

Teaching Professional English to Saudi Students Studying Abroad

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Abstract

14,000 Saudi students are currently studying in the UK. Before they start their coursework in their major, most take English language courses for at least a year and should pass the IELTS test. Interviews with a sample of Saudi students studying in the UK showed that focus in the English courses that students take is mainly on grammar and written exercises. Academic reading and writing skills, technical terminology and library searching skills are not emphasized. Traditional methods that depend on the textbook only are used by instructors and some instructors are non-native speakers. Even after 3 months, many students' English remains poor (faulty grammar, faulty pronunciation, confuse similar words, lack of fluency, do not read, do not write) although the students take 20 hours of English per week. In language classes Saudi students are grouped together. Thus they mingle with Saudi students and communicate in Arabic rather than English. The present study aims to propose a model for teaching professional English to Saudi graduate and undergraduate students studying abroad based on their academic and professional needs. The model emphasizes oral English, language functions, correct pronunciation, academic reading and writing, technical terminology (Greek and Latin Roots), locating references and electronic searching. Students should be helped to practice English out of class right from the beginning. To do so, each should be matched with a native-speaking partner. Technology must be integrated in English language teaching. Students can practice English using a blog, a discussion forum, language websites, MP3 lessons, text-to-speech software to improve oral reading skills. Daily extension activities such as a daily journal, watching TV, reading simplified novels, reading signs in the street and on the bus must be required by the instructors. To be successful learners and professionals, students need to be trained to be autonomous learners.

Keywords: *Saudi students, English proficiency, English language courses, study abroad, scholarship students, undergraduate students, low proficiency, English as a foreign language, second language learning, formal language learning.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In Saudi Arabia, the total number of freshman students admitted to higher education institutions tripled in 10 years. In the year 2000, it was 70,000, and in the year 2009, it went up to 216,367 students. To meet the increasing demand for college education, Saudi universities have adopted an open admission since the year 2000 and 13 new state universities have been established in the past 5 years, in addition to several private colleges and universities. The Saudi Ministry of Higher Education has also expanded its scholarship programs. 150,000 Saudi students are currently studying in the USA, UK, France, Germany, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, China, South Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, and India¹. 14,000 Saudi students are

¹ http://www.mohe.gov.sa/ar/news/Pages/25_1_2014.aspx

studying in the UK alone. Students studying abroad are pursuing their undergraduate, M.A., Ph.D. and fellowship in medicine, dentistry, pharmacy, nursing, radiology, physical therapy, biomedical engineering, civil, electrical, mechanical, industrial, chemical, environmental, communication and computer engineering, networking, computer science, math, physics, chemistry, biology, law, accounting, e-business, finance, marketing, and insurance.

Before starting their coursework in their major area of specialization, most students take an intensive English language courses (IEL) for a year. In the UK, international students, including Saudi students, are required to submit a satisfactory standard in the *International English Language Testing Service (IELTS)*: 5.5 overall for International Foundation level entry, and 6.0 overall for undergraduate bachelor's study.

The author had a chance to meet several Saudi students studying abroad and converse with them. She noticed that they have difficulty with listening comprehension and responding to very simple questions in English. Some complained of and showed dissatisfaction with the IEL course they are taking. Therefore, the aims of the present study are to: (i) describe the current status of IEL Program (IEL) in the U.K. (ii) To survey students' views of the IEL, its strengths and weaknesses, and whether the IEL prepares them for college, i.e., listening to and comprehending lectures, taking notes, reading specialized texts, writing reports and term papers), and whether the IEL program satisfies students' academic and professional needs; and (iii) to propose a model for enhancing English language instruction in English-speaking countries, such as the U.K.

To investigate the problem, the author visited the UK for the IATEFL convention and visited the University of Portsmouth in March 2009. In July 2009, she visited the University of Warwick, and joined a tour to Bath that was organized by Warwick College for its Saudi students enrolled in the Summer IEL Program.

Having 22 years of experience in EFL instruction to Saudi students, the author is quite aware of Saudi students' English language needs and difficulties, and through this study, she hopes to provide some guidelines for EFL instructors to help them provide effective instruction to Saudi students.

II. PARTICIPANTS

A random sample of 20 graduate and undergraduate students enrolled in English classes at the University of Portsmouth and Warwick College in the U.K. Their age ranged between 19-25 years old. Participants have been in the U.K. between 3 and 18 months and finished at least one IEL course.

III. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The following instruments were used to collect data about the IEL programs under study and to establish a basis for identifying Saudi students' academic needs:

- (i) Since it was not possible to test the students nor obtain their placement test score, an *informal oral interview* was used to assess the participants' proficiency level in English. The author asked each participant several questions in English about their school, life in the U.K, and daily activities. She also had each read a short paragraph.
- (ii) A *student questionnaire-interview* was used to collect data about the participants' experience learning English in the U.K. The student questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions such as:

- Describe the program you are enrolled in (student placement, textbooks used, skills practiced, teaching methodology, use of technology, out of class practice).
- Do you think the program is helpful to you? Why?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of the current intensive English language program you are enrolled in?
- Which skills do you wish the intensive English programs for Saudi students studying in the U.K. should focus on?
- Did you have English language difficulties in the foundation year, i.e. first semester of college)?

Questions were asked in Arabic and the participants were allowed to give their answers in English or Arabic.

- (iii) **Students' e-mails:** 190 emails received from Saudi students studying in English-speaking countries such as the U.K., U.S.A., Australia, New Zealand. Emails were analyzed for the types of requests the students made. Such requests reflect the students' academic and linguistic needs.

IV. RESULTS

A. Proficiency Level

The author found that the participants' general English proficiency level is poor. Even after 3-18 months of living and studying in the U.K., many students' English was still poor. Many participants have difficulty comprehending even very easy questions the first time they hear them. They confuse question words. Their pronunciation is faulty (incorrect phonemes such as /p/). They confuse minimal pairs. Most of them lack fluency. Their vocabulary knowledge is limited. They make many grammatical mistakes such as constructing simple sentences with a missing verb to be, with faulty tenses, missing articles, confusing singular and plural forms, faulty subject-verb agreement, and faulty word order. They read slowly, word by word not in meaningful phrases.

B. Grouping

When Saudi students enroll in an IEL program, they are given a placement test and are placed in one of 7 English language proficiency levels accordingly. However, it is up to the student to move to any level of his/her choice regardless of his/her actual proficiency level and whether they can make it through the foundation year or not.

In language classes, Saudi students are grouped together. Thus they mingle with other Saudi students and communicate in Arabic rather than English.

C. Allocated Time

Students take 25 hours of English per week or an average of 5 hours a day divided into 2 sessions: a 3-hour morning session taught by an instructor and a 2-hour afternoon session, taught by another instructor. In the morning session, focus is on grammar, whereas in the afternoon session, students play language games.

D. Textbooks

The participants indicated that **one textbook** such as *Headway*, *Cutting Edge* or *English5* is used to teach reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary building skills (4 hours per week). The English **curriculum** is easy. Units and exercises in the textbooks are not thoroughly covered.

Instructors choose some exercises and parts of each unit. They do not cover all the grammatical structures and each structure is not covered in depth. Students are given extra worksheets with extra grammar exercises.

E. Skills taught

The participants reported that focus in the IEL courses is mainly on grammar and written exercises. Academic reading and writing skills, technical terminology and library searching skills are not emphasized as much. There is little speaking practice. They watch a video once a month for 5-10 minutes only. They also practice writing once a week, in which they write about a familiar topic or a letter. They write a total of 6 topics per semester. They do not learn anything about the reading and writing process. They read a passage and answer the questions that follow the text. They are only told that an essay consists of an introduction, a body and a conclusion. Even in grammar, they do not study grammatical structures such as singular and plural rules, use of articles in depth, and tenses. Some indicated that although their vocabulary has increased but they do not know how to use them in sentences and in communication and they do not know how to use the grammatical structures they study in class in oral communication and writing.

F. Teaching Methods

Most instructors are non-native speakers. They use traditional methods that depend on the textbook only. Students listen passively while the instructor lectures and explains grammar rules. Assignments consist of one sheet of matching, gap filling and multiple choice grammar exercises. No production exercises are given. They are instructed to change the verb from one tense into another. No out-of-class extension activities are given. Weekly trips are not used for language learning purposes. For example, no brain-storming activities were conducted before taking the trip to Bath. No assignment was based on the trip such as writing a report or an essay about the trip, the places they visited and their opinion of them and of the trip.

G. Assignments

Most Saudi students studying abroad depend on what they are given in class. Assignments are kept to a minimum. They only finish exercises that were not finished in class, or they are given a single worksheet of objectives questions that they answer mechanically. Homework assignments do not require the students to produce the language orally or in writing. Assignments never connect what the students learn in the classroom with daily life outside the classroom. Assignments do not include any extension out-of-class activities such as preparing a presentation on a particular topic, reading an article or a simplified book, watching a movie or the news, checking a website or a software.

H. Assessment

At the end of the course, the students take a placement test. All of the students pass, even poor ones. It is left up to the students to move up to the next level or to stay in the level they were placed in.

I. Attitude towards IEL Courses

Most Saudi students studying abroad do not work hard enough during the IEL courses. They feel they are on holiday and not studying. Some do not exert any effort to improve their English. Some come to class late and even miss classes. Instructors do nothing about that.

J. Overall View of IELP

In general, the participants are dissatisfied with what they learn and how they learn English in the U.K. They wish the IELP focuses on the skills tested on the IELTS test. They also wish they watch movies, use the internet, read simplified books, learn technical terms in their major (prefixes, suffixes and roots), learn to read long texts, and write essays.

V. PROPOSED MODEL

Results of the interview have shown that the current IEL courses offered to Saudi participants are inadequate and insufficient for developing their proficiency level and preparing them for the foundation year or academic studying in their major. To overcome the difficulties that participants have in learning English and overcome the inadequacies of IEL courses, the study recommends that instructors find out why undergraduate/graduate students need to learn English and what they will be using English for while studying in the B.A. or M.A. program and after graduation. On the basis of the needs assessment, the major skills and subskills that the students need to acquire must be defined.

Second, upon arrival in the U.K., many Saudi students' proficiency level in English is poor. In Saudi Arabia, Arabic is the medium of instruction at the grade school level and in many college majors. English is only taught as a single subject or a university requirement and students study it to pass exams only. The textbooks are very simple, and students memorize exercises, passages, questions and answers, and compositions to do well on the test and many forget what they have studied after passing the test.

Third, since Saudi students will be pursuing their undergraduate or graduate education in English-medium universities, in an English-speaking country, this means that English is needed to understand class lectures, taking notes while listening, to give presentations, to read specialized reference materials, to respond to essay questions, to write reports and term papers, to locate information in English resources for courses, oral presentations, assignments, reports, term papers and theses.

Fourth, due to the latest advancements in computer technology, online dictionaries and encyclopedias, e-books and journals, websites for teaching language skills, grammar, vocabulary, spelling, literature, newspapers, tests, news groups, e-pals, discussion forums and online courses are now being integrated in EFL and ESP classrooms, in addition to online library resources.

Finally, results of the content analysis of 190 e-mail messages received from Saudi students studying in the USA, U.K., New Zealand, Australia, showed that 47% of undergraduate students mainly sought help with assignments, 29% asked how to improve their English, 31% asked an academic question, and 9% requested examples of admission test questions. On the other hand, 78% of graduate students requested a list of references for their theses.

A. Recommended Skills

On the bases of the academic needs of Saudi students, the proposed model emphasizes oral English, language functions, correct pronunciation, academic reading and writing, technical terminology (Greek and Latin Roots), summarization, note-taking from class lectures and from

written sources, study skills, time management, test-taking, locating references and electronic searching. Each is described in detail below.

Oral English

The study recommends that an IEL course for Saudi students train the students in the following [1]:

- Discriminating and producing English phonemes, consonant clusters, word stress.
- Discriminating minimal pairs and homophones.
- Associating written graphemes with their corresponding phonemes.
- Listening comprehension of main ideas and important details.
- Taking notes from lecture: Using abbreviations, writing main ideas, and significant details such as statistics, reasons, noting transitional words and phrases, writing quickly.
- Language functions such as expressing thanks, apologies, compliments, invitations ...etc.
- Presentation skills such as getting ready for the presentation, preparing and organizing the presentation, rehearsing and practice and delivering the speech.

Reading Skills for Academic Purposes

The present study recommends that Saudi students receive training in the following reading comprehension skills [2]:

- Identifying main ideas and supporting details.
- Locating main ideas and supporting details such as place names, characteristics, classification, time sequences, enumeration, comparison and contrast.
- Comprehending ideas that are explicitly and implicitly stated in a text.
- Skimming and scanning for required information.
- Distinguishing facts and opinions.
- Finding reasons an author used to support his/her opinion.
- Detecting inconsistencies in the presentation of information.
- Following directions.
- Identifying pronoun antecedents.
- Identifying the organizational structure of a text.
- Identifying transitional word and devices that signal comparison and contrast, classification, enumeration, sequences of events, cause-effect, illustrative examples.
- Text macro- and micro-structure.
- Outlining and highlighting key concepts and key terms.

Writing Skills for Academic Purposes

The present study recommends that Saudi students receive training in the following writing skills [3]:

- Writing a 5-paragraph how-to, classification, compare-contrast, descriptive, argumentative, narrative essay.
- Writing a topic sentence and appropriate supporting details.
- Generating and organizing ideas, developing cohesion and style, and editing the whole essay.
- Summarizing.

- Making an outline.
- Letter writing

Vocabulary Skills for Academic Purposes

The present study recommends the following:

- Learning at least 2000 words per semester (4000 words a year).
- Lexical items should cover technical terms and general English words and should be taught in context.
- Teaching students how to break technical terms into prefixes, suffixes and roots.
- Identifying the part of speech of a term by examining its suffixes.
- Training students to derive meaning of unknown words from semantic, syntactic and morphological clues (through definitions, use of punctuation marks, synonyms and antonyms, examples) to infer the meaning of unknown words from context [4] [5].

Grammar for Academic Purposes

The present study recommends teaching the students the following [6]:

- Grammatical structures that frequently occur in technical texts such as passive structures, participial phrases, verbless structures, compounds, compound and complex sentences.
- Students must be trained to locate the head noun and verb in a sentence, connect pronouns with their antecedents and understand compound, complex and embedded sentences by breaking them down into smaller units and identifying parts enclosed between commas, parentheses or dashes.
- Understanding long, complex sentences and breaking them down into smaller units.

Study skills

The present study recommends training the students in the following:

- Identifying their own learning style and using learning styles checklists.
- Setting a reason for reading before reading the text.
- Changing their reading speed according to text difficulty, and purpose of reading.
- Reading and interpreting graphs, photos and maps available in the text.
- Reading a text to locate answers for specific questions.
- Making an outline for a single paragraph, multiple paragraphs, a chapter, a whole book.
- Summarizing a single paragraph, and several paragraphs.
- Taking notes from a single printed source and from several printed resources.
- Representing main ideas and supporting details with graphic organizers.
- Using study techniques such as SQ3R (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review).
- Using mnemonic devices.
- Following directions made of one step, and multiple steps.
- Using higher-level thinking skills such as: Applying knowledge, analyzing, synthesizing and evaluating information. Starting with difficult courses or difficult topics.
- Setting time for rest and entertainment, meals, sleep.
- Getting ready for exams: Preparing a study schedule, be familiar recall techniques and requirements, factors; motivating himself/herself, relationship between exams and

attitudes, Factors affecting mental energy, relationship between exams and mental energy, overcoming test anxiety, avoiding cramming, reviewing several times, reviewing long enough before exams; reviewing using index cards, summaries while waiting

- Applying, analyzing, evaluating, and interpreting information.

Time Management Skills

The present study recommends that students be trained to:

- Analyze the current use of time.
- Define time wasters and procrastination styles
- Control paperwork, visitors and phone calls
- Organize files and information
- Write a to-do list
- Be aware of time investment strategies
- make a list of tasks to be accomplished
- Make a list of daily, weekly, and semester tasks to be accomplished
- Prioritizing tasks.
- Make a daily, weekly and a semester schedule
- Set a deadline for carrying out tasks.
- Follow up the completion of tasks.
- Modify plan continually.
- Preparing a schedule for the whole semester.
- Making use of wait time.

Electronic Searching Skills

The study recommends that students receive training in the following [7]:

- Searching for information in the library and on the internet using OPACS and search engines.
- *Electronic searching basics*: selecting a database relevant to the student's subject area; accessing databases from campus and from home, types of search such as Boolean; selecting a search strategy; selecting, broadening and narrowing of the search terms; types of fields such as author, descriptor, keyword ...etc; selecting the document language; selecting the type of documents needed; marking the relevant records; selecting the display options such as number of articles displayed per screen or what to be displayed (citation only, citation and abstract, full text); documenting the records obtained.
- *Basic electronic searching terms and commands*: Advanced search, basic search, field, author, title, abstract, descriptor, keyword, subject, topic, identifier, journal, language, accession number, records, citation, full text, full record, image, collection, peer reviewed journal, refereed journal, report, book chapter, magazine, newspaper, document, periodical, index, publication date, display, save, print, view, search, submit, browse, continue, login, clear, mark, unmark, select, request, obtain, order, previous, next, return to.
- *Common abbreviations* used in the citation, abstract and full-text articles

B. Teaching Methodology

The present study recommends the following:

- All units and exercises in the textbook should be covered. The more the students learn and practice, the more efficient they will become.
- Authentic reading texts with different organizational structures, length and difficulty level, from different resources such as books, magazines, newspapers, internet websites should be selected. Expository texts selected should have a main idea and supporting details (compare-contrast, cause-effect relationships, classification, illustration, enumeration, definitions, sequencing). Texts should contain transitional words between sentences and paragraphs, and devices that signal the text structure should be used.
- Students should be encouraged to practice English out of class right from the beginning. To do so, each can be matched with a native-speaking partner. Daily extension activities such as writing a daily journal, watching TV, reading simplified books, reading signs in the street and on the bus must be required by the instructors.
- Technology must be integrated in English language teaching. Students can practice English using a blog, a discussion forum, language websites, MP3 lessons, text-to-speech software to improve oral reading skills.
- To be successful learners and professionals, students need to be trained to be autonomous learners. Students must acquire study, time management and searching skills.
- The class session can be divided into several small tasks. Each task is explained, illustrated, performed under supervision. A time limit is set for completing the task. The students perform the tasks individually, in pairs or small groups. While performing the tasks, students are monitored, and feedback is provided. **Communicative feedback** focusing on meaning and highlight only errors related to rules or skills under study is given. Feedback is provided on the presence and location of errors and they figure out the correct forms themselves. Self- and peer-correction should be encouraged.

C. Testing

Saudi students study and work hard for the test. So they should be given weekly or biweekly quizzes and a final exam. Questions should require students to apply knowledge and to produce the language orally and in writing.

D. Management of the Course Time

Since 25 hours per week are allocated to the IEL course, the present study recommends that the IEL course be divided into sessions, each of which devoted to a skill as follows: Listening (3 hours), speaking (4 hours), reading (4 hours), writing (4 hours), grammar (3 hours), vocabulary (3 hours), study skills (2 hours) and library and electronic searching (2 hours) per week. Skills sessions can be organized in single hour slots, 2, 3, or 4 times a week.

E. Textbook

Textbooks that focus on developing listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar, vocabulary such as the Interactions and Mosaic series can be used.

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