



Barriers in the Learning of English: An Exploratory Study

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analyzed and interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Education in Saudi Arabia (KSA) is becoming crucially important due to its economic and technological connections. Teaching English is felt important especially at tertiary level for many educational reasons. The experts are of the view that educational objectives will remain unachieved unless teaching-learning of English is properly done. The entire process of the learning of English in general is attributed to many variables' adverse effect. The study explores the barriers faced by the learners while learning English. Descriptive method of analysis includes purposive sampling technique to choose two samples: students and teachers. The study took place at KAU-Jeddah consuming around 8 months. The findings indicate that the obstacles confronted by the learners are of different kinds such as learning habits, information retention abilities, linguistic issues, and attitude towards learning. Other barriers are concerned with the nature of learning styles, methods, pedagogies etc.

Keywords: Barriers; learning; habits; linguistic issues; retention abilities; pedagogies.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education as a concept is generally misunderstood by many. It is a complex system and learning is a part of it. Learning, teaching and education are inseparably connected to each other. Though most institutions try to arrange necessary equipment, infrastructure, workforce to carry out the teaching-learning activities yet there are some barriers that need to be handled tactfully. Some barriers act as extraneous which can be controlled, but there are many which can be regarded as intervening the influence of which will continue to be there in the system. These will eventually affect the learning activity unless dealt with in a specific manner.

In the present research, the target learners are those who are just like any students of other parts of the world. They may come across to different barriers while learning English as a second/foreign language. These barriers to learning English language may include: personal, socio-economic, psychological (attitudinal), infrastructural or even institutional/administrative. These categories may further be grouped as: habitual barriers, linguistic barriers, personal barriers, physiological barrier (fatigue) and pedagogic barriers. The ultimate purpose of the study is to explore the prominent barriers that affect the learning of English in Saudi Arabia leading to the stage where a compatible strategy may accordingly be evolved for better and effective outcomes in near future.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies have been carried out by different researchers such as in researchers [1] and [2]. Research indicates that many learners come across many barriers in attaining the target of second language reading. The main reasons pertaining to the issue of learning include: lack of linguo-cultural knowledge, lack of interest and motivation for learning, complete dependence on the classroom activities, lack of opportunities to read interesting material [3]. Teaching style can be considered as another barrier for learning, observed in [4]. 'Pedagogies also exert great impact on reading comprehension'.

The important elements of reading comprehension are quite complex due to the reason that these involve some psycholinguistic variables [5]. A specific study reveals in [6], 'that there are learning connections with the linguistic and sociolinguistic factors'.

Quite a few popular barriers have only been mentioned above, however in a general context. But, the following is a brief description of some of the relevant points of Saudi English language learning environment.

2.1 Barriers in the Learning of English in KSA

Learning barriers are as crucial as the case of learning itself in general. It is important in Saudi Arabia as well. Saudi government does not hesitate in utilizing a bulk of money on the staffing and hiring process for teachers especially of English to create much better infrastructural facilities, curricular development (policies, planning, textbooks etc), research and training, there always remain some barriers in the learning English, though.

2.1.1 Barrier of bilingualism

The barrier of the first language in the second language learning is always inevitable as most of the bilingual and cross cultural studies have contended. In the present case, the background of Arabic (L1) affects the learning of English for the target learners. Arabic being the language of religion and Qur'an can never be ignored in a place like Saudi Arabia. The discussion doesn't lead to any formulation of hypotheses that Saudi learners encounter barriers due to the fact that Arabic overshadows English. There are many countries where real bilingualism prevails. In addition, knowledge as a whole has been highly emphasized in Islam through the noble teachings of holy Qur'an and the traditions of prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

2.1.2 Motivational factor

It was noticed that most students had failed to learn a target subject due to lack of motivation and similar other variables. Authors in [7] added that motivation influences language achievement. The researchers in [8] opined that integrative approach might exert positive interest towards learning a language due to increased motivation level.

A study by [9] found that the attitude of the learners for the target achievement can be one of the most important indicators of the learners' achievement. An author in [10] also concluded that the dropout case of the language students did not actually possess the aptitude as well as the attitude for the learning of the language.

As mentioned earlier, motivation plays a highly significant role in encouraging the learners to come up to the desired level. As teaching is considered as an interactive and two-way process, the concerned teacher must deliver the material to the learners, and they must receive the teacher's delivery. The teacher's and learner's motivation also interact with each other to yield better results; or else the entire activity will be somewhat futile. In another study [11], the researcher is of the opinion that 'Learning skills and behavioral patterns have close connections, and affect each other during the teaching-learning activities.

Both kinds of motivation are important in a given context of education. Sometimes, external motivation affects the internal motivation of the teachers as well as the students. Intrinsic (internal) motivation is highly important which creates a basis for other forms of motivation. It has been best understood as the sense of satisfaction which learners obtain during the process. On the other hand, extrinsic motivation is the outcome of those external factors that encourage participation in the classroom as revealed in [12]. Motivational factors can lead to the autonomous learning (self-directed or independent learning) felt a researcher in [13] which can be described as the capacity of learners to manage and self-monitor their learning processes referred in [14].

The issues like interest, attitude, dedication and commitment are not only related to the educational context of Saudi, it is perhaps the most challenging issues in the field of education in rest of the world as well. A teacher without motivation, sincerity and dedication may not be a true professional as a teacher.

2.1.3 Language and culture

Language learning doesn't take place in isolation. It is closely related to the culture of a particular group. Therefore, cultural factors can't be ignored while discussing language education simply because of the fact that a language is a product of culture and a language preserves a culture in the best possible manner. In other words, there is always a need of a context in which an individual develops along with the language and surroundings.

The culture and educational setting may act as a motivating factor as well as mentioned in [16]. In Saudi Arabia, Arabic is extremely important due

to religious and social reasons. However, the importance of English is now being realized these days for the purpose of economy, business, technology and higher education. Recently, it was shown [15] that integration of local culture can be an effective tool to combat with the cultural barriers in English classrooms.

2.1.4 Language and the factor of anxiety

Language anxiety is another crucial factor that seems to be inevitable in the English language teaching and learning situation in Saudi Arabia. Studies in [16] and [17] describe language anxiety as nothing but just an apprehension of the learner when he gets ready to acquire the target language. It has been an established fact that there is always a negative effect of the language anxiety on the learning of a second or foreign language as shown in the studies of [18] and [19].

2.1.5 Lack of clear objectives

Learning is nothing but a change in one's behavior and personality. One must know about the type of change targeted or else it will be a journey without a destination. Consequently other ambiguous barriers emerge in the process. The content must accordingly be designed or selected in order to avoid the impart of irrelevant knowledge or undesired skills.

Thus, it is also the concerned teacher's responsibility to diagnose such problems and extend help to overcome them if possible. The entire process follows a systematic approach starting from conceiving goals, selecting material, delivering the targets and assessing in a manner that approves the teaching efficiency.

2.1.6 The teacher: The most important factor

Being the central figure in the entire system and a hub of all pedagogic activities, teachers should be accountable for bringing out the desired changes in the behavior of the learners. In this case, the education and training of teachers is always needed for effective learning outcomes. Though it is quite controversial whether a teacher is born or made, there is no controversy over the issue of innate traits that need to be developed in teachers to make them a very useful resource. In case if a teacher has no formal pre-service teacher training, he should go for in-service training or professional developmental

programmes. In addition, a teacher should do some action research, attend workshops/seminars and even conferences to learn further. All kinds of teachers are also advised to undergo specific professional development programs in order to be update and equipped in particular domains [20].

As an experience, one may raise the issue that a good number of teachers join teaching profession after having teacher training, but there are many others who have neither in-service nor pre service training for teaching except a few years experience in some schools/colleges. Such teachers need to undergo certain developmental programs. However, they are even not at all interested in attending any continuous development program, and if they are forced to, they only attend physically.

As there are many barriers faced during the teaching/learning process, there is a crucial need of strategies to be developed to cope with the issues. It has been usually noticed that quite many students are physically present but mentally inactive in the classes due to possible emotional issues. Being a friendly person, a teacher can deal with some sort of such problems if he really wishes to [21]. Moreover, such issues may be taken up later to accomplish the target.

Despite the fact that many researchers have contributed in different forms, there remains a gap between the need and availability of reviews on the issue. A comprehensive work was required in the local context to develop a vision as to what are the barriers that can appropriately be tackled while teaching. The present study is a modest step towards the conceived aims and objectives.

3. THE PRESENT STUDY

The study is of qualitative/exploratory type. It explores the general and specific barriers of learning English. General barriers refer to pedagogic, psychological, sociological and philosophical while linguistic factors are specific in nature.

3.1 The Research Questions

- 1 What are the common obstacles or barriers while learning English?
- 2 What are the reasons of such barriers?

3.2 Subjects

3.2.1 Learners

Forty five EFL learners, ages 18 to 22, participated in questionnaire-filling activity. They were students in a first year program in a college of KAU-Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. They were learning English as a foreign language and taking Intensive English courses at the tertiary level.

3.2.2 Teachers

Forty four teachers of English from KAU-Jeddah filled in the teachers' questionnaire.

3.3 Instruments

Two self developed questionnaires were used by the investigator to elicit the required data from the students on the barriers of learning in English. The questions were not asked directly because the learners even don't know as to what are the barriers and they affect their learning of English.

3.3.1 Establishing validity

Validity is an important point of consideration in especially experimental researches that technically establishes the amount of systematic and logical measurement with the help of a group of subject experts. In the present context, since it was an exploratory study, content validity was applied to assess the validity of the instrument in accordance with the objectives of the study [22] in order to be sure if the questions are valid. It was ascertained by taking the opinions of various experts in the field of ELT/ESL/educational research and testing.

3.4 Data Collection

As mentioned, the research tools were developed following the standard of a descriptive research. As the sample(s) were related to the researcher's workplace, it was not much difficult to convince the subjects by explaining the purpose of the research and the confidentiality of the data. After a few reminders, the teachers (colleagues) returned the filled in questionnaires.

3.5 Research Questions

The following questions were addressed:

1. Does the designed questionnaire measures what it aims to?

2. Are the items representative of the dimensions of the study?
3. Is it appropriate for the sample of the study?
4. Does the instrument include the features of a questionnaire?

- 18 Only around 40% respondents are able to manage their time well.
- 19 Nearly 80% respondents don't make notes in classes.
- 20 Approximately 30% students find studying boring.

Experts were consulted to assure the mentioned points above, and the questionnaire was edited according to the comments.

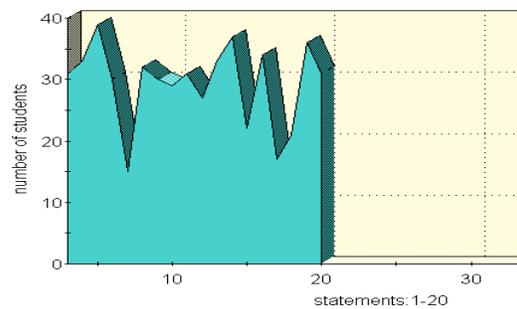
The above data analysis and the following based on the Graph 1 reveal that there exist active barriers of learning English. Based on the responses of the students, the barriers can be grouped as: Personal, fatigue, family, motivational and teaching related.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Item-wise Analysis of the Students' Responses (Appendix-A)

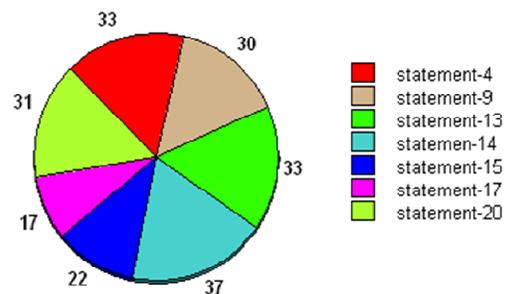
- 1 Around 40% students say that they are happy being at the college.
- 2 Approximately 20% respondents are the opinion that they feel comfortable joining with activities in class. The percentage is quite low.
- 3 Some 60% students find it difficult sitting in the class.
- 4 More than 60% say that their teachers understand their learning problems.
- 5 80% students confirm that they find it easy to make friends.
- 6 60% respondents state that they always try hard to learn their subjects.
- 7 Only 30% are of the opinion that they are never tired in the college.
- 8 Around 65% students would like to stay in their own rooms while being at their houses.
- 9 60% respondents find it difficult to concentrate in their classes.
- 10 61% students like to be at home with the family, and they always want to leave the college at the earliest.
- 11 Less than 60% students enjoy working in a group.
- 12 Around 55% students would like to go to visit their friends, thus such students are outgoing type.
- 13 Nearly 70% respondents confirm that teachers teach well.
- 14 Around 80% respondents usually sleep quite late at nights which may lead to the issue of tiredness or fatigue.
- 15 Nearly 41% get educational support at their homes.
- 16 Nearly 40% students say that they find their classes difficult when they are tired.
- 17 Only around 30% respondents get parents/brothers' help in their studies.

students perception on barriers



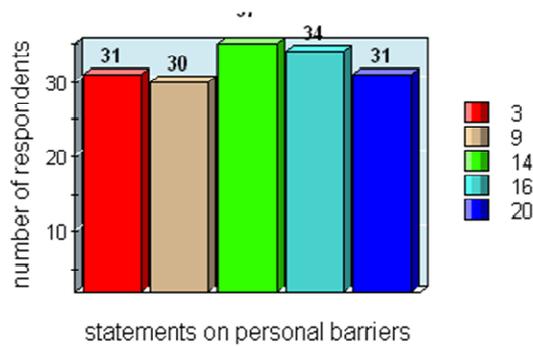
Graph 1. Students' perception on learning barriers

Similarly, the students' responses clearly revealed that specific barriers such as fatigue, lack of motivation, parental attitude, life style and teaching factors also exert influence on the learning of English.



Graph 2. Students' perception on specific barriers

As regards personal barriers, both the item analysis of the data and the graphical presentation reveal that personal factors also affect the learning of English.



Graph 3. Students' perception on personal barriers

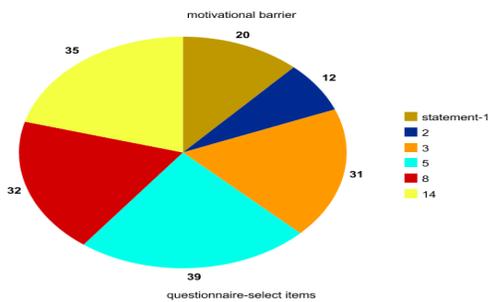
4.2 Results (based on the Analysis of the Responses from the Teachers)

- 1 More than 45% teachers opine that the teaching is a boring experience.
- 2 Around 27% respondents say that the students attend classes without much interest.
- 3 More than 70% feel that there is a lack of participation among students.
- 4 72.72 % say that the students seem to be tired.
- 5 According to some 88.63% teachers the students usually become active on mobiles if unchecked.
- 6 More than 65.90% are of the pinion that they don't do homework.
- 7 Little more than 34% state that some of the students come without books, pens etc.
- 8 More than 72% teachers opine most of the time they wait the class to get over.
- 9 Around 66% agree that they can discuss about personal things for a long time.
- 10 More than 70% teacher are of the opinion that some of the students often take permission to drop their family members.
- 11 Around 66% teachers feel that group learning usually distracts the students.
- 12 Exactly 75% expresses that the students only depend on class teaching.
- 13 Nearly 82% teachers feel that sometimes the students come to college without breakfasts.
- 14 Some 80% are of the view that the students don't do anything in the class unless asked.

4.2.1 Motivational factor

(The responses from the teachers' group-2)

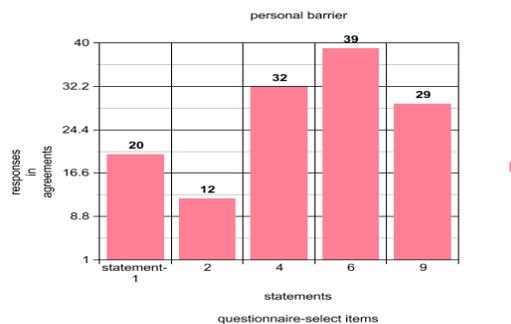
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- 8 More than 72% teachers opine most of the time they wait the class to get over.
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Graph 4. Teachers' perception on motivational barrier

4.2.2 Personal factor

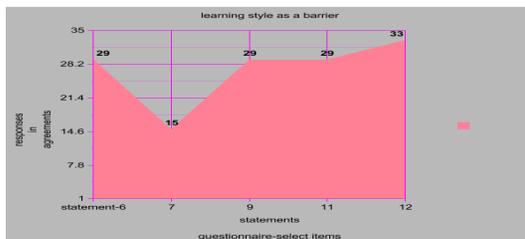
- 1 More than 45% teachers opine that the teaching is a boring experience.
- 2 Around 27% respondents say that the students attend classes without much interest.
- 4 72.72% say that the students seem to be tired.
- 6 More than 65.90% are of the pinion that they don't do homework.
- 9 Around 66% agree that they can discuss about personal things for a long time.



Graph 5. Teachers' perception on personal barrier

4.2.3 Learning style as a barrier

- 1 More than 45% teachers opine that the teaching is a boring experience.
- 6 More than 65.90% are of the opinion that they don't do homework.
- 7 Little more than 34% state that some of the students come without books, pens etc.
- 9 Around 66% agree that they can discuss about personal things for a long time.
- 11 Around 66% teachers feel that group learning usually distracts the students.
- 12 Exactly 75% expresses that the students only depend on class teaching.



Graph 6. Teachers' perception on learning style

5. FINDINGS, DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Findings

The item-wise analysis and graphical presentation of data revealed that all the general, specific and personal barriers exist especially in the case of learning. The result of English is quite below the expectations. Each barrier has a specific reason which needs to be studied and tackled appropriately. As it has already been mentioned that almost all the necessary infrastructural facilities are available (including e-resource), one can point one's finger towards these barriers and a suitable strategy should also be evolved to cope with them.

5.2 Discussion

The results of the present study and the literature review seem to support the finding that sample students encounter learning barriers in learning English. There is a variety of barriers and each barrier has a pedagogic relevance which should be coped with. Starting from the life style, habits, fatigue and lack of motivation to pedagogy it has been noticed that the learners suffer a lot. Each factor seems to be important which the family

and the teachers are supposed to look into. Though the learners group is mature and self dependant to a great extent, the teachers' role can't be ignored.

In order to deal with the learning barriers, there is a need of modification in the existing curriculum. An appropriate curriculum may prove to be ineffective if the teachers are not well equipped for the task. Thus, the concerned teachers should go through the professional development activities. In addition, a provision of remedial teaching and counseling should be made to facilitate the learners.

It is found that the learners can be motivated if there is an opportunity of the job in the area of expertise. More vocational learning institution should be established. Lastly, stipend provision should be made if needed.

5.3 Conclusions

Learning barriers are as crucial as learning or education. It is because of the fact that most individuals or institutions fail to achieve the educational targets basically due to some extraneous or intervening variables within the educational system. Keeping the learning barriers in view, it seems imperative for policy makers, planners, curriculum designers, pedagogues and administrators to consider the pedagogic relevance of all the expected barriers in order to diagnose, explore their types, choose relevant material, evolve effective strategy and finally achieve the target.

It is very common with most institutions in Saudi in general and language department/EFL centres in particular as they face such issues in day to day teaching-learning activities. English as a medium of instruction add up to the problem at higher/tertiary education due to the inappropriate learning experience in the past. Bilingual scenario though not always an adverse factor, affects negatively in most cases because one's mother-tongue overpowers the target language for many socio-cultural and linguistic reasons. Therefore, it becomes inevitable to make all effort to cater to the urgent needs of the target learners to yield maximum possible educational benefits.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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APPENDIX-A

Questionnaires for the students

S.N.	Statements	Agree	Undecided	Disagree
1	I feel happy at college.			
2	I feel comfortable joining in with activities in class.			
3	I find sitting in the class very difficult			
4	My teachers understand my problems			
5	I find it easy to make friends.			
6	I always try hard to learn my subjects			
7	I am never tired in the college			
8	I stay in my room at my home			
9	It is difficult to concentrate in the class			
10	I stay happy being with my family.			
11	I enjoy working in a group			
12	I often go to visit my friends			
13	My teachers teach well.			
14	I sleep quite late at nights			
15	The support I get at home helps me in the college.			
16	When I am tired I find class more difficult.			
17	My parents/brothers help me with my studies.			
18	I manage my time well.			
19	I don't make notes in class.			
20	I find studying boring.			

APPENDIX-B

Questionnaires for the teachers

S.N.	Statements	Agree	Undecided	Disagree
1	Teaching is basically boring.			
2	The students attend classes without much interest.			
3	There is a lack of participation among students.			
4	They seem to be tired.			
5	They become active on mobiles if unchecked.			
6	Most students don't do homework.			
7	Some of them come without books, pens etc.			
8	Most of the time they wait the class to get over.			
9	They can discuss about personal things for a long time.			
10	They often take permission to drop their family members.			
11	Group learning usually distracts them.			
12	They only depend on class teaching.			
13	They sometimes come without breakfasts.			
14	They don't do anything in the class unless asked.			

APPENDIX-C

Data from the students' questionnaire

S.N.	Agree	Undecided	Disagree
1	20	11	14
2	12	15	18
3	31	6	8
4	33	6	6
5	39	2	4
6	30	9	6
7	15	11	19
8	32	7	6
9	30	7	8
10	31	6	8
11	29	6	10
12	27	12	6
13	33	5	7
14	37	3	5
15	22	7	16
16	34	4	7
17	17	9	19
18	21	16	8
19	36	5	4
20	31	5	9

APPENDIX-D

Responses from the teachers

S.N.	Statements	Agree	Undecided	Disagree
1		20	10	14
2		12	14	18
3		31	6	7
4		32	6	6
5		39	2	3
6		29	9	6
7		15	10	19
8		32	7	5
9		29	6	8
10		31	6	7
11		29	6	9
12		33	4	7
13		36	3	5
14		35	5	4

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