

## Language Difficulties Faced by Saudi Diploma Students at King Abdulaziz University: A Case Study

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### Abstract

This study aimed to explore the language difficulties faced by English diploma students and provide solutions to overcome them. The data collected in the form of a questionnaire administered to 39 female students were compared in percentages for closed – ended questions and thematically for open-ended ones. Results showed that diploma students struggled with listening, speaking and reading's higher cognitive skills such as guessing the meaning from context and reading between the lines. In addition, tenses, question formations, and reported speech were the most difficult grammatical points for them. These challenges were attributed to the institutional, dispositional, situational, academic, and pedagogical barriers faced by students as adult learners resulting mainly from the students' study gaps and their lack of contact with the English language. Solutions included the use of more varied activities and up -to -date interesting reading passages, more practice of listening and speaking inside and outside classrooms, and having a placement test before joining the diploma program.

*Keywords:* academic challenges, adult learning, diploma students, learning theories, pedagogical challenges, Saudi Arabia

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## Introduction

Education is a life-long learning process that prepares an individual for life. It has many benefits including a prosperous career and financial security. More specifically, it increases adult students' opportunities and improves their overall quality of life. It "is the best possible means for adults to grow in their life, achieve their goals, and give meaning to their existence.... as it develops in the adult learners the critical consciousness which is so vital to help them face situations and use their prior knowledge and experience to learn how to succeed in all the challenges and understand the world in a better way." (Javed, 2017, p.59) As a result, the number of students enrolled in higher education programs is increasing. In the academic year 2017-2018, the number of students in Saudi Arabia amounted to 139.61 thousand whereas it was 58.94 thousand in 2013-2014 (Puri-Mirza, 2020).

To satisfy the labor market needs and fulfill the 2030 Saudi vision, the Deanship of Community Services and Continuing Education in our university is holding, among other training courses, eight student -paid qualifying diplomas which aim to support and resettle Saudis with the needed experience and knowledge. High school and university graduates are accepted to study in an evening class schedule in these programs which academic duration ranges from one to two years. Thus, getting a diploma in the English language in two years; four semesters (part1-4), was one of the options available for adult female Saudi learners in this research.

As a diploma teacher, the researcher noticed that some students were up to the level whereas others were facing difficulties and could not cope up with the level of their peers and the requirements of the diploma which resulted in their failure or withdrawal. Therefore, the researcher was motivated to explore the language difficulties faced by the students and their reasons which can often lead to some students' attrition as "one way to increase successful participation in education and training is to tackle barriers to adult learning" (Roosmaa and Saar, 2011, p.3). Therefore, students' perceptions and their suggested solutions are crucial to overcome the challenges they face and to improve the program as a whole as Lucas (1993) assured "Determining problems that university students face clearly and concretely moving from their own individual evaluations will present important feedback in the development programs and services directed at young people" (cited in Doygun & Gulec, 2012, p. 1116).

Thus, the main objective of this study is to enhance the academic performance of English diploma students by:

1. Exploring the language difficulties encountered in the pursuit of their degree;
2. Providing solutions to these difficulties.

To achieve this aim, the following research questions are developed:

1. What are the language difficulties faced by the English diploma students?
2. Why are the English diploma students facing these language difficulties in their course of study?
3. How can these language difficulties be reduced?

The importance of this research stems from the fact that it is the first research, to the researcher's knowledge, to tackle the challenges faced by English diploma students in Saudi Arabia in general and in our university, in particular, as the diploma program was recently

established (academic year 2018-2019). Thus, it is an attempt to fill the gap in the literature as “the lack of scientific research about Saudi adult learning leads to continued obstacles” (Alajlan et al., 2013, p.2). Furthermore, students’ perspective on the challenges they face is another strength of the study as it reveals the genuine and true challenges faced and the suggestions for the improvement of the diploma program. In addition, the findings of the study can be beneficial for other teachers in the diploma program, policymakers, course designers, and other academicians at the university level.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of this paper is based on the language teaching and learning theories related to adult learning and Cross (1981)'s adult learning barriers. To begin with adult learning theories, humanism and constructivist learning are among the core theories. Agrghode et al. (2017) defined constructivism as “Emphasis on learner involvement. Learners create their meaning. Conceptual understanding may differ among learners. It placed importance on experiences and promoting learning through experiential learning” (p.600). This means constructivism stresses on internal mental processes to build knowledge and generate sense from experience and meaning- making. In short, it enhances learning through experience, cognitive abilities, and skills. Teachers are facilitators who agree upon meanings with learners.

Likewise, humanistic psychology is a general term for learning theories that take feelings, attitudes, and values into account. Learning is a personal endeavor toward fulfillment “human beings control their own destiny. People are inherently good and are free to act. Behavior is a consequence of human choice. People have unlimited potential for growth” (Agrghode et al., 2017, p.601). The teacher is the facilitator who believes in the learners’ potentials of learning and creates a democratic, student-centered, welcoming, and safe environment. In this type of environment, the teacher promotes self-confidence and self-esteem, and the learner is encouraged to speak freely without the fear of criticism. The aim of learning in the humanistic theory is to support adult learners’ self- actualization, self-awareness, and independence. The role of teachers is to facilitate.

Andragogy is a teaching strategy or a set of principles related to humanistic theory in which “Adults are self-directed learners and learn through experience. Adults want immediate application. Adults learn best when they choose content and method of learning” (Agrghode et al., 2017, p.600). The perspective is that learning can be achieved with or without help. Learning aims to develop adults. Teachers support learners and emphasize individual motivation.

However, there should be a kind of balance between teacher – centered approach and student autonomy in teaching adult learners (Rydell, 1985; Johnson, 1996). Rydell (1985) assured that teachers should use more active modes of teaching and should require students to assume greater responsibility for their learning. Johnson (1996) also stressed, “there must be a fine balance between denying the student adequate opportunities for self-direction and providing too little structure” (p. 18). He further elaborated, “The teacher is a facilitator, resource person, and guide. The teacher will walk beside the student on this journey, not in front. The student and teacher will work together to find the literature which is best suited to the teacher-perceived needs of the student while still being attractive to the student” (p.61). In

other words, the teacher becomes a facilitator and manager of the student's learning environment. He shifts his mind from teacher-centered to student-centered education.

The previously mentioned theories illustrate how adult learners learn and how we can, as teachers, make what they have learned beneficial to their future lives. The teacher can adopt one of the theories illustrated above or make an amalgam of these theories to fit the situation and to suit his / her teaching style. Higgins and Elliott (2011) pointed out "Instructors should apply learning theory principles and motivation of learning to design a simple, easy and effective online instruction for better learner engagement"( cited in Agrghode et al., 2017, p.603).

As for adult learning barriers, Cross (1981) identified three types of barriers: institutional, situational, and dispositional. The following definition for each type of barrier is provided:

- Institutional: barriers that are a result of the "practices and procedures that exclude or discourage working adults from participating in educational activities such as inconvenient schedules or locations, fulltime fees for part-time study, inappropriate courses of study, and so forth" (p. 98). They also relate to the methods of designing, delivering, administering a course, and include financial support to learners to pay tuition fees, resources for learning, lack of support services, recognition of prior learning, and previously obtained academic credentials.
- Situational: barriers "arising from one's situation in life at a given time such as job and home responsibilities" (p. 98). They include aging, life phases, and developmental stages and comprise part-time versus full-time and voluntary versus compulsory learning.
- Dispositional: barriers "related to attitudes and self-perceptions about oneself as a learner" (p. 98). They relate to learners' inner feelings and their perceptions of their ability to register, attend, and complete learning activities. It includes low self-esteem, and a negative attitude about being an adult learner e.g. being too old, too busy, too tired, too sick, and not smart enough.

In addition to these previously mentioned challenges by Cross (1981), Potter and Alderman (1992) stressed the academic factors as barriers to university students (as cited in MacKeracher et al., 2006). Habibah (2006) also emphasized the personal challenges, professional challenges, and academic challenges, which are related to the skills for successful learning. Yasmin (2018) defined academic challenges as "the factors that are crucial to the process of teaching and learning. They include problems in teaching and learning oral expression and written expression, computer-related skills, critical and reflective skills, examinations and tests" (p.114).

Furthermore, MacKeracher et al. (2006) pointed out that pedagogical barriers to adult learners are due to:

"lack of understanding on the part of instructors, facilitators, and administrators about how adults learn; the benefits of learner-centered teaching and active learning; diversity among adult learners in terms of learning style and preferred types of learning activities and information;

and adult learners' needs for relevancy in content, recognition of prior learning, respect from others, and a responsive lifelong learning system" (p.2).

The above theoretical framework provided a working definition of both the term "adult" and the various types of barriers encountered by the diploma students and guided the researcher in the thematic interpretation of data. Thus, in this research, the term "adult" is used to denote learners after compulsory learning, both formal and informal. It also refers to students acquiring postsecondary and tertiary education (Luka, 2019).

### Literature Review

In this part, the literature review is designed by the research questions of the study. It gives an overview of what is meant by adult learning, characteristics of adult learners, and the types of challenges they face as shown by previous works of literature.

Adult learning is a "lifelong, continuing education" that includes "all daily tasks as well as human development and community activities" (Qrenba, 1980 as cited in Alajlan, et al. 2013, p.7). Furthermore, it is

A targeted process based on former knowledge and learning experience, self-directed learning, adults' impact on the study process, pre-conditioned and meaningful, reachable goal learning and creation/ setting of an appropriate study situation. Adults who are pursuing study have to be well-aware why they pursue it, what they have to pursue and how they have to pursue it. Adult's learning is self-directed, self-studying and autonomous. (Liepa & Spona, 2012 as cited in Luka, 2019, p. 163).

Teachers are facilitators who help students to "diagnose their own learning needs, define their learning objectives, put their learning strategies into practice, and finally evaluate the outcomes of the whole learning process." (Javed, 2017, p.55)

Unlike traditional-aged college students, individualism is adult learners' most distinguishing characteristic. They are not homogenous and vary in regards to career experiences, family life, and educational background. They are self – directed learners because of "the wealth of prior experiential learning they bring to the classroom" (Rydell, 1985, p. 52). These experiences could be exploited by the teachers "in eliciting real-life examples, solving problem –based tasks" (Luka, 2019, p.153). They also have "a burning thirst for knowledge for its own sake." (Rydell, 1985, p.52).

In previous literature, adult learners' challenges varied. The top three challenges faced by adult students, based on research results, were financial, managing commitments, and academic preparedness (enrollment builders.com/blog/the –top-three-challenges-students-face).

Alajlan et al. (2013) stated that the obstacles facing adult education in Saudi Arabia were the lack of scientific research and curricular, teacher, and learner's obstacles. The reason behind these obstacles was the unclear concept of adult education in Saudi Arabia. The researchers also advocated that adult education is a lifelong continuing education that should extend to include all

daily tasks as well as human development and community activities. They recommended spreading the culture of adult education in society, giving more training courses for adult teachers, and establishing more departments for adult learning at universities to overcome the obstacles.

In Yasmin et al. (2018), students' challenges were dispositional, situational, institutional, academic, and class size. In Doygun and Gulec (2012), Turkish students faced problems like accommodation and nutrition, adaptation and orientation, anxiety about the future and unemployment, and qualified education. In Fook and Sidhu (2015), American undergraduate and postgraduate students faced eight challenges: cognitive challenge, becoming an active learner, coping with reading material, instructional problem, language barrier, time management, the burden of assignments, and culture difference in higher education.

Furthermore, post-graduate adult learners in Baharudin et al. (2013) faced the following internal challenges: dispositional (anxiety towards learning), time-management challenge, situational or personal challenges (family and finance). Other combinations of challenges included administration of faculty, resources, stress, career, knowledge, experience, journey or commuting, the ability to digest what is being learned, and the students' inability to converse well in English during presentations and when expressing their ideas in the classroom.

In Roosmaa and Saar (2011), students' challenges were situational and institutional. Situational barriers included having financial problems, time constraints (balance between family, work, and learning), transportation problems, and lack of preparation for the study program. Institutional barriers like time-related reasons were mentioned as reasons for not participating in education.

In Deggs (2011), students faced three barriers in the online undergraduate degree program. The first one was intrapersonal like time and money management, the balance of family responsibilities, handling of physical and emotional matters, and fear of failure. The second barrier was career and job – related barriers; situational, including meeting job expectations, lack of support from the workplace. The third barrier was an academic-related barrier including understanding and utilizing technology, lack of face-to-face interaction with faculty and peers, balancing academic course loads, meeting the general expectations and lack of instruction feedback, and coping with a learning disability.

As shown from the above findings of research papers, adults are facing many challenges in their pursuit of education. However, these challenges have to be dealt with by learners, teachers, and admin of programs based on their understanding of the peculiar characteristics of adults.

## Method

This study is carried out to explore answers to research questions. To this end, it embraces the exploratory case study research design because it “provides numerous opportunities for research and analysis” (Coimbra & Martins, 2013). Therefore, it is used here to explore a particular issue; diploma students' language difficulties, in-depth within the boundaries of a specific environment, situation, or organization; diploma program. This paper

also provides solutions from students' perspectives and evaluates them based on previous literature's research results. However, putting these solutions in effect and evaluating their results, to fully apply the case study principles, are beyond the boundaries of this research.

### ***Participants***

The sample included two groups of female students (n=39) in parts 2 and 3 of the diploma program in the first semester of the academic year 2019-2020. It is a convenient sample chosen based on the availability and suitability of the sample for the study as the researcher was teaching the reading and grammar subjects. This involvement in the context brought advantages of proximity and ease of access to data. This sample represents the target population; diploma students, as it is sufficient in number and as participants share the same social and educational backgrounds with the target group and therefore the research results can be generalized.

### ***Instrument***

A convergent mixed methodology was employed combining qualitative and quantitative data by the use of a survey questionnaire that included ten closed and open-ended questions. According to Creswell (2013):

The purpose of a convergent (or parallel or concurrent) mixed methods design is to simultaneously collect both quantitative and qualitative data, merge the data, and use the results to understand a research problem. A basic rationale for this design is that one data collection form supplies strengths to offset the weaknesses of the other form and that a more complete understanding of a research problem results from collecting both quantitative and qualitative data. (p.540)

The research questionnaire started with demographic questions about the respondents; age, previous study, and the aim for joining the diploma. The rest of the questions were grouped under four main headings: language/skills difficulties, causes of difficulties, solutions, and students' evaluation of the program; what they liked and what they wanted to change. Participants were allowed in the close-ended questions to choose more than one answer and were encouraged to add their input in the open-ended ones. Thus, the mixed - method methodology helps to get a deeper insight into the challenges faced by the diploma students, their causes, and their solutions.

### ***Procedures***

The questionnaire was given to specialized colleagues for revision to ensure that the questions are following the purpose of the study. Data collected from the closed-ended questions were analyzed statistically and data collected from the open-ended questions were analyzed thematically. The ethical code of conduct was adhered to by administering the questionnaire after the final exam and by explaining to the participants the research objective and ensuring that the use of the data would be solely for the research purpose.

The researcher was responsible for data collection and interpretation in the light of adult learning theory, adult characteristics, and previous research results. The research alignment was achieved by the coordination of the research objectives, the research questions, the instrument

of the study, and the data analysis. This research's results and findings can be generalized in similar contexts and social backgrounds.

## Results

This section shows the results of the analysis of the responses to the questionnaire questions showing the challenges students faced during their study in the English diploma and their overall evaluation of the program. The analysis of the demographic information of participants showed that their age range was between 19 and 37. Thirteen students were above 25 (37%) and the majority were between 19 and 24 (63%). This shows that some students had study gaps. As for their academic qualifications, the majority were high school graduates (51.3%), followed by BA holders (28.2%) and BSc holders (2.6%). As for their objective to join the English diploma, all the respondents agreed that they wanted to improve their English language. Some of them added various reasons besides language improvement:

1. self- development (2 respondents), learning and experience (1 respondent)
2. Getting a certificate (4 respondents)
3. Getting a job (3 respondents)
4. Learning new vocabulary (1 respondent)
5. Professional development/ pass proficiency exams; TOEFL and IELTS (2 respondents)
6. Everyday life practices (1 respondent)

Although participants did not take a placement test or any entrance exam before joining the diploma, when they were asked in the questionnaire whether it was important to have a placement test or not and why, the majority thought it was necessary to have a placement test for various reasons: 1) "for students to know their level" (6 respondents), 2) "it is a way to improve the language and continue learning" (1 respondent), 3) "to be placed in the appropriate level" (2 respondents), 4) "to concentrate on the weak points and improve them" (1 respondent), 5) "to allocate the subjects to study based on the level" (1 respondent), 6) "advanced students will be placed in different groups" (1 respondent), 7) "everyone will be in the suitable level" (2 respondents), (8) "to know where to start" (1 respondent), 9) "to know the learners' level and enhance the academic achievements of students", (1 respondent) 10) "to learn the language gradually based on my level" (1 respondent). For those who said "no need to have a placement test", their reasons were 1) being afraid of rejection "the diploma is for learning and if I didn't pass the placement test, would I still have the chance to join the program?" Another reason was "no because learning is a process that never ends." A third reason was "the result of the placement test sometimes does not reflect the level of the student so it is better not to have it."

As for the language skills that participants had difficulty with, listening was at the top (42.9%), followed by speaking (28%).

Table 1: *Adult learners' difficulties related to language skills*

Skills	Percentage (%)	Count (N)
Listening	42%	18
Speaking	28%	12

Reading	9%	4
Writing	21%	9
Total	100%	43
Mean	2.09	
Confidence Interval @ 95%	[1.743 - 2.443]	
Standard Deviation	1.171	
Standard Error	0.179	

Reasons for the difficulty of listening were “different accent” (1 respondent), and “if the speaker is speaking fast” (2 respondents). For speaking, the lack of practice was mentioned as a major challenge “Speaking is a problem because I don’t have anyone to practice with.”

As for the reading skills, guessing the meaning from context received the highest percentage (41.3%), followed by reading between the lines (37%) as shown in table 2.

Table 2: *Adult learners’ difficulties related to reading skills*

Reading Skills	Percentage (%)	Count (N)
Predicting	2%	1
Reading for main ideas	11%	5
Reading for details	9%	4
Reading between the lines	37%	17
Guessing the meaning from context	41%	19
Total	100%	46
Mean	4.04	
Confidence Interval @ 95%	[3.733 - 4.354]	
Standard Deviation	1.074	
Standard Error	0.158	

As for the grammatical rules that participants struggled with, their answers can be shown in the following table:

Table 3: *Adult learners’ difficulties related to grammar rules*

Grammatical Rules	Percentage (%)	Count (N)
Tenses	23.3%	18
Relative clauses	0%	0
Active & Passive	19.48%	15
If sentences	6.49%	5
Prepositions	3.89%	3
Conjunctions & Clauses	6.49%	5
Questions Formation	10.38%	8
Auxiliary Verbs	5.19%	4
Reported Speech	7.79%	6

Pronouns & Possessives	2.59%	2
a, the	3.89%	3
Adjectives	2.59%	2
Adverbs	5.19%	4
Comparative / Superlative	2.59%	2
Total	100%	77

The English tenses were the grammatical aspect that received the highest percentage, as shown in the above table, followed by the active and passive forms and question formation.

As for the reasons for these difficulties, respondents put the lack of exposure to the language in ordinary life (26%) as the first reason for their difficulties followed by lack of practice and the way of teaching which received equal percentages (15%) of the respondents' choices. The gap between study periods (10%) was also considered the cause of their barriers. Other factors that received fewer percentages can be shown in the following table:

Table 4: *Reasons for the difficulties that adult learners face*

Reasons for Difficulties	Percentage (%)	Count(N)
Lack of time for each subject	6%	5
Lack of practice	15%	13
English is not the medium of instruction in schools	9%	8
Lack of exposure to the language in ordinary life	26%	23
Teaching style	15%	13
Course books	6%	5
Exam methods	3%	3
The gap between study periods	10%	9
Comparing the new grammatical rule to Arabic grammar	8%	7
Other	1%	1
Total	100%	87
Mean	4.69	
Confidence Interval @ 95%	[4.194 - 5.185]	
Standard Deviation	2.359	
Standard Error	0.253	

As for what can help to improve their level, respondents chose the use of varied exercises/ activities (22.5%), followed by more practice (14.7%), up-to-date interesting reading topics (13.2%), and having placement test before joining the diploma (12.2%) as the following table shows.

Table 5: *Suggestions to improve adult learners' level*

Suggestions to improve your level	Percentage (%)	Count(N)
Placement test	12%	12
More practice	17%	17

Up- to- date, interesting reading topics	13%	13
Project-based learning	7%	7
Use of technology	10%	10
More effective contact with teachers	9%	9
Use of varied activities	22%	22
Increase diploma time	8%	8
Other	0%	0
Total	100%	98
Mean	4.44	
Confidence Interval @ 95%	[3.971 - 4.907]	
Standard Deviation	2.364	
Standard Error	0.239	

Regarding the open-ended questions, answers were grouped thematically for more clarification of results into what participants learned in the diploma, what they liked, and what they wanted to change. Qualitative results related to these themes, from exemplar participants, are given as follows:

1) As for what participants learned in the diploma, 12 respondents replied in general that they improved their language skills or level. The speaking skill was the skill that the majority of students said they improved during their study (9 respondents), followed by vocabulary and grammar (8 respondents each), and then writing (7 respondents). Respondents said that they were able to: “present in front of my colleague”, “to talk and ask when I don’t understand”, “more confident in speaking”, “speak more fluently”, “developed the ability to speak in public” and “learned how to speak confidently even if I made mistakes”. For vocabulary, they said they “learned new words so it became easy to form sentences and speak”.

2) Regarding what participants liked about the diploma program, answers were categorized under important headings: content, teaching and teachers, and program organization. Generally, participants said the diploma program integrated all the language skills, it was an academic program, and it was an opportunity to learn new things “I learned the language more than before as I took courses in private institutes. The diploma is intensive, wonderful, and varies in nature.” More specifically, they said the content is clear, varied, and easily transferred to students. It is, intensive concentrating only on the skills, and comprehensive as it has all the language skills. As for teaching and teachers, participants praised the cooperation of teachers (3 respondents), way of teaching (6 respondents), transferring content simply and clearly, and the method of assessment. As for the program organization, participants liked the intensity of lectures, the evening schedule, services provided, organization of the program, the understanding of the circumstances of students, and the reasonable price/ fees.

3) As for what they wanted to change in the program, respondents suggested adding more training and practice of the language to the content of the program, having more

interesting topics in speaking and reading subjects, having small projects chosen by students, reducing the intensity of the course, and increasing the time for writing in the lectures. One student remarked, "Exam questions have to be easy and do not include questions out of the book". As for the program organization, they suggested having a placement test to place students based on their level; part 1 to be basic for beginners and then becomes more challenging. Also, they wanted to increase lecture time and break time, change the distribution of subjects in the schedules to mingle easy with difficult subjects on the same day, change the evening schedule, change the teaching building as it is far from the university gate and the air condition in classes as it is very cold, and reduce the fees. As for teachers, they wanted to change the teaching styles of some teachers.

### **Discussion and Implications**

To answer the research questions concerning the language difficulties faced by the diploma students, their reasons and how to reduce them, the results emerged from the above analysis of data were found to be related to the institutional, dispositional, situational, academic, and pedagogic challenges which were regarded by previous literature as the main barriers for adult learners.

#### ***Institutional challenges***

Generally, participants liked the program, the services provided, and the organization. However, some wanted to increase lecture time and break time, change the distribution of subjects to have easy and difficult ones on the same day. Regarding the evening schedule, students' opinions differed. Some liked the evening schedule and others did not. In addition, they wanted to change the building where classes took place as it is far from the main gate of the university. Regarding the program fees, one student commented favorably on the fees and another wanted to reduce them. This discrepancy between participants proves the individualism of adult students as what one student likes might not suit the other and vice versa. The barrier of program fees was also faced by students in Baharudin et al. (2013) and the solution proposed is applicable here as well which is to pay fees in installments.

Besides, the lack of preparation of students for the study program was one of the challenges lately discovered because students did not enter an entrance or placement test before joining the diploma. This resulted in having students of various competency levels in the same class.

#### ***Dispositional challenges***

Students' opinions differed on the importance of having a placement test. Some recognized its value for the student and others did not want to have it. This can be attributed to their anxiety towards the placement test because its result might prevent them from joining the diploma. This fear and attitude towards exams can be attributed to participants' previous educational experience which was test-oriented "much of the teaching inside the classroom is test-driven instructions that is generally geared towards passing the final exams" (Mustafa, 2002 as cited in Al-Qahtani, 2016, p.2). Students who got low scores or failed the test can overcome this dispositional barrier if they would be provided with remedial courses to regain or attain the base level of English competency for the diploma (Baharudin et al. 2013).

***Situational challenges***

Almost (37%) of the participants are above 25 years old which means they had study gap periods for personal reasons. These periods surely affected their level of English. They also lacked exposure to the language as English is a foreign language in Saudi Arabia and it is spoken only on a limited scale.

However, this diploma is not compulsory and participants, being self-directed adult learners, voluntarily applied for it recognizing its benefit in changing their lives in different ways. Some of the participants showed anxiety about the future and unemployment and that is why they decided to join the diploma to develop their abilities, to have jobs, and to pass proficiency exams. Having clear goals for joining the diploma is a major characteristic of adult learners “Most adults come to learn for a definite reason. They are goal-oriented, pragmatic learners. They want their learning to help them produce something that is of real value to them.” (Johnson, 1996, p.16). Other participants were learning-oriented and wanted just to learn English for its own sake. This accords with the classification of adult learners into target-oriented (learning to fulfill definite need), activity-oriented, and learning-oriented (learning for the sake of learning) (Long, 2002 as cited in Luka, 2019)

***Academic challenges***

Participants had the most difficulty with listening, and speaking; the two skills that require continuous practice. In the reading classes, higher skills or cognitive / inference skills like guessing the meaning from context and reading between the lines were problematic areas for the majority of participants. This finding of the study is in agreement with previous research which showed that Saudi EFL readers face major reading- problems in understanding the meaning of a text, predicting and using prior knowledge, and limited vocabulary (Raihan et al., 2012). Al-Qahtani (2016) also pointed out “there is a huge gap between Saudi students’ actual reading proficiency level and their expected reading proficiency, even at the university level.” (p. 12) He found out that Saudi students had problems with guessing the meaning from context and drawing conclusions from information that was not explicitly stated (reading between the lines) due to the same reason mentioned in this research; lack of exposure to the target language, and other reasons like unfamiliar and unsuitable reading topics, lack of reading skills training and students’ limited vocabulary.

In grammar, tenses, question formations, and reported speech were the most difficult grammatical points. These academic challenges are due to the fact that language skill level declines with time and the lack of exposure and daily contact. Thus, it might take some time and effort to get accustomed to learning after a longer disruption in one’s learning path. During this period, increasing student vocabulary and more practice on the critical thinking skills will help students to master the skills especially the inference and cognitive skills; “careful reading skills” (Al- Qahtani, 2016, p.9). Other solutions included the use of a variety of activities, more practice of grammar rules, and up- to- date interesting reading topics.

***Pedagogical challenges***

The majority of participants praised teachers. They commented on their cooperation, their style of teaching, and how they transferred the content simply and clearly. However,

participants complained of the lack of practice and the way of teaching of some teachers. For those teachers, they "should have expertise, empathy, enthusiasm and clarity" (Johnson, 1996).

The diversity of language levels in the same classroom was one of the challenges faced by the participants and teachers. This problem was mentioned as a challenge for foreign language teaching (Al- Qahtani, 2016), especially in crowded classrooms. Richards and Renandya (2002) argued, "A great many of teachers would like to teach in classes composed of students who are close to one another in terms of competence level. However, with the exception of several of them who can be counted as lucky, they teach in classes composed of fifty or more students with different competence levels." (cited by Doygun & Gulec, 2012, p.1118). Luckily in our context, classes are not crowded still the mixed ability classes lays a burden on teachers to find a way to address and engage all students by "adapting the instruction to the learners' levels of experience and skill development; and continuously considering the learners' perspective." (Johnson, 1996, p.16). Teachers also should provide individual attitudes to sustain the students' level of motivation (Luka, 2019).

Therefore, a different teaching strategy might be necessary to accommodate differences between learners in their personal and situational circumstances "Adults have different needs, motivations and also constraints in their life." (Baharudin et al. 2013, p.773). This strategy should cater to the experience of participants, aging limitations, optimizing personal development, and learners' opinions as regards the availability and organization of learning programs.

### **Conclusion & Recommendations**

To be successful in today's world, one should have competitive abilities and skills. Among the essential skills needed are the English language skills, a fact which motivated adult learners to join the English language diploma. However, in their effort to develop themselves they faced language difficulties related to institutional, dispositional, situational, academic, and pedagogic challenges which as Yasmin et al. (2018) affirmed is a natural and healthy phenomenon.

Generally speaking, it can be said that the diploma program was beneficial for students. Although they mentioned that speaking was a great challenge to them, they recognized that the program developed their speaking skills, vocabulary, and grammar. However, there were some language difficulties and organizational drawbacks such as the lack of preparation of some students for the study program and the diversity of student language levels in the same classroom.

Thus, it is important to know the challenges first and then exploit the traits of adult learners to face them. Diploma students are self-directed and intrinsically motivated and if their difficulties will be considered by the admin and teachers who will boost their abilities, these problems will diminish. Solutions included using more varied activities, up -to -date interesting reading passages, more practice of listening and speaking inside and outside classrooms, and having a placement test before joining the diploma program.

Other recommendations to overcome the challenges are to:

1. Spread the culture of adult education in society, giving more training courses for adult teachers, and establishing more departments for adult learning at universities to overcome the obstacles. (Alajlan et al. 2013)
  2. Have remedial courses for the underprepared students to regain or attain the base level of English competency before joining the diploma course. (Baharudin et al. 2013)
  3. Conduct an annual survey to identify challenges and address them (Yasmin et al. 2018)
  4. Award more scholarships to students to cope with the financial challenges (Yasmin et al. 2018)
  5. Pay fees in installments (Baharudin et al. 2013)
  6. Stress learners' ability to adapt and find solutions for their problems as adult learners (Baharudin et al. 2018)
  7. Treat students as independent learners, they have to find solutions to their challenges themselves.
  8. Allow students to participate in choosing content and method of learning (Agrghode et al., 2017)
  9. Have a course program that considers adult learners' specific needs and special educational treatment to overcome learning barriers. (Luka, 2019)
  10. Create a more positive learning environment starting from initial education to lower the dispositional barriers to learning in adulthood. (Roosmaa & Saar, 2011)
- Finally, yet importantly, enriching adult learners' skills and knowledge will result in fostering their inclusion in the labor market and becoming true lifelong learners. (Luka, 2019).

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