The Perceptions and Beliefs of Saudi Preparatory Year Program Learners Towards Learning English: A Case Study

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Abstract
Learning English in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) can be a challenging experience. Nevertheless, being proficient in English language guarantees better job opportunities in various fields and thus learners need to acquire an acceptable level of proficiency. Recognizing its significant role in the learners' academic and professional excellence, the English language has gained the status of a mandatory language in the Saudi higher education institutions. As students enter universities for higher studies, they are often required to take prerequisite courses in English to gain a higher level of proficiency. This qualitatively driven descriptive case study investigated the attitudes of EFL students who were enrolled in the Foundation Year Program. This study aimed to examine the learners' feelings, emotions, and attitudes in the light of their academic performance. In total, thirteen male and seventeen female students were interviewed using semi-structured interviews as a main tool for the data collection. They were asked to recall and write their narratives regarding their experience of learning the English language throughout the foundation year program. The socio-constructivist nature of this qualitative case study offered an opportunity to participants to share their stories. Consequently, it highlighted the factors that motivated them for a language learning experience. Moreover, it allowed them to reflect on the challenges that they encountered during their learning odyssey of the English language course as part of the preparatory year program (PYP). Findings from this research study suggest that the participants' motivations to learn English are primarily related to socio-economic reasons. Besides, students were particularly motivated to learn English when they were encouraged by their families and by 'good' teaching practices. Nevertheless, these findings failed to establish an association between the learners' attitudes and their performance on the assessments during the course. This case study adds to the existing literature by examining a context that lacks empirical evidence on the topic of EFL learners' beliefs about English learning. More research in this area is required to determine why this discrepancy occurred.
Keywords: EFL, learners' attitudes, qualitative research, sociocultural, Saudi Arabian context

1 Introduction

In 2008, the Saudi government initiated educational reforms in the realm of the English as a Foreign language (EFL) teaching and learning that led to massive transformations in pedagogy and learning in schools and universities. Although the reforms appeared to be promising, these changes have yielded various challenges for teachers, course designers and other stake holders in educational institutions, such as using teaching methods. Moreover, the newly introduced changes gave rise to concerns related to the learners' attitude towards English language learning that might influence the implementation of teaching and learning plans (Hult, 2017). In the Saudi EFL setting, the major concern of the teachers and course designers is the learners' low level of motivation that often makes it difficult to implement the reform agenda in educational institutions. This situation in itself has caused various societal and cultural factors (Costa & Norton, 2017; Pennycook, 2017), which are related to language.

Language is considered the most "important channel of social organization embedded in the culture of the community where it is used" (Dörnyei, 1998, p. 118). When learners undertake to learn a second language (L2), their attitudes and learning are influenced by the culture of their mother tongue and the culture of the target language. Since language is socially and culturally bound, it makes language learning a deeply social experience that involves the integration of a wide range of elements of the target culture (Dörnyei, 2003). This can be deemed a vital issue due to the nature of the English language in a non-English society where EFL learners have limited access to the target culture and its language. Hence, it is significant in the case of Saudi EFL learners who attempt to negotiate with two very different cultures and languages that include Arabic as their L1 and English as the target language and their learning goal in the classroom. We can assume that the enormous challenge of adapting to the new 'culture' and worldview correlated to learning English has impact on the attitudes of the Saudi EFL learners. This challenging situation also suggests that the EFL learner attitudes and motivations may play an important role in determining the outcomes of an EFL reform agenda (Ushioda & DÖRnyei, 2017). Bearing in mind the associated hurdles related to the reform agenda, it is vital to explore and understand the EFL learners' attitudes that stem from their cultural and social milieus and they impact the teaching and learning practices of English language (Savignon, 2018). More rigorous research in this direction will help the practitioners as well as add to the existing literature on the learners' beliefs, dispositions, attitudes and opinions about English language learning which will improve the pedagogical practices in the Saudi EFL context. Hence, this study aims to examine the attitudes and beliefs of the Saudi students enrolled in an EFL program and explore their experiences, perceptions, and motivations.

2 Literature Review

The constructivist paradigm recognizes the learner's functional role in creating personal knowledge. It holds the view that due to the expression of the self and the individual perspective; the creation of knowledge varies in its exemplification of reality. These four basic principles form the basis for pedagogical process in classrooms, which is described as constructivism (Wilson, 2017). Romanowski, Alkhateeb, and Nasser (2018) and Bosman and Schulze (2017) also suggest that knowledge is not passively acquired and that it is acquired when a person is thinking actively. They also posit that behavior is transformed through cognition so that individuals can function

irrespective of their social settings. The understanding offered by Nguyen (2016) proposes the description of the constructivist approach into two precise categories, which encompass the constructivist and socio-cultural worldviews, also identified as socio-constructivist perspective.

Within the socio-constructivist realm, attitudes towards English language learning play a vital role. Many researchers have defined "attitude" from a socio-cultural perspective (Jones & Moreland, 2015; Norton & Toohey, 2001; Singh & Richards, 2006). Some researchers believe that second language (L2) achievement is influenced by attitudes, although this influence is mediated by motivation (ho Kang, 2014). In early research, attitudes were defined as: "sum of beliefs about a particular behavior weighted by evaluations of these beliefs" (Miller, 2005, p. 126), which influenced how the individual responded towards related subjects in addition to situations. Later definitions defined attitudes as "the overall positive or negative evaluation of the behavior. In general, the more favorable the attitude toward the behavior, the stronger the individual's intention is to perform it" (Lipnevich, MacCann, Krumm, Burrus, & Roberts, 2011, p. 106). Some researchers perceive attitudes as biologically driven (Cantril, 1947; Gonzalez, 2007), while others have theorized that these are learned and hence susceptible to modification (Spencer & Horowitz, 1973; Xuan & Yihong, 2017). According to Maio and Haddock (2010), "they all emphasize the notion that reporting an attitude involves the expression of an evaluative judgment about an object. Indeed, most attitude theorists would argue that evaluation is the predominant aspect of the attitude concept. In other words, reporting an attitude involves making a decision about liking versus disliking, or favoring versus disfavoring a particular issue, object, or person. Thus, we define an attitude as an overall evaluation of an object that is based on cognitive, affective, and behavioral information" (p. 3). However, Chambers (1999) offers a different perspective on attitudes towards language leaning. He argues that socio-cultural elements affect attitudes to language learning which are perceived as a set of values that the language learners bring to the Foreign Language (FL) classroom. In classroom environment, these values are shaped by anticipated psychological benefits and benefits of learning the target language. Several factors affect the values that the learner holds which might be manipulated by a range of factors including the language learning experience, the community of the target language and the attitudes towards the target language demonstrated by parents and peers of the language learner.

There is an agreement in the current research that the language learners' attitudes affect the overall outcome of a foreign language learning program (Cook, 2016; Gardner, 2014), and that motivation has a vital role to play in this process (Gardner, 2014; Lasagabaster, 2017; Woodrow, 2017). Therefore, various pedagogical approaches mainly stemmed from the notion of social interaction, have occurred and progressed in a bid to developing positive language learner attitudes. A survey of these illustrates the role these approaches has to play in supporting EFL learners to develop a positive outlook of English language learning in their classrooms. In the first instance, family-school partnerships are believed to represent approaches that focus on

the child within a framework of cooperation, coordination and collaboration established between families and educators so as to improve opportunities for "children and adolescents across social, emotional, behavioral, and academic domains" (Kim et al., 2012, pp. 3-4). Understanding the impact of such partnerships upon the language learning of English learners, research shows that parents of ELLs play an essential role in their children's motivation to learn English (Rowe, Ramani, & Pomerantz, 2016). In this respect, Peeters (2015) argues that peer collaborations have the potential to influence learner attitudes in a positive and beneficial manner. More importantly, learners' motivation is "socially distributed [and] created within cultural systems of activities involving the mediation of others" (Rueda & Moll, 1994, p. 131). Therefore, social interaction seems to be an important factor in language learning (Savignon, 2018), which engages learners in peer collaborations and helps teachers to use it a as a teaching tool for developing learners' attitude towards EFL learning.

Literature suggests an alternative teaching approach which can be useful in developing EFL learners' attitude. This approach involves creating a supportive environment and developing learners' autonomy. It is a positive approach "as learner control characterized by self-directedness" (Huang, Chandra, DePaolo, & Simmons, 2016, p. 738).

A contemporary pedagogical approach that has recently been suggested for shaping EFL learners' positive attitudes is the utilization and integration of technologies and the Internet into classroom practices. The incorporation of educational technology in teaching practices has a positive influence on the EFL learners attitudes, which is supported by the relevant literature (Healey, 2016; Liu & Lan, 2016). As Yang (2018) contends, web-based language learning can stimulate learners to engage in creative and collaborative learning through self-directed learning.

The fourth approach thought to be of considerable usefulness in influencing EFL learner attitudes is that of Extensive Reading (ER). The ER approach is a "reading pedagogy in which language learners freely choose reading material of their interests and, in a rather fast pace, they read large quantities of material for enjoyment, information and comprehension" (Lin, 2014, p. 48). The ER approach encourages EFL learners to read and comprehend texts that are reflective of their proficiency level and aims to motivate them to continue reading. Moreover, this flexible approach allows the learners to choose the texts they want to read, same as they may enjoy in their first language as well as to stop reading a text, they do not find exciting or too challenging to read.

3 Methodology
This study adopted a qualitative and descriptive case study design. According to Edgar and Manz (2017), "descriptive studies focus in-depth on a specific case of some system" (p. 131). The qualitative research descriptive case study design is appropriate for uncovering the meanings individuals attach to an event, situation, or phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015).
The study utilized semi-structured interviews as its mail tool supported by learners' diaries and

their life histories, which were collected in Arabic. Similarly, the collected data from the semi-structured interviews were transcribed in Arabic. Excerpts included in the findings section of this paper were translated into English. Twenty-nine students enrolled in the Preparatory Year Program (PYP) at a leading Saudi university were selected to take part in the study. Aged between eighteen and twenty, thirteen of these students were male and sixteen were female. All the participants studied at separate, gender-segregated campuses. It is important to note that these students had no exposure to the English language or classrooms where English was the medium of instruction. Although the participants were sciences and arts entry-level students enrolled in a foundation years program who were all required to take the similar subjects for a year. The participants shared a similar socio-economic background who had both both native and non-native EFL teachers on the foundation year program, hence having a considerable consistency in terms of learning English as a foreign language. This particular study utilized the flexible design method for sampling the students. The aim was to collect relevant data to improve the individual learning environment, methodology, setting, and approach depending upon what the findings showed (Lumley, 2011). Due to the nature of this study, convenience sampling was conducted. This approach allowed the researcher to conveniently choose the participants based on their location and accessibility on the campus (Robinson, 2014). As the data collection involved three main sources, such as semi-structured interviews, diaries and life histories, the researcher gathered the data from the same participants to ensure the trustworthiness of their views.

3.1 Data Analysis
The collected data was presented in the form of words, phrases, quotes and excerpts that offered valuable insights into the learning experiences of the participants. These extracts helped the researcher to analyze the data in the form of codes, categories and themes. Those formed codes were extracted from the specific text, phrases, or ideas that were shared by the participants (Saldana, 2015).

3.2 Thematic Analysis
The collected data were thematically analyzed. As thematic analysis is effective for its flexibility, it suited the nature of the current qualitatively driven study since the focus was on the content of a participant's story, the *'what'* rather than *'how'* it is told (Willig & Rogers, 2017). According to Braun and Clarke (2006), "through its theoretical freedom, thematic analysis provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data" (p. 5). More importantly, as the study's aim was to inform the program designers and policymaker, the thematic analysis proved to "… be useful for producing qualitative analyses suited to informing policy development" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 37).

The researcher considered both the advantages and the disadvantages of employing thematic analysis and took extra steps to guarantee the validity of the identified themes, which were evidently supported by the primary data. The validity procedure included member checking since the researcher aimed at shifting the validity procedure from the researcher herself to the participants (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe the importance of member checks in a research study by stating that it is: "the most crucial technique for establishing

credibility" (p. 314). Furthermore, the researcher conducted a triangulation of the data as an additional validity procedure (Flick, 2018). Creswell and Miller (2000) consider triangulation a crucial tool for researchers as "it [triangulation] is a systematic process of sorting through the data to find common themes or categories by eliminating overlapping areas" (p. 126).

In the first stage of the thematic analysis, initial codes were put together in order to merge the identical ones and create broader categories. This was followed by merging categories and developing overarching themes. Some of the major themes included: the influence of friends and family on the EFL learners' attitudes towards English language learning; the impact of education on EFL learners' attitudes towards learning English; the influence of economic status on the EFL learners' attitudes towards learning English as a foreign language, and key motivations for learning English. As part of the data analysis, conceptual and thematic labels were ascribed to the words, phrases and sentences in the interview transcripts in order to apprehend what each participant had expressed. From this point, themes were defined and named, and a report on the findings was created utilizing NVIVO.

4 Findings and Discussion

The qualitatively driven case study research aimed to determine the attitudes and emotions of the EFL learners studying English in a foundational year program at Saudi Arabian university. This case study aimed to explore the impact that English language learning had on the EFL learners who strived to achieve their academic goals. There are particular complexities of teaching EFL in the Gulf States (Belhiah & Elhami, 2015; Mahmoud & Al-Mahrooqi, 2012) and in Saudi Arabia (Barnawi, 2017; Elyas & Picard, 2018; Shah, Hussain, & Nasseef, 2013). Hence, this case study tackled a vital issue to explore EFL learners' views and understand their motivations behind English language learning. To achive the objectives of the study, the following four key questions were answered via discussing the qualitative findings.

1. What are the key attitudes of the foundation year students towards learning English as a foreign language in the Saudi EFL context?
2. What are the factors, according to the foundation year program EFL learners, which shape their attitudes towards learning English as a foreign language in the Saudi EFL context?
3. What, if any, is the relationship between the attitudes of the Saudi EFL students in EFL classes and their wellbeing and performance?
4. Is there a relationship between the EFL learners' attitudes and academic achievement in EFL classes?

This case study research has a significance in the Saudi educational realm as the government has invested in the foundation year program across the country and hopes to achieve the desire outcomes in the light of the Vision2030. To be specific, the Saudi Ministry for training and development has taken major steps to improve the EFL teaching practices and enhance learning outcomes (Elyas & Picard, 2010). As part of the teacher development, the ministry has focused on teacher evaluation and on employment on non-Saudi teachers in order to diversify the teaching and learning experience in the Saudi EFL context. (Al-Omrani, 2008; McMullen, 2009). This primary plan of teacher evaluation had inherited issues as it failed consider the sociocultural

differences in pedagogical practices (e.g. the teachings of Islam) for classroom practices (Ali, 2009; Barnawi & Le Ha, 2015; McMullen, 2009). This case study intended to benefit the educational program designers, curriculum designers, teacher trainers and strategy makers who had the responsibility to develop and improve the quality of the existing EFL education in the Saudi EFL context.

The predominant themes were consistently reflected in the collected data in different forms as it was the needed for learning the English language. This does not suggest that all the students felt the need for learning English, rather it was mandatory for them to learn it. Nevertheless, their ability to communicate in English would certainly benefit them later in their professional life. For some, this 'benefit' was an entry into a program of their choice. While others associated it to securing a better job. Some of the participants found English would as a helping tool in their travels and studies abroad, whereas others believed that English would assist their understanding of English media, books and culture. It is also evident that not every student liked English, and some even admitted to hating it. The findings conclusively suggest that at the end of the Foundation Year Program, all the students on this study successfully completed the program, regardless of their feelings towards learning English.

4.1 Attitudes
Dörnyei (2003) considers language learning as a deeply rooted social event that leads to the construction of new knowledge in a given context. From this perspective, various sociocultural aspects such as, such as history, culture, and the learners' L1 context provide the foundations for developing target language proficiency. Giles and Rakić (2014) propose that attitudes are acquired and related directly to the sociocultural constituents of a society where learning is taking place. The findings showed that the EFL learners expressed their opinions which could be attributed to specific categories, such as cognitive, affective and behavioural. In the process, certain limitations were placed on these categories to code the participants' responses appropriately. Outcomes from the cognitive attitudes section focused on the importance of learning English, which was to some extent, focused on its necessity. Responses were classified as positive, negative, or neutral. Overall, there were more positive answers than negative or neutral ones, though numerically, because of the small sample size, this is not particularly relevant. What was perhaps more useful was the diversity in the positive cognitive responses. This diversity-related in part to the idea of the 'self.' According to Dornyei, (2003), 'self' can be recognized in three different manners; first the ideal L2 self, second the ought-to-be L2 self, and third the L2 learning experience in a given context. In the light of the cognitive framework of attitudes, the EFL learners could show the presence of all three constructs of 'self' and how they might influence their future endeavors in relation to learning English as a foreign language in the Saudi EFL context. Moreover, affective and behavioral attitudes were recognized to show how much they appreciated the English language and how their views were associated to the learning outcomes. It is evident from the data the key goal of the EFL learners was to learn English irrespective of their use if it in near or far future. The participants of the study were expected to show individual attitudes due to internal or external social pressures which would push them to come up with their own justifications for learning English or successfully completing the FYP.

4.2 Factors affecting attitudes

The literature shows various factors that can have an impact on an EFL learner's attitude. These factors include, social pressure or family obligations, economic propositions, goals related to higher studies and intentions to travel or study abroad. These findings were consistent in the Saudi context within the participant group of this study. Within this study, motivation seems to be closely linked to these factors which was categorized into integrative, instrumental and developmental motivation. These three types of motivation were abundantly found in the literature. In the case of the current research, there appears to be no big difference between the males' and females' responses on this issue. However, some differences were apparent, as some females had a more positive attitude than males towards learning English in an EFL context. Beyond the motivational factors, it was the role of the teachers and chosen pedagogy within the participants' previous learning experiences of English language that emerged as an essential theme. The participants could recall a particular language teacher and specific learning events that might have contributed to their own learning and development. In some cases, the participants who could recall positive experiences from their past seemed to be more motivated to learn English than those learners who could not recall any positive experiences related to their classroom learning. This difference in the level of motivation did not necessarily propose that a positive teaching experience of the past led to a higher level of motivation. Instead, it could be the learners' positive attitude and individual motivation that helped them recall their good learning and teaching memories. However, more research is required in this area to determine the full extent of this relationship.

The findings also indicate a link between the teaching material, its implementation and the learners' motivation. For example, the students suggested that when the language material was taught through active learning, such as games or other interactive activities, there was a higher level of motivation to learn from the same material. Irby (2017) suggests that technology integration in the classroom was strongly and positively associated with desire and motivation of the EFL students. As in the Saudi EFL context, EFL teachers often consider a more traditional and lecture-type approach at the university level, there is an urgent need for updating this pedagogical method and introducing more innovative approaches into teaching the EFL classrooms.

4.3 Relationship between attitude and performance of EFL learners

The findings explicitly indicated the wellbeing of the EFL learners. In the coding process and the framework of this project, the wellbeing of EFL learners centered mainly upon the feelings and emotions of the participants. In the light of the findings, we can divide wellbeing into positive, negative, and neutral constituents. The participants were specifically asked to know whether there was a relationship between their feelings and their performance. The participants who were able to suggest a positive association scored better on the final assessment than the students who indicated a negative relationship. However, given the relatively small sample size of the participant group, more research is required to understand this relationship more conclusively. In some of the existing literature, emotions and wellbeing have been linked to stress and anxiety as seen in the work of Bennett and Dorjee (2016). In these instances, students undergoing a higher level of stress are more likely to show negative emotions and feelings. This study did not explicitly consider the learners' stress and anxiety and the participants were not asked about their

level of stress; however, it was obvious that pressures of academic success and acceptance on a desired program could have played a considerable role in their stress levels. It would be interesting to examine whether there is relationship between the participants' performances reflected on their academic achievement over more extended period and a more standardized or rigorous examination of the testing instruments, as both of these factors could have significant influence on the final outcomes.

4.4 Attitudes and academic achievement

The findings from this study included the grades that the participants received on their four assessments that they were required to take in order to complete the foundation year program. These findings indicate a lack of relationship between the EFL learners' achievement on the final assessments and their level of motivation or attitudes towards learning English as a foreign language in the Saudi EFL context. This absence of connection seemed particularly baffling; therefore, it requires further research. The EFL learners that took part in this case study research all scored particularly high on all of the required assessments. Their good performance raised questions to the validity of the evaluation tool that tested and determined the level of academic English demonstrated by the students. One of the final research questions aimed to determine whether or not there was a relationship between the students' attitudes and their academic achievement. The findings of this study suggest that no relationship could be established but the future research on the topic would further contribute to the understanding of the research phenomenon.

5 Recommendations for further research

The future research may consider the possibilities of investigation afar from the EFL learners' domain and include EFL teachers' perspectives. As the findings of this study indicated that the Saudi EFL learners had a clear picture of their past learning experiences, more research on this topic can develop better understanding of what factors lead learners to remember their good or bad learning experiences in an EFL classroom. The future research may also consider the attitudes of EFL teachers who teaching professionals currently work in the Saudi EFL context. While some previous research indicates that teachers may not be culturally equipped to work in the Saudi context, much of this outdated research assumes that teachers lack contextual knowledge due to which their pedagogical practices are impacted. As more and more Saudi teachers are trained and equipped with top-notch pedaogical tools, there is a need for further research on classroom practices to see the current level of teaching and how to take it to the next level. It may also be useful to assess the effectiveness of existing teaching approaches, as new and innovative strategies might not only benefit the students but the teachers who need to consistently upgrade their pedagogical repertoire.

It may also be possible to examine students over an extended period of time. Most of the participants in the current study suggested that their motivation to learn English was linked to the necessity entering a degree program, finding job opportunities, travelling or studying abroad, etc. It would be interesting to explore whether or not the students achieved these goals, and possibly if their attitudes or emotions changed over the course of any future study or employment period. There is also room for negotiating what is meant by 'attitude' or 'emotion'. As this case study has considered and assessed the definitions of 'attitude' and 'emotion' in a language learning

milieu, they appear to be two very different constructs. Future research may take both into account as different notions that might lead to varied interpretations of the teachers' and learners' perspectives. Moreover, investigators can use the findings of this research as a guideline and pursue other areas related to the learners' motivations, dispositions, attitudes and emotions in the EFL context of Saudi Arabia. More research in this direction will assist course designers to develop a new framework or model related to testing, evaluatinon and assessment and provid a new longer-term context-specific plan to enhance the effectivness of the foundationa year programs acrros the Kingdom.

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