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## **Teaching English in Professional Colleges of Saudi Arabia: Trends and Challenges**

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### **Abstract:**

Unlike most countries, teaching English in the Saudi Arabian universities is quite difficult with all the restrictions but once we get the hang of it, it can also be counted as a good experience. Not only are the students first generation learners but they have also been affected by their mother tongue and peculiar writing style. The experience as a foreign teacher in the universities of Saudi Arabia is exigent and elevating as well. There is lack of motivation, interest and learning spirit among the students, unavailability of required and adequate teaching/learning aids (study materials, books, journals and news papers), inappropriate and flexible examination system, and absence of scholarly ambience and some of the social blocks which obstruct the process of learning the English language.

However, there are also special characteristics found in them such as their amazing cramming power, imitation of American accent of communication etc. Teaching English could be a pleasant experience in Saudi Arabia if the teacher is equipped with understanding, appreciation, encouragement and the skills for using appropriate, pragmatic teaching strategies so that the inherent talents of students could be brought out and enhanced. Hence, this paper focuses on challenges and the different approaches of teaching English to the Saudi Arabian students at the university level.

**Keywords: Motivation, Pragmatic, Practical, Challenges, Trends.**

### **Introduction**

Arabic is the national language and lingua franca of Saudi Arabia. It is widely used, both formally and informally, for inter-personal communication. English is the medium of instruction in many higher educational institutions in Saudi Arabia, like medical and technical Education colleges. This change in the medium puts a strain on the students. As a result, many of them rush to language teaching institutes to learn to cope with the new medium in tertiary education. Many

students, it is observed, watch English movies and use electronic media to develop communication skills. They struggle hard to learn to both receive and produce English sentences and discourse.

Saudi government made it a point to provide equal educational opportunities to all Saudi nationals irrespective of their sex and age. It established the policy of sending students abroad for education and signed contracts with teachers from different parts of the world to come and teach Arabic and English in Saudi Arabia. It also started conducting business transactions with the world. With the advancement in business, science and technology, English became very important and the number of foreign teachers of English in Saudi Arabia kept increasing steadily. New Universities were established and Saudi citizens started joining the Departments of English where they were trained/ educated to teach English.

Medical institutions in many EFL countries including Saudi Arabia have recently adopted English as the medium of instruction. In such institutions, learners are likely to have problems coping with the change of medium. It is worth quoting:

Chia et al (1998:190) here: "Students who just step out of high schools where the medium of instruction is not English are, more often than not, overwhelmed by anxiety, or even frustration, when confronting such an intimidating task.

Higher medical education in the Arab world in general and in Saudi Arabia in particular has received little attention so far. Though the curriculum prepares the students well and provides them with good content knowledge of their specialization, they finish their four years of college without being able to speak English well. This is because oral communication skills are not paid the attention required at the school level. Students who pursue medical studies are poorly equipped to deal with functional English. Moreover, some of the teachers assigned to teach English to students in colleges are not trained to teach ESP courses. Thus they find it difficult to enrich their students' knowledge of medical English. Without conducting any needs analysis, these teachers simply teach whatever is convenient to them. The teachers' exam-oriented approach to teaching is a general problem faced by all graduate students in all disciplines in Saudi Arabia.

## **English as an International Language**

The globalization of the world and the urgent need to communicate at world level has necessitated the use of a common standard language, a role which English fulfils because of its wide intelligibility and reach. Teaching of English has thus acquired increased significance in a world which is connected by information technology and satellite television, where English is used as the main medium of communication. English is a very important language in the world of communication, business and medicine at the international level is an undeniable fact. *It has become the language of power and prestige in many countries, thus acting as a crucial gatekeeper to social and economic progress.*(pennycook, 1994) The world's most widely surfed or cited journals are either published in English or translated into English. English is the language of international travel and tourism and the language of science and technology.

## **Trends**

English has been growing tremendously over the years. Recognizing the role of English as an international language, White (1988:9) says:" in the twentieth century English has become the language of the world, thanks to the linguistic legacy of the British Empire, the emergence of

the USA as an English speaking superpower and the fortuitous association of English with the industrial and technological developments of the nineteenth and twentieth century's." and that "the role of English as a language of international communication had expanded by the 1950s. There was much greater mobility of people as a result of growth in air travel and international tourism. English was supported by the growth of radio, film and television". In fact, as evident from the advertisements for jobs, excellent communication skills in English have become a necessary tool in all professions. In this context, the learning and teaching of English has become most essential in Saudi Arabia.

English enjoys the status of a foreign language in Saudi Arabia. It is taught as a compulsory subject in government schools from class fourth and is the medium of instruction in a few academic disciplines at the tertiary level. In private schools, however, it is taught from kindergarten. There is a genuine need for teaching/ learning English in Saudi Arabia for many reasons some of which are:

- 1-Higher education in Saudi Arabia is expanding; there is a need for offering advanced courses in the fields of medicine, science and technology, which makes the use of English in higher education necessary.
- 2- The number of Saudi students going to the UK, USA, Australia, Canada and India etc for professional studies is on the increase and they need advanced skill in English.

### **Challenges- Hitches, Problems and Facts:**

Teaching English in the Saudi universities is a Herculean task. Except in the language class, students find no opportunity to learn or use English anywhere. Not even name boards of shops, hospitals, banks etc., are written in English. Invariably Arabic is used everywhere. It is surprising to note that the university students fail to understand the meanings of even the commonly used English words like "post office", "fire brigade", "gym", etc., The complete lack of exposure to English of the students makes even more the task difficult to the teachers. Students seem to have no idea of proper sentence structure in English. They do not know the correct spellings and grammatical rules.

As Arabic is a stressed language like English, students use stress in speaking English but stress in the wrong syllables making their English incomprehensible. The students seem to be less motivated and uninterested in English language classes. Still as a silver lining in a cloud, the Saudi students have excellent memory, interest in humour, communicative language and stories. A report, carried by Al-Riyadh Arabic daily, shed light on this issue and examined the viewpoints of prominent academics and educational figures in addressing this issue (Arab News). Dr. Hassan Sindi noted that the teaching of English language is not at all up to the expectations and aspirations of the Kingdom's leaders. "It also cannot fulfil our ambitions to become a society achieving academic and scientific progress and development,"

Low standard in English language learning attributes to a number of factors, including defective learning methodology, unsuitable learning environment, and non-accessibility to necessary teaching tools. A great number of Saudi medical students do their schooling in Arabic-medium schools; they find it difficult to understand lectures in college as the medium of instruction there is English. Consequently, they fail to pass most of the courses. They badly need to gain some proficiency in English or improve their threshold proficiency level in English.

Even though the Saudi government is making every effort to promote learning English as a second language at its schools and universities in addition to extending all financial and logistic support to establish this language for over 80 years ever since the Kingdom's foundation in 1927, it has not rooted itself yet in society.

There are more than 800 study hours devoted to teaching English from the first grade of intermediate school up to the final year of secondary school. Even then, the standard of English learning is still at the lowest level globally. Most students who graduate from universities are not in a position to speak fluently or write even a letter or paragraph in English.

### **Defective learning methodology**

Though English is taught in Saudi Arabia in order to enable students to use English accurately and appropriately, and create an interest in them to continue to learn English for pursuing higher studies, these objectives are not always achieved. This is because most Arabic speaking teachers of English teach English through Arabic thinking that students will find it difficult to understand English, if taught through English. Thus students who do their graduation in the Faculty of Medical Sciences find it difficult to interact with their teachers in English. They also find it difficult to follow the lectures that are given in English.

This is because most of the teachers of English do not pay enough attention to the dialogic nature of language learning. They spend almost all class time teaching students structures and patterns of the language. This, in most cases, does not provide students with opportunities to voice their opinion and express their personal meaning. Rather it encourages memorization of particular structures, which is not enough for using the language creatively. Prioritizing accuracy over fluency is also one of the reasons behind the students' inability to use the language productively.

Because they lack general English skills, Saudi students cannot deal with learning medicine. They lack communicative competence in English. Throughout their four-year Degree Course, they are expected to learn by making their own presentations and follow those made by their classmates.

### **Different social background**

Students in Saudi Arabia come from different academic backgrounds. 20% of them have had more than eight years of English instruction. In other words, they did their schooling in English-medium schools. The remaining 80% have had only six years of English instruction. That is to say, they did their schooling in regional /Arabic medium schools. 40% of them have attended a course in Spoken English and found it useful. All of them think that English is important in their professional studies for the following reasons:

1. To be able to speak with teachers and understand them well.
2. To speak with professional and write exams.
3. To read medical/technical books written in English.
4. To use English as an international language.
6. Its importance in getting a job.

Though there are some things in common among the learners, they do also differ in many aspects related to their difficulties in the language, their wants, and lacks, and the styles and



strategies of learning they use. It is noted that most students use their first language, naturally and instinctively, for learning the second language. Experience shows that reasonable and sensible use of the mother tongue can facilitate the learning and teaching of the target language.

### **Unsuitable learning environment:**

The deficiency of the English-oriented programmes at the university level can be traced to the approach adopted by the teachers of English. They design courses and teach them in such a way that the learner is no more than a passive element in the educational process. Teaching or learning, in such a strategy, is essentially monologue; it is not based on interaction as promoted by the communicative theories of language teaching.

The increasing significance of English in all the fields of knowledge calls for a re-orientation in the curriculum, the methods of teaching and the approaches adopted to serve such a purpose.

### **De-colonization of EFL textbooks:**

As trade increased with America and Britain since the discovery of oil, Saudi Arabia did not just import clothes, films and cars; it also imported a culture from these as well as from English language teaching materials that continues to flood the market without any or much consideration that it might affect language learning.

“Extreme emphasis on the native speakers’ culture in TESOL textbooks often makes language learning somewhat artificial in many circumstances.”(Mazungane) Most English language course books are written in native speakers’ countries, mostly Britain and the USA, tend to present language in contexts which may only typically occur in a native speakers’ society. In many language teaching/learning circumstances, this contextualization of learning materials makes language learning problematic.

### **Non-accessibility to necessary teaching tools:**

ESP Books are either unavailable or written by foreign writers in such a way which is hard to grasp. Most of the professional students lack the habit of reading. This may be due to the absence of public libraries, English news papers, weeklies, monthlies and journals in English.

### **The Question: How to Overcome This?**

Ayed Al-Amri, chairman of the Saudi Quality Council, underscored the significance of giving top priority to learning English as it is the gateway to acquiring skills in modern technology and taking advantage of the breathtaking changes brought about by the IT revolution. This does not mean sidelining Arabic, the mother tongue. However, English should be taught as a second language. Scholars emphasize the need for taking advantage of international expertise and experiments of neighbouring countries in acquiring higher standards in English language learning.

Echoing the same view, Professor Abdullah Al-Ghamdi, director of Al-Nur Educational Complex in Jeddah, says the Kingdom lacks any well thought out and comprehensive plans to

improve the standard in English language learning. There should be more teaching hours and advanced facilities for practical learning of the language at school and university levels.

A noted academician says that mental preparedness plays a significant role in achieving success or failure in English language learning moreover English should be taught as a second language from the beginning of the school education.

In the government schools, English learning begins from the first year of intermediate phase of education. The student who did not receive any English language learning during six years of elementary school sees it a very hard subject. On the other hand, students at private and international schools can learn English from the beginning of their KG level and they see it very easy to study together with Arabic or other mother languages.

Students who learn English at a later phase of their education might have a fear of the language and hence see it as very difficult to learn. Therefore, they try to learn by heart only the necessary parts of lessons that supposedly help them just to pass the examination. Naturally, they do not have any desire to perform well in English language learning and so they do not do any hard work to improve their language skills. English language teachers should send to abroad to undergo intensive training in English language teaching with the support of advanced teaching tools.

As far as the wrong pronunciation of many English language teachers is concerned, experts demand **the introduction of foreign language orientation courses for English teachers** in the Kingdom. Mahfouz bin Muhammad Al-Zahrani, a graduate of naval institute, urged the ministry to issue an order banning speaking of Arabic by English teachers at schools and students during English class hours.

English teachers, stress the need for **allocating more study hours** for English in addition to making available learning tools. Students must be put in a proper learning environment in which they must speak only English. Teachers should also be given proper orientation courses that enable them to impart an interesting learning experience for their pupils.

Referring to the **successful experiment of private schools** in English learning English teacher, suggest that all science subjects, such as physics, chemistry and biology as well as mathematics would be taught in English language. Dr. Anwar Ishqi, head of the Middle East Center for Strategic Studies, attributed the backwardness in English learning to a number of factors such as apathy of parents towards Western culture, hesitation to learn a foreign language and the opposition of some conservatives who claim English learning could lead to a possible cultural invasion. He called for introducing English learning from KG level onwards.

Dr. Hassan Sindi suggested implementing a number of plans aimed at helping students have direct interaction with native English language speakers through conducting local and international study tours and enabling them to listen to audio tapes to help them with correct pronunciation.

To sum up following suggestions could be adopted to change the present scenario-

### **Teaching Methods and the Role of Teacher**

The traditional methods of teaching are lecture methods wherein we find one-sided discourse of the teacher and passive response or blind acceptance by the students. Much is left to the imagination of the teacher and the students, and, if possible, upon the interpretative ability of the students. In new methods, the teacher's skill in making the learner feel the experience of the writer contributes to effective learning. The teacher has to have ability to apply new techniques suitable to the learning of English language.

The teacher must have an ability to connect the non-native aspect in the content and language with real life situation. It is very important for teachers to provide a safe learning environment, treat language learning as a social process where comprehensible input is a must when expecting comprehensible output. Most importantly, FL teachers must provide students with adequate teaching methodology and time, as well as suitable vocabulary and learning activities that will permit for the development of verbal skills. There is no single the best way to teach English language. That is why English teachers must find methods that are the most appropriate during the different stages of the teaching and learning process and then design curriculum to meet their final goals. Discover the maximum opportunity to develop your potential with the help of teaching methods offered.

### **Changes in Focus of Learning**

In the new world of changing global requirements, the methods are to be modified by the teacher while educating the students. Globalization now has altered the objectives of teaching English into skill based, self- learning, professional and unicultural concerns. The modern techniques, use of materials like audio-video, participations in seminars, live interactions, preparing students for varied source of information on their own, developing the skills of synthesis of knowledge among them, such methods are to be followed to remove the cultural and linguistic barriers and make the learning more fruitful.

To foster learning a teacher should make the students think critically. Critical thinking is a disciplined manner of thought which assess the validity of things such as statements, news, stories, arguments, research etc. (Richard R. Day, 2003).

Richard R. Day (2003) limits critical thinking to the following:

1. Differentiation between facts and opinions.
2. Examination of assumptions.
3. Flexibility while looking for explanations and solutions for problems.

Use of **Video aids** can give visual information of unreachable and unseen places and references to make them more familiar. The advanced information of the topic on Internet enriches the teacher and learner to equip himself before dealing with the topic. For this, the teachers and institutions must have new perspective and vision, new approach and readiness to change.

### **Using English in practical way**



One of the practical solutions is to suggest the students to watch English movies which put emphasis on phonetics and pronunciation such as *My Fair Lady* based on George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion*. In the same way students can watch English news to learn the proper pronunciation. Language teachers and content specialists in the Medical Science College should work together. In other words, there should be a high level of co-operation between language teachers and content specialists. They should work hand in hand to prepare the teaching materials before using them in the classrooms.

## Motivation

The most important thing in teaching English is about motivating the students to learn and create an interest in what they are learning. Some students are enthusiastic learners but many depend on the teacher for enthusiasm. For them the interest lies in the teacher, what is being taught and how it is being taught. Thus teachers on these faculties should try and lessen students' anxiety as well as help them get over it. They should motivate them with the skills essential to speaking good English and help them learn English to be able to perform tasks such as accessing medical texts published in English to continue their professional development.

Effective learning depends on the teacher's ability to maintain the interest that brought the students to the course in the first place (Erickson, 1998). The main idea of motivation is to capture the students' attention and curiosity and channel their energy towards learning. Intrinsic motivation is motivation from within the students that is of much importance. To boost positive attitude and motivate learning, an environment conducive to learning must be created (Finocchiaro, 1982; Ngeow, 1998). Factors that create conducive learning environment include non-threatening fun environment, providing various types of input which are auditory, visual, sensual, verbal and non-verbal in nature.

## Conclusion

At the end, keeping in mind the level and the standard of the learners, academicians should adopt flexible and effective teaching methodology. Books and other teaching material should be prepared according to the need and understanding of the students. The purpose of English language teaching should be to enable the learners in comprehension and communication in English language, not to impose the language on them. Motivation is the strength of any classroom. When the students are motivated the teacher performs his/her job the best. "Don't give your students fish, but teach them how to fish". This proverb is true in language learning.

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