Learning English: Experiences and Needs of Saudi Engineering Students

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In this qualitative study, Saudi engineering students talk openly of their experiences learning English in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and as university students in the United States (US). These students reported that they learned only the basics of vocabulary and grammar in KSA. Consequently, they came to the US with few English skills. In particular, their conversational and writing skills in English were deficient. In the US, they found themselves surrounded by Arabic-speaking compatriots and lacked opportunities to speak English and interact with domestic students. Implications of the findings are discussed. Key words: Saudi Arabia, English language learners, ESL, international students, engineering students, English proficiency

Introduction

International students play a critical role in supplying United States employers with professional engineers. A 2013 National Science Foundation policy brief indicated that, at that time, international students made up 70.3% of fulltime graduate students in electrical engineering, 60.4% of industrial engineering students, and over 50% of chemical, materials, and mechanical engineering students (Anderson, 2013). The proportion of foreign-born scientists and engineers in the US has been trending upward for some time. The percentage of immigrants with doctorates in science and engineering rose from 23% in 1993 to 42% in 2010 (Anderson, 2014).

Many aspiring engineers come from the country which ranks fourth (following China, India, and South Korea) in sending international students to the US—the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (Institute of International Education, 2015). An important impetus for Saudi students to attend universities in the West is the King Abdullah Foreign Scholarship Program, which provides tuition, a stipend for living expenses, health insurance, and airfare back to Saudi Arabia (Denman & Hilal, 2011; Leggett, 2013).

The goal of the international student who matriculates to an institution of higher education in a host country is, ultimately, to earn an undergraduate and/or graduate degree. A variety of factors play roles in the academic success of international students. Some of these factors have their roots in the culture and educational experiences of the students' home countries. Other factors arise in the host country and are a function of systems, pedagogical practices, and the culture of the host institution. In helping students achieve their goals, both the home and host countries must be cognizant of the factors that can be helpful and those that can present obstacles to the students' progress and persistence in gaining the degrees they seek. The focus of this study was to investigate certain of these factors, specifically having to do with the important task for Saudi engineering students of becoming fluent in English in order to earn a

degree in the US. This study seeks to answer these questions:

- What were the educational challenges related to learning English for Saudi students in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA)? What educational practices have KSA instructors employed in teaching English and what strategies have students used in studying English?
- What are the challenges that face Saudi students in learning English at an institution of higher education in the US?

Literature review

Language, cultural, and pedagogical factors all influence the study of English in Saudi Arabia and may present challenges in adjusting to study in the US. In terms of language, it is well-established that a student's proficiency in the language of instruction is a skill essential to academic success at a university or college (McClure, 2007; Msengi, 2003; Razek & Coyner, 2013). English language learners (ELLs) face significant hurdles in addition to those faced by domestic students. ELLs often require extra time to read assigned readings and tests, they frequently have problems understanding lectures and discussions, and they may struggle to express their own concerns and perspectives inside and outside of classes (Dao, Lee, & Chang, 2007).

Cultural adjustment is also a challenge faced by Saudi international students in the US. In coming to the US, Canada, Great Britain or other Western countries, Saudi students must adjust to considerable differences in academic, economic, psychological, social, and political circumstances (Miller, 2002). There are stark differences between the cultures of Saudi Arabia and the US. In the US, domestic students and many of their professors have been reared in a culture that values the separation of church and state, coeducation, and individualism. The Saudi culture emphasizes the study of Islam (Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, 2015), separation of males and females in education, and collectivism (Prokop, 2005).

Cultural beliefs have an impact upon academic performance in terms of transition, academic life, and social life, according to Razek and Coyner (2013). Adjustment difficulties have been shown to be related to the cultural novelty that is experienced by international students (Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen, & Van Horn, 2002). One of the many features of cultural novelty has to do with the way instruction is delivered in elementary, middle, high, and post-secondary levels.

In 2011, a Ministry of Higher Education official in Saudi Arabia, Majed Alamri, presented an overview of higher education in Saudi Arabia (Alamri, 2011). He detailed several strengths of KSA higher education, such as the huge numbers of both male and female students who have the opportunity to receive a world class education through study abroad, as well as scholarships that are granted both domestically and internationally at public and private institutions. These strengths, he said, were expected to produce a "tremendous change in level of higher education in Saudi Arabia in the near future" (p. 89). Alamri also pointed out weaknesses in the system, including (1) bureaucracy with no clear venue for changes; (2) a high proportion of expatriate faculty who lack motivation due to

discrimination in salary and incentives; (3) a somewhat narrow range of degrees offered in KSA, with several specialties offered only to men or to women; and (4) missing elements, such as online education, scientific conferences and journals, and limited academic freedom stemming from cultural and political factors (see also Mills, 2009). Alamri also concluded that pedagogy in KSA must shift from being faculty-centered to being student-centered and that faculty must learn "to use different teaching strategies that motivate students and ensure achievement of the objectives" (p. 90).

For some time, observers of the Saudi educational system have lamented aspects of pedagogical practices present at all levels— elementary, secondary, and post-secondary—which have been dependent on transmitting uncontested (and sometimes irrelevant) knowledge from faculty to students, with heavy reliance on rote learning and memorization along with a lack of emphasis on teaching students to think critically and analytically (Al-Seghayer, 2011; Hamdan, 2014; Krieger, 2007; Prokop, 2005). The term inert knowledge has been used to describe knowledge and skills gained in school which, although it may be widely applicable, is not immediately practicable, and is not seen or experienced by students as useful or meaningful (Slavin, 2014). In the past, Saudi students have viewed higher education as a way to gain access to high salaries and high employment positions (Khashan, 1984). Learning English as a foreign language was not necessarily seen as a way to achieve success in Saudi society and instructors were neither versed nor vested in providing strategies to help motivate their students. Furthermore, as Mahboob and Elyas (2014) point out, English is hardly a "neutral" language in KSA, but is "loaded with political, religious, social, and economic overtones" (p. 128). However, English is considered to have significant economic value in KSA because of heavy reliance on a number of foreign companies that aid in its economic development (Al Haq & Smadi, 1996; Mahboob & Elyas, 2014).

In an early survey of successful English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers and selected Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) specialists in KSA, Sheshsha (1982) established that the abilities to understand, speak, write, and read fluently in English were rated as highly valuable qualifications for teachers of English. But the foundations of EFL teacher preparation programs in Saudi Arabia, according to Al-Hazmi (2003), have been shaky, wherein English teachers and their supervisors "lack subject knowledge, language proficiency, and competence in second/foreign language teaching methodology" (p. 342).

Another pedagogical aspect influencing the learning of English in the KSA has to do with motivation. A student's motivation to learn a particular subject can be influenced by instructional strategies employed by the teacher. In a pilot study of the effects of instructors' motivational strategies on Saudi learners' motivation, Moskovsky, Alrabai, Paolini, and Ratcheva (2013) found that several strategies could have a positive result on students' achievement in learning English, including instructors showing students that they cared about their progress, recognizing student effort and achievement, making learning tasks fun, reminding students of the global use of English, and increasing the amount of English used in the classroom.

What is the "culture of learning" regarding the study of English in Saudi Arabia, a country which has gone through profound changes since its establishment in 1932? How has the English proficiency of international Saudi students been impacted as a result of pedagogical practices used while they were studying the subject in their homeland? What challenges do they face as they continue their studies abroad and what are their perspectives on how these challenges can be met? This paper investigates these issues through in-depth interviews of 10 Saudi students at an institution of higher education in the US.

Method

Context.

This study was conducted at a public university of approximately 15,000 students in the Midwest of the United States. Slightly over 10% of the students attending this university are from countries other than the US and about a quarter of the international students are from Saudi Arabia. Students with limited English proficiency typically study at the university's English language institute for about a year in order to improve their proficiency before matriculating to an undergraduate or graduate program. At the time of this study, approximately 70% of the institute's students were from Saudi Arabia.

The qualitative interview.

The objective of the study was to gain the Saudi students' views on their academic training in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), the differences in their experiences studying between KSA and at this university in the US, and their perspectives on how the process could be improved. The qualitative approach, and specifically the open-ended interview method, were employed in order to allow students to express their thoughts freely without being bound to questions or topics suggested by the extant literature. Qualitative research and the use of open-ended interviews are ideal when the objective is for interviewees to express themselves openly and genuinely, as opposed to being bound to the items in a more impersonal questionnaire, survey, or a fully structured interview (Patton, 2002).

The investigators developed a standardized semi-structured interview consisting of open-ended questions which were asked of each interviewee. This format helped make good use of the participants' time, reduced variation between interviews, and facilitated the comparison of responses in analyses (Patton, 2002). Depending upon the responses to the questions, additional follow-up questions were posed in order to allow the interviewees to talk freely about the matters they considered most relevant to the topic. The objective was to encourage the interview to be similar to a conversation, so participants could express themselves spontaneously and make digressions as they naturally occurred to each interviewee.

The items being reported in this article are a subset of the entire interview, which explored study skills and methods that were being used by these students. The present items focus specifically on the study of English both in the Kingdom and the US. The rationale for the items was based on three foundations. First, the importance of English language proficiency to the academic success of international students has been well established

for many years (see, for example, Graham, 1987). An in-depth investigation of issues surrounding the learning of English was considered important in understanding these international students' experiences. Secondly, various items from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE; 2016) served as inspiration for the questions in the interview. The NSSE was introduced in 2000 and updated in 2013; it appraises the extent to which college and university students participate in educational practices that are correlated with high levels of learning (Kuh, 2001). Third, the choice of items was influenced by the investigators' review of the literature and their experiences in working with international students, especially Saudi Arabians.

Several aspects regarding the study of English were explored in these interviews, both in the US and the KSA. In regards to their KSA experiences, interviewees were asked when they started and how long they studied English, the methods their English instructors used to teach the language, their motivation for learning English, and what opportunities there were to speak English outside of classes. They were also asked about their experiences studying and using English in the US at the university. Please see Appendix A for a list of the questions.

The investigators were a faculty member in the school psychology program whose specialty is bilingual education and an educational leadership doctoral candidate whose first language is Arabic. The doctoral student, a Jordanian, had several years' experience teaching English as a second language in KSA.

An audio recording of the interviews was made with the permission of the interviewees. Interviews were conducted in Arabic by the doctoral student and then transcribed. Two translations into English were made, one by the investigator; a second, de-identified transcription was translated by another Arabic speaker who holds a Master's degree in linguistics. Both translations were compared for agreement. Where there were discrepancies between the two translations, the two Arabic speakers and the bilingual education specialist met to compare them and come to a consensus on the most appropriate translation.

Participants

The Arabic-speaking primary investigator recruited ten interviewees using the network sampling method (Merriam, 2009). He asked potential interviewees whether they would be willing to answer a series of questions about their academic experiences in the US and KSA. The interviews were conducted in private on the university campus.

A decision was made at the outset to only interview male students; this decision was made out of respect for Saudi Arabian standards governing interactions between males and females. Saudi Arabian women would not be permitted to meet one-on-one with a male investigator unless accompanied by a male relative. It was determined that, for this study, having a male relative present during the interview would affect the dynamics of the interaction and introduce a confounding variable into the study.

Five of the male students were enrolled in the university's English

language institute and the other five were enrolled in the university. The five students who were studying English at the institute intended to matriculate to the university. All ten of the interviewees aimed to graduate with an engineering degree. This university is known internationally for its engineering programs and there is a preponderance of international students who pursue degrees in the engineering field. Of the five university students, two were undergraduates. One of the undergraduates was studying mechanical engineering and the other biomedical engineering. Of the three graduate students, two were studying industrial engineering and one was in the computer engineering program.

Results

In distilling the themes that emerged, the investigators used the process of open coding; they read over the responses several times, looking for common threads in the responses and jotting them down (Burnard, Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick (2008). Duplications were crossed out, thus reducing the thematic categories. The transcript was gone through again and statements were coded as to their fit within the categories. Table 1 lists the themes and the frequency with which these themes were mentioned.

Table 1 - Number of Comments by Interviewees Endorsing the Themes

Theme	n
In KSA, students begin learning English in middle school or later	9
English instruction is weak and only the basics are taught in KSA	11
There is limited motivation to learn English in KSA	6
There are limited opportunities for speaking English both in classes and outside of classes in KSA	16
English teachers in KSA lack fluency in English	11
English classes in KSA are taught in Arabic	10
KSA English classes focus on grammar rather than conversation	9
There is limited writing instruction in KSA	4
Saudi students are not well prepared for English study in their host countries	30
Saudis lack opportunities to speak English in English-preparatory classes in the US because there are so many Arabic speakers in their classes	7
Saudis would like more opportunities to converse in English outside of their classes	16

Pseudonyms are being used in this article in order to help the reader distinguish between the institute students and the graduates and undergraduates. The institute students are Fahid, Faisal, Fawwaz, Falah, and Faraj. The university graduate and undergraduate students are Musa, Muad, Malek, Mazin, and Majid.

Studying English in the KSA

Fahid said that, in the past, Saudis started studying English at about 13 years of age or the first year of middle school. He said,

> This is the age of the studying of English in Saudi Arabia because we were an old generation. Now the study of English starts from the primary school…since the age of about 9 years or 10 years, which is fourth grade.

Others agreed that they started studying English in middle school but that it was very basic. As Fawwaz said, "We learned the letters and numbers in addition to simple sentences at the age of 15, but it did not add anything to me. When I came here, everything changed. I started from the zero point." Muad agreed, "At school we started from the seventh grade and I graduated from high school without learning anything."

The interviewees largely agreed that there was little motivation for learning English while growing up in the KSA. This was due mainly to a couple of issues. One was that it was not considered an important subject, compared to Arabic or other subjects. Majid observed that he did not start to study English until 10th grade and "it was an ignored course, there was not focus on it." Half of the interviewees said that they had no motivation to study English while in the KSA except that it was "obligatory." Musa said, "I didn't know why, but it was a requirement to pass." Mazin agreed and said, "There was no motivation…We were studying to pass the exams."

For the interviewees, the motivation to learn English came later, after realizing that they had a need for it. As Faraj said,

> My interest to learn English started after I finished my study. I had some visits to some other countries and I was surprised with the universal language at the airports and hotels. Without the English language, you feel as if you can't speak and as if you don't have any voice to talk to anyone.

Falah agreed that "English is an international language and it is the language used to communicate with the world." He went on to say that he needed English in his work in the KSA, which motivated him to learn it better.

The interviewees were asked what opportunities they had to speak English (in the KSA) outside of their English classes. Fahid said that in the past there were few, if any, chances to speak English outside of class but there were more now "…due to the openness and the development of the Internet and social networking sites." Falah said he never spoke English in the KSA and he watched movies to learn the language. Faraj remarked, "After 2007/2008, it was the beginning of using English widely in public places (such as on the streets and in restaurants)." According to Majid,

> It was zero in the past. Currently, the situation has changed because the number of students who study abroad increased and the western culture started to enter our country. In the past, if one was speaking even a single word in English, they would consider him as an excellent person and we would sit next to him thinking he is a special person.

He said that now, because of social media, there is more of an orientation toward western culture in both language and clothes and "even the small child has at least 15 to 20 words."

Two major themes emerged regarding the actual English instruction that participants received in the Kingdom. The first was the lack of English fluency of their English instructors, mostly Arabs for whom English was not their native tongue. Perhaps related to this was the fact that English classes were largely taught in Arabic. Fahid said, of his English teacher in the KSA,

> He used the Arabic language …to explain and clarify the vocabulary and the meanings and we did not pay any attention because we considered it supplementary material. The teacher was having difficulty in the use of the English language, especially in defining some of the vocabulary.

Faisal said, "When the students didn't understand, the teacher was speaking in Arabic. My communication with my teacher was in Arabic." Falah said that his English teacher's method of teaching vocabulary was to read the words in English and then have the class repeat them. As Musa said, "Everything was in Arabic." According to Majid, "(Instruction) was completely in Arabic maybe because of the teacher's weakness in the English language. But," he added, "It is difficult to speak for 45 minutes in English. (If) he speaks in English, you should know that the teacher will be in a valley and the students will be in another valley."

A second theme relates to the focus on grammar, rather than actual communicating, in English classes in the KSA and some ineffective instructional practices (such as heavy use of memorization), and unaligned curricula. The interviewees were asked how much grammar and conversation were emphasized in their English classes. They had various estimates, from Faisal who estimated that 70% of instruction related to grammar to Falah who estimated that it was 97% grammar. Malek said, "We did not have anything except grammar. When I finished my high school, I thought that English is only grammar. If you know grammar then you know the English language, which is practically wrong." In high school, Mazin said, students listened to recorded audios in class. For him, things improved at the university because he had a British teacher who spoke in English, not Arabic. So they were obliged to speak English so the instructors could understand them. Faraj declared,

> Essentially 80% of our curriculum was about grammar. The other skills were rare. For example, writing was a topic we memorize and then we come to the test. So, you memorize five topics; one of them will be in the exam taking the shape of paragraph writing. It was not a writing skill, but it was to memorize and then come to the exam.

Fawwaz observed that his English classes only taught him to read simple sentences with nouns, objects, and adverbs, and that the curricula were not aligned. He said, "(We) always start from a certain point. In the next grade, we were starting from the same starting point that we learned in the previous grade." Falah said, "I learned simple things about grammar, such as is and are." Majid remembered that both the curricula and the

teaching procedures were weak.

Several of the interviewees lamented the lack of writing instruction in Saudi Arabia. They were asked if they learned how to write a paragraph or an essay in a systematic way in Arabic. According to Fawwaz, "I didn't learn that in Arabic. I had one course at college in Saudi Arabia about how to search and use references." Muad said that he writes better in English than in Arabic. Majid agreed and said, "I learned (to write systematically) here in writing courses in the English language. Then I change it to the Arabic language and I don't know if the structure is correct or not."

Learning English in the US

Perhaps because of problems with curricula and instructional strategies used to teach English in the Kingdom, the interviewees were not well prepared for English study in the US. They found it to be harder than they expected; their English skills were not as good as they had assumed they would be. Half of the interviewees reported that their biggest problem here is lack of English proficiency. Fahid lamented, "The biggest problem is speaking because I think that it is the most difficult stage in learning the language, which is speaking fluently." Majid agreed that classes and situations which require speaking are the most difficult. He said, "So, it was exhausting at the beginning. Now we've moved to problems in courses which require a lot of reading. It is also exhausting." Mazin spoke of becoming discouraged about learning to speak English which almost caused him to drop out: "The first six months (were the hardest) because of the language and I was intending to go back to Saudi Arabia."

Because of the large numbers of Arabic-speaking students, Saudi students lack opportunities to use English in conversations in classes and on campus. According to Faisal, "We don't speak in English with Saudis unless we meet some foreigners like Chinese or people from different nationalities." Fawwaz said, "There are so many Saudi students and a few public places which makes it difficult to find someone to practice conversation with except in private places." Muad believed that always being with the same people from the same country hampers the study of English. He said, "They are always together. So they don't learn because the language requires practice. Practice is what teaches you the language." Fahid, whose wife is also a student here, was particularly aware of problems faced by women Saudi students. He said,

> I think that the institute is full of Saudi students and some
> students, especially the females, find it embarrassing to
> speak or to ask questions in front of the male students
> because they came from a conservative community where
> there was no coeducation. If the female Saudi students were
> with a teacher or students from another nationality, it would
> be much better.

The interviewees believed that more opportunities to live and interact with US natives would significantly improve their English language proficiency. The temptation to speak Arabic—in which they can easily express themselves—was great when they first arrived. After a time, some of them began to form relationships with non-Arabic speakers, which changed their use of languages. Falah was able to spend about 70% of his

time speaking English after he developed some friendships with other students. Speaking of his use of English when he first came to the US, Musa said, "I didn't use it. It was zero. But now, it is almost 80% and I have a girlfriend, and I think that writing, not only the conversation, developed to a great extent for me."

Discussion

As the interviewees in this study observed, their study of English in Saudi Arabia was under less than ideal circumstances.

1. They began studying the language in middle school rather than in the elementary grades.

2. The curriculum was very basic and not well-aligned; they learned "letters and numbers" along with basic grammar.

3. They did not see the importance of learning English while studying the subject in middle and high school. It was not until they needed it in their work or they left the country that they realized the place of English as an international language. Therefore, they lacked motivation to do much more than restate on tests what their instructors expected from them.

4. Related to this, their instructors did little to impart to them the usefulness of English in a broader context.

5. There were not opportunities to practice English outside of the classroom; it had yet to be used in shops and restaurants or other places outside of the classroom.

6. Oftentimes their English instructors lacked fluency in the language.

7. English classes were taught in Arabic and students were not expected, themselves, to speak in English in the classes.

8. There was a focus on grammar to the virtual exclusion of conversation.

9. Pedagogical methods centred on rote repetition and memorization.

10. Systematic instruction in writing that taught students the intentional use of such writing conventions as organization, ideas, content, voice, and word choice was available neither in English classes nor in Arabic classes.

As a consequence, the engineering students in this study arrived in the US with much less English proficiency than they expected; they felt they were starting from 'zero.' English proficiency was their major challenge as they began their studies at the undergraduate or graduate levels. Once at the university, they encountered additional barriers to the goal of English proficiency.

1. They found themselves surrounded with Saudi compatriots, along with Arabic-speakers from other

nations, all of whom found it easier and more tempting to communicate in Arabic.

2. Americans tend not to congregate in public places to study and converse so the opportunity to do that was missing.

3. They lacked opportunities to live with Americans or other native English-speakers.

4. Opportunities to become close friends with native English-speakers did not come about early in their stays.

As mentioned earlier, some of the reasons for the obstacles faced by these students are deeply rooted in the culture and politics of both the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the United States. For example, Razek and Coyner (2013) observe, "The degree of connectedness of Saudi students sometimes hinders their ability to socialize and build new social relationships outside of their group." Saudis share a high degree of cultural and religious homogeneity, along with strong family tribal relationships (Al-Seghayer, 2011; Hamdan, 2014). Even though students may realize that they are more likely to improve their English proficiency by speaking English outside of their English classes and by conversing with native English speakers, they must overcome deeply-ingrained habits formed over their lifetimes. And they must do this when they are homesick and, it may be presumed in some cases, treated with suspicion by other students in the host institution and by the larger community.

Implications

The findings from this study suggest several implications which may result in improved English proficiency for Saudis coming to the US to study. According to the interviewees, changes are already being effected in the KSA so that, hopefully, the children and the younger siblings of these interviewees will have a better start in learning English. The study of English is starting much earlier and there are more opportunities to speak and read English outside of the classroom. No doubt the globalization of social media is contributing to such opportunities as well. This may make the study of English seem more important and of more practical use than it was in the past.

There appears to be a realization by the KSA Ministry of Education that Saudi instructors must employ different instructional strategies than a heavy reliance on rote learning, memorization, and an instructor-centred model of pedagogy (Alamri 2011). There is also a recognition that many expatriate instructors in the KSA have been treated in a discriminatory manner in terms of salary and opportunities, thus providing limited motivation for non-Saudis to seek out positions in that country.

If English teachers in the KSA suffer from low proficiency in the language they are teaching, it is likely that classes will continue to be taught largely in Arabic, thus limiting the opportunities for students to develop conversational proficiency. In addition, the interviewees in this study pointed out the lack of a curriculum for teaching students to write a well-crafted paragraph or essay in Arabic classes; unless that is done, it seems likely that Saudi international students will have to learn writing conventions in their host countries, in addition to English skills.

In terms of removing barriers to English fluency at host universities, it is obvious that Saudi students see the value in conversing with native speakers outside of the classroom. Many studies have found that, despite international students wanting to have more contact with domestic students, the level of contact is low (see, for example, Kashima & Loh 2006; Sakurai, McCall-Wolf, & Kashima 2010; Ward & Masgoret 2004). Various reasons have been cited for this, such as the international student's lack of confidence in speaking English, domestic peers' reluctance to make contact, cultural differences, and lack of common interests (Campbell 2012). The English language institute at the university in the present study does provide a conversational partner for their students for a couple of hours once a week.

There are other possibilities for encouraging interactions between international students and native English speakers that can be employed by universities, such as a "buddy system" (Campbell, 2012; Shigaki & Smith 1997), wherein the international student is paired up with a domestic student early in the stay. This conveys a variety of advantages in terms of social support, an entrée into forming relationships with domestic students, and an opportunity to practice English skills with native speakers. There are doubtless other programs that could be developed to widen the opportunities for speaking English with natives outside of classes if a university's administration sees this as a priority. It is hoped that the present study raises the awareness of the challenges that Saudi students face so they can be helped to persist in their studies in the US and other English-speaking nations and to ultimately master their objective of graduation.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has a limitation that is common in qualitative research, namely, that the experiences of a small group of students at a single institution may not be widely generalizable. In addition, this study represents only Saudi male perspectives. A future study could employ a female interviewer to conduct interviews with female Saudi students in order to learn their perspectives. Also, this sample is limited to engineering students. As pointed out in the Introduction, many of the engineers in the US have come from other countries so, to that extent, it is legitimate to investigate the needs of this subset of international students. That said, there may be certain characteristics of engineering students that would limit the generalizability of the results of this study to other Saudi students. A future study might expand the sample to include Saudis who are entering other professions than engineering. It would also be helpful to canvas universities for ideas regarding programs that provide opportunities for international students to use English outside of their classes.

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