

Creating a Quality Learning Environment for English Language Learners in Saudi Universities

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Abstract

Learning environment is an essential component of the learning process. Alongside text, teacher, and learner, we need to ensure the quality of the learning environment as well for active learning. The present research focused on creating a quality learning environment for English language learners at university level in Saudi Arabia. A questionnaire was designed to assess the students' perception regarding quality learning environment. The questionnaire was administered to the first year university students. The sample consisted of 100 male and 100 female students. The questionnaire consisted of five sections: course content and organization, student contribution, learning environment and teaching methods, learning resources, quality of delivery, and assessment. Using lickert scale, the data were analyzed and it was found that despite of having excellent content and teaching methodology, learning environment is greatly affected by the physical settings, pacing of the course content, interaction, timely feedback by the teacher, etc.

Keywords: Learning environment, English language learner, ELT in Saudi Arabia

1. Introduction

Educating the individuals in a society aims at preparing them for challenges in life ahead. The education system equip them with training and gadgets they may need to achieve success in different fields of life. Mostly, education and training is provided in mother tongue in different countries, however, English being an international language has become part and parcel of education systems across the globe. English is world's language for research, publication, business and commerce (Flowerdew & Peacock, 2001; Lauder, 2008). The programs and curricular for English language teaching are designed according to the local and international requirements to keep the individual abreast with the changes and developments in their fields. Therefore, a continuous process of evaluation is indispensable to keep the courses and content current and updated. Also importance of evaluation is evident from the fact that a good curriculum always perceives for quality and development (Ornstein and Hunkins, 1998). The essential components of an evaluation process are getting constructive feedback from stakeholders about the effectiveness of planned and implemented educational actions. Nunan (1993) observes that in order to facilitate proper evaluation, curriculum experts are required to give consideration to data coming from teachers, learners and evaluation specialists. It also suggests that evaluation is the heart of the systematic approach to the curriculum of any program. Madaus, Stufflebeam, & Scriven, (1983) suggest that evaluation has played a central role in education for a long time and in ELT its importance is widely recognized (Alderson & Beretta, 1992; Beretta, 1992; Lynch, 1996, 2003). Students, the end-users, are the most important element in education system, so are the most important element in evaluation of curriculum as well.

1.1 Research Questions

1. What do the students think about English language course content and organization?
2. Are the students positive about learning environment and accessibility of learning resources?
3. Are the students satisfied with the quality of delivery and assessment?

2. Literature Review

Teaching and curriculum are two sides of the same coin. The curriculum is commonly known as “what schools teach” (Eisner, 2002: 25). It includes philosophical, social and administrative choices. Such choices build the content of the curriculum which leads us to what is to be learned, how is to be learned, and assessed (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Nunan, 1988; Yalden, 1987). The curriculum provides structure (content) for classroom teaching and learning and suggests ways of exploiting the content and assessing learning outcomes. (Brown, 1995). In other words, curriculum suggests and provides means of evaluating the content and organization, learning resources and environment, teaching approach, student contribution, quality of delivery, and assessment.

A textbook is an important tool in setting direction and content, and to some extent how to teach (McGrath, 2002). Also a teacher’s role is also significant in exploiting the content as his beliefs and attitude will be reflected through his teaching of the text. To minimize such subjective approach towards a textbooks, it should pass through certain standards, like physical outlook, design, objectives, content, flexibility, teaching methods and assessment as this ensures the reliability and good learning to parents, teachers and students. Weir and Roberts (1994) mentions two important reasons to evaluate the textbook which are “to provide evidence informing theoretical considerations about directions to be followed in language teaching or in teacher education and secondly as a tool to indicate the suitability of particular approaches or techniques under given conditions and whether they meet the claims made for them” (p.11).

Researches in the last quarter of the twentieth century tend to be learner-centered and individual differences in learning, and the learning outcomes. Researchers intended to know what influences the approach to learning that a student adopts. Also they focused on assessment procedure that could create a balance between deep and surface knowledge. Other issues included learning context and characteristics of individual student whether someone prefer a surface approach actively or a deep approach. So students perceive about the learning environment which influence their learning (Entwistle and Tait 1990).

The profile of class group properties is an essential component in determining the classroom learning environment or social climate. The profile consists of students’ interpersonal relationships, relationship between teacher and students, relationship between subject studied and learning methods, and students’ perception of the structural characteristics of the class (Fraser, et.al., 1982). They further explain that the first aspect students’ interpersonal realm include cohesiveness and friction among classmates. The second aspect, teacher-students relationship include the extent to which students have formal rules to guide their behavior, as well as the extent of democratic policymaking, disorganization, and teacher favoritism of some students over other. The third aspect include students’ perception of the speed of the class, the difficulty of the subject matter, and the amount of diversity in classroom activities. The structural characteristics include

the acceptance of common goals toward activities, physical environment, and the degree of stratification of the class into friendship cliques.

The activities, which provide student with an opportunity to extend their understanding of a concept, are the central part in language arts. On the other hand, teachers feel confident in giving feedback during the lesson by using techniques like questioning. Therefore the quality of the task leads to the quality of the interventions.

A text is a dynamic interaction between the student and the new concepts. However, a text is generally seen as a prepared script for the interaction. Allwright and Bailey (1991: 21) highlight that effectively managed interaction is an important aspect for teachers and learners as it provides “everyone the best possible opportunities for learning the language”. According to Prabhu (1992) teachers perceive the textbook as a guideline as it “saves time, gives direction to lessons, guides discussion, facilitates giving of homework”, making teaching ‘easier, better organized, more convenient’, and learning “easier, faster, better” (p. 162). Within a textbook, a lesson is not an isolated unit but it’s a segment in the string. It is considered as “an incremental sequence of teaching units, the sequence as a whole meant to achieve a larger objective” (Prabhu 1992: 162). These larger or long-term objectives relate to the requirements of the stakeholders including the learners, education authorities, sponsors and parents. Thus each lesson needs to be seen as a segment in a series and in relation to what goes before it and what will come after it.

2.1 English Language Teaching in Saudi Arabia

English is used as a means of communication in higher studies, business, and diplomacy in Saudi Arabia. English was introduced as a subject in schools in 1927 and later on at intermediate level in 1953 (Al-Subahi, 1988). However, the study material is designed or selected according to the Saudi learners’ needs and customs (Alamri, 2008). Though the pace of progress in learning English remained slow in past (Al-Sadan, 2000) but now “English as a subject matter has received a lot of care from Saudi Ministry of Education as well as from Saudi community” (Hajailan, 2003: 01). The main issue with learning of English in Saudi Arabia is that instead of a language to be used for communication in daily life, it is treated as a subject for study. Therefore the context of learning and teaching English in schools here is a bit different from other Asian countries. English language teaching in KSA has gone through a number of changes and developments (Liton, 2013). Measures were taken to introduce English at university level to produce graduates with good communication skills to deal with latest developments, scientific or political, around the world. TEFL in the Saudi Context Teaching EFL in any context is very much challenging. Ministry of education in Saudi Arabia has framed four stages in the education system which are kindergarten, primary (6 years), intermediate (3 years) and secondary (3 years). The main objective of education the kids is to enable the students to contribute productively towards the development in the country. The TEFL curriculum in Saudi Arabia was designed by the Directorate of Curriculum (Department of English) in 1999 which specifies teaching of four skills in order to communicate with English speaking communities. According to Al-Hajailan, (2005) improvements were made in the document in 2001 with an objective to develop students’ intellectual, personal and professional abilities, acquire basic language skills to communicate, acquire the linguistic competence required in various professions, develop positive attitudes towards learning English, and enhance globalization to develop understanding and respect for cultural differences among nations.

English language teaching material was either adopted or designed keeping in view the general objectives as set by the ministry. TU-ELC, based on a need analysis, designed study material to fulfil academic needs of the students in their first year at university. Four books have been designed in consultation with foreign experts keeping in view academic and cultural environment in KSA.

Much research has been conducted on designing, selecting, adopting and evaluating the study material for English language learners. There are various perspectives in designing, selecting or adopting the materials whether to maintain L2 acquisition theories or implementing socio-cultural aspects utilizing the L1 learning experiences. The concept of evaluation has been discussed a lot. Starting with Hemsley (1997) who discussed three basic ideas in material evaluation which are intuitive/impressionistic approach (based on first impression), a formal prior-to-use evaluation (a systematic analysis), and a process approach (post-use retrospective evaluation). Another framework was suggested by Littlejohn (1998) consist of three aspects which are pedagogy (publication and design), tasks (focus, participation, and content), and materials' objectives and teacher and student roles. Byrnes (2000) is concerned with cultural linguistic sensitivity in designing L2 materials whereas Spielmann and Radnofsky (2001) focuses on learner psychology.

2.2 Relevant Studies

Spielmann and Radnofsky (2001) conducted a research on learner psychology and found that the learners' anxiety primarily dominates L2 learning environment. They suggested that the TEFL material designer may address the students' tension and anxiety, minimize psychological and social barrier in L2 learning, focus on culture and linguistic features familiar to students, and assess the value of the study material beneficial to students' knowledge, attitude, and competence (Byrnes, 2001; Spielmann and Radnofsky, 2001).

Crandall and Basturkmen (2004) conducted a research on material evaluation and concluded that L2 students do not enhance communicative competence and often misuse words. They suggested to evaluate the study material according to the students need and practical use of language (Crandall and Basturkmen, 2004: 38).

Nitta and Gardner (2005) conducted research on evaluating conscious-raising tasks and practice tasks in nine contemporary ELT textbooks in the UK. They concluded that all the books in their grammar section followed the same pattern which is presentation – practice approach. In presentation both inductive and deductive approaches were observed, shifting from interpretation-based tasks to production-based practising tasks. This approach was followed in the textbooks analyzed.

The present study focuses on the study material designed by the TU-ELC for its EFL learners.

3. Research Methodology

The main focus of the current research was to investigate the first year university learners' understanding of quality learning environment. To get their opinion, a questionnaire was designed consisting of five sections: course content and organization, student contribution, learning environment and teaching methods, learning resources, quality of delivery, and assessment. The data collected from randomly selected 100 male and 100 female learners. The questionnaire was

based on lickert scale (5-strongly agree – 1-strongly disagree). The questionnaire was translated into Arabic to facilitate the students and to get their honest opinion.

4. Data Analysis and Discussion

The data collected through questionnaire was analyzed. The following section presents analysis and discussion on the issue.

4.1 Course Content and Organization

The first section of the questionnaire focused on learners' opinion on course content and organization.

	Statements	Both	Male	Female
1	The course objectives were clear.	3.64	3.68	3.60
2	The course was well organized in the form of units.	3.74	3.48	4.00
3	Activities were relevant and interesting.	2.72	3.04	2.40
4	The course workload was manageable.	2.80	3.16	2.44
5	The presentation of content in textbook motivates the student to learn.	3.02	3.24	2.80
6	Real-life language has been used in the textbook.	3.32	3.24	3.40
7	Text has been designed keeping in view the local culture.	3.22	3.24	3.20
8	Visuals are culturally suitable.	3.64	3.64	3.64
9	Textbook has been designed keeping in view the needs of the students.	3.16	3.32	3.00
10	Enough examples have been given in the textbook to explain grammatical points.	3.30	3.04	3.56

The respondents opined that the course was well organized (3.74), with clear objectives (3.64), and culturally appropriate visuals (3.64). Actually the course book was designed by ELT experts after having a detailed need analysis of ELT scenario and culture in Saudi Arabia. Also they agreed to the points like real-life language (3.32), examples to explain grammatical points (3.30), culturally appropriate text (3.22), and catering students' needs (3.16). As the textbook material was need oriented, the students expressed their satisfaction on appropriateness of text, explanation, and visuals. However, they expressed their concerns regarding motivational presentation of content (3.02), workload management (2.80), and interesting activities (2.72). English which is taught as a foreign language is really a challenge for most of the students due to lack of motivation and interest in learning English. There's a strange contradiction in their grades at school level and proficiency test at the university. Having excellent grades at school level, most of the students are unable to express themselves in speaking and writing. Students with high grades usually opt for medical education whereas others study computers science, business management, engineering, and religion or Arabic language. Though the students acknowledge the objectives and organization of the course but they feel it as a burden due to lack of motivation in learning English as they don't need English to communicate in society or general settings.

4.2 Student Contribution

	Statements	Both	Male	Female
11	Students participated actively in the classroom activities.	3.52	3.48	3.56
12	Students have made progress in this course by improving their language skills.	3.28	3.04	3.52
13	Students submitted course assignment well in time.	3.88	3.96	3.80

Regarding student contribution or classroom activities, most of the students submit their assignments well in time (3.88), and they participated actively in classroom activities (3.52). On the other hand, they (3.28) expressed that they made progress in this course by improving their language skills. As already discussed in the first section of the questionnaire that they lack motivation and interest in learning English, the same is reflected through their expression regarding improvement in language skills. Though they submitted assignments well in time and participated in classroom activities but they lack any significant change in their language skills.

4.3 Learning Environment and Teaching Methods

This section discusses the learning environment and teaching methods in the classroom.

	Statements	Both	Male	Female
14	Textbook was well structured to achieve the learning outcomes.	3.44	3.28	3.60
15	Teacher encouraged the students to participate in classroom activities.	3.48	3.80	3.16
16	There were group activities in the classroom to practice the language.	3.40	3.12	3.68
17	The overall environment in the class was motivating to learn and practice English.	2.70	2.60	2.80
18	Classrooms were satisfactory.	2.36	2.72	2.00

Most of the students acknowledged teachers' role in encouraging students to participate in classroom activities (3.48) and they also appreciated the textbook which was helpful in achieving learning outcomes (3.44). Regarding the group activities in the classroom to practice the language skills, both (3.40) acknowledged the statement but there was a noticeable difference in male (3.12) and female (3.68) responses. It was also observed that male students don't feel comfortable in group discussion which reflect their fears of not being participative and active in group work. However, the learners expressed their concerns regarding motivational learning environment (2.70), and physical environment (2.36) in the classroom. The reasons may include physical settings of chairs, availability of AV aids, large classes, etc.

4.4 Learning Resources

In this section, opinion was sought by students regarding learning resources.

	Statements	Both	Male	Female
19	There were enough interactive activities in the books for language practice.	3.44	3.64	3.24
20	Learning material (other than the textbook) used by the teacher was relevant and useful.	3.28	3.68	2.88
21	Classroom activities were relevant and appropriate	3.50	3.60	3.40
22	Library facility was available to the students.	2.46	2.44	2.48
23	Online support for practicing language skills was available to student.	2.74	2.92	2.56
24	Students had access to language lab for practicing language skills.	2.56	2.60	2.52

Learners appreciated relevance of classroom activities (3.50), and interactive activities in the book (3.44) which reflect appropriateness of the textbook and study material. However, there was divided opinion on the usefulness of the learning material (other than the textbook) by the teachers by male (3.68) and female (2.88) learners. The reason may include dependence of female teachers on textbook only or the activities selected/adopted by the female teachers were not relevant or useful. However, the learners didn't favor the statements regarding availability of online support for practicing language skills (2.74), access to language labs for practicing language skills (2.56), and library facilities (2.46). Though facilities of online support, language lab, and library are available in the Center but they are not properly accessed or utilized by the teachers and students which unfortunately reflect lack of interest and motivation in teaching learning process.

4.5 Quality of Delivery

This section discusses the issue of quality of delivery in the classroom.

	Statements	Both	Male	Female
25	The course stimulated students' interest and thought on the subject area.	3.20	3.32	3.08
26	The pace of the course was appropriate.	3.18	3.56	2.80
27	The instructor presented language concepts clearly.	3.42	3.72	3.12
28	I understood the lectures.	3.32	3.52	3.12
29	The instructor was responsive to student needs and problems.	2.98	3.84	2.12
30	The instructor was regular throughout the course.	4.10	4.00	4.20

Most of the students agreed to the points like instructor's punctuality (4.10) and presentation of language concepts (3.42). They also, somehow, agreed to understanding the lecture (3.32), and course stimulated their interest (3.20). These responses suggest that the teachers were punctual, competent in their subject and most the students understood what the teachers explained to them in the classroom. Though male students expressed their satisfaction (3.56) but female students were not happy (2.80) with the pacing of the course content. They, female learners, may need more time to learn and practice English language in their classroom. This point is further supported by the

responses of the female students (2.12) to the statement that instructor was responsive to their needs and problems. On the contrary, male students agreed to the statement (3.84). The reasons may include provision of qualified and experienced teachers and nationality of the teachers. As there is a variety of teachers from various countries, with varied educational qualification and experience, the teachers at female campus may need more exposure and training in teaching English as a foreign language.

4.6 Assessment

The last section of the questionnaire discusses learners' responses on assessment.

	Statements	Both	Male	Female
31	Instructions for assignments/projects were clear.	3.54	3.60	3.48
32	Feedback on assignments/projects was timely.	3.24	3.28	3.20
33	Feedback on assignments/projects was helpful.	3.28	3.56	3.00

They appreciated that instructions for assignments/projects were clear (3.54). They also agreed to the statements on helpful (3.28) and timely (3.24) feedback on assignments and projects. However, feedback on formative assessment needs more attentions as learners' responses, especially female, reflect.

5. Conclusion

The focus of this research was to get university EFL learners on the learning environment. Data was collected and discussed keeping view course content and organization, student contribution, learning environment and teaching methods, learning resources, quality of delivery, and assessment. The responses of the learners reflected that they are well-aware of their learning environment. They appreciated textbook, delivery, teaching methods but have certain problems with learning resources, language activities, pacing, motivation and physical environment. The findings reveal that the content of the textbook are clear and understandable yet its implementation is problematic due to the factors such as lack of resources, fixed furniture, large classes, loaded content, time constraints, etc. Though the textbook is activity based but to ensure quality learning environment, active involvement of the teacher and students in the learning process is quite essential besides having an effective physical learning environment as the lack of resources become more meaningful. Therefore, while designing or creating a congenial learning environment, physical conditions (technological devices, setting, number of students, etc.) should be considered more realistically to ensure the quality of teaching learning process. Also a teacher's work and thinking pattern lead to the quality of the curriculum reform (Baturay, 2007). Also in teacher development programs, teachers should be encouraged to constructivist learning, multiple intelligences, task-based learning and so forth to create a productive learning environment.

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برنامج السنة التحضيرية بجامعة الطائف
تقييم الطلاب لجودة تجاربهم التعليمية

القسم: مركز اللغة الانجليزية

المقرر: اللغة الانجليزية 1)

ELC-101(

السنة الدراسية: 1433-1434

الفصل الدراسي: الفصل الأول

الجنس: ذكر أنثى

الحرم الجامعي: _____

معدل حضورك خلال الفصل الدراسي: 20% 21-40% 41-60% 61-80% 81%

لاوافقشدة	لاوافق	لااعرف	أوافق	أوافقشدة	
أ. محتوى وتنظيم المقرر					
					1 كانت أهداف المقرر واضحة.
					2 الكتاب الدراسي مرتب بطريقة جيدة على شكل وحدات
					3 كانت الأنشطة ممتعة
					4 حجم العمل قابل للتحكم
					5 تقديم محتوى الكتاب حفز الطلاب على التعلم
					6 استخدم في الكتاب لغة حقيقية تعبر عن مواقف واقعية
					7 تم تصميم النص بطريقة تراعي الثقافة المحلية
					8 المواد البصرية مناسبة من الناحية الثقافية
					9 صمم الكتاب بطريقة تراعي احتياجات الطلاب
					10 الأمثلة في الكتاب كافية لتوضيح النقاط القواعدية
ب. مشاركة الطلاب					
					11 شارك الطلاب بفاعلية في الأنشطة الفصلية
					12 اظهر الطلاب تقدما من خلال تحسين مهاراتهم اللغوية
					13 قام الطلاب بتسليم واجباتهم في الوقت المناسب
ج. البيئة التعليمية وطرق التدريس					
					14 تم تنظيم الكتاب بطريقة جيدة لتحقيق مخرجات التعلم
					15 شجع المدرس الطلاب على المشاركة في الأنشطة الفصلية
					16 وجود أنشطة جماعية في الفصل الدراسي وذلك من اجل ممارسة اللغة
					17 البيئة بشكل كلي في الفصل الدراسي تحفز على تعلم وممارسة اللغة الانجليزية
					18 الفصول الدراسية مقنعة من حيث المساحة، الاضاءة الجيدة، الخ).
د. مصادر التعلم					
					19 يحتوي الكتاب على أنشطة تفاعلية كافية لممارسة اللغة
					20 المادة التدريسية(غير الكتاب المقرر) التي استخدمت من قبل المدرس ذات صلة ومفيدة
					21 الأنشطة الفصلية ذات صلة وملائمة
					22 مرافق المكتبة متاحة للطلاب
					23 الدعم عبر الانترنت لممارسة مهارات اللغة متوفر للطلاب
					24 وصول الطلاب لمختبر اللغة متاحا لممارسة مهارات

					اللغة بشكل منفرد
ه. جودة المقدم					
					25 حفز المقرر اهتمام الطلاب في مجال الموضوع
					26 وتيرة المقرر مناسبة
					27 قام المدرس بتقديم المفاهيم اللغوية بشكل واضح
					28 لقد فهمت المحاضرات
					29 المدرس متجاوب مع حاجات ومشاكل الطالب
					30 المدرس منتظم طول فترة المقرر
و. التقييم					
					31 التعليمات المتعلقة بالواجبات والمشاريع واضحة
					32 التغذية الراجعة المتعلقة بالواجبات والمشاريع تقدم في الوقت المناسب
					33 التغذية الراجعة المتعلقة بالواجبات والمشاريع ذات فائدة

مع الشكر