

Factors to Consider while Teaching English to Arab Students

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When you have a chance to teach English in Saudi Arabia at different levels – beginners, intermediate, and advanced levels, you will discover a lot of challenges that face a teacher of a foreign language. Those barriers vary from one situation into another, from one level into another, and from one place into another. Some barriers are connected with the culture in question, others – with the contents of the syllabus, passing through the method your students are taught with while taking other subjects. These aforementioned barriers are few among many others. They are focused on here because of their importance in obstructing learning and teaching a foreign language like English. Moreover, at a college level, English may be chosen as an optional, elective, pass-guaranteed, and grade-gained subject. In this sense, this issue might become a good topic for researchers who are interested in teaching and learning a foreign language. Some students told me in more than one department and on many occasions that they chose English because they do not like much work and in this subject they are sure of passing the test. What a teacher expects from such students is just nothing; they have no mere idea of learning at all. They need to fill in a number of courses they have to register in their transcripts with no effort on their part. I will address some of the challenges teachers of English at Saudi Arabian schools should be cautious of while practicing their career. The aim of this article is to attract the attention of teachers of foreign languages to these obstacles that definitely exist and hinder all efforts of teaching and learning a foreign language. At the end of this article, some suggestions are provided depending on my experience in teaching English at different levels and to different types of students.

Keywords: teachers, English, foreign, students, language

Introduction

Teaching English requires paying attention to some elements that a lot of instructors ignore or try to avoid. The reason for such behavior is related to educational background and the interest in research as well as social and cultural backgrounds. Here, what I am concerned about is the factors instructors should consider while teaching English; factors such as the curricula, the environment English is taught at, the traditionally adopted method of teaching in classes, the society you are teaching in, and the lack of support you may need as an instructor from the colleague. I will address those factors, depending on my teaching experience.

Studies conducted in the field focus on difficulties that learners face while communicating and suggest some solutions. Authors of those studies think that speaking is the main skill a learner needs and a teacher should focus on. Al Hosni (2014) in her article “Speaking Difficulties Encountered by Young EFL Learners” asserts that “Speaking is the active use of language” (22) to communicate with others. Though she admits that “oral skills [are] being simply one aspect of learning language” (22), other skills are not addressed in that article. From her article, one can trace some difficulties and problems that are applicable elsewhere.

In their paper, Abdelgadir and Ramana (2016) focus on “the study of sounds.” For them, “it is no use learning the written symbols of a language and reciting its grammar rules without being able to communicate” (221). Here a researcher can read about some of the difficulties that are addressed and related to the topic of teaching English.

According to the study conducted by Elttayef and Hussein (2017), “discourse competence” relates to other performances of a language. They state that “Arab students have no knowledge of even Basic English although they are taught English in schools” (1). One of the reasons, they stress, is that a teacher “suffers the most and faces a lot of problems while teaching [students] a prescribed book or course” (1). Hence, they addressed in their article a punch of challenges that might benefit any related study on the topic.

Ansari (2012) refers to some problems a teacher may encounter while teaching English to the Arabs in his article “Teaching of English to Arab Students: Problems and Remedies.” He concludes: “The progress of the students in learning the English language totally depends on the competent teachers and the curriculum they are taught” (524).

Recommendations and suggestions at the end of this article might be adopted in the process of teaching English. They also help teachers, educators, and specialists of curricula to develop both helpful educational

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environments and practical ways of learning and teaching English skills. This paper will help those involved teachers understand and prepare themselves for challenges addressed here.

Discussion

A – English as a Requirement

English is a required subject in both intermediate and secondary schools in Saudi Arabia. Depending on whether they attend a public or religious school, students must attend between two and five classes per week. Each class is 45 minutes long.

B – Teaching Methods

In most, if not all, classes, English is taught in the form of a monotonous one-way monologue (the teacher-centered approach in Saudi Arabia). The teacher enters the classroom, calls attendance, asks students to open the assigned book; in some cases, he / she helps students find the page, and explains words he / she is required to focus on as instructed in the teacher's guide. Then, a passage at the beginning of the lesson in question is read aloud by the teacher followed by its translation into the mother tongue. Usually, time is consumed in explaining the content of an assigned English text in the native language. Students do nothing except listen to the teacher and in the best cases, some try to write the translation in their texts. At the end of the semester, they learn by heart few things to pass the exam. They usually do not bother themselves about the actual text; they prepare for the exam from the help hints/strategies to spot answers and review, teachers provide them with a shortcut to passing the course in question at the end. They don't use any of the material they studied after the exam.

C – Factors to Be Considered While Teaching English as a Foreign Language

In the light of my thirty-some years of experience in teaching English, I recommend thinking about the following factors that will contribute and help in teaching and learning English as a foreign language in a better way. These factors include the ones given below.

First, the most important item is the text you are going to use in teaching. *Curricula* are designed in advance and in case of necessity are hardly changed. What is expected to be changed is the cover and the font of the text, and some pictures might be added. Moreover, books that are published by international well-known publishers do serve specific ideology and are prepared to serve some cultures and conceptual tendencies. As an instructor, you must work from a given text and stick to it. The schoolmaster and inspector will visit the class a few times a year to determine how well the students have learned with the text in question. The entire text should be discussed according to the time and schedule set out by the instructor at the beginning of the semester. As a result, the teacher's aim moves from concentrating on the teaching process to meeting the timetable and covering the text in question – a text that has a lot of content. In short, for those in charge, the quantity of the lessons becomes more important than the content.

When I spoke with an English school inspector about problems in the text I was teaching – issues that could be reviewed, changed, or removed – he asked me to write my notes and comments and submit them. I did, but he never replied.

Another aspect is the type of instruction. Because the instructor must cover the entire given text and other subjects are taught using the teacher-centered method, and because students are resistant to change, a teacher has no choice but to teach using the teacher-centered method; all students expect the teacher to do everything. To put it another way, it's difficult to use group activities outside of class, or to anticipate reader-response interaction, for example. Since students are unaware of such methods and administrators are reluctant to consider any new invention or process reform, any new activity, if necessary and applicable, takes a long time to train students for the method in question.

If students are asked to form groups, for example, it will take a long time for them to do so. Second, the noise they will create when shifting chairs and tables will annoy other nearby classes. Students and school officials view a teacher who participates in an activity other than the conventional listening-class approach as a frivolous individual who wants to waste time. Such a teacher is not eligible in the eyes of certain administrative officials.

Third, the environment in which English is taught is not conducive to foreign language instructions. As I previously said, the repetitive one-way process, the class size exceeding thirty students, all of whom are beginners, the teacher's load that is out of reach, the limited time a teacher has to teach, and the lack of help one receives are all factors to consider if we look for succeeding appropriately in doing such a job.

Furthermore, the conditions in the classroom are detrimental; you have noisy, chaotic classrooms. You have a huge class of over thirty students in your class. In the back of the class, there are children playing. You've got kids who are talking and others who are listening. Others may have finished their homework for

different subjects. These students aren't doing it for the first time; they've done it before in other courses. Many who sit in the back of the classroom assume they are free to do whatever they want. And it seems that the teachers are just instructing those in the front row. And those who want to learn in the back couldn't because they couldn't hear in such a loud, distracting environment.

Fourth, the ineffectiveness of any effort is exacerbated by a lack of support from both colleagues and society. If your colleagues are suspicious of everything you do, if they see you and your subject as a threat to what they're teaching or doing in their classes, and if they see what you're doing as a waste of time that won't help students in the long run – if all of this and more happens at your school, it's a real challenge that will take a lot of effort and will not be easily solved. To put it another way, individual's efforts are insufficient to resolve such a problem.

In terms of culture, it is a different polar power – the majority of people consider English as an obstacle to their children's success; it is difficult to read, odd to write, and useless to use in a group where everyone speaks a different language. Some parents like to see their children speak and use English in public places, such as hospitals. However, their objective emphasis turns to their children's passing due to their failure to assist them with their homework and their children's concerns about difficulties they are having while learning English.

Officials become preoccupied with the issue of "passing" the exam. My school principal once refused to xerox my test because he thought the questions were difficult, despite the fact that he didn't speak English and judged questions solely by looking at them. He used to summon me to his office after each exam, telling me that the percentage of students who failed my subject was the highest he had ever seen. He used to say that there was no reason for five to ten percent of students to fail the English exam. At the college level, it is the same problem; more than the usual process of sending an official letter of reminding the teacher in question of what he / she should do, he / she may be denied of teaching in his/her specialized field. By the way, the topic of job-security might become a serious issue, particularly when you are hired according to a contract which could be ended up by one of your bosses. No need to mention that a lot of managers, directors, and bosses have no idea or knowledge of your specialization, concerns, and commitment.

Of course, there are other variables that influence the learning of English, such as the relationship between native and foreign language speakers, supporting materials, and teacher qualifications.

- The Arabic alphabet is written from right to left, while the English alphabet is written from left to right. Some students can become perplexed as a result of this, whether in writing or in their approach to words, phrases, and sentences.

- Materials such as posters, cards, and tapes that assist in the teaching of English are important. Usually they are not available. There are a lot of reasons for not having such materials; other teachers do not use them, such materials are lost or not provided, you have to apply for them.

- Qualifications are critical; decision-makers should hire qualified teachers. In addition, the majority of teachers lack formal training in teaching methods. As a result, they tend to teach in the same way that their own teachers did decades ago. You will be surprised, at least in some cases, to learn that English is being taught by teachers whose area of expertise is not English. Even teaching the fundamentals necessitates the use of a qualified individual who can effectively transfer knowledge.

What I encountered at the college level when teaching non-specialists is almost identical to what I encountered in secondary school. The assigned text usually reflects the best choice for those in charge and is prepared and designed by the publisher to be distributed all over the region if not the world. Because the text does not meet some students' needs, they may develop a dislike for it. "Try your best and stay away from the pieces that trigger problems," those in charge used to say. Besides, at the college level, I met students who could not recognize some letters!

Conclusion

After considering the factors mentioned above, the following suggestions are of great importance:

- Curricula should be subjected to regular review and assessment by experts and professionals in the area.

- Those who design textbooks should concentrate on modern language, simple style, and appropriate content.

- The size of the class and the amount of time dedicated to teaching English should be carefully considered.

- Workshops for parents will be held to remind them of the value of what their children are learning.

- Colleagues should be made conscious of the importance of working together. Principals must also be told of the conditions for teaching a foreign language.
- Supportive materials should be available. Furthermore, assistants must be open at all times.
- Officials must employ trained teachers with the requisite credentials to carry out the task of teaching a foreign language.
- Training in teaching methods should be given when it is necessary.
- Frequent assessment and evaluation are important.

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Чинники, які необхідно враховувати під час навчання англійської арабських студентів

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Гізан, Саудівська Аравія

Під час викладання англійської мови в Саудівській Аравії на різних рівнях – від початківців до просунутих, виникає багато проблем, з якими зустрічається вчитель іноземної мови. Ці чинники змінюються від однієї ситуації до іншої, від одного рівня до іншого та від одного місця до іншого. Деякі чинники пов'язані з культурою, інші – зі змістом навчальної програми, із методами, за якими навчають учнів під час вивчення інших предметів. Окреслено, що на рівні коледжу англійська мова може бути обрана як факультатив, гарантований для здобуття успішної кар'єри та оцінки. Розглянуто деякі проблеми, які для вчителів англійської мови в школах Саудівської Аравії є пріоритетними. Мета статті – привернути увагу вчителів іноземних мов до чинників, які, безумовно, існують і перешкоджають викладання та вивчення іноземної мови. Подано рекомендації з досвіду викладання англійської мови на різних рівнях та для різних типів студентів.

Ключові слова: викладачі, англійська, іноземна мова, студенти, мова

Accepted: September 27, 2021



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