

EFL Acquisition External Problems and Difficulties: An Investigative Interview to Examine Saudi Students' Thoughts and Feelings

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Abstract—This study aimed to explore and discover how Saudi students feel and think about English as a Foreign Language (EFL) acquisition and its problems and difficulties. It also aimed at sorting out the most common external EFL problems and difficulties that made most of them fail to successfully acquire English language. A sample of 300 male students was randomly chosen from level one students in their foundation year at King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Those students recently graduated from secondary schools spread all over the country and so they represented the different regions of the country. Data for this study was obtained from interviews. The results of the interviews showed that students had an actual desire to learn English. The EFL external problems and difficulties were categorized into a set of four main groups: (1) Insufficient exposure to and practice of language in real life situations, (2) Teachers' lack of seriousness and training, (3) Lack of motivation and (4) Inappropriate textbooks. This study can help English teachers, supervisors, curriculum designers and education policy-makers in Saudi Arabia overcome these problems and difficulties.

Index Terms—EFL acquisition, external problems, difficulties, barriers, obstacles, students' thoughts, feelings

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Importance of Students' Opinions on EFL Acquisition Problems and Difficulties

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners faces problems and difficulties which should be taken into consideration when dealing with the whole process of EFL teaching/learning (Anderson's, 1995; Arshad, Attari and Elahi, 2012; Gan, 2013). Noonan (2005) states that college students in China are faced with difficulties concerning learning EFL and they always ask a reoccurring question about the way they can improve their English. In all societies where English is learnt as a foreign language there is a consensus among researchers that students encounter many problems and difficulties with EFL acquisition (Suleiman, 1983; Mann, 1985; Zughoul, 1987; Ballatine, 1993; Tanveer, 2007; Alkhalwaldeh, 2010; Farooq, Chaudhry and Shafique, 2011; Tariq et al, 2013; Gan, 2013; Primlyn, 2013; Al-Nasser, 2015). While learning EFL, students try to build reading and speaking vocabulary and understand written and spoken language. Although they have the potential abilities to do so, most of them fail because they encounter some obstacles and difficulties which should be intentionally identified and recognized. The researcher believes that no one can exactly identify and precisely define these problems and difficulties other than the students themselves. To facilitate a positive learning atmosphere for students and encourage them to practice and continue learning English, these problems should be first identified and then solved with the help of those students. As students are the center and target of the learning process, they should be part of not apart from the solution.

B. Statement of the Problem

Problems and difficulties of EFL acquisition still need more efforts to be widely researched. After 12 years of learning English in private schools and nine years in public schools, most of our students in Saudi Arabia leave school and they find it hard: **to** express thanks, opinions, facts, feelings, etc., **to** communicate with an English speaker where very simple English is needed, like ordering food in a restaurant, directing a lost person how to get to a specific place, etc., **to** write two or three simple sentences about a general topic like weather, favorite food or friend, sports, etc. and for example **to** compose a short letter of complaint or thanks, apply for a post, etc. Those students encounter difficulties dealing with the previous productive skills (speaking and writing) as well as receptive skills (listening and reading). They feel lost: listening to a short conversation, trying to recognize what someone asking for, responding to a telephone call from an advertising company, etc. They also couldn't understand well simple instructions written on medicine bottles or packets, words of road signs and advertisements, basic instructions on how to operate a washing machine, a video game or an iron, etc. Educationalists, supervisors, teachers, parents and even students themselves indeed have a consensus on the problem of acquiring English language by our students.

This educational problem is one of the most scandalous worries that educators and society have controversial opinions and experiences about. Families and individuals face this problem daily; they actually want to reach an easy and absolute solution that paves the way for them to acquire this international language.

C. *Significance and Aim of the Study*

The researcher thinks that there is no easy answer to this problem unless the members of the society, who suffers from its effects and considers it a hard experience to emerge an answer from, are openly asked about its reasons and backgrounds. Therefore, the researcher tries to deeply go into the minds and hearts of one of the various society members to identify and explore the causes of this problem. He believes that the shortest and easiest way to investigate this problem and discover its causes is to interview those who first and last suffer from it, namely, students. This could be the first step to help educationalists, supervisors, teachers and researchers suggest and implement creative and innovative elucidations and solutions to come to possible answers to overcome difficulties facing students learning EFL. Students especially adult and mature ones can try their own suggestions to deal with this problem, which is originally theirs, and this is why the researcher assures that the straight way to approach this problem is to take into account the humanistic dimension of solving it. And this is why he is encouraged to take an investigative interview strategy to examine the thoughts and feelings of the concerned people in an attempt to discover the truth. The researcher tries not to stop on the limits of the EFL problems and difficulties, but to continue his investigation and discover and identify the worst problem and order the other problems according to their difficulty degree. This study would be useful to scholars to find solutions in order to reduce the outcomes of the problems that face EFL learners and to give priority to most difficult and frequent ones.

D. *Research Questions*

To explore and discover how EFL students feel and think about the problem of acquiring EFL, I addressed the following questions.

- Do you feel convinced and have an actual desire to learn English? If no, why not?
- What are the common external problems and difficulties that make most Saudi students fail to successfully acquire English language?
- Which of these problems and difficulties has the most negative effect on EFL acquisition?

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

EFL Acquisition Problems and Difficulties

The following is a brief but comprehensive literature review that concentrates on the studies that investigate the problems and difficulties confront EFL students.

Many research efforts have been carried out to find out the various difficulties and problems that badly affect EFL acquisition. Mann (1985) says that the formal research of the factors that affect EFL acquisition started in the 17th century and Ballatine (1993) states that these aspects are usually discussed under the title of demography. As stated by (Nariswariatmojo, 2011) previous studies classified these factors into two significant groups, internal factors (factors due to language itself) and external factors. According to (Farooq, Chaudhry and Shafique, 2011) the external factors may be classified as student, family, school and peer factors. They assured that home atmosphere affects the educational performance of students, namely educated parents can make available such an atmosphere that suits well for educational achievement of their children. Tariq et al (2013) stated that Pakistani students in rural areas, where all family factors to some extent are against learning, face many problems and difficulties in learning EFL. They emphasized the family factor and found out that most Pakistani parents in such areas do not have any attention to EFL learning. They concluded that parents' culture, interest, family and home environment are essential for EFL acquisition.

Rathod (2012) reports that there is a correlation between community class and foreign language achievement. Learners from poorer socio-economic clusters are less successful in acquiring EFL than learners from richer groups. Arshad, Attari and Elahi (2012) argued that parents' socio-economic rank has straight effect on their children's education in the form of offering learning resources. Primlyn (2013) reports on the difficulties faced by EFL students. He concentrates on their amalgamation of social and cultural characteristics in language learning, because every language is a combination of both. Allard, Bourdeau and Mizoguchi (2011) also address an internal problem, the cultural and native language interference problem in EFL acquisition. More particularly, they examine topics of interference that can be affected by a learner's native language and that also have an educational elements.

Gan (2012) in his paper argues that inadequate chances to use English in classroom, lack of focus on language development, and input-poor atmosphere for speaking in English outside class actually cause a range of difficulties EFL students face. Gan (2013) in another paper argues that students' perceived EFL problems are analyzed in relation to lack of language proficiency, spoken language processes, conversational skills and educational speaking conventions, emotional influence as well as lack of chances to practice English in speaking.

Alkhalwaldeh (2010) studies the types of difficulties Jordanian EFL students encounter from teachers' point of view. The findings of the study brought huge difficulties such as big classroom size, students' negative attitudes towards English, lack of teacher training and lack of parental follow up. Many studies by researchers like Mukattash (1983), Suleiman (1983), Zughoul (1987) and Ibrahim (1983) find that most of the Arab students' difficulties concerning the speaking skill are due to the reasons such as: deficiency in English language curricula, old pedagogical methods, problems with appropriate linguistic environments, lack of individual momentum on the part of the students, and first language interference.

Tanveer (2007) in his dissertation addresses a specific EFL acquisition problem regarding a specific language skill, anxiety and apprehension expressed by EFL learners in learning speaking skill. He argues that such feelings may prevent learners from achieving the anticipated performance aims in the target language. According to (Bathan, Aldersi and Alsout, 2014) mastering speaking skill by EFL learners is not easy as many factors, including mother tongue interference, lack of required exposure, very restricted opportunities of practice and lack of motivation, hold back the process of mastering this skill.

In his study (Hamouda, 2013) tries to examine the listening difficulties encountered by the first year English major students of Qassim University. The results of the study revealed that intonation, articulation, pace of verbal communication, inadequate words, various accent of speakers, lack of absorption, apprehension, and bad quality of recording were the main listening comprehension difficulties faced by Saudi EFL students. According to (Chen, 2005) difficulties or barriers confronted by the EFL learners while acquiring listening comprehension are associated with factors such as learners' emotional statuses, listening practices, information processing capacities, and negative attitudes towards the listening skill.

Al-Nasser (2015) states that learning English in Saudi Arabia has many problems. According to him the problems come out of policy making and its performance, namely, dealing with English as an optional school subject, introducing English at a late stage and dealing with English language as a subject that needs passing marks not as a life skill. The problems also are related to mother tongue interference, lack of teachers' training, old-fashioned curriculum and methodology, absence of using modern technology and modern infrastructure, panic about learning in the learners' minds as classroom environment depresses student contribution of any type and natural opposition to learning English. It seems to the researcher as a specialist with a long experience in EFL teaching in Saudi Arabia that some of the points discussed by Al-Nasser (2015) needs some kind of revision and reconsideration.

The previous studies investigate the barriers, obstacles, difficulties or problems EFL students face while learning EFL in general or a specific EFL skill in particular. However, none of these studies tries to answer a big question concerning the worst problem faced by EFL learners and negatively affects EFL acquisition, or to order these problems according to their difficulty degree, which this study tries to address.

As shown in the literature review above most previous studies did not distinguish between problems due to language itself (internal difficulties) and other problems due to reasons and factors not related to foreign language (external difficulties). This study assumes that students have the potential ability to acquire EFL and so tries to look into the external barriers that hinder EFL learners in their way of acquiring English language from a comprehensive viewpoint. While most of the EFL acquisition studies have addressed a specific language skill or a specific problem and have followed quantitative approaches to address related EFL acquisition difficulties, this study tries to adopt a qualitative methodology instead of a quantitative one and tries to seek an answer to a big question about the external and general EFL acquisition difficulties and problems encountered by EFL learners. In addition, the interview as seen by the researcher is the best way to interpret these difficulties and discover what stands beyond them.

Dealing with a comprehensive perception of a problem can consequently lead to a comprehensive solution. The case is different when we deal with a single part of an entire problem and accordingly reach a smaller conclusion consistent with that single part of that problem. In the current study, the first type of problem tackling is adopted in an attempt to reach a solution suitable for the big EFL acquisition problems faced by Saudi students in their own and particular educational and cultural environment.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. *Informants of the Study*

The sample of the study is randomly chosen from level one students in their the foundation (first) year at King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Those students have recently graduated from secondary schools spread all over the country and so they represent the different regions of the country. They have been learning English for 8 to 12 years depending on the type of school they attended (public, private or international). They are adult enough to deal with the problem of the study and to give mature answers. After taking the placement test, more than 80% of those students were assigned to study level one which is the lowest level of the four levels they have to pass in their foundation year before choosing their fields of study. Being in level one means that they suffered from the problem of EFL acquisition and they consider it a hard experience that they can emerge an answer from. They were openly asked about its reasons and backgrounds. The sample consists of twelve sections, each section consists of 25 male students, a total of 300 students. The interview was implemented in the beginning of the first semester of the scholastic year 2015/2016. Those 300 students were interviewed to try to discover the causes that stand behind the problems of EFL acquisition.

B. *Data Collection*

Data for this study was obtained from an important source of social and interactive communication method; that is interview. The investigation represents a qualitative method that aims to explore students' desire towards learning English and elicit the common factors standing behind the difficulties of learning EFL. In this study the researcher conducted an interview to discover the real problems and difficulties Saudi students face in their way of learning EFL.

He chose the interview as opposed to the questionnaire which in this context cannot go deep into the minds and feelings of students, simply because when building a questionnaire, certain difficulties and problems are to be prepared in advance. The situation is completely different when conducting an interview and allowing students to express themselves and freely tell about their thoughts and feelings without having limits around their minds and hearts.

Interviewing is one of the most well-known and influential methods of trying to understand human thoughts and feelings. The interview is an important source of social, interactive and interpersonal communication method. There are three main types of interview: structured, semi-structured or unstructured. To answer the questions of the study, the researcher developed a semi-structured interview to try to recognize how EFL students think and feel about the problem of acquiring EFL.

A semi-structured interview is a technique used in the social studies. While a structured interview has a precise group of questions which does not tolerate new ideas, a semi-structured interview is not closed, tolerating new thoughts to be brought up as a result of what the interviewee states. This freedom can assist interviewers adapting their questions to the interview position, and to the people they are interviewing. The interviewer in a semi-structured interview generally identifies in advance a specific topic to be investigated (Edwards and Holland, 2013).

The 300 male students who were randomly chosen were interviewed. For this task I appointed 6 interviewers who tried to explore whether students are convinced and have an actual desire to learn English and to investigate the problems that most EFL students have with acquiring English language. The interview covered the following areas:

- Whether students are convinced and have an actual desire to learn English,
- The problems and difficulties that make most Saudi EFL students fail to successfully acquire EFL, and
- The problem that comes first (the worst problem faced by EFL learners and negatively affects EFL acquisition) and accordingly the right order of these problems according to their degree of difficulty.

C. Data Analysis

To study the raw data of the interview, I started with the classification of the ideas coming out of the raw data-open coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Similar to many other studies, the investigation in this study followed a system of coding and classifying categories based upon patterns and thoughts that came out of the raw data (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Patton, 1990).

IV. RESULTS

Results of the Interviews

Concerning the first question, "Do you feel convinced and have an actual desire to learn English? If no, why not?", of the 300 students interviewed, 293 were convinced and had an actual desire to learn English. The rest of the students (only seven students) didn't have a desire to learn English not because they were not convinced to learn English but because of another problems such as heavy instructional load, time restrictions and constraints and type of field of study they want to specialize in. One student said, "I don't have time to learn English because of the heavy load I have this semester. I start my day at 8 am and finish it at 4 pm. I spend my rest of the day preparing for the next day."

Another said, "I want to specialize in Arabic language, why should I learn English? If I learn English, I will rarely use it and I will lose it."

A third student commented, "I want to study French and I am afraid I will get confused if I learn the two languages together."

With reference to the second question, "What are the common external problems and difficulties that make most Saudi EFL students fail to successfully acquire English language?", the results of the interviews were categorized into a set of four main groups (difficulties). These four categories were: (1) Insufficient exposure to and practice of language in real life situations; (2) Teachers' lack of seriousness and training; (3) Lack of environment motivation; and (4) Inappropriate textbooks.

Regarding the third question, "Which of these problems and difficulties has the most negative effect on EFL acquisition?", of the 293 students interviewed (who were convinced and had a desire to learn English), 126 (43%) stated that the main difficulty that hinders EFL acquisition is rare exposure to and use of English in everyday life. The second main difficulty which was stated by 70 students (24%) is teachers' lack of seriousness and training. Then comes lack of environment motivation, affirmed by 41 students (14%). And not far from that is inappropriate textbooks as thought by 38 students (13%). Eighteen students, only (6%) thought that EFL acquisition difficulties belong to various problems other than the above ones. They mentioned problems and difficulties such as starting learning English at a late stage, dealing with English as a school subject that needs passing marks and absence of using modern technology to enhance learning EFL.

The most difficult problem referred to insufficient exposure to and practice of language in real life situations. The majority of students (126 out of 293) stated that this difficulty hinders their EFL acquisition. This difficulty hinders their ability to remember the words, expressions, structures, etc. they learn at school. Because of this difficulty they don't have enough authentic chances to acquire language. One more reason that makes it difficult to acquire language is the unnatural way the class introduces it and the limited time available in class to use the language. One student said,

"We study new words and expressions at school and sometimes have no chance to practice them in class and rarely have an opportunity to use them outside the class. As a result we forget them."

Another one commented,

"What kind of artificial way we follow to learn English! Although the class can help us learn English, it is not the natural place to acquire language. Language should be learned in real life situations and this is what we miss."

A third student added,

"Unless we have chances to use English outside the class, I think it is very difficult to improve our English language. We actually need such chances to help us acquire English and keep what learn in our minds."

A fourth student suggested,

"If we want to improve our English language, I think the easiest way is to create real opportunities to use it at home, with friends, on the Internet, etc. This can of course help us memorize and activate what we learn in class."

One more student proposed,

"I think there should be an action taken by the Ministry of Education to solve the difficulty of learning English students encounter. I propose that they either arrange for summer courses where we can study and use English in camps, or to support us to travel abroad and learn and use English in English-speaking countries. Otherwise, the class will fail to solve the problem because we don't have enough time and opportunities to practically use English."

The second main difficulty referred to teachers' lack of seriousness and training. This difficulty was stated by about a quarter of the students (70 students out of 293, 24%) interviewed. Students obviously wondered about the ways some of their teachers follow to teach English language and thought that they use old methods of teaching language. They also complained about the carelessness of some of their English teachers who ignore a lot of the important parts of the textbook and ask them to concentrate only on a few pages for the purposes of the exams. Two more signs that obviously indicate teachers' lack of seriousness are the number of classes they miss and the amount of class time they used to waste. One student said, *"Why such old ways of teaching still used! We feel very bored because of listening to the teacher or one of our classmates reading aloud the whole reading passage. In addition, the teacher ties to translate every single word to Arabic. It is better to have some kind of discussion so that we feel interested."*

Another stated,

"Why always focusing on grammar! What about the other language skills! It seems that our teachers don't know how to teach listening and speaking. They rarely go through such activities even though they seem attractive and interesting. They must receive periodical training in order to be able to deal with such activities and to get rid of the boredom we usually have."

A third student added,

"One of the problems students know well is the missing classes they usually have. Out of five classes a week some teachers only attend three or even two. Moreover, when attending the class, some teachers have a bad habit; they spend a lot of time doing nothing or chatting in Arabic about irrelevant issues."

A fourth student complained,

"We usually study how to use English, grammar. We need to learn how to write, read, speak and listen. And when it comes to exams a few pages are included, i.e. round up pages and we get high marks."

The third main difficulty is related to lack of environment motivation and advocated by 41 out of 293 students interviewed, 14%. Those students affirmed that they seldom receive encouragement and motivation from their parents, teachers, friends, etc. to improve their English language. They emphasized that such demotivating atmosphere is a real difficulty that delays their attempts to acquire English language. Moreover, some of them considered motivation, which they lack, an essential factor for creating a high spirit that raises their potential learning ability and engages their interest in learning English. One student said, *"I tried to use English outside the classroom, with friends, at home and even with teachers, but I received very few responses in English. They usually ask me not to use English instead of Arabic, maybe because I couldn't express myself or because they couldn't understand my messages. This demotivated and discouraged me to continue such attempts."*

Another student stated,

"Everything around holds attempts to improve my English back. I tried many times to communicate what I learned in class with others, but they rarely reply in English. This situation represents a hindrance on my way to learn English. I feel disappointed."

A third student explained,

"I feel frustrated because our English teachers never care very much about encouraging us to use English and so are our parents. I think they should always motivate us to learn and use English. I think such motivation is a crucial factor that can help us overcome the difficulties we encounter on our way to acquire English."

The fourth main difficulty Saudi students encounter in their way of acquiring English is related to inappropriate textbooks. Thirty-eight out of 293 students (13%) thought that textbooks have some problems that negatively affect their EFL acquisition. They mentioned that textbooks should concentrate on the most frequent words and expressions and review and recycle them again and again until they are able to absorb them. They complained about some odd words and expressions which are rarely used, irrelevant topics that deal with very specialized issues and going deep in explaining some grammatical points. One student explained, *"We need to learn the most frequent words and*

expressions, and in order to acquire them we should be exposed to them many times. Why should we learn words rarely used in everyday English? We learn them and never use them; they are very strange words."

Another stated, *"Some textbooks topics discussed very specialized issues such as sea animals, archeology, electricity, symbiosis, etc. Instead general topics are more beneficial to language acquisition."*

A third student complained, *"Why should we learn grammar in details? We sometimes get confused because of grammar. I think grammar should be simplified and only main and frequent grammar points are to be introduced."*

V. DISCUSSION, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of this study reveal four cornerstone pillars which could be considered the most influential external difficulties that face Saudi students on their way of learning EFL. As revealed by the results of this study, opposite to what Alkhalwaldeh (2010) concludes and consistent with the researcher's assumption, our students do not have any negative attitudes towards learning English; although they complained about some difficulties and problems, all the interviewees expressed their willingness and readiness to learn this language. In comparison with Al-Nasser's study (2015), there are some common agreements between the findings of this study and his. However, there are some other crucial difficulties absent from his study's findings, i.e. **lack of exposure to and practice of EFL** and **demotivating environment**. The four difficulties revealed by this study should be studied in details individually and in relation to each other so that possible and comprehensive solutions and elucidations could be proposed and applied in the field.

Acquiring EFL successfully is not an easy task. Many factors contribute to this difficulty. Learning EFL and achieving proficiency needs **enough exposure and practice, serious and competent teachers, well designed and organized textbooks, a motivating environment** and many other factors. All these factors and difficulties are concluded and discussed in Gan (2012), Gan (2013) and Bathan, Aldersi and Alsout (2014) who investigate EFL speaking difficulties. However, this study investigates EFL acquisition in general, arranges these difficulties according to their degree of difficulty and gives priority to exposure to and practice of EFL. Such relative weights of difficulty degrees should be taken into account when designing and building up EFL curricula and textbooks. For example, initiatives such as launching English school clubs and English learning camps should be considered so that students have opportunities to be exposed to and use English naturally not artificially. More and more ideas can be created to overcome the other factors or difficulties, i.e. Rewards can be used to increase motivation.

Unfortunately, most of these factors are partially or even completely absent from the EFL learning environment. Consequently, this absence creates difficulties and problems that hinder and delay foreign language acquisition. Each of these difficulties has its own reasons and effects as revealed in the results of this study. Moreover, the interrelation between these difficulties and problems adds more complexity to them and as a result finding possible solutions needs serious efforts and exertions and creative and innovative initiatives. Giving priority to the four cornerstone factors mentioned above could cover the various dimensions of EFL learning process and lead to better results of mastering English language.

The **insufficient exposure to and practice of language** in real life situations could hinder or hold back students' remembrance ability, the availability of authentic chances to acquire language, the natural way of language acquisition and the availability of enough time to use the language. The **teachers' lack of seriousness and training** could be related to the old and traditional methods teachers follow, the ignorance of important parts of the textbook, the exam oriented teaching/learning strategy and the waste of class time. The **lack of environment motivation** pertain to the demotivating atmosphere which causes some kind of disappointment and frustration. Some of the **textbooks defects** are the lack of concentration on and recycling of the most frequent words and expressions, the odd words and expressions and the irrelevant topics and grammatical points. These four critical problems and related factors form a mixture of elements that should be well considered when designing, building up, evaluating and developing EFL curricula and textbooks.

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