



## ENGLISH TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARD DIFFICULTIES FACED BY LEARNERS OF ENGLISH AT BIOLOGY DEPARTMENT

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### **Abstract:**

Teaching and learning of English as a foreign language is not only challenging, but using English as medium of instruction is also crucial. When it comes to the places where English is not a *lingua franca* (a link language), the challenges simply double and both the teachers and learners face many problems due to the fact that the target subject (biology) is difficult and the medium of teaching (English) is also not easy. Teaching of English as a subject as well as a medium of instruction (teaching) in the Gulf region in general and Saudi Arabia in particular catches attention of many researchers and scholars especially when the issue is particularly related to poor achievement. Teaching of English at preparatory level (foundation year) at King Abdulaziz University (KAU), Jeddah serves two purposes: first, it lays and strengthens the foundation of general English that they carried forward from schooling. Second, the learners are made proficient in English during the foundation year so that they can pursue their specialties later. Despite the fact that English in Saudi Arabia is generally taught at school levels also, the achievement is far below the expectations from the viewpoint of English teachers at Biological/medical/health related subjects. Moreover, 'Englishes' at these departments are known as specific, and teaching/learning is somewhat different from the context of general English. Therefore, the present article is intended to explore the teachers' perception and factors contributing to the difficulties in learning general as well as specific English. In addition, it focuses on sort of remedial teaching required to prepare the students at biology department.

**Keywords:** foreign language, difficulties, general English, Biology, perception

## **1. Introduction**

English language as a subject, skill and medium of interaction is extremely important. It is perhaps the most widely used language in the world by non-English-speaking countries. In Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) too, English is quite essential at tertiary level especially in the fields of medicine, engineering, computers and management. English is known as the language of medicine, therefore subjects like Biology is also significant as medical subjects are mostly connected to zoology (a branch of Biology). Despite the fact that English becomes doubly important for students at biology or applied science departments, EFL students in many gulf/Arab countries don't spend much time learning English at schools and colleges since the medium of instruction in these schools is not English. Biology students face difficulties due to their semi proficient background and lack of interest and opportunities to learn biology related terms in English, thus they avoid learning English for general as well as specific reasons. The paper is descriptive-exploratory in nature, especially based on the experiences at King Abdulaziz University. Findings of the study interpreted from the results and data analysis will contribute to the teaching methodology and curriculum development. Finally, it will provide a base of future research perspectives.

### **1.1. Students' background and current problems**

Generally, background of learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) indicates a modest background among most of the learners in KSA. In EFL schools in most Arab countries, English is not the medium of instruction, so it is usually ignored by the teachers, learners and other users. As students face difficulties and problems in learning/using English, remedial teaching and special education is sometimes needed to cater to the need of the learners.

The word "remedy," operationally means "correction, repair, and improvement". Remedial teaching can be based on the diagnosis of the problem faced by the learners/students. According to Selvarajan & Vasanthagumar (2012), 'students have shown good progress in their abilities and skills in English language. The effectiveness of the remedial program is affected by utilization of some existing or novel strategies of teaching/learning English. Remedial programs can significantly contribute to learners' performance in English.

Learners with special needs in English to get ready for pursuing courses at biology department need to be dealt with properly. Else, they fail to attain prescribed aims and objectives meant for them. In some cases, their failure can be directly

attributed to ineffectiveness of teaching, however, learner's background, attitude and vision do play more significant role in learning any new skill.

### **1.2. Need analysis and strategies**

Although EFL students try hard to gulf the gap between previous knowledge and current proficiency, it is quite challenging for them to acquire required proficiency in the target language (English) due to the limited opportunities and lack of vision, attitude and hard work. Moreover, most of the specific learning difficulties or learners' problems in the language learning scenario is found in critical shape as these are left unattended.

### **1.3 Purpose and significance of the study**

The ultimate purpose of this study is to explore, assess English learners' specific needs and evolve (later) strategies to teach/learn general and specific English at biology department in particular.

### **1.4 Statement of the problem**

The relative importance of linguistic factors has created an academic enthusiasm in the investigator to go deep into the learning problems and performance in Biological subjects of the students of first year of KAU, Jeddah, KSA. The characteristic learning problems arise out of the one or the other from the following list of factors: background of the medium of instruction, textbooks' difficulty level, learning habits, lack of motivation, teaching methods, teachers' training and development, college atmosphere, lack of infrastructural facility and lack of support from the administration/management.

### **1.5 Objectives of the study**

1. to find out the types of difficulties faced by learners and teachers of English at Biology department at KAU,
2. to study the possible factors that affect the learning of the target language: target language background, learners' motivation, teacher- factor etc,
3. to explore importance of remedial teaching,
4. to find out if English teachers are ready to teach the target learners,
5. to suggest other measures for teaching biology related subject in English at KAU such as writing a Biology book / biological terms for Saudi learners.

### **1.6. Research questions**

1. Why do the learners of English face difficulties at biology department?

2. What are the reasons of difficulties faced in the learning of English?
3. How can a teacher cope with such learning difficulties?

### **1.7 Delimitations of the study**

This study is delimited up to the students of foundation year English at various departments/colleges at the university within KSA and even outside the kingdom.

### **1.8 Limitations**

The study is limited to the first year students of Biology dept. of KAU-Jeddah. The study is limited to a small sample. Students' perceptions have not been elicited. Questionnaire's validity has not been tested through a pilot study or statistical means.

## **2. Review of related literature**

Most Arab learners of English encounter problems as stated by many researchers, e.g. Abdul Haq (1982), Harrison, Prator and Tucker (1975), Abbad (1988) and Wahba (1998). If we specify the case of Jordan: the native language is Arabic, and the only way to learn English in Jordan is through formal instruction restricted to the classroom activities. Thus, there is little opportunity to learn English informally with families, and in social gathering.

Pointing towards the specific linguistic difficulties, Kambal (1980) reported on three main types of error in the verb phrase: verb formation, tense, and subject-verb agreement. He discussed errors in tense under five categories: tense sequence, tense substitution, tense marker, deletion, and confusion of perfect tenses.

On the other hand, Egyptian learners of English also face problems. Some of these problems are summarised by Wahba (1998, 36), problems related to pronunciation including stress and intonation possibly due to differences in pronunciation between English and Arabic.

In Yemen and Saudi Arabia, the situation is even worse because children start learning English in grade 7 (first preparatory class). Abbad (1988, 15) admits the weakness of Yemen Arab learners of English: *"in spite of the low proficiency level in English of most applicants, they are accepted into the department"*. Motivation also plays an important part in improving and developing the learners' communicative ability. Attitudinal studies conducted on Arab students, such as those of Zughoul and Taminian (1984), Salih (1980) and Harrison et al. (1975), have consistently shown that Arab students are instrumentally motivated to learn English and that they are well

aware of the utility of knowing English (Zughoul, 1987:225). The case of Saudi Arabia is not much different from other Arab countries/states.

### **2.1. Teachers' perception of levels and problems**

Collier et al (1994) tried to analyze three biology teachers' perception of their English proficiency; however, no consensus has been achieved with respect to appropriate instruments to evaluate the spoken language proficiency of international teachers after their enrolment. In this connection, Trice (2003, 390) commented, "*the TOEFL scores do not seem to be indicative of whether the students can speak English or not.*" The author continued, 'a professor in materials science and engineering also remarked, "*the TOEFL scores on our incoming students are very high, (Trice, 2003, 395), but the actual level may differ*".

In a country like China, subject teachers' situation may be even more complicated. (Yan & Berlinder, 2011, 180). In general, non-English major college students in China are faced with an inadequate level of proficiency of most Chinese EFL teachers, large class size, limited resources and equipment, traditional teacher-student relationships, and the pressure of public examinations (Burnaby & Sun, 1989; Leng, 1997). Thus, they are used to learning English "*confined to textbooks,*" "*memorizing vocabulary and grammar rules, based on knowledge and not skills.*" (Yang, 2003, 64).

Local students' negative perceptions of language proficiency have been interwoven with ethnic stereotypes (Rubin, 1992). In other words, local students of China have believed that many teachers in China cannot speak English fluently despite the fact that they can. Besides ethnic stereotypes, undergraduate students' ratings have been also influenced by their anticipated grades. Their grades have been relatively low in mathematics and science, many of which were taught by Chinese teaching assistants (Rubin, 1992).

The case of biology subject teachers of universities in KSA may not be much different from the ones in China unless studied. Besides, biological terms are not as easy as the general words. Therefore, both teachers and learners are supposed to work with enthusiasm and dedication to cope with the situation related to learning and teaching. In addition, the textbooks may be more difficult for the level of the students, and the contents may create equally crucial problem like the medium of instruction.

The proposed research is also going to attempt to study the learning difficulties due to various factors, and a possible solution for the effective teaching/learning of Biological subjects using English at KAU-Jeddah.

### 3. Methodology

The study was a descriptive-exploratory research. Teachers in general were given questionnaire to elicit required data. Researchers' own experience and observation were also utilized to interpret results and arrive at logical conclusions.

#### 3.1 The sample

Only 42 teachers of English teaching at different colleges/universities returned the questionnaire via mail, LinkedIn, ResearchGate. Some of the local English teachers and biology professors were informally interviewed to develop ideas on the proposed issue.

#### 3.2 Data source

##### 3.2.1 Questionnaire for teachers

A questionnaire was developed by the researchers. Keeping the nature and scope of the study, only content validity was tested prior to the administration and collection of required data. (Appendix-A)

#### 3.3 Data analysis

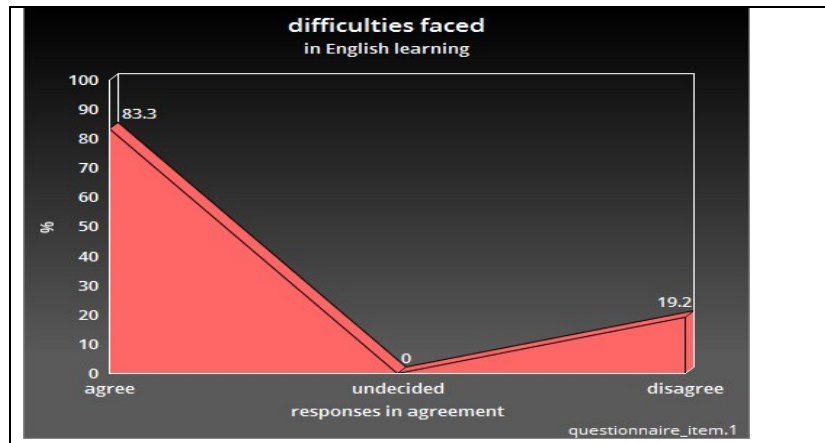
**Table 1:** Questionnaire data (N=42)

SN	Statements	Agree	Undecided	Disagree
1	Learners of English face a lot of difficulties in learning at Biology dept.	35	-	8
2	Students' background in English is quite modest.	35	3	4
3	Most students need remedial teaching to bridge the gap.	33	4	5
3	There is a need to assess special learners' need in English.	31	6	5
4	Vocabulary is the most crucial aspect of English for the learners.	35	3	4
5	'Inflections' create problems for most learners.	30	8	4
6	Change of nouns into verbs and vice versa are one of the most crucial problems.	28	6	8
7	Sentence structure (subject- verb- object) creates other type of problems for the learners.	33	5	4
8	Description of biological terms (prefix, root, suffix) should be the main focus of teaching.	30	5	7
9	There are many Latin borrowing in biological terms.	36	-	6
10	Web resource can be utilized to teach biological terms in English.	38	2	2
11. Any other comments:				

### 3.3.1 Item wise analysis

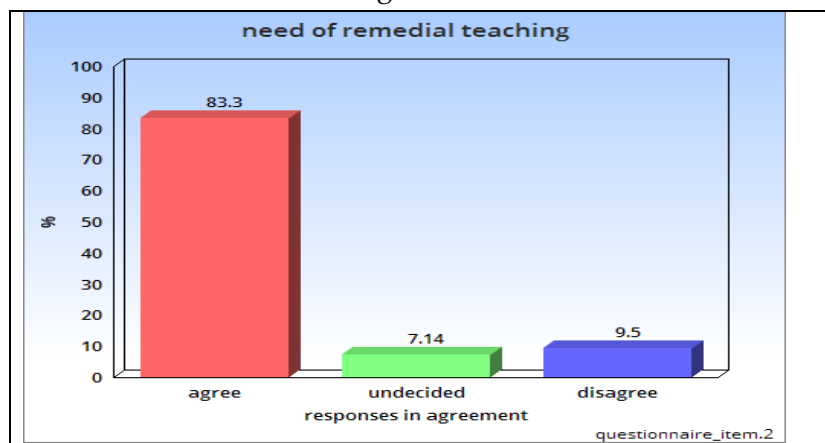
1. 35 respondents over 42(83.3%) are in agreement that Learners of English face a lot of difficulties in learning at Biology dept.

Figure 1



2. 84.3% teachers opine that there is a need of remedial teaching.

Figure 2



3. 78.5% respondent teachers contend that most students need remedial teaching to bridge the gap.

4. 73.8 % teachers are in agreement that there is a need to assess special learners' need in English.

5. 83.3% respondents contend that vocabulary is the most crucial aspect of English for the learners.

6. Around 71% teachers agree that 'Inflections' create problems for most learners.

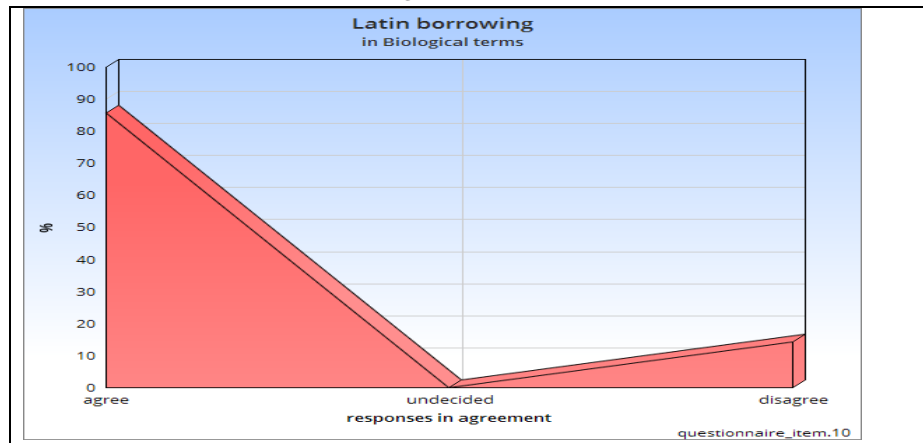
7. 66.6% agree that change of nouns into verbs and vice versa are one of the most crucial problems.

8. 78.5% respondents are of the view that sentence structure (subject- verb- object) creates other type of problems for the learners.

9. Nearly 71% teachers approve that the description of biological terms (prefix, root, suffix) should be the main focus of teaching.

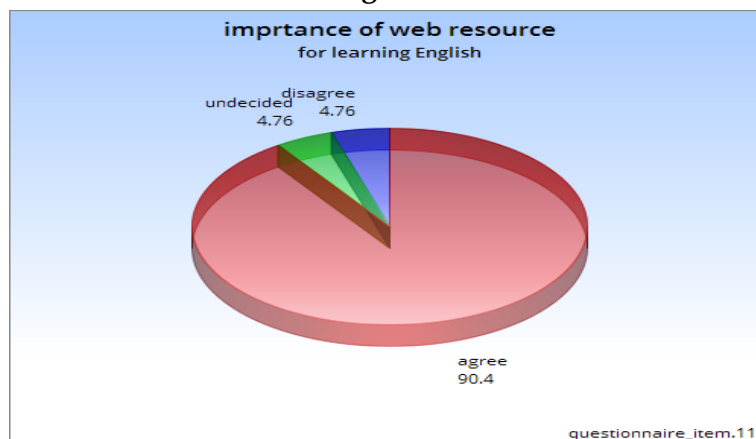
10. 85.7% teachers responded in positive that there are many Latin borrowing in biological terms.

Figure 3



11. More than 90% teachers admit that 'web resource' can be utilized to teach biological terms in English.

Figure 4



## 4. Conclusions, implications and recommendations

### 4.1 Conclusions

Achievement in English in general and ESP in particular is highly demanded. Students in medical/paramedical/applied sciences/biological sciences face specific difficulties in learning English because of the specific terms in the area/field of study. English is itself difficult for many reasons. On the other hand, borrowing features put more burdens on the EFL learners. In order to cope with the teachers' specific need to be ready to teach or develop specifically in the target fields of study in which English is taught. There is a



need to modify/design appropriate curriculum, write textbooks/adapt certain suitable materials, provides notes and supplementary material to assist in learning process. In addition, teachers' professional development and specific training is also crucial.

#### **4.2. Implications**

The result is going to be utilized not only in the Dept. of Biology, KAU- Jeddah or other colleges in the kingdom where biological sciences are taught using English as a medium of instruction. It will also help such institutions in assessing the issues, problems of learning English, learning scientific subjects like Biology and developing innovative strategies to teach/learn. The findings can be distributed among policy makers, planners, textbook writers, curriculum designers, teachers and administrators that are concerned with the teaching/learning of science in general and Biology in particular.

#### **4.3 Recommendations for future research**

Based on the findings, it is recommended that an in depth empirical study is essential in order to assess the effectiveness of new curriculum and methods of teaching.

#### **About the Author**

**Dr. Intakhab Alam Khan** (an internationally acclaimed educationist, teacher and trainer) teaches at Community college, King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah-Saudi Arabia. He has almost 24 years of experience in teaching/training/research at various universities. An author of a dozen of academic and research books, and around 68 papers in different international online and print journals, Dr. Khan has taught medical/health/business English in Saudi Arabia. His presentations at international conferences have already been published in ISI indexed proceedings. He is honorary chief editor/associate editor/asst. editor of many online educational journals published worldwide.

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## Appendix A - Teacher's questionnaires

<b>A: Personal information</b>				
<b>Name (optional):</b>	<b>Age:</b>	<b>Affiliation:</b>		
<b>Teaching Experience:</b>	<b>Qualification:</b>			
<b>Part B: Statements on ELC</b>				
Please choose an option from the following:				
*Agree (A) Undecided(UD) Disagree(DA)				
SN	Statements	Agree	Undecided	Disagree
1	Learners of English face a lot of difficulties in learning at Biology dept.			
2	Students' background in English is quite modest.			
3	Most students need remedial teaching to bridge the gap.			
4	There is a need to assess special learners' need in English.			
5	Vocabulary is the most crucial aspect of English for the learners.			
6	'Inflections' create problems for most learners.			
7	Change of nouns into verbs and vice versa are one of the most crucial problems.			
8	Sentence structure (subject- verb- object) creates other type of problems for the learners.			
9	Description of biological terms (prefix, root, suffix) should be the main focus of teaching.			
10	There are many Latin borrowing in biological terms.			
11	Web resource can be utilized to teach biological terms in English.			
12 Any other comments:				

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