asking questions, engaging with peers, or monitoring and reflecting on learning. This, in fact, contradicts some of the claims made in the *Vision* and other EFL policy documents in Saudi Arabia.

Elyas and Picard (2010) explained that the Saudi EFL context is a typical example of the traditional grammar-translation method (GTM) of teaching which involves explicit instruction of L2 grammatical rules and then applying them in the translation of sentences from L2 to L1.

As a result of long-lasting exposure to GTM and other inefficient and inappropriate teaching methods, Saudi EFL learners have developed inadequate learning strategies, such as memorisation and rote learning (Alkubaidi 2014; Almutairi 2008; Alrabai 2014a; Fareh 2010; Rajab 2013, etc.). According to Alrashidi and Phan (2015), most learners in Saudi EFL classes employ memorisation as their

sole strategy for learning – they try memorising everything they learn, including paragraphs, grammar rules, or vocabulary, without necessarily understanding their meanings and the ways in which they are formed. Memorisation as a learning strategy is further reinforced among Saudi EFL learners by the nature of language testing at Saudi public schools and universities which almost exclusively targets memory-based declarative knowledge. As both Saudi EFL teachers and learners already know very well, rote memorisation can help students pass exams and achieve high grades without actually mastering language skills.

Instead of being encouraged to employ their creativity and imagination learners are often provided with summaries for each unit of the curriculum, and are asked to study these summaries for the exam and to memorise information, but not to think deeply about it. According to Al-Misnad (1985), such students are typically unfamiliar with the task of pursuing knowledge on their own; rather, they expect their instructors to explicitly tell them what they need to know which they then memorise and regurgitate on exams. This is indeed widely recognised as a crucial flaw of the Saudi educational system.

There are other cross-institutional and inter-governmental factors contributing to the lack of adequate achievement in this field. One of them is the absence of effective partnerships with international institutions in the area of English language teaching and training. Al-Seghayer (2014) noted the lack of partnerships with well-known EFL educational centres throughout the world and the lack of efforts to collaborate with well-respected long-established schools and language institutes. According to him, suitable cross-institutional partnerships would have the capacity to promote the development of new language curricula and language policies, as well as improve teacher-training standards. However, there are also arguments against partnerships – see alternative viewpoints in Chapter 7 of this book.

A large body of earlier research (see, e.g., Al-Khairy 2013; Alrabai 2014a; Alrashidi & Phan 2015; Rahman & Alhaisoni 2013) has recognised that low achievement is a rather common phenomenon in English language classes. Many learners usually graduate with a low level of English competence despite the nine years they spend learning English at the school level and regardless of the considerable efforts of the Saudi government to improve English teaching and learning in the country (e.g., Al-Johani 2009; Alhawsawi 2013; Khan 2011; Rajab 2013). Saudi EFL learners' low achievement has been attributed to a variety of multi-dimensional factors. These include affective/psychological factors, such as lack of motivation to learn English, high learner anxiety during language classes, low autonomy, and low self-esteem.

Lack of motivation for learning English is widely recognised as a key characteristic of Saudi EFL learners that negatively affects both their EFL learning and the ensuing EFL competence (see, e.g., Al-Khairy 2013; Alrabai 2014b; Khan 2011). Fareh (2010, among many others) claimed that most learners in Saudi Arabia are unmotivated and have no particular desire to learn English. Alrabai (2011, 2014b, 2014c) conducted a series of experimental investigations to examine Saudi learners' motivation for learning English attributing their low motivation to diverse and complex reasons. Among these reasons are inappropriate teacher behaviour, low

self-esteem and self-confidence, high language anxiety, low motivational intensity, low autonomy, and inappropriate EFL teaching methods. Al-Khairy (2013) emphasised the existence of other factors behind the low motivation of Saudi EFL learners, such as poorly designed textbooks, improper English faculty behaviours, peer pressure, inappropriate teaching methods, insufficient use of modern teaching aids, and difficult English vocabulary and grammar. Alrabai and Moskovsky (2016) examined five affective factors – motivation, attitudes, anxiety, self-esteem, and autonomy – with the aim of establishing their effect, both collectively and individually, on Saudi learners' L2 achievement. Descriptive and inferential data analyses confirmed the importance of affect in relation to L2 acquisition – the five affective variables together accounted for 85% to 91% of the L2 performance variance in the study sample. Individually, each of the five variables was found to uniquely contribute to L2 performance, but among them motivation clearly emerged as the strongest predictor of L2 achievement. By comparison, the effects of the other four variables on achievement can be described as marginal. This outcome constitutes compelling evidence of the critical role of motivation in L2 acquisition generally and achievement more specifically.

Previous studies (Al-Johani 2009; Alrashidi & Phan 2015; Khan 2011) have proposed that the teacher is perhaps the strongest determinant of learners' motivation, and have attributed Saudi EFL learners' low motivation to lack of proper teacher encouragement and support. As Al-Johani (2009) has pointed out, teachers commonly fail to provide encouragement to their learners and/or to acknowledge learners' participation and ideas; they often fail to offer examples from real-life situations when presenting lessons; they tend to overcorrect learners' mistakes and to be unduly critical of their learning attempts (cited in Alrashidi & Phan 2015, p. 39). Khan (2011) noted that EFL learners in Saudi Arabia are usually left to their own devices – without any guidelines from the teacher. Teachers' failure to regularly provide substantive feedback on learners' EFL output or to offer constructive commentary on their development can reduce learners' motivation and consequently curtail their progress (see also Al-saraj 2014).

The majority of Saudis have held negative attitudes about English in the past. There has, however, been a noticeably positive shift in Saudi learners' attitudes towards English in recent years. The reader is referred to Chapter 3 of this book which is specifically concerned with learner attitudes.

One issue that has received very little attention is the role of aptitude in learning English for Saudi learners. To the best of our knowledge, the only study that has investigated the impact of foreign language aptitude on English proficiency in the Saudi context is Moskovsky et al. (2015). This rather limited interest in foreign language aptitude in Saudi applied linguistics research might be due to the lack of a valid reliable Arabic version of the foreign language aptitude test. For this reason, Moskovsky et al. (2015) conducted a study that aimed to develop a foreign language aptitude test for Arabic native speakers and to determine whether foreign language aptitude was related to Saudi learners' L2 proficiency. The study established foreign language aptitude to be a significant, albeit weak, predictor of English language achievement among Saudi learners.

Feelings of anxiety are often prevalent in English language classes in Saudi Arabia (Al-Saraj 2014; Alrabai 2015; among many others). Alrabai (2014a) established that language anxiety often manifests itself in Saudi EFL learners' reluctance to participate in classroom discourse, their unwillingness to provide responses, to ask questions, or to engage in class discussions, as well as their excessive dependence on their teacher. Past research conducted in the Saudi EFL context (including Al-Saraj 2014; Alrabai 2014a, 2015; Alshahrani & Alandal 2015, etc.) has identified fear of negative evaluation, communication apprehension, negative attitudes towards the English class, and language testing as the major sources of language anxiety among Saudi EFL learners. According to Hamouda (2013), low self-esteem also contributes to anxiety and to learners' reluctance to engage in EFL communication.

Second language research has established that L2 learners quite often approach the learning of the new language with a set of well-established beliefs about the nature of L2 learning. Regardless of whether these beliefs are valid (or otherwise), they can contribute to language anxiety. According to Alrasheed (2012), Saudi EFL learners' beliefs about L2 learning include beliefs that mastering a foreign language is an overwhelming task requiring special learning abilities and a substantial amount of intelligence, that only younger language learners can be successful, that learning a foreign language is a matter of only memorising vocabulary items and grammatical rules, and that success in L2 learning means achieving native-like fluency and a perfect accent in the foreign language (cited in Alrabai 2014a, p. 90).

Tanveer (2007) identified other factors contributing to language anxiety in the Saudi EFL context, such as the threatening classroom atmosphere, the lack of learners' involvement in class discussion and decision making; the competitive learning atmosphere where learners work against each other instead of cooperating, overcrowded EFL classes, the ready-made EFL curriculum that often emphasises the quantity over the quality of the content, and the unduly strict classroom rules imposed by schools in Saudi Arabia.

With respect to the gender of EFL learners in the Saudi context, Salem (2006) found no statistically significant differences between males and females regarding EFL achievement. However, other gender-related studies indicate that females outperform males in general. In a study sample of 315 Saudi university students (177 males and 138 females), Ismail (2015) reported that females significantly outperformed males in EFL achievement. Likewise, Al-Nujaidi (2003) identified significant gender differences favouring females in Saudi EFL learners' test performance. This pattern is, in fact, present in other cultures and societies as well. It should be noted, however, that there is no evidence indicating that single-sex education has a negative effect of on EFL learning in Saudi Arabia. Although education in Saudi Arabia is segregated based on gender, both sexes receive the same quality of education and educational facilities (Al-Johani 2009). For example, the stages of schooling are the same for both genders (e.g., primary, intermediate, and secondary school), and curricula are almost identical – with only minor variations to meet different gender-related needs (Alrashidi & Phan 2015).

The role of religion in L2 learning in Saudi Arabia is sometimes discussed. It is a misconception that Islam impedes the learning of languages including English. Instead, Islam promotes and encourages the learning of languages for a variety of reasons. One reason, according to Nouraldeen and Elyas (2014), is for the sake of spreading Islam and communicating with other people and nations. Communicating with other nations and people in other cultures requires learning their languages. As Allah states in the Holy *Qur'an*: 'O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other' (*Surah Al-Hujurat* [The Private Apartments] 49:13) (Ali 1997). Likewise, non-Muslims cannot be invited to practise Islam unless Muslims master the languages of the people of other nations. As Allah instructs in the Holy *Qur'an*: 'CALL THOU [all mankind] unto thy Sustainer's path with wisdom and goodly exhortation, and argue with them in the most kindly manner' (*Surah An-Nahl* [The Bee] 16:125) (Asad 2008).

Investigating the role of age in learning English among Saudi learners has generated little or no interest among language researchers in the country. A comprehensive search of related literature was only able to identify a single study that investigated the effect of age on learning English in Saudi Arabia. Using three achievement tests, Gawi (2012) compared young students' performance (level-4 elementary school) with older students' performance (level-3 intermediate school) to determine whether there is a significant difference in EFL achievement between younger starters (aged five or six) and somewhat older learners receiving their first exposure to the L2 at around the age of 12. The study's findings supported the widely held understanding that younger starters generally achieve better including better fluency and a more advanced lexical competence. The study's author encouraged the MOE to introduce EFL classes at an earlier age.

Saudi EFL-related research has given some attention to the role of learning strategies and learning styles in learning English by Saudi learners. Utilising the most inclusive taxonomy of language learning strategies (LLSs) – that of Oxford (1990) – Alhaisoni (2012) investigated the type and frequency of LLSs among a population of 701 male and female Saudi EFL learners. The results revealed that the Saudi learners employed LLSs at low to medium frequency. They further showed that cognitive strategies (e.g., practising, analysing, and reasoning, etc.) and metacognitive strategies (e.g., organising, setting goals, etc.) were the most frequently used strategies in the study's sample. Affective strategies, on the other hand (e.g., controlling anxiety, etc.) and memory strategies (e.g., asking questions, etc.), were the least frequently used strategies (see also Alqahtani 2016; Alhaysony 2017; Al-Otaibi 2004.) Al-Qahtani's (2013) study is notable as perhaps the only one that tried to establish the relationship between the use of learning strategies and L2 achievement. Al-Qahtani found that achievement in English was positively and significantly associated with the social learning strategies.

Alkahtani (2011) examined Saudi EFL college students' preferred learning styles as a predictor of academic persistence, satisfaction, and success in different learning environments. The preferred learning styles included *tactile*, *auditory*, *visual*, *group*, *kinaesthetic*, and *individual*. They were typically determined by

learners' personality types, cultural beliefs, and teachers' teaching style. Additionally, there was a correlation between students' satisfaction and success, their positive and negative learning experiences, and their learning style preferences. The study's findings revealed further that the learning styles of Saudi EFL learners are determinants of their language learning strategy choice, motivation, and confidence. This study emphasised the importance of understanding Saudi students' learning styles and meeting their expectations and needs in the classroom.

Implications

As part of its examination of issues of in-country Saudi EFL learners/learning, this chapter considered factors pertaining to the EFL learning environment in Saudi Arabia, such as the community, culture, role of the mother language (L1), religion, teacher behaviour, teaching method, curriculum, lack of learning facilities and resources, lack of adequate exposure to the L2, and faults with the Saudi EFL educational system. It seems that the nature of the language learning environment in this country is at least in part responsible for some common demographic, social, and psychological traits of Saudi EFL learners including motivation, aptitude, anxiety, autonomy, self-esteem, gender, learning styles, and learning strategies; all of these have been found to impact EFL learning and its outcomes.

This section of the chapter considers the practical implications of the research findings presented above, and discusses how these findings can be used to improve EFL teaching and learning practices in Saudi Arabia, and thus ultimately contribute to higher achievement. These implications and recommendations concern the different major stakeholders of the EFL teaching/learning process in Saudi Arabia – the government, EFL Policy makers, the teachers, and the learners.

In order to improve the general community's understanding of the value of high English competence for a broad range of social and professional domains in the Kingdom, the government needs to undertake sweeping PR initiatives designed to raise the population's awareness of the importance of learning English. A PR campaign of this type would point out that English is not only the world's most widely spoken language, but is also the language of science, technology, politics, and world business. It would similarly highlight the practical ways in which learning English can benefit Saudi individuals and the whole Saudi community alike. It would emphasise that English is particularly important for the Saudi community because globalisation has created an intense demand for English language skills in the Saudi marketplace, and because of that the Saudi educational system must change to meet this demand. A PR campaign will highlight that the significance of English for Saudi Arabia is not limited to its linguistic and/or communicative practicalities, but is actually fundamental to a broad range of social, economic, political, and religious domains at the national and international levels.

Regarding the economy, English is particularly important for the Saudi context because of its perceived economic value; the language has become intrinsically

linked with the discourse of petroleum. Even with the very recent move away from petroleum as the most important aspect of the Saudi economy towards a knowledge economy due to the unstable oil market, English remains important. By way of providing an alternative to dependence on oil resources which will be depleted in the future, the Saudi government must consequently recognise education as the cornerstone of a knowledge-based economy that can support sustainable development and economic growth in the country. Therefore, the government should invest heavily in English language learning/teaching and provide incentives for Saudi citizens to continue taking up educational opportunities in English-speaking countries. When those students return to Saudi Arabia they would be expected to contribute to an enormous expansion of EFL delivery in the country. In addition to currently sending substantial numbers of Saudi students abroad to obtain a Western education, the government should recruit qualified teachers from around the globe to teach English at Saudi academic institutions.

One way of promoting the development of higher English proficiency among Saudis is to provide EFL learners with more opportunities for exposure to English. Classroom interactions between the teacher and students should be conducted in the target language. Teachers' use of the Arabic L1 should be strictly controlled and should only occur when the use of English becomes impractical. Learners should also be encouraged to take advantage of opportunities for exposure to English outside the classroom by using social media and watching English language media, such as television programming. Teachers should raise their learners' awareness of suitable online sources, such as electronic English newspapers, articles, journals, magazines, and stories, and provide them with guidance on how to use information from these sources in classroom activities. Language institutions should regularly hold extracurricular activities that stimulate learners' imagination and creativity, help them think beyond the content of the ready-made curriculum, and offer them opportunities to use English outside of the classroom.

High L2 proficiency may be impossible to attain in the absence of professionally developed curricula and suitable teaching methodologies – ones that properly reflect learners' needs, goals, and preferred learning styles. In relation to this, teachers should be encouraged to start phasing out outdated methodologies, such as the Grammar-Translation Method, which have been shown to lack the capacity to develop learners' communicative competence, and gradually adopt the undeniably superior communicative language teaching approach. Teachers should also adopt task-based language teaching that promote self-directed learning in the classroom, such as community language learning and experiential language learning.

In terms of curriculum design and development, any future reforms should take into consideration both teachers' and learners' perspectives, and should necessarily include adequate training for teachers on how to implement the new curriculum. Curriculum designers should reduce the curriculum's preoccupation with the content of the language itself rather than the use of the language

as a communication vehicle (Zaid 1993). Designers should emphasise quality over quantity of curriculum content by reducing EFL curriculum density, and should promote more extensive use of communicative exercises and activities, such as group and pair work, games, puzzles, and role play, to help students practise communicative tasks in real-life situations. Curriculum content and related tasks/activities should be within the students' abilities in order to reduce their fear of failure and boost their confidence. Importantly, teachers should be provided with adequate financial and material resources to enable them to implement the prescribed curriculum.

A lot can be accomplished via providing Saudi EFL teachers with better pre-service and in-service training. For instance, pre-service training should include much more extensive school practice which could even involve partnerships with local, regional, and international training centres; such partnerships have a tremendous potential to reinforce and extend the qualifications and skills of Saudi EFL teachers. Both before they begin teaching and throughout their teaching careers, teachers should receive comprehensive training on how to utilise the most up-to-date teaching methodologies and modern technology (devices and applications) in EFL teaching.

One of the main problems with the Saudi educational system is overcrowded classes. A student-centred rather than teacher-centred approach is highly recommended to facilitate the learning process in overcrowded classes. This approach allows learners to become more responsible and involved in the learning process rather than being mere observers. In order to deal with oversized classes, teachers should be encouraged to utilise collaborative tasks that allow greater interaction among students and thus enable them to become active participants in learning activities thereby creating a more effective and productive learning environment. Other strategies that promote cognitive elaboration, enhance critical thinking, provide constructive feedback, promote social and emotional development, foster an appreciation of diversity, and reduce student attrition are highly recommended in large classes; such strategies may include group work, pair work, peer editing, games, role play, and interviews.

Teachers in Saudi Arabia should be encouraged to be mindful of students' psychological and emotional dispositions. They should endeavour to promote learners' motivation and autonomy while minimising negative feelings, such as language anxiety and low self-esteem. Sound advice in relation to how to promote learner motivation and reduce anxiety can be found in Alrabai's (2014d) practical guide.

Teachers can also do a lot to promote learners' autonomy. Training learners on certain skills, such as self-management, self-monitoring, and self-assessment, can raise learners' awareness of autonomy and the benefits of independent/autonomous learning. According to Benson (2001), training learners on such skills would make them psychologically prepared for more learner-centred learning instead of the teacher-centred education to which they are accustomed. Teachers must, however, pay heed to Little's (1995) note of caution – it is difficult for learners in formal education contexts to immediately accept responsibility for their learning,

and teachers can help them do so gradually by equipping them with sufficient materials and opportunities to practise.

Saudi EFL teachers should act as facilitators of learning, helpers, supporters, guides, counsellors, and builders of learners' self-confidence and motivation. They should regularly engage learners in autonomy-promoting activities, such as role-transfer activities (e.g., choosing and preparing learning materials, being a source of information to other learners, peer monitoring, peer teaching, peer correcting, etc.).

Self-esteem is primarily about having a good self-image including how much students feel valued, appreciated, accepted, and loved. Teachers can effectively promote learners' self-esteem in a number of ways. For instance, they should avoid criticising students, should always accentuate the positive, encourage students to identify things they can do well and things they feel good about, help them have realistic expectations of themselves, and help them accept the fact that making mistakes is a normal aspect of any learning process and that such mistakes are learning opportunities. Teachers should take time to commend learners for their accomplishments and efforts. This will encourage positive behaviour towards the foreign language and will contribute in building a strong self-esteem. Helping students feel important in class can likewise contribute to their self-image. The teacher can do this by giving each student an important classroom job, or find ways in which this student can be helpful to others. Students can gain self-esteem from involvement in activities they care about. For this reason, the teacher can find a few minutes every day to talk with his/her students about their favourite hobbies, sports, television programs, or musical groups. Since students with low self-esteem are often isolated from their classmates, teachers are to encourage a sense of belonging among learners. This can be done by enabling such students to engage with their classmates in activities that take place both in and out of school

Learners should also have sufficient access to technology, such as laptop computers, cellular phones, and YouTube EDU channels. Modern technology must become an integral part of the Saudi EFL classroom to enhance the quality and effectiveness of learning. Furthermore, proper learning facilities, such as wall charts, flash cards, posters, audio and visual aids, language software, e-learning resources, and a well-equipped language computer laboratory can confidently be expected to further promote the efficiency of the learning process and ultimately lead to higher L2 proficiency.

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