

A Systematic Review of Research on Teaching English Language Skills for Saudi EFL Students

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ABSTRACT

This systematic review study sought to examine the teaching of English language skills in Saudi Arabia by systematically analyzing the previous studies on language skills which were published within the past ten years and identify the research areas to be bridged in the future. The study employed the systematic review approach. The search strategy yielded 221 studies for inclusion in the systematic keyword map, and 95 studies for in-depth review. The findings of this systematic review revealed that students sampling presented (80.09%) in those studies, and female students participated in only (24.43%) of those studies. In addition, (73.30%) of the conducted studies were at the university level indicating a limit interest of the school-level research. In addition, (68.52%) of those studies focused on writings kills, reading skills and achievement indicating the necessity to give more attention to speaking, listening, pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar research at all education sectors in the future. The in-depth review also indicated an obvious focus on reading and writing skills and most the studies were undertaken at the university level. The findings were discussed and a number of language skills research gaps were pointed out

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, English language is considered the dominant language worldwide. This importance comes as a result of its role in education, industry, commerce, media, business, technology, trade etc. "For better or worse, by choice or force, English has 'traveled' to many parts of the world and has been used to serve various purposes (Sharifian, 2009:1). English language teaching, hereinafter (ELT), "observes the complexity of a field which incorporates teaching and learning English as second, additional or foreign language or as an international lingua franca; for specific, academic or more general purposes: in different countries and contexts; and at different levels" (Hall: 2016:1). ELT affirms itself as a specialty of particular academic interest with professorships, research grants, journals, conferences and so on (Littlejohn, 2013). Therefore, teachers and ELT professionals need to be aware of the contemporary status of the language and of the issues for both learners, institutions and policymakers to tailor their professional practice to the circumstances of their students and to the contexts in which those students will be using the language (Seargeant, 2016). Research on teaching English language skills in Saudi Arabia witnessed rapid development within the past decade. This development has generated hundreds of research papers that dealt with language skills, but those research papers have not been an-

alyzed before to explore their contribution to English language teaching in Saudi Arabia. So, this study attempts to bridge this research gap since no similar studies have been conducted in the Saudi context.

Education System in Saudi Arabia

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was established in 1932. It is the largest country in producing oil in the Middle East. It witnesses a rapid growth in all fields. Education has been given a special place over the last few years. The amount allocated for education in 2017 exceeded 200 billion Saudi Riyals which presented approximately (22%) of the total budget of the country (Ministry of Finance, 2017). The Ministry of Education, for public education, and the Ministry of Higher Education were incorporated in one ministry called The Ministry of Education in 2015 which supervises both public and higher education. Moreover, Education in Saudi Arabia is free from kindergarten to graduate studies, and the government provides public schools with furniture, textbooks, health services, and technological equipment (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015). As seen in Table 1, the number of public schools has grown from 24,300 in 2009 to 31,841 in 2016 which asserts the noticeable development of education in Saudi Arabia. Moreover, the number of students has %

Table 1. Public education statistics

Level	Schools				Students			
	2009		2016		2009		2016	
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
Primary	5 876	5 735	7 881	7 680	1 1375 41	1 044 995	1 411 034	1 434 303
Intermediate	4 064	3 780	5 056	4 453	625 835	561 669	689 648	651 753
Secondary	2 405	2 440	3 559	3 212	596 419	500 179	675 449	601 085
Subtotals	12 345	11 955	16 496	15 345	2 359 795	2 267 249	2 776 131	2 687 141
Total	24 300		31 841		4 627 044		5 463 272	

from 4 627 044 to 5 463 272 within seven years only (Ministry of Education, 2017).

On the other hand, the government has expanded higher education to meet the increasing number of students graduating from the secondary level every year. Table 2 shows that the number of higher education institutions has increased from 51 in 2009 to 58 in 2016 and the number of students has rapidly grown from 819,012 in 2009 to 1,489,013 in 2016 (Ministry of Education, 2017) as a result of the huge expansion of student acceptance in higher education institutions during the past few years.

Status of ELT in Saudi Arabia

Unlike the past, the status of English in Saudi Arabia has changed and English language is considered one of the major subjects in the Saudi education system (Rahman & Alhaisoni, 2013). “English is the only foreign language taught in Saudi schools as part of the mandatory curriculum and therefore enjoys a relatively high status” (Carfax Educational Projects, 2016:10). The Ministry of Education states the aims and objectives of teaching English language in Saudi Arabia as follows: (1) To enable student to acquire basic language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing). (2) To develop student’s awareness of the importance of English as a means of international communication. (3) To develop student’s positive attitudes towards learning English. (4) To enable student to acquire the necessary linguistic competence required in various life situations. (5) To enable student to acquire the necessary linguistic competence required in different professions. (6) To develop student’s awareness about the cultural, economic, religion and social issues of his society and prepare him to participate in their solutions. (7) To develop the linguistic competence that enables student, in future, to present and explain Islamic concept and issues, and to participate in spreading Islam. (8) To enable student linguistically to benefit from English speaking nations, that would enhance the concepts of international co-operation that would develop understanding and respect of cultural differences between nations. (9) To provide student with the linguistic basis that would enable him to participate in transferring other nations’ scientific and technological advances that can enhance the progress of his nation (Rahman & Alhaisoni, 2013).

At present, English language is taught in Saudi Arabia from the primary 4th grade up to the university level. For the upper three years of the primary stage, time allocated for teaching English is 90 minutes per week divided into two

Table 2. Higher education statistics

Institutions type	Institutions		Students	
	2009	2016	2009	2016
Governmental Universities	24	28	784 068	1 400 297
Private Universities and Colleges	27	30	34 944	88 716
Total	51	58	819 012	1 489 013

periods. For the intermediate stage and the secondary stage (Traditional System), English is taught 4 periods a week for a total of 180 minutes. On the other hand, secondary stage students enrolled in the (Credit System) have to study five compulsory English courses (from English 1 to English 5) and each course lasts for a semester through 5 periods a week (225 minutes). Besides, a student may optionally choose one to three English courses if he wants. As seen above, time allocated for teaching English language in public schools is not enough to provide students with the skills needed for communication, reading and writing. At the university level, English language is used as a medium of instruction in some disciplines such as English language, medicine, engineering and the sciences. Besides, it is taught in the foundation year or as compulsory separate courses.

Despite the great efforts and facilities exerted by the government, represented by the Ministry of Education, teaching English in Saudi Arabia is still constant. Although students study English for nine years at schools, they have a low level of achievement and proficiency, face troubles in language skills and rarely communicate properly. Students at universities also have low competency in English language which affect their learning process. The main causes for low competence in the English language among students include teacher-centered instruction, traditional teaching methodologies, memorization, lack of motivation, lack of practice, customs and culture (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015). Other barriers to learning English in Saudi Arabia include the introduction of English at a later stage, mother tongue interference, heavy use of L1, shortage of teachers training, the constancy of curriculum and syllabus for long time and lack of Information and communication technology use (Al-Nasser, 2015). Saudi students’ English language proficiency is among the worst in the world (Carfax Educational Projects, 2016). According to the EF English Proficiency Index, Saudi Arabia ranks 68 out of 72 countries observed (EF English Proficiency Index, 2017) (Table 3).

The poor performance of the Saudi students is also confirmed by results of Saudi students in global TOEFL. Saudi TOEFL test-takers rank as the worst in the MENA (MIDDLE EAST/NORTH AFRICA) region. Their scores placed them in the 20th position out of 20 countries in 2016. Globally, their scores are within the worst 10 percent, 16 percent, 22 percent and 24 percent in the world in writing, reading, listening and speaking respectively. Their overall performance on TOEFL placed them within the 18th percentile, which means that they are amongst the worst 18 percent of scores in the world (Table 4).

Due to the lack of IELTS statistics in 2016, the researcher referred to IELTS scores of 2015 which indicated that Saudi Arabia ranked 39th out of 40 countries monitored by the IELTS on the Academic test performance and 40th out of 40 countries on the General Training test as seen in Tables 5.

As seen above, Saudi students are at the bottom of the list in English proficiency compared to their counterparts all over the world. To some extent, students perform better in speaking and listening more than reading and writing. For the Academic test, the writing was the weakest skill and speaking was the best skill for IELTS test takers. On the other hand, for the General Training test, students were very weak in reading and writing. These aforementioned results are supported by research findings undertaken in the Saudi context over the last few years.

Table 3. Saudi Arabia ranking of English proficiency index EPI (2011 to 2016)

Year	Ranking	Performance
2011	26 out of 44	Low
2012	50 out of 52	Very Low
2013	59 out of 60	Very Low
2014	59 out of 63	Very Low
2015	68 out of 70	Very Low
2016	68 out of 72	Very Low

Source: (EPI, 2017)

Table 4. Saudi Arabian students' TOEFL scores (2016)

	Reading	Listening	Speaking	Writing	Total score
Saudi Arabia	14	16	18	15	64
MENA average score	18.1	20.15	21.45	19.85	79.8
KSA rank in MENA	20 out of 20	20 out of 20	20 out of 20	20 out of 20	20 out of 20
KSA Global percentile	16	24	22	10	18

Source: (ETS, 2016)

Table 5. Saudi Arabian students' IELTS Academic and general training test performance (2015)

IELTS	Reading	Listening	Speaking	Writing	Total score
Academic test performance	4.8	4.9	5.5	4.6	5
Rank Globally	39 out of 40	39 out of 40	38 out of 40	39 out of 40	39 out of 40
General Training test performance	3.7	4.7	5	4.2	4.5
Rank Globally	40 out of 40	40 out of 40	40 out of 40	40 out of 40	40 out of 40

Source: (IELTS, 2016)

Language Skills of Saudi EFL Students

The research conducted regarding English language teaching in Saudi Arabia supports the above-mentioned findings. In general, Saudi students have low level of English proficiency and low achievement (Alhawsawi, 2013; Al-Johani, 2009; Al-Khairi, 2013a; Alrabai, 2014; Alrabai, 2016; Alrashidi & Phan, 2015; Alseweed, 2009; Elyas & Picard, 2010; Faruk, 2013; Rahman & Alhaisoni, 2013; Rajab, 2013). About 70% of Saudi students mentioned that the lower level of their English proficiency is due to the faulty junior and secondary schooling where English would not be taken seriously (Habash & Idapalapati, 2016).

Specifically, it has been found that the writing performance of Saudi students was generally poor and they suffer from weakness in writing specially when using grammatical structure (Baka, 2013; Alkubaidi, 2014). Students have numerous writing difficulties in organization, capitalization, vocabulary, grammar, spelling, prepositions, lexical items, syntax, punctuation marks and suffixes and prefixes (Ababneh, 2017; Alhaisoni, Al-Zuoud & Gaudel, 2015; Althobaiti, 2014; Javid, Farooq & Umer, 2013; Javid & Umer, 2014; Raja & Zahid, 2013; Sawalmeh, 2013; Siddiqui, 2015; Younes & Albalawi, 2015). Through analyzing their writing samples, Saudi students lack sociolinguistics competence, grammatical competence, strategic competence, and discourse competence (Almubark, 2016). Moreover, Saudi undergraduates are very weak in writing skills and usually engaged in sentence-level or at the maximum at paragraph-level academic writing (Al-Khairi, 2013b). Their writing errors refer to the interference of mother tongue, over-generalization, insufficient activities and practice of basic techniques of writing (Ahmed, 2016; Naikoo, Ganai & Tawhari, 2016).

Moreover, research indicated an overall low reading comprehension and low reading proficiency among Saudi EFL students (AlAbik, 2014; Al-Qahtani, 2010; Al-Roomy, 2013). Most of Saudi students lack the necessary reading habits (Al-Qahtani, 2016), and they have difficulties in different areas such as use of vocabulary, scanning, skimming,

prediction and summarizing (Nezami, 2012). They rarely make use of important reading skills when they read English texts as a result of lack of exposure to the target language, poor teaching skills, little attention to comprehension, lack of motivation, unfamiliar and unsuitable reading topics, lack of reading skills training and limited vocabulary (Al-Qahtani, 2016).

Regarding oral proficiency, it has been found that Saudi students have difficulties in pronouncing certain English consonant sounds (Ahmad, 2011; Hago & Khan, 2015). Pronunciation, speed of speech, insufficient vocabulary, the different accent of speakers, lack of concentration, anxiety, bad quality of recording, appropriate grammatical structures, hesitation to use the target language, conceptual knowledge, listening ability, motivation to speak, teachers' feedback during speaking activities, confidence, mother tongue, low participation time allow to speak and time allowed for preparation were the major listening comprehension problems encountered by Saudi EFL learners (AlAsmari, 2015; Hamouda, 2013a; Younes & Albalawi, 2016). This low proficiency is due to many causes such as low English proficiency, fear of speaking in front of others, negative evaluation, shyness, lack of confidence and preparation, and fear of making mistakes (Hamouda, 2013b). Hence, students' speaking performance is mainly affected by four factors that are namely; insufficient input, time for preparation, poor instructions and the unsatisfactory amount of practicing speaking (Younes & Albalawi, 2016).

Interestingly, a large number of Saudi EFL students fail to understand basic English grammar, suffer from the lack of proper grammar rules in forming various types sentences (Alamin & Ahmed, 2012; Al-Hassaani, 2016) and have difficulties in many grammatical features (Aljumah, 2011). Of the most important barriers of oral proficiency, using Arabic in class, lack of practicing speaking, devoting more time to listening skills than speaking skills, lack of laboratories for teaching listening and speaking skills, rare use of CD as speaking models. More than 30 students are in listening and speaking class (Hamad, 2013). In concluding, these difficulties are mainly due to intense mother tongue interference and intralingual interference (Alamin & Ahmed, 2012; Al-Hassaani, 2016).

Statement of the Problem

The total number of students in Saudi Arabia reached seven million in 2016. This huge number of students who study English as a foreign language encounter numerous difficulties and obstacles in acquiring English language skills during their learning period. During the last 10 years, the field of ELT had rapid development, and it is expected that ELT in Saudi Arabia will respond to these developments in order to solve the problems of teaching/learning English language skills that many students face in schools and universities. It is also expected that researchers in Saudi Arabia will benefit from the international trends in ELT to help students overcome frustration and barriers that hinder their effective language skills. Therefore, the current study serves as a basis of teaching/learning language skills in Saudi Arabia since the

future research mostly flows from an understanding of the gaps, inconsistencies, intellectual problems, and controversies emerging from the feasible areas of the current literature (Murrey & Beglar, 2009). Consequently, it is important to conduct a thorough analysis of the previous research on teaching/learning language skills in Saudi Arabia to understand the development of language research during the past ten years in order to be able to have a clear image of the appropriate and inappropriate directions applied in Saudi Arabia to solve the problems of gaining language skills among Saudi EFL students. This study first provides a literature review on ELT in the Saudi context. Then, it examines trends in the teaching/learning of language skills in Saudi Arabia by systematically analyzing the previous studies on language skills which were published within the past ten years. Finally, it presents the future research areas to fill the gaps in teaching/learning language skills in Saudi Arabia.

The objectives of the Systematic Review

The main objectives of this systematic review were to:

1. Present the current status of research on language skills of Saudi EFL students between 2007 and 2016.
2. Investigate the contribution of those studies in improving the language skills of EFL students in Saudi Arabia.
3. Identify the language skills research gaps and where further research should be carried out.

Research Questions

1. What studies have been undertaken on language skills of Saudi EFL students between 2007 and 2016?
2. How do those studies contribute to improve language skills of Saudi EFL students?
3. What are the particular points that need to be taken into consideration for future research on the language skills of Saudi EFL students?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current study employed the systematic review method. A systematic review is a summary of the research literature on a single situation to identify, select, appraise and synthesize all high-quality research evidence relevant to that situation (Bettany-Saltikov, 2012). "Good systematic review sample sufficient precautions to minimize error and bias" (Littell, Corcoran & Pillai, 2008:1). A systematic review follows a well-defined protocol, that indicates objectives, concepts, and procedures in advance, to synthesize the available research to arrive at reliable conclusions (Lau, 2007). After developing the research questions, the review protocol was established to search for the relevant studies.

Search Strategy for Systematic Map Studies

This step aimed at identifying the most relevant databases for this systematic review. The search was conducted using different databases including ERIC, Google Scholar, Wiley Online Library, Web of Science, Taylor & Francis, Spring-

gerLink-Springer, Scopus-Elsevier, Sage Journals-Sage, EduSearch and Saudi Digital Library. Different research strategies were tested, including reviewing the abstracts, adding/deleting different research terms (variants, synonyms, hyponyms) and manual searching. A specific set of research terms was selected to yield the most appropriate results in both English and Arabic languages as seen in Table 6. The terms were searched using “OR” function for each column and “AND” function for each row. For example, “Saudi Arabia” “AND” “English” “AND” “Listening” “AND” “Learning” was used for the first search and “Saudi” “AND” “English” “AND” “Listening” “AND” “Learning” was used for the second search and so on until all conjunctions of terms were used. Searches were done by two independent reviewers (the author and a specialist in ELT) to assure reliability.

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

After carrying out the initial search strategy, the studies to be included in the keyword map were identified according to the following inclusion and exclusion criteria:

Inclusion criteria

Studies were included if:

1. They were conducted in Saudi Arabia.
2. They focused on language skills.
3. They were published between 2007 and 2016.
4. They were peer-reviewed journal publications.
5. They were not obtainable in full-text form
6. They covered any of these educational settings (public schools or universities).

Exclusion criteria

Studies were excluded if:

1. They were not conducted in Saudi Arabia.
2. They did not focus on language skills.
3. They were published before 2007 or after 2016
4. They were not peer-reviewed journal publications

5. They had an inappropriate methodology.
6. They focused on industrial and/or vocational students.

Using PRISMA checklist. The search strategy generated 1438 studies which were reduced to 983 studies after duplicates removed. After records screened, 522 studies were excluded, resulting in 461 full-text articles. Then those full-text articles were assessed against the above-mentioned inclusion/exclusion criteria resulting in the exclusion of 238 studies. This search strategy yielded 221 studies for inclusion in the systematic keyword map.

In-depth Review Studies

Two independent reviewers read each study in depth. They compared their findings and resolved any differences. For the in-depth synthesis, additional criteria were applied:

Studies were excluded for in-depth review if:

1. They focused on teachers’ performance or behaviors in teaching language skills.
2. They focused on variables not directly related to language skills.
3. They focused on general achievement.

The application of these three additional criteria yielded 95 studies which were included in the in-depth review (Figure 1).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Studies Included in Systematic Map Review

This section focuses on the systematic map review to describe the relevant studies to answer the first research question: “*What studies have been undertaken on language skills of Saudi EFL students between 2007 and 2016?*” (Table 7).

Almost all of the included studies were published in English language (93.67%), whereas only (6.33%) were published in Arabia language. This explains researchers’ desire to use English language when conducting their ELT research (Table 8).

The majority of included studies were published in foreign journals (73.30%), while (16.74%) of the studies were

Table 6. Keyword search terms

Saudi Arabia	AND	English	AND	Listening	AND	Learning
OR		OR		OR	Speaking	OR
Saudi		Language		OR	Reading	Teaching
				OR	Writing	
				OR	Grammar	
				OR	Vocabulary	
				OR	Pronunciation	
				OR	Oral	
				OR	Linguistic	
				OR	Skill	
				OR	Communication	
				OR	Achievement	
				OR	Proficienc	

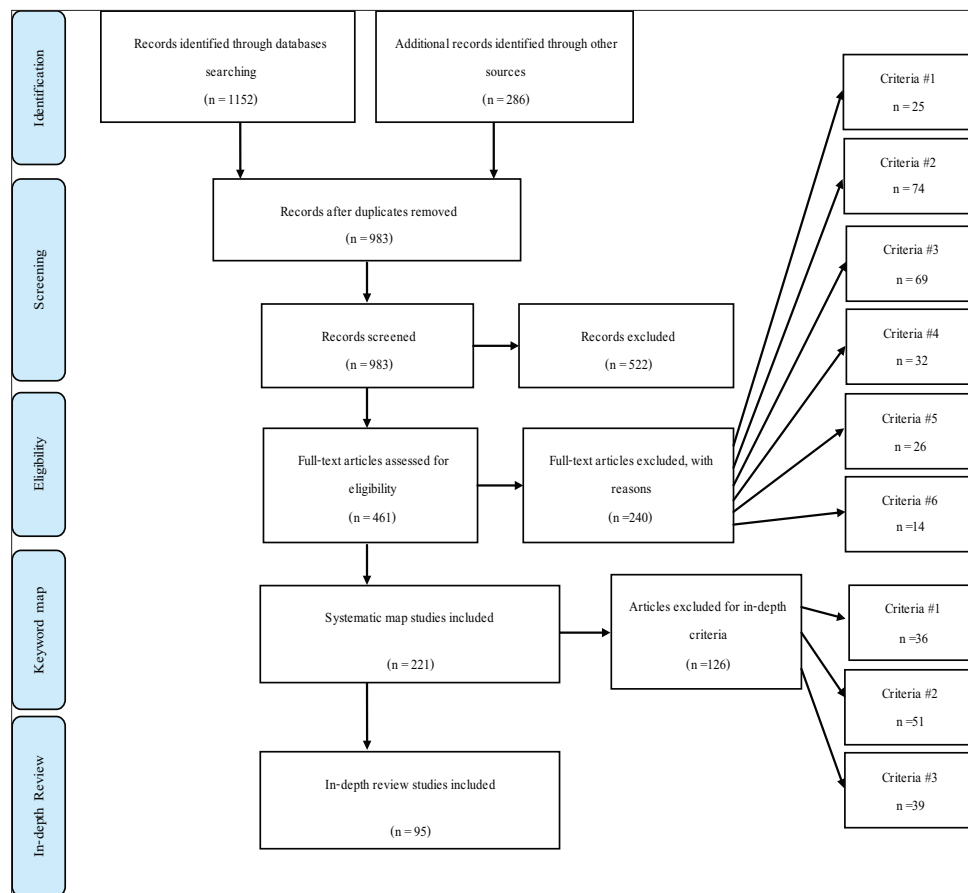


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram

Table 7. Language of included studies

Language	Number	Percentage
English	207	93.67
Arabic	14	6.33
Total	221	100

Table 8. Types of journals published included studies

Journals	Number	Percentage
Foreign	162	73.30
Arab	37	16.74
Saudi	22	9.96
Total	221	100

Table 9. Number of authors

Number of author (s)	Number	Percentage
One author	148	66.97
Two authors	60	27.15
Three authors or more	13	5.88
Total	221	100

published in Arab journals. The minority of studies were published in Saudi journals (9.96%). This shows that Saudi journals do not contribute appropriately in publishing ELT

research which is due to scarcity of specialized journals in the field of E T.

Table 9 illustrates that (66.97%) of included studies was conducted by only one author, followed by (27.15%) conducted by two authors, and a small proportion was conducted by three or more authors. It is clear that researchers of ELT in Saudi Arabia almost lack cooperation when conducting ELT research.

The majority of included studies (68.32%) were conducted by male authors, while only (23.08%) were conducted by females, and only (8.60%) of the authors were mixed-gender. This indicates that most of the research of ELT in Saudi Arabia were conducted on male students or teachers, and the minority of research were conducted on female students or teachers.

Almost half of the included studies were conducted by Saudi researchers (54.75%), followed by (33.94%) conducted by non-Saudi authors, and a small percentage (11.31%) were conducted by Saudi and non-Saudi authors. This illustrates the growth of Saudi ELT faculty members in the past few years as a result of the existence of qualified Saudi researchers in ELT.

The majority of included studies employed the quantitative methodology (81.45%), whereas only (6.33%) employed the qualitative methodology, and (12.22%) used mixed-method approach. This finding shows that most of the researchers prefer the qualitative method since it easier to apply. One of the most important limitation of using the

qualitative method is that it does not give a deep insight of the phenomenon being studied. Therefore, ELT researchers in Saudi Arabia should use the qualitative method in accordance with the qualitative method in order to have more consistent results.

Table 13 shows that (59.44%) of the quantitative studies were quasi-experimental, (35.56%) were descriptive in nature, and only (5%) were correlational studies.

The majority of the included studies utilized only one instrument (54.75%), while (31.22%) of included studies used two instruments. Three instruments were applied in only (10.41%) of the included studies, and four or more instruments were used in a small proportion (3.62%). Researchers should use more than one instrument to collect as much data as possible on the subject of the study.

Table 15 illustrates that the sample of (80.09%) of included studies were students, followed by students and teachers with (10.41%), and only (9.50%) were teacher-sampling. It is clear that students with special needs were almost neglected when conducting studies. Only four studies out of 221 were conducted on those students representing only (2.26%).

The majority of the participants were only male, representing almost half of the studies conducted (51.13%), followed by an almost quarter of the studies (24.43%) con-

ducted on females only. About (19%) of the studies were conducted with mixed students, and finally (5.44%) were not specified. More research should be conducted on female samples because they present almost 50% of the total students in Saudi Arabia.

Table 17 shows that:

1. There was a significant increase of studies from 2007 to 2016. Between 2007 and 2011, there were only (48 studies; 21.72%), while 173 studies (78.28%) were conducted within the past five years
2. About three-quarters of the studies were conducted at the university level (162 studies; 73.30%), while only (59 studies; 26.7%) were conducted at the school level from kindergarten to secondary level. There was more interest in conducting studies at the university level since most of the researchers were faculty members and it was easy for them to conduct their studies at universities rather than schools. This tendency prevents school students from participating in those studies, and consequently, their language skills problems are almost neglected.
3. Within schools, it was clear that most concentration was devoted to secondary level students and teachers with (13.12%), and only (10.87%) was devoted to students and teachers from kindergarten to intermediate.

Majority of included studies (31.22%) was conducted on the strategies used in teaching and learning of language skills, followed by (21.72%) which were conducted regarding the use of technology in general and CALL in particular in teaching/learning language skills. Difficulties of language

AQI Table 10. Gender of authors

Gender of author (s)	Number	Percentage
Male	151	68.32
Female	51	23.08
Mixed	19	8.60
Total	221	100

AQI Table 11. Nationality of authors

Nationality of author (s)	Number	Percentage
Saudi	121	54.75
Non-Saudi	75	33.94
Mixed	25	11.31
Total	221	100

AQI Table 12. Methodologies of included studies

Methodology	Number	Percentage
Quantitative	180	81.45
Qualitative	14	6.33
Mixed	27	12.22
Total	221	100

Table 13. Designs of the quantitative studies

Designs	Number	Percentage
Quasi-experimental	107	59.44
Descriptive	64	35.56
Correlational	9	5.00
Total	180	100

Table 14. Number of instruments

Number of instruments	Number	Percentage
One instrument	121	54.75
Two instruments	69	31.22
Three instruments	23	10.41
Four or more instruments	8	3.62
Total	221	100

Table 15. Sampling

Sampling	Number	Percentage
Students	177*	80.09
Teachers	21	9.50
Students and teachers	23	10.41
Total	221	100

(*) For student samples, only 4 studies out of 177 dealt with special needs students (2.26%).

Table 16. Gender of participants

Gender	Number	Percentage
Male	113	51.13
Female	54	24.43
Mixed	42	19.00
Not specified	12	5.44
Total	221	100

Table 17. Studies by year of publication and education level (K=Kindergarten, P=Primary, I=Intermediate, S=Secondary, ASL=All School Levels, U=University)

Year	K	P	I	S	ASL	U	Total	%
2007	-	1	-	2	-	2	5	2.26
2008	-	-	-	3	-	5	8	3.62
2009	-	-	-	-	-	3	3	1.36
2010	-	1	-	6	-	6	13	5.88
2011	-	-	-	-	1	18	19	8.60
2012	-	-	-	2	-	25	27	12.22
2013	1	2	-	3	1	22	29	13.12
2014	1	1	4	5	3	29	43	19.46
2015	-	4	6	6	1	27	44	19.91
2016	1	1	1	2	-	25	30	13.57
Total	3	10	11	29	6	162	221	100
%	1.36	4.53	4.98	13.12	2.71	73.30	100	

AQ1 Table 18. Studies by subject matter used in language skills research

Category	Number	Percentage
Teaching/learning Language skills strategies	69	31.22
Technology and CALL	48	21.72
Difficulties of Language skills	41	18.55
Students' perceptions on Language skill	23	10.41
Mobile learning	14	6.33
Beliefs and attitudes towards Language skills	11	4.98
Teachers' performance on Language skills	7	3.17
Impact of L1 on Language skills	4	1.81
Social media	4	1.81
Total	221	100

AQ1 Table 19. Systematic map studies by language skills (N=221, not mutually exclusive)

Category	Number	Percentage
Writing	66	28.09
Reading	56	23.83
Proficiency and achievement	39	16.60
Vocabulary	26	11.06
Speaking	22	9.36
Listening	11	4.68
Grammar	8	3.40
Pronunciation	7	2.98
Total	235	100

skills represented (18.55%) of included studies, while students' perceptions on language skill gained (10.41%). Mobile learning was used in language skills research with (6.33%),

and only (4.98%) was devoted to the beliefs and attitudes towards language skills. A minority of included studies was conducted on teachers' performance on language skills, the impact of L1 on language skills and the use of social media with (3.17%), (1.81%) and (1.81%) respectively.

The largest number of studies focused on writing (28.09%) and reading (23.83%). Then proficiency and achievement of language skill represented (16.60%) of included studies. After that vocabulary came with (11.06%), speaking (9.36%), listening (4.68%), grammar (3.40%) and finally, pronunciation (2.98%). It was clear that about (70%) of the studies focused on writing, reading and general achievement, whereas approximately (30%) focused on vocabulary, speaking, listening, grammar and pronunciation together. There was a lack of studies that addressed the latter skills, whereby, the need for more studies on those skills arises.

The In-depth Review

This section focuses on the in-depth review to answer the second research question: "How do those studies contribute to improve language skills of Saudi EFL students?" and the third question: "What are the particular points that need to be taken into consideration for future research on the language skills of Saudi EFL students?"

Ninety-five studies from the systematic map review were included in the in-depth review. Some of the studies investigated more than one skill.

The majority of studies investigated writing skill (32 studies; 30.47%), reading skill (28 studies; 26.67%), vocabulary (16 studies; 15.24%) and speaking skill (14 studies; 13.33%). Only 7 studies (6.67%) investigated listening skill, 6 studies (5.71%) for grammar, and finally 2 studies (1.91%) for pronunciation. As seen in Table 20, most of the studies were conducted from 2012 to 2015 (80 studies; 76.19%) which indicated a significant growth of language skill studies in the Saudi context during the past few years.

Table 21 illustrates that most of the in-depth studies were conducted at the university level (64 studies; 67.36%), fol-

Table 20. In-depth review studies by language skills (N=95, not mutually exclusive)

Category	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	Total	Percentage
Writing	-	2	-	1	2	8	2	7	9	1	32	30.47
Reading	-	-	-	1	1	2	4	6	9	5	28	26.67
Vocabulary	1	-	-	-	-	1	3	1	8	2	16	15.24
Speaking	-	1	-	1	-	4	3	2	2	1	14	13.33
Listening	-	-	-	2	-	4	1	-	-	-	7	6.67
Grammar	-	-	-	1	1	-	-	1	2	1	6	5.71
Pronunciation	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	1	-	-	2	1.91
Total	1	3	-	7	4	19	13	18	30	10	105	100

lowed by secondary, intermediate, primary and finally kindergarten with only 2 studies (2.11%). As known, language skills grow from childhood, but the studies at this level were rare which indicated the importance of conducting more studies at primary and intermediate levels.

The studies included in the in-depth review were classified according to language skills as writing, reading, listening, speaking, vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation.

Writing skill

Thirty-three studies investigated writing skills of Saudi EFL students. Those studies were analyzed in-depth to summarize the most important findings

Table 22 illustrates that almost half of the studies (46.87%) were conducted on the writing problems and difficulties that Saudi EFL students face, followed by using technology and social media in writing (28.12%), teaching strategies (15.63%), and finally Mobile learning with only (9.38%). These findings indicated the lack of searching for a solution to writing problems which could be helpful in teaching writing skill since only five studies experimented writing teaching strategies.

The studies of writing problems were all conducted at university level neglecting the importance of conducted similar studies at school level in which students had several writing problems. Three studies of the total writing studies concentrated on spelling error (Albalawi, 2016; Alhaisoni et al., 2015; Hameed, 2016), two studies explored essay writing problems (Naikoo et al., 2016; Sawalmeh, 2013), one study dealt with syntactical and punctuation errors (Alamin, 2012) and one investigated capitalization errors (Siddiqui, 2015). The remaining studies focused on writing problems in general. Studies review indicated that spelling errors of Saudi EFL students were errors of omission, wrong use of vowels, transportation spelling errors, diphthongs and silent letter words. Two of the three studies were conducted in the same year and had identical findings which meant that some researchers did not look for research gaps to make their research supportive of other research. Moreover, the two studies which investigated essay and paragraph writing errors included copula, concord, number, tense markers, prepositions, articles, conjunctions, word order, singular/plural form, subject-verb agreement, double negatives, spellings, capitalization, articles and sentence fragments were the most

Table 21. In-depth studies by education sector

Education sector	Number	Percentage
University	64	67.36
Secondary	18	18.95
Intermediate	6	6.32
Primary	5	5.26
Kindergarten	2	2.11
Total	95	100

Table 22. In-depth studies by research field

Category	Number	Percentage
Writing problems	15	46.87
Technology and social media	9	28.12
Teaching strategies	5	15.63
Mobile learning	3	9.38
Total	32	100

common errors among Saudi EFL students, but both studies did not suggest solutions to the aforementioned problems and neither further research to bridge this gap.

From 2013 to 2016, eight studies investigated writing problems of Saudi EFL students in general. The findings of these studies were almost identical. They showed that Saudi EFL students were very weak in writing skills and committed lots of errors in their writings. They had serious problems in their writing due to many factors such as mother tongue interference, besides insufficient activities and practice of basic techniques of writing in addition to the lack of follow-up to the students' writing performance. Although many writing problems among Saudi EFL students were discovered, almost no studies were conducted to solve those problems empirically since most of the studies conducted were exploratory ones that ended in investigating the problem without giving accurate further research recommendations to be followed by future researchers.

On the other hand, technology use in teaching writing was investigated in nine studies. All nine studies were conducted at the university level; no single study was applied to school level students although technology and social media are widely implemented at the school level. The most frequently used technologies were Wikis and Blogs. Four

Table 23. In-depth studies by research field

Category	Number	Percentage
Teaching strategies	13	46.43
Technology and social media	10	35.71
Reading problems	3	10.72
Mobile learning	2	7.14
Total	28	100

studies applied “Wiki”, whereas WebQuest, Online checker, WEB and Twitter were used once in three studies. The findings of all those studies indicated that Web 2.00 technology was effective in teaching writing skills. Surprisingly, female students participated in only three studies; two of them were conducted by one researcher (Grami, 2012; Grami & Alkazemi, 2016). This indicated that technology must be investigated more with females and mixed-gender students. Although many technologies and social media has emerged in the last decade, most of them were not experimented in teaching writing such as YouTube, Facebook, webcasts, Myspace, Flicker and so on.

From in-depth studies review, only five studies experimented teaching strategies from 2007 until 2016. Those strategies were Journal Writing, Dialogue Journal, Self-Regulated Strategy Development, Visualization and Discourse Markers. Three of those five interventions were conducted at the university level while only two interventions were applied to primary and secondary students. It is noticed that the studies that experimented strategies in teaching writing skills were limited although there were lots of strategies which could be used to improve writing skills. So, researchers are advised to bridge this gap by experimenting new strategies, especially at earlier stages of schooling, to improve teaching writing to young students and never wait until they move to higher education.

Finally, three studies included in the in-depth review investigated the effect of mobile learning in teaching writing skills. Hence, three applications, namely, Podcasting, SMS and WhatsApp were used. All studies were conducted at the university level and the participants were male only. The findings of all studies revealed a significant effect on students’ writing skills. There was a limitation in two studies (AbdulFattah, 2015; Mahmoud, 2013), due to the small samples used. So the findings might not be generalized to the populations of the studies. Moreover, mobile learning was used in the above-mentioned two studies as an alternative means of traditional teaching, and not as a method that could be assessed. More studies in this research area must be undertaken employing larger random samples to clearly investigate the effect of mobile learning in teaching writing skills.

Reading skill

The in-depth review included twenty-seven studies which investigated reading skills of Saudi EFL students. Twenty-four of them were conducted from 2013 to 2016.

Table 23 shows that almost half of the studies (46.43%) investigated using teaching strategies to develop reading skills. Technology and social media represented a consider-

able percentage (35.71%) in teaching reading, followed by investigating reading problems (10.72%) and finally utilizing mobile learning with (7.14%).

Thirteen studies investigated the effect of different teaching strategies on reading skills. Those strategies included Metacognitive reading strategies (3 studies), “3-2-1” reading strategy, expansion of vision span, textual discourse markers, schema-based techniques, self-managed strategies, creative circles, multiple intelligences activities, exploration and thinking loudly strategies, talking story books and word walls. Moreover, the participants of five studies were university students, followed by secondary and intermediate (3 studies) for each level, then primary and kindergarten (1 study) each. It is noticed again that university students gained the highest interest. Much interest is supposed to be devoted to lower level students and to poor reader students who suffered from serious reading difficulties

Moreover, ten studies investigated the effect of technology and social media on learning the reading skill. Most of the studies (8 studies) were conducted at the university level with exception of two studies; one for primary and one for secondary level. The most frequently used technologies were Wikis, Blogs and WebQuest. Other technologies included flash professional, smart classrooms, computer-based concept maps and Twitter. All findings indicated that using technology yielded an improvement in students’ reading skills. Thus, there was a limited use of technologies in teaching reading skills since there are lots of applications that can be used effectively in this area. Astonishingly, all the ten studies were conducted on male students only which indicated the ignoring of female students in benefiting from technology applications to improve their performance in reading skill.

Although Saudi EFL students face many serious problems in learning reading skills as mentioned earlier, a limited number of studies was conducted in this research area. Of the 95 studies included in the in-depth review, only three studies tackled this problem. In general, the main findings of those limited studies indicated that Saudi EFL students had difficulties in reading such as the use of limited of vocabulary, scanning, skimming, prediction, summarizing and lack of exposure to the target language. There is a demand for more studies in this area to identify more reading problems and try to find solutions to overcome those difficulties. In addition, an amazing finding was that all participants of those studies were male; no female students participated in any study dealing with reading problems. It is obvious that more interest has to be directed to fill this research gap by investigating female students reading problems since gender may have an impact on the findings of the mentioned studies.

Finally, only two studies investigated the effect of mobile learning on reading skills. They were conducted in 2016. One of them applied WhatsApp to exchange information regarding reading passages and used mobile as a means of introducing information, but not as a learning tool. The other study applied Augmented Reality applications to be used in class to improve students’ reading skills. Both interventions showed significant improvements in students’ reading comprehension. This review indicated that much applications of

mobile learning should be experimented for both male and female students at all levels of education.

Listening skill

Between 2007 and 2016, only seven studies were conducted on listening skills. Although listening is one of the most important skills of language learning, the number of studies conducted is still very limited.

As seen in Table 24, most of the studies (42.86%) investigated using technology in teaching listening skills. Only two studies discussed the problems of learning listening skills (28.57%). Finally, one study experimented a teaching strategy, and another one experimented applying mobile learning to develop listening skills.

Simulation, multi-media software and MOOC'S technologies were implemented in three studies at secondary and university levels between 2011 and 2014. The findings of those studies were contradictory to some extent (Al-Hammadi, 2011, Freihat & AlZamil, 2014; Javid, 2013). During the last two years, no studies were conducted regarding using technology in teaching listening skills although many applications emerged during the few past years. Teaching listening with technology at schools level needs more research since listening is taught by Saudi teachers who must expose students to texts spoken by English native speakers to improve students listening skills.

On the other hand, only two studies investigated the listening difficulties that Saudi EFL students face (Alenazi, 2013; Hamouda, 2013a). Those two studies were only undertaken at the university level in one year. Those studies showed that university students had serious problems in listening skills such as accent, pronunciation, speed of speech, insufficient vocabulary, different accent of speakers, lack of concentration, anxiety, bad quality of recording, teacher's techniques of teaching, English sound system, English words meaning, memory and attention, topic of the lecture, learner's strategies of learning, tasks and activities of listening, listener, the environment surrounding the listener, and the emotional and psychological side of the listener. Although several problems were identified, no later studies contributed in solving those problems. As seen above, there is a research gap in conducting studies at the school level and studies that find solutions to those problems

Lastly, there was a single study conducted in 2011 to experiment a strategy (the communicative approach), and it was effective in improving secondary school students' listening skills. In addition, mobile learning was also implemented in a single study in 2013 and found effective in learning listening skills. Researcher are recommended to try more effective teaching strategies and invest mobile learning applications, which are available to students, in teaching listening skills in the future.

Speaking skill

Regarding speaking skill, fourteen studies were undertaken between 2007 and 2016 on Saudi EFL students.

Table 25 shows that (5 studies; 35.72%) investigated five different teaching strategies used to develop students' speaking

skills, followed by (4 studies; 28.57%) on speaking problems of Saudi EFL students, (4 studies; 28.57%) on using technology and finally one study (7.14%) on using mobile learning

The findings showed that researchers experimented five different teaching strategies namely; concept mapping, drama, structural discourse markers, task repetition and the communicative approach. These strategies were all effective and had a positive effect on students' speaking skills. Only two of those studies were conducted on female students which indicates the need for more research on female students in the future. Moreover, four of those studies were conducted at university level which makes the need for conducting studies on school level students since they need more interest to improve their speaking skills at early stages.

Next, four out of those fourteen studies investigated speaking problems of Saudi EFL students. The finding showed many problems and difficulties such as using Arabic language in class, fear of speaking English language in public, lack of laboratories and CDs, inability to command proper pronunciation, lack of appropriate grammatical structures and necessary vocabulary items, fear of criticism, the disability to think of anything to say and speaking very little during class. All those studies were conducted on university level students and the participants of three of them were female students. These findings point out that male students speaking difficulties were almost neglected during the past ten years. Speaking difficulties of school level students were neglected too which shows two main research gaps in these areas.

Moreover, technologies were used in teaching speaking skills in four studies only (Alharbi, 2014; AlJiffri, 2009; Alshahrani, 2016; Javid, 2013). The findings of those studies were conflictin which requires more research in this area. Also, most of those studies were conducted on male students which again requires paying more attention to involve female students in technology research.

Finally, only one study was conducted on the use of mobile learning in teaching speaking skill. That study experimented using SMS which was really not an appropriate application for teaching that kind of skill. More investigations

Table 24. In-depth studies by research field

Category	Number	Percentage
Technology	3	42.86
Listening problems	2	28.57
Teaching strategies	1	14.28
Mobile learning	1	14.29
Total	7	100

Table 25. In-depth studies by research field

Category	Number	Percentage
Teaching strategies	5	35.72
Speaking problems	4	28.57
Technology	4	28.57
Mobile learning	1	7.14
Total	14	100

are expected in the future to experiment more applications of mobile learning in teaching speaking skills due to the emergence of mobile applications in the past few years.

Vocabulary

From 2007 to 2016, sixteen studies were conducted on teaching/learning vocabulary. Ten of those studies were undertaken during the past two years.

Table 26 shows that using technology in teaching vocabulary came first (7 studies; 43.75%), then (6 studies; 37.50%) investigated different teaching strategies to develop students' vocabulary, followed by (2 studies; 12.50%) on vocabulary problems that faced Saudi EFL students, and finally one study (7.14%) on using mobile learning.

Effects of different technology tools were widely investigated in teaching vocabulary. The seven studies implemented multimedia (2 studies), online tools, video games, synchronization, simulation and smart classrooms. The findings showed that technology was effective in vocabulary learning. Moreover, those studies were undertaken at almost all levels of education, and male and female students participated in those studies. More studies are required at primary and intermediate levels since these levels affect the acquisition of vocabulary and help students gain more vocabulary at early stages.

Regarding vocabulary teaching strategies, only six strategies were experimented. Most of them focused on secondary and university students. The findings of those studies proved their effect on vocabulary learning. But the number of studies was limited since students had inadequate vocabulary items even though at the university level. Researchers have to conduct more studies on vocabulary teaching strategies at kindergarten and primary levels to increase their vocabulary items due to the fact that more vocabulary leads to better learning of the language in general.

In addition, only two studies were conducted regarding the difficulties of vocabulary learning and the impact of L1 on second language vocabulary learning. The findings of both studies were not decisive enough in this area. As Saudi EFL students have limited vocabulary items, there is a crucial necessity to conduct more studies to explore the difficulties that students face in vocabulary learning and to find practical solutions to these difficulties.

Lastly, only one study was conducted on using mobile learning in vocabulary learning although mobile learning has many beneficial applications which can be used especially for vocabulary learning. More studies are required in this field since more than 775,000 applications were available in the beginning of 2013 that have the potential to help learners get immediate learning in new ways that have never happened before (Deng & Trainin, 2015).

Grammar

Grammar had inadequate interest during the past ten years. Only six studies were conducted at different education levels.

Table 27 illustrates that using technology in teaching grammar, using teaching strategies and grammar difficulties had similar interest with two studies for each category.

Two studies were conducted on secondary school male students using E-learning and synchronization technology. Female students did not participate in any research concerning the use of technology in learning grammar. Moreover, two studies were conducted on grammar difficulties and the impact of using L1 in teaching L2 grammar. They found that students had many difficulties in learning grammatical rules and using L1 in teaching L2 grammar did not benefit the students. In addition, two teaching strategies were experimented in teaching grammar; flipped classroom which was ineffective and constructive learning strategies effective in learning grammar rules. The findings showed that female students participated in only two studies which require paying more attention to this research gap. Another finding was the noticeable limit of grammar research during the past ten years. More research is required at all education levels to investigate the problems that Saudi EFL students face in learning grammatical rules and structure. Furthermore, more experimental interventions are necessary to experiment new strategies in this research area.

Pronunciation

Pronunciation had the least interest in the other skills of English language in Saudi Arabia. Only two studies were conducted at secondary and university levels.

Table 28 illustrates that only two studies were conducted regarding the pronunciation of Saudi EFL students. Both

Table 26. In-depth studies by research field

Category	Number	Percentage
Technology	7	43.75
Teaching strategies	6	37.50
Vocabulary difficulties	2	12.50
Mobile learning	1	6.25
Total	16	100

Table 27. In-depth studies by research field

Category	Number	Percentage
Technology	2	33.33
Teaching strategies	2	33.33
Grammar difficulties	2	33.33
Mobile learning	0	0.00
Total	6	100

Table 28. In-depth studies by research field

Category	Number	Percentage
Pronunciation difficulties	2	100
Technology	0	0.00
Teaching strategies	0	0.00
Mobile learning	0	0.00
Total	2	100

studies concentrated on pronunciation difficulties at secondary and university levels. They were undertaken in 2011 and 2015. The findings of those studies showed they had difficulties in pronouncing certain English consonant sounds. Both findings of the two studies were identical. Female students did not participate in those studies which show a need for investigating their pronunciation problems at all education level.

In concluding, there is a lack of pronunciation studies during the past ten years. Surprisingly, teaching strategies were not experimented at all to solve students' pronunciation problems which is a research gap in this area. Furthermore, using technology and mobile learning was also neglected although technology is vital in teaching pronunciation due the fact that most teachers of English language in Saudi Arabia are non-native speakers of English language which requires applying various kinds of technologies to enhance students' pronunciation.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The current emphasis on the significance of English language skills has had a significant impact on educational systems worldwide (Wilson & Poulter, 2015). As mentioned earlier, Saudi EFL students had serious problems in learning English language due to their lack of effective language skills. Thus, there was a need to conduct a thorough analysis of the previous research on teaching/learning language skills in Saudi Arabia to understand the development of language research during the past ten years. Therefore, this systematic review study sought to examine the trends in teaching/learning language skills in Saudi Arabia by systematically analyzing the previous studies on language skills which were published within the past ten years and identify the research areas to be bridged in the future.

The search strategy yielded 221 studies for inclusion in the systematic keyword map, and 95 studies for in-depth review. The findings of the systematic review revealed that (93.67%) of those studies were published in English language and (73.30%) of them were published in foreign peer-reviewed journals. Most of those studies (66.97%) were undertaken by only one author which reflected the absence of cooperation among researchers in this field. The most frequently used research methodology was the quantitative approach (81.45%) which indicates the need for using qualitative and mixed method approaches to gain insight findings in the coming research. Moreover, students sampling presented (80.09%) in those studies, and only (24.43%) of them were female which requires conducting more studies on Saudi EFL female students. Surprisingly, (73.30%) of the conducted studies were at university level indicating a limit interest of school-level research. In addition, (68.52%) of those studies focused on writing, reading skills and achievement indicating the necessity to give more attention to speaking, listening, pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar research at all education sectors in the future. The in-depth review also indicated an obvious focus on reading and writing skills research (57.14%), while only (14.29%) devoted to grammar, listening and pronunciation. In addition, (67.26%) of

those studies were undertaken at university level which calls for conducting more studies at the school level.

For an in-depth review, writing skill research focused mainly on writing problems at university level neglecting the importance of other education levels. Conversely, no studies were conducted to solve those problems empirically which represent a research gap that should be bridged. In addition, technology use in writing research was only at university level which opens a path for more investigations at all school levels using different kinds of contemporary technologies and mobile learning applications. Regarding reading skill research, most of the participants were university level students. So, more interest is supposed to be devoted to lower level students and to poor reader students who suffered from serious reading difficulties. Reading teaching strategies were not sufficient to solve the severe problems of students since they were rare, and concentrated at one education level or two at most. Moreover, technology and mobile learning were not investigated properly in teaching reading skills since most of the interventions were undertaken to male students or repeated using the same technology at the same education level. On the other hand, listening and speaking skills research were rare and investigated limited levels of education. Listening and speaking problems were not explored well since most of the studies were conducted in higher education. Besides, these two skills can be improved by using an unlimited number of emerging technologies and applications. In fact, rare studies were conducted in this field pointing to a need for more research in this area. In addition, vocabulary research was also limited and had insufficient investigations on students vocabulary learning problems and teaching strategies. Moreover, grammar research was also limited to few studies which were not enough to improve students' grammatical skills. Lastly, pronunciation research was almost neglected. Only two studies were identified, and their findings were identical and proved that Saudi EFL students had serious problems in pronunciation. In fact, no studies investigated any strategies or solutions to overcome those problems at any education level.

As any systematic review study, this review has two main limitations. Firstly, the time limit of the review was only ten years which is almost too short since English language in Saudi Arabia has been taught since 1958. Secondly, there is a level of subjectivity in including the reviewed studies due to the large number of the scanned studies. There was an attempt to reduce this subjectivity in having two independent reviewers and in applying strict criteria for inclusion and exclusion.

The findings of this review suggest that there are some research areas to be explored further in the future. These areas include exploring more research on language skills of Saudi EFL students at the lower levels of education especially on listening, speaking, pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar, and conducting additional language skills research on Saudi EFL female students since gender has an impact on students' English language learning. Besides, struggling readers and writers should be given more research interests to develop their reading and writing proficiencies. Moreover, there is an important scope for research that carries out in-

terventions aimed at using technologies and mobile learning applications. Since male and female students in Saudi Arabia study separately, cooperation between researchers from both sides in carrying out the same studies on male and female students are fruitful areas for future investigations and comparisons between the two genders.

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AQ1: KIndly cite tables 10-12, 14, 16, 18, 19 in text part