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Unique Challenges Saudi EFL Learners Face

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Abstract

Learning English as a foreign language (EFL) is both a promising endeavor and a challenging undertaking. All language learners encounter unique challenges in the process of learning English, and Saudi EFL learners are no exception. This article identifies the unique and multifarious challenges Saudi EFL learners face, and explores the multidimensional causal factors in the progression of the challenges they face most commonly. The analysis first tackles the considerable challenge of accurate spelling, followed by a discussion of the challenges Saudi EFL learners encounter when learning to read and write in English. This discussion addresses challenges in sociolinguistic competence and English pronunciation arising from multivariate factors, and concludes by offering measures to help Saudi EFL learners overcome these characteristic challenges and promote their trajectory toward successful acquisition of EFL.

Keywords

challenges, Saudi EFL learners, spelling challenges, English reading challenges, writing, sociolinguistic competence challenges, English pronunciation

1. Introduction

Learning a language is a complex, time-intensive undertaking with multitudinous factors at play requiring dedication, persistence, and hard work. Even if learners, as the key players during the language-learning process, manage to exert these necessary efforts, they are nevertheless subject to a multitude of obstacles. Thus, it is vital that language educators investigate the contributory variables to these difficulties and their underlying causes. A thorough investigation will enable practitioners to trace factors that might explain low language-learning attainment, help language learners correct deficiencies, and reduce or eliminate symptoms—or, at the very least, to seek therapeutic measures to address these difficulties.

Within the Saudi EFL context in particular, the unique challenges these learners encounter throughout the English acquisition process require thoughtful and urgent attention, especially in the wake of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, along with the fact that Saudi Arabia has entered the global economic, educational, and political theaters. The full-capacity implementation of this ambitious vision on logistical grounds demands a workforce with strong English skills because this language is considered a resource beneficial for national development. Currently, competent English skills are in high demand nationwide, and are becoming prerequisites in an increasing number of domains and functions. This demand also reflects the newly realized importance of English for career advancement and scientific and technological progress, and as a means to access worldwide businesses. As a result, while absorbing what the world at large has to offer, successful enterprise requires the Saudi people to be equipped with the means to convey Saudi Arabia's vision and needs to the outside world. This task entails profound command of the international language, English.

The purpose of this exploratory discussion is to capture a more complete picture of the myriad challenges that Saudi learners confront when learning EFL, particularly in five learning areas: spelling, writing, reading, sociolinguistic competence, and pronunciation (Figure 1). Together with the triadic interplay of various language-learning factors, these challenges are responsible for Saudi EFL learners' poor performance and overall failure to achieve acceptable competence in the English language. In the following discussion, I will identify and explore causal factors in the appearance of significant English-learning challenges within each aforementioned learning area, and conclude by offering recommendations for effective teaching practices and curricula, as well as proposing some remedies with which to overcome those challenges. The following two questions will guide the in-depth description and discussion of the challenges facing this unique group of learners:

1.   What persistent difficulties do Saudi EFL learners experience in mastering English spelling, writing, reading, sociolinguistic competence, and pronunciation?

2.   What antecedents lead to the development of the significant English-learning challenges faced by Saudi EFL learners encounter?
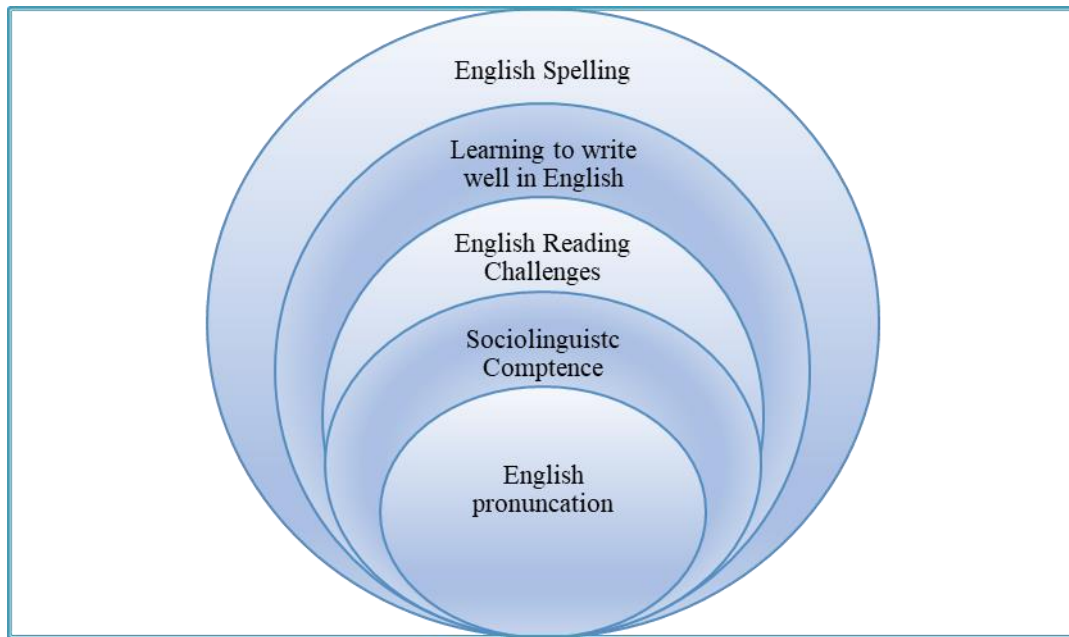
Figure 1. Five Challenges Saudi EFL Learners Confront in Learning EFL

2. Spelling Challenges Saudi EFL Learners Face

One major and persistent difficulty that Saudi EFL learners experience is mastering English spelling. They are inaccurate when spelling English words and are highly prone to making spelling errors. Al-Haisoni et al. (2015) and Al-Tamimi and Rashid (2019) argued that spelling poses a major challenge to Saudi EFL learners. This difficulty has been attributed to a number of causes, including differences between Arabic and English orthographies, first-language (L1) interference, oddities in English orthography, and differences between the L1 and second-language (L2) sound systems, in particular, leading to the L1's phonology influencing L2 spelling. In this section, I will discuss each cause, identify the most common spelling errors, and highlight the prevalent types of spelling difficulties.

3. Arabic Orthography System

Although both Arabic and English use sound-based writing systems in which graphemes represent phonemes, various peculiar features of Arabic orthography (the conventional Arabic spelling system) differ significantly from the features of English orthography. These differences create significant challenges for Saudi EFL learners when learning English spelling. First, Arabic is written in cursive, and written and read from right to left (unlike English, which is read from left to right), with most letters being connected and appearing as different allographs, depending on their position within a word. An Arabic letter may also have up to four shapes, depending on the letter itself: an isolated shape, a connected shape, a left-connected shape, and a right-connected shape.

Second, Arabic is a dominantly consonantal orthography comprising 28 letters written in a non-Roman script, with short vowels corresponding to long-vowel phonemes. Arabic has three short vowels (*a*, ´_; *i*,

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َ ; and *u*, ُ) and three long vowels (*a*: ا; *i*: ي; and *u*: و). In text, long vowels appear as graphemes, and short vowels appear as diacritic marks above or below consonants. In contrast, English has 21 consonants and five vowels. Arabic's orthographic representation of different vowel and consonant sounds is also more regular than that of English. However, Arabic does not distinguish between uppercase and lowercase letters, and its punctuation rules are much looser than those for English.

Third, as noted in the previous paragraph, Arabic orthography uses diacritic marks known as *fatha*, *damma*, and *kasra*, which are placed above or below letters to indicate the /a/, /u/, and /i/ vowels, respectively. Depending on the context, these markers can represent different sounds (including the three short vowels), no vowel, or a lengthened vowel. According to Bauer (1996) and Fischer (1998), this variability in representation results in numerous heterotopic homographs in Arabic writing (i.e., words with the same spelling but different pronunciations and meanings).

Fourth, unlike in English orthography, consonants and vowels hold different semantic values in Arabic orthography. In Arabic, a word's basic meaning is attached to its consonant structures. Vowels are then used to alter the basic meaning, creating a plethora of derived meanings. Additionally, short vowels—which can only be represented through diacritics—are often absent in Arabic. Accordingly, Arabic speakers develop what Ryan (1997) calls "vowel blindness," in which learners disregard "the presence of vowels when storing vocabulary" and make "indiscriminate choices as to which vowels to use when one is needed" (p. 189). This vowel blindness creates significant spelling-related difficulties for Saudi EFL learners in terms of English word recognition, reading, and writing.

In fact, because of the disparities between these orthographies, native speakers of Arabic and English differ in their recognition patterns and spelling strategies (Mick & Meara, 1988; Ryan, 1997). For instance, native English speakers sample strings from left to right, with three important points of consideration: a preferential response to targets on the left of the string relative to targets on the right, and a weaker response to medial targets; this creates an M-shaped search function or recognition pattern. In contrast, native Arabic speakers sample strings initially from the middle, with less attention paid to targets on either side, in what can be described as a U-shaped recognition pattern. Unsurprisingly, the unique features of Arabic orthography and their influence on recognition patterns are the main sources of Saudi EFL learners' difficulties with mastery of English spelling.

4. L1 Interference

Saudi EFL learners' erroneous transference of Arabic's orthographical features when learning English spelling creates what is known as L1 interference, or an orthographic transfer effect. For instance, according to Hayes-Harb (2006), Arabic speakers tend to transfer visual word-processing strategies concerning the semantic strength of vowels and consonants from Arabic when reading English, leading to the aforementioned issue of vowel blindness (Saigh & Schmitt, 2012). Likewise, Al-Haysony (2012) argued that EFL learners use their L1 as a cognitive resource from which to extract English's rules and principles, often resorting to methods such as generalization and substitution, among others. They also

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tend to transfer a set of psycholinguistic strategies better suited for processing Arabic words.

Negative transfers are most evident in how Saudi EFL learners handle vowels. As noted earlier, in Arabic, short vowels are only indicated by diacritics. Accordingly, Saudi EFL learners frequently gloss over vowels and focus on consonants when reading English, which results in inaccurate spelling. For instance, Saudi EFL learners tend to confuse English words such as *disk* and *desk* because /i/ and /e/ are allophones of the Arabic /i/ (*kasrah*). Because the Arabic /u/ and /ɒ/ are allophones of the Arabic /u/ (*damma*), Saudi learners may spell *put* and *pot* with either /o/ or /u/. Likewise, because Arabic lacks the phoneme /p/, Saudi learners tend to write *bicture* for *picture*. Finally, Arabic does not represent short vowels graphemically in names such as بشير ر ي ش ب (*bʃjr*); thus, an Arab learner of English would tend to write × *bsheer* instead of the correctly pronounced *Basheer* (Al-Busaidi & Al-Saqqaf, 2015).

5. Oddities in English Orthography

The inconsistencies in English orthography, discrepancies between English orthography and pronunciation, and deviations in English word structure only exacerbate the difficulties Saudi EFL learners face when learning English spelling and developing an appropriate word-handling system. Unlike Arabic, which has a regular one-to-one sound–letter conversion or one-to-one phoneme–grapheme representation, wherein sound–symbol correspondences are relatively transparent, English has a complex and often unpredictable system of mapping sounds to letters; thus, English sound–symbol correspondences are relatively more opaque.

This opacity and the irregularity of English orthography—which allows for oddities such as silent letters, double vowels, compound vowels, and compound consonants—results in difficulty for Saudi EFL learners to rely on general rules to predict spelling a word. Phonemes that are non-existent in the Arabic sound system, such as the bilabial plosive /p/ and voiced apico-alveolar fricative /v/, are also confusing because these phonemes resemble existing Arabic phonemes such as /b/→/ب/ and /f/→/ف/. Differentiating /b/ and /p/ or /f/ and /v/, as in *bery* (*very*) and *combins* (*convince*), is a common difficulty. Accordingly, learners tend to spell /v/ as *f* and /f/ as *v*, and confuse the two distinct English bilabial plosives /b/ and /p/, leading to spellings such as *blaying* (*playing*) and *bicture* (*picture*) or *hapit* (*habit*) and *hoppy* (*hobby*).

English's lack of clear phoneme–grapheme rules creates an additional challenge for Saudi EFL learners. For example, the /k/ sound can be represented by *k*, *c*, *ck*, or *ch*, depending on its position and the graphemic sequence. Similarly, *gh* has three pronunciations, as in *though*, *enough*, and *ghost*. English also contains more phonemes than graphemes; for instance, the letter *s* can represent either /s/ or /z/.

All of these nuances highlight the difficulties EFL learners face in achieving native-like English phoneme–grapheme mapping proficiency (Saigh & Schmitt, 2012). Moreover, phoneme–grapheme mapping involves at least two steps: acquiring the set of phonemes in English and acquiring their corresponding orthographic representations. Thus, Saudi EFL learners may have difficulty with either or both steps when learning English spelling.

6. The Arabic and English Sound Systems

Phonemes (the individual speech sounds of a language) are typically divided into consonant and vowel phonemes. With respect to the differences between Arabic and English phonologies, English comprises 24 consonant phonemes and 20 vowel phonemes (12 monophthongs and eight diphthongs formed by *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, and *u*), whereas Arabic comprises 28 consonant phonemes and six vowel phonemes (including two diphthongs). Thus, English contains more than three times as many vowel sounds as Arabic, which is generally considered a consonant-heavy language.

Accordingly, the sound combinations found in Arabic differ from those found in English. In particular, Arabic has three-consonant roots at its base. All words (discrete units of speech) are formed by combining three possible root consonants with fixed vowel patterns. Thus, the languages differ in their distributions of consonants and vowels. For instance, English uses far more consonant clusters (which are phoneme groupings, not letters) to form words. In addition, English words can begin with vowels. In contrast, Arabic words begin with a single consonant followed by a vowel, and long vowels are rarely followed by more than a single consonant. Some two-consonant clusters do occur at the beginning of Arabic words, but Arabic does not have any initial three-consonant clusters. While English has numerous three- and four-consonant clusters at the ends of words, Arabic does not. Furthermore, unlike in English, only consonants are written in Arabic; the reader is required to fill in the vowels based on context. Thus, as Akasha (2013) and Al-Enazi (2018) noted, Arab EFL learners in general, and Saudi EFL learners in particular, may have difficulty with proper vowel use in English.

Although most Arabic consonant phonemes are similar to those of English, several Arabic consonant phonemes do not exist in the English language, such as /ʔ/, /ħ/, /x/, /sˤ/, /dˤ/, /tˤ/, /ðˤ/, /ʕ/, /ɣ/, and /q/ (Allaith & Joshi, 2011). Conversely, a few English consonant phonemes do not exist in Arabic, such as /g/, /p/, /v/, and /tʃ/; although /g/ and /tʃ/ do exist in some spoken Arabic dialects, they do not exist in Standard Arabic and, hence, have no written form. Furthermore, as indicated by Abdulwahab (2015), English consonant phonemes can seem similar to some Arabic consonant phonemes, such as /t/ or /k/, but are not identical; they may differ in the manner and even the context of socially acceptable articulation. For example, the English /t/ is alveolar and aspirated in word-initial position when followed by a vowel, as in tea /tiː/, whereas the Arabic /t/ in the same position is dental and unaspirated, as in تين /tiːn/.

Overall, the phonological differences and related articulatory differences between Arabic and English complicate EFL learners' acquisition of new sounds and their proper articulations. For example, English allows up to three consonants between two vowels in a given syllable, which does not occur in Arabic. Thus, when speaking English, Arabic-speaking EFL learners in general, and Saudi EFL learners in particular, often fragment consonant clusters by inserting a short vowel sound (e.g., by saying *nexist* instead of *next* or *againest* instead of *against*). However, by identifying and understanding the source of such spelling errors, solutions can be devised to correct them.

7. Most Common Spelling Errors

The English spelling errors made by Saudi EFL learners typically fall within four categories: substitution, omission, insertion, and transposition. These spelling errors are developmental rather than random in nature, are byproducts of phonological processing, and are often overgeneralizations of particular grapheme–phoneme principles (He & Wang, 2009). Gibreel and Babu (2018) investigated spelling errors made by Saudi EFL learners and found that omission errors are most frequent, followed by substitution and insertion errors. Transposition errors were the least common type of error. Similarly, Al-Besher (2018) found that the errors by Saudi EFL learned were attributable to various causes. These spelling errors stem from interlingual and intralingual transfer strategies to loan words; phonemic, orthographic, homophonous, morphological, and compounding confusions; and ignorance or overgeneralization of spelling rules.

The following is a list of spelling errors most frequently made by Saudi EFL learners:

1.   Issues with consonant doubling, such as ×*diferent* or ×*neccessary* instead of *different* or *necessary*, and ×*afect* instead of *affect*.

2.   Silent-letter omissions such as ×*goverment* and ×*nowledge* instead of *government* and *knowledge*.

3.   Insertion of a silent *e* into the final position, such as ×*develope* instead of *develop*.

4.   Transposition of *ei* and *ie*, as in ×*thier* instead of *their*.

5.   Schwa substitution errors such as ×*definate* instead of *definite*.

6.   Substitution errors such as ×*therteen* for *thirteen* or ×*beg* for *big*.

7.   Confusion with the phonemes /p/ and /b/.

a.   In monosyllabic words, the letter *b* is replaced with *p* if *p* appears in the beginning, especially before *o* (e.g., ×*boor* instead of *poor*).

b.   In polysyllabic words, if *p* is at the beginning of a word or before the consonant *r*, it is replaced with *b* (e.g., ×*brotect* instead of *protect*).

c.   In the middle of words, when *p* occurs after *m*, *p* is replaced with *b* (for example, ×*combanion* instead of *companion*).

8.   Omission of *e* in the final position, such as *crim* instead of *crime* and *hid* instead of *hide*.

8. Areas of Spelling Difficulties

Saudi EFL learners face various spelling difficulties, which are generally related to the following issues:

1.   Mishearing /t/ and /d/; as a result, *kindergarten* is often misspelled as ×*kindergarden*.

2.   Using vowels incorrectly (e.g., *grammar* misspelled as ×*grammer*, *definite* as ×*definate*, *integrate* as ×*intigrate*, and *career* as ×*carier* or ×*cariere*). They also struggle with final vowels, especially *e* (e.g., *develop* misspelled as ×*develope*).

3.   Placing letter combinations (e.g., *ie* or *ei*) in the wrong order, as in ×*thier* rather than *their*.

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4.   Misspelling words that contain letters with mirrored shapes, such as *p* and *q* or *d* and *b*.

5.   Misspelling words due to the right-to-left reading direction of the Arabic writing system, such as reading *form* as *from*.

6.   Changing /eə/, as in *there*, to /ei/, as in *they*.

7.   Confusing vowel sound pairs, such as /i/ and /e/.

8.   Inserting vowels initially or between consonants in syllable-initial positions, as when *stop* becomes /əstɒp/ or /sətɒp/.

9.   Adding intrusive vowels in syllable-final positions, such as the /ə/ in /desək/ instead of /desk/ (*desk*).

10.   Spelling rhyming words (for example, *rule* and *role*, *hit* and *heat*, or *full* and *fill*).

11.   Failing to distinguish between short and long vowels, such as spelling *hit* as *heat*.

12.   Conflating two similar words, as in spelling *money* and *many* as ×*maney* and ×*mony*, respectively.

13.   Misspelling words that contain letters with mirrored shapes, such as *p* and *q* or *d* and *b* due to the right-to-left direction of the Arabic writing system.

14.   Confusing the short /ɪ/ and short /ə/ because Arabic phonology does not have the short sound /ə/, as in ×*relegion*, *cilibration*, and *devorced* instead of *religion, celebration*, and *divorced*, respectively.

9. Challenges Saudi EFL Learners Face While Learning to Write in English

Beyond these daunting spelling hurdles, Saudi EFL learners also face difficulties with learning to write well in English, which are primarily related to differences between the rhetorical writing styles and linguistic features of Arabic and English. They also stem from the difficulty of mastering effective features of, as well as strategies and technical skills for, English writing. In this section, I will examine the major challenges to Saudi EFL learners' overall English writing competency in light of contrastive rhetoric and examine this topic from syntactic, rhetorical (coordination vs. subordination, repetition and elaboration, and direct and metaphorical styles), and communicative perspectives.

10. Rhetorical Writing Styles

The Arabic writing system plays a particularly significant role in shaping how Saudi EFL learners write. Thus, these learners tend to transfer Arabic stylistic features to English. Ultimately, these cross-linguistic influences impede the development of effective writing skills and the conformation to English writing conventions and stylistics. For example, in their English writing, Saudi EFL learners tend to overuse coordination as a means of structural linkage, such as *and* and *as*, which are parallel to *wa*, *fa*, and *lakinn* in Arabic, and underuse subordination, resulting in run-on sentences or long sentences joined by coordinating conjunctions. Similarly, presentation and elaboration are features of argumentation in Arabic prose. Thus, Saudi EFL learners tend to repeat themselves and argue through presentation and elaboration by talking around the topic and repeating phrases before presenting the

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main points (Al-Mehmadi, 2012; Younes & Al-Balawi, 2015), especially when Saudi EFL learners are unfamiliar with certain stylistic and textual features of written English discourse.

The differences between Arabic and English stylistics are also manifested in the message's degrees of explicitness and implicitness. In Arabic writing, writers typically avoid conveying a straightforward message because they assume that readers are responsible for discerning the intended meaning. As Al-Mehmadi (2012) contends, it is the reader's responsibility to uncover the writer's implicit message and determine the relationships between information in the text. Conversely, in English writing, it is the writer's responsibility to convey a direct, clear message and to provide sufficient lexical, transitional, and grammatical signals—and other metatextual content—to facilitate the reader's understanding.

The reliance on parallelism and the repetition of words, phrases, synonyms, and ideas are also common Arabic stylistic conventions that become improperly transferred to English writing (Abu Rass, 2015). As Al-Qaedi (2013) found, Saudi EFL learners' widespread repetition of words and phrases in their English writing can be attributed to the influence of Arabic's rhetorical style. Instead of being concise and direct, they use repetition to highlight the importance of their ideas, present convincing arguments, or simply convey emphasis (Abu Rass, 2011; Al-Mehmadi, 2012; Elachachi, 2015). For example, they might use the phrase *demolition and destruction* to emphasize their meaning; in English writing, such phrases are considered verbose and redundant.

Arabic writing also uses lexical repetition as a cohesive device with which to clearly communicate ideas. As Mohamed and Omar (2000) argued, Arabic cohesion can be described as repetition-oriented, whereas English cohesion can be described as change-oriented. Instead of repeating lexical items, English uses devices to connect ideas. Alluhaydan (2016) found that Saudi EFL learners make two types of repetitions in their writing: they repeat the sentence's meaning to emphasize the importance of the point and they repeat words.

Other rhetorical patterns specific to Arabic writing are evident in Saudi EFL learners' writing, particularly in the tendency to adopt a metaphorical style, and to begin essays with universal statements and end them with formulaic or proverbial statements. Relative to the circular structure of English essays, Arabic essays are quite linear, and the conclusion must present novel information. Furthermore, Arabic writers accomplish coherence through the internal meanings of sentences, rather than through apparent conjunctions or other organizational links. Because of this transference of Arabic rhetorical conventions, the English writing of Saudi EFL learners tends to be equivocal; consequently, identifying and understanding the author's arguments often proves difficult.

11. Syntactic Features

Saudi EFL learners transfer Arabic syntactic features or subcategories to their English writing. Arabic and English differ in their use of auxiliaries, articles, prepositions, the corpus in the use of word order, genitive constructions, relative clauses, and pronouns. For instance, Arabic has no indefinite article. The definite article *al*—equivalent to *the* in English—is almost exclusively used as a prefix for nouns,

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and is not typically considered distinct from the noun. Therefore, Arabic distinguishes defined noun phrases (marked by the definite article /al/) from undefined noun phrases (marked by the absence of /al/). In English, the definite article *the* and the indefinite articles *a* and *an* are distinct lexical units that must be paired with nouns in order to specify which noun is being referred (Barry, 2014). Accordingly, as Younes and Al-Balawi (2015) explained, Arabic imposes a binary distinction between the defined and the undefined, whereas English opts for a tripartite distinction. These additional differences between Arabic and English create further confusion and generate transfer hindrances and challenges for Saudi EFL learners.

Similarly, Saudi EFL learners struggle with English word order (regarding adjective use, especially), and display cross-linguistic influence when they write adjectives after nouns. In Arabic, an adjective follows the noun it modifies; in English, an adjective precedes the associated noun. Accordingly, Saudi EFL learners tend to misapply the Arabic rule to English by writing the adjective after the noun it qualifies (e.g., "it is famous for its *air pure*"). Nuruzzaman et al. (2018) and Hafiz et al. (2018) attributed this misapplication to interlingual errors resulting from L1 transfer, in which learners use grammatical features of Arabic when writing in English.

Genitive constructions, such as *the boy's dog*, also present a challenge to Saudi EFL learners. In Arabic, this phrase might be expressed as *dog the boy*, which is how Saudi EFL learners might render choose such constructions when writing in English. Because Arabic does not inflect nouns to indicate number or possession, or inflect verbs to indicate number or tense, in the same manner as does English, these constructions remain difficult for Saudi EFL learners. Likewise, in relative clauses, Arabic requires the inclusion of the pronoun, but English omits the pronoun. This results in mistakes such as *Where is the pen which I gave **it** to you yesterday?* Such errors reflect the learner's inability to distinguish Arabic from English.

12. English Writing Features, Strategies, and Skills

Saudi EFL learners face further challenges in mastering various identifiable features of effective writing, writing strategies, and technical skills, such as deciding how to start a piece of writing; writing a correct English sentence; using correct structure, vocabulary, and writing mechanics (e.g., punctuation, capitalization); and, as Javid and Umer (2014) and Al-Mudhi (2019) highlighted, organizing ideas coherently. In particular, they evince difficulty selecting the right words to express their thoughts effectively, and often lack sufficient ideas about a suggested topic. They encounter difficulties developing ideas, organizing sentences logically within a paragraph and paragraphs logically within the paper, and concluding essays. Furthermore, Al-Mukhaizeem (2013) found that Saudi EFL learners often incorrectly transfer Arabic punctuation to their English writing, which leads to the misuse of punctuation marks, particularly commas.

Finally, Saudi EFL learners have difficulty structuring information and sometimes misuse certain cohesive devices. Instead of using transitional phrases such as *in addition* to add relevant information

and *in contrast* to highlight differences, Saudi EFL learners tend to write long clauses and to use *and*, *also*, *so*, and *but*, in excess, while forgoing proper sentence and paragraph structure. They tend to write a number of discrete and disjointed sentences that do not constitute a coherent unit. Also, they struggle with focus, support and elaboration, style, parallel structure, unity, consistency, concision, and simple tasks such as generating a thesis and topic sentence, providing supporting evidence, and refraining from introducing new ideas in the conclusion. These challenges hinder Saudi EFL learners' writing proficiency and effectiveness and interfere with their ability to accomplish written tasks satisfactorily. Accordingly, creating coherent and well-reasoned written content that is syntactically accurate, semantically acceptable, and culturally appropriate constitutes significant challenges for Saudi EFL learners.

13. English Reading Challenges Saudi EFL Students Face

Saudi EFL learners are subject to a variety of reading challenges with multiple origins. In this section, we will enumerate these reading difficulties among Saudi EFL learners and explore factors contributing to the development and causes of the reading challenges that Saudi EFL learners face. These challenges, which make reading English texts a formidable task for Saudi EFL learners, generally fall within the two related categories of reading processes that occur in working memory: lower- and higher-level reading processes.

14. Reading Processes

Reading processes are activation patterns within cognitive neural networks at any given moment. According to Hannon (2011) and Perfetti and Adlof (2012), lower-level reading processes include rapid, automatic word-recognition skills; automatic lexico-syntactic processing (recognizing word parts and morphological information and parsing the immediate clause for syntactic information); and semantic processing of the immediate clause into relevant meaning units (or propositions). Comparatively, higher-level processing involves processes and resources more closely associated with the strategies and resources used for text comprehension. These include identifying the main ideas, inferring or drawing conclusions from the given information, activating prior knowledge, using higher-order knowledge of text representation, and integrating ideas with the reader's global knowledge. Saudi EFL learners face a variety of challenges associated with skills related to both levels of reading processes and face challenges in progressing from lower- to higher-level reading skills.

Lower-level processing. Saudi EFL learners' first sources of difficulty with lower-level processing are their insufficient general vocabulary knowledge and incompetence in deploying effective word-learning strategies, which limit their subconscious lexico-syntactic processing and semantic processing of an immediate clause into meaningful units. Thus, Saudi EFL learners struggle tremendously with word recognition and reading fluency. Specifically, they have difficulty with automatic word recognition; consequently, they process a word's meaning slowly and with great effort. Therefore, they are slow

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readers because they are unable to automatically, quickly, and accurately access the meaning of a large number of words; the more automatic performance becomes, the more attentional resources are available for other purposes. Stott (2001) maintained that when learners' word recognition is not instantaneous, their attention and cognitive ability are focused on a bottom-up process, leaving them with little ability to concentrate on comprehension and higher-order skills. Because their cognitive effort is focused on decoding rather than on understanding the text, these learners are compromised in their ability to completely comprehend the text. The more automatic word recognition becomes, however, the more attentional resources become available for other purposes. Furthermore, in his study on Saudi EFL learners' reading-comprehension challenges, Al-Subaie (2014) found that Saudi learners struggled with new words, including those associated with unfamiliar cultural concepts. They also struggled with long words and with words containing single, compound, or double vowels, which they could not integrate into a fluent meaning. Furthermore, they failed to recognize words with difficult pronunciations.

Higher-level processing. Additional identified reading challenges and difficulties that Saudi EFL students face when reading English texts are related to higher-level reading-processing abilities, which, in large part, involve reading-comprehension skills. The direct cause of a range of reading-comprehension challenges is the Saudi EFL learners' lack of strategic text-comprehension processing skills, such as drawing and extrapolating inferences, monitoring comprehension, setting goals, using metacognitive awareness, parsing sentences, constructing and integrating main ideas from contextual cues, and using information retrieved from long-term memory. Moreover, they have difficulty with using comprehension strategies to facilitate the construction of meaning. In particular, they lack strategies such as implementing effective ways to expeditiously skim and scan reading material, previewing, predicting the content of passages, and activating prior knowledge to construct meaning. Al-Haisoni (2017) pointed out that Saudi EFL learners have difficulty using prior knowledge to bridge their existing and new knowledge to enhance their text comprehension due to their low level of reading skills. Similarly, Al-Asmari and Javid (2018) indicated that Saudi EFL learners do not exploit the relationship between the main idea and the secondary ideas to increase their comprehension of the target text. Background knowledge deficits—including in formal, content, and cultural background knowledge—pose challenges to filling contextual gaps in the text and to developing a global understanding, or schematic model, of it (Al-Qahtani, 2016).

Saudi EFL learners also implement inefficient reading processes. Instead of using top-down processing to grasp the overall text, they tend to process texts in a word-for-word manner by simply directing their attention to the text's words and structure. Thus, Saudi EFL learners focus on local concerns, such as grammatical structure, sound–letter correspondence, word meaning, and other local or bottom-up processing features, and approach reading as a process of decoding rather than one of meaning-making. Alluhaydan's (2019) results showed that Saudi EFL learners lack knowledge of metacognitive reading strategies and that metacognitive reading awareness remains low.

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15. Social and Cultural Forces

In addition to the challenges linked to both levels of reading processes listed above, Saudi EFL learners encounter further reading barriers that are not merely accounted by their inability to read English texts, but are attributable to social and cultural forces. They lack reading motivation and have little interest in reading English texts (Mohammed & Ab Rashid, 2019). Saudi EFL learners are primarily motivated to read for quite narrow purposes; that is, their incentives for reading are frequently for high grades and meeting teachers' requirements. Thus, they are extrinsically rather than intrinsically motivated. Their disinterest in reading English texts is likely attributable to the absence of a reading culture in Saudi Arabia. Reading rituals are not developed in Saudi Arabia nor in Arab culture in general. On this note, Al-Samadani (2009) argues that Saudi EFL students fail to appreciate the purpose of reading and are poorly motivated readers. Similarly, Al-Subaie (2014) contends that few children in Saudi Arabia read for pleasure and that many are incapable of reading any material other than what is required in school. Other researchers are converging on the same conclusion, indicating that Saudi EFL students do not read enough—if at all—and that they are nearly as unlikely to read in Arabic as they are in English. Further, the majority do not read outside of school (Al-Mansour & Al-Shorman, 2011; Al-Qahtani, 2016; Rajab & Al-Sadi, 2015). Less than 8% of all Saudi EFL who participated in Alluhaydan's (2019) study read on their leisure time.

The outcome of such deficiencies in reading experience is that Saudi EFL learners have low confidence in their ability to read or to improve their reading skills, which compounds the issue. These deficiencies also lead them to procrastinate because they regard reading English texts as complicated and time-consuming. Such insufficient reading experience contributes to Saudi EFL learners struggling as unmotivated readers of English with deficiencies in the cognitive processes required for comprehension and who possess inadequate knowledge of semantics, text structure, reading strategies, use of context, inference making, and other essential reading skills.

An additional challenging cultural factor that Saudi EFL students face is framing and understanding the cultural assumptions presented in the English texts under study, especially those that learners do not share, are unfamiliar with, or find hard to accept. This is because culture-bound background knowledge plays a facilitative role in L2 reading comprehension. The difficulty level also increases and their struggle becomes much more difficult when they read contemporary cultural literary texts because, based on the schema theory of reading, a culturally specific schema affects comprehension. Brock (1990) explained that culturally familiar texts, or what he referred to as "localized literature," are "texts that contain content, settings, cultural assumptions, situations, characters, language, and historical references that are not familiar to the second language reader" (p. 23).

16. Linguistic Factors and L1 Interference

Linguistic factors further compound these reading challenges. Linguistic ability contributes to the development of L2 reading in general, and to reading comprehension in particular. Saudi EFL learners

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typically have a much smaller base of English linguistics knowledge. Specifically, their syntactic parsing—or ability to analyze the rules governing combinations of linguistic units—is limited. Such students have difficulty identifying constituent structures in sentences, word order, and phrase knowledge. Moreover, because of their insufficient reading experience, these learners are oblivious to text structure—that is, knowing how texts should be organized (i.e., what information to expect in which places), how information is signaled, and how content changes might be indicated. Similarly, they have insufficient understanding of the specific characteristics of English orthography and lack a conscious awareness of the English phonology system. Thus, their ability to manipulate the morphology or units of meaning, as well as their familiarity with semantics (meaning extracted from text) are shallow.

Differences between Arabic and English reading contexts produce yet further challenges. Saudi EFL learners carry over their previous performance, L1 processing routines for word forms, and L1 linguistic knowledge when they read English texts, creating L1 interference. Such interference, or this language-transfer effect, occurs in various processes (including word recognition, syntactic parsing, and strategy use) and with different knowledge resources (i.e., general background knowledge, specific topical knowledge, and cultural knowledge), ultimately compromising comprehension.

Thus, Saudi EFL learners often struggle with the unpredictable phoneme–grapheme patterns found in English because they tend to depend on the strategies they employed to learn Arabic. They also tend to process short and long vowels in English as they would process vowels in Arabic. Another illustrative example involves Arabic words, which are read more slowly because they are more morphologically complex and contain more embedded grammar than do English words (Geva, 2007). Accordingly, this array of differences leads to various differences in reading in the two languages and explains possible L2 reading difficulties in terms of word recognition, fluency, speed of syntactic processing, comprehension strategies, and reading rates (Koda, 2007). Therefore, the related L1 transference hampers word recognition and negatively affects comprehension.

17. Sociolinguistic Competence Challenges Saudi EFL Learners Face

The unique learning context of Saudi EFL learners contributes to delays in the development of socio-pragmatic skills for the appropriate use of English in diverse social settings. More specifically, the difficulty lies in the internalization of sociolinguistic rules that would otherwise facilitate the identification of linguistic resources and their integration with contextual factors to choose the most apt verbal delivery. Two major areas of sociolinguistic competence hold the greatest challenges for Saudi EFL learners: communicative competence and functional abilities. Communicative competence describes the appropriateness of the form (e.g., pragma-linguistics), which signals "the particular resources that a given language provides for conveying particular illocutions" (Leech, 1983, p. 11). Functional ability refers to the appropriateness of the conveyed meaning (e.g., socio-pragmatics), which defines the ways in which pragmatic performance depends on specific sociocultural conventions

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and values (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993). In this case, Saudi EFL learners fail to develop new representations of pragma-linguistic and socio-pragmatic knowledge. Hence, during English conversation, they are limited in their ability to modify their speech according to the setting, topic, and relationships among the conversers. This lack of knowledge creates barriers to proper communication in English. A study by Al-Hadidi (2017) showed that Saudi EFL learners rely on the pragmatics of their first languages (L1) when communicating in second languages (L2) because they lack pragmatic competence in L2. This section will enumerate the most pervasive sociolinguistic challenges that Saudi EFL learners face, to reveal causative factors and scrutinize the existing challenges.

18. Factors Contributing to Sociolinguistic Challenges

Several interrelated contextual, cultural, and pedagogical factors contribute to sociolinguistic incompetence in Saudi EFL learners; such incompetence results in barriers to effective communication in English. The first challenging factor is that English learners acquire sociolinguistic competence skills slowly, through immersion in English-dominant cultures. Learning these skills and the particular rules of speaking through immersion is time-consuming; many sociolinguistic rules go unnoticed for years or, worse yet, are not acquired in any meaningful capacity whatsoever (Mizne, 1997). Moreover, in the Saudi Arabian context, opportunities to practice sociolinguistic skills in real-world conversational speech beyond the classroom may be scarce. Consequently, Saudi EFL learners lack the sociolinguistic competence necessary to behave and communicate appropriately, remaining unfamiliar with the ways in which sociolinguistic features or rules of speech are encoded in English.

The second challenging factor is that Saudi EFL learners are not taught cross-cultural differences and, consequently, are unable to recognize the ways in which Arabic culture differs from English-speaking cultures. For instance, they learn neither the appropriateness of when to speak in English cultures nor the how (i.e., via its social norms, attitudes, or mannerisms). Furthermore, they are not taught about certain aspects of English speaking cultures, such as the notions of politeness that pervade the cultures, the taboos, the customary forms of address, the verbal and non-verbal expressions and exchanges of courtesy, nor to registering differences, taking turns tactfully, giving and responding to compliments, and identifying when to speak and when to remain silent.

Saudi EFL learners are often unable to differentiate between the rules required for functional communication when speaking Arabic and those needed when speaking English. These cultural differences in sociolinguistic rules are a source of difficulty for Saudi EFL learners. For example, problems arise from circuity when responding to questions or providing unspecified excuses when evading questions. They also fail to consider that intonation patterns that are appropriate in Arabic are not necessarily suitable in English. What results is a failure to acquire sociolinguistic competence because they are not taught about certain aspects of it and lack opportunities to acquire it naturally. They are not aware of sociolinguistic norms in English and do not acquire the linguistic resources needed to encode native-like patterns. According to Mizne (1997), language is so deeply embedded

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within the subconscious that learners do not immediately recognize where L2 rules of speaking differ from those of their innate L1. Al-Ghamdi and Al-Qarni (2019) examined the refusal strategies included in the invitations and requests that Saudi and American students receive and found discrepancies in the frequency of their use, which the authors attributed to the Saudis' collectivistic culture wherein emphasis is placed on belonging to the group, and to the Americans' individualistic culture, which emphasizes the individual.

The third challenging factor is the fact that, due to a limited knowledge of sociolinguistic competence in English, Saudi EFL students tend to transfer Arabic sociocultural patterns into the English sociolinguistic rules of language use. For instance, Saudi EFL learners favor indirect and suggestive comments rather than direct and plain statements, thereby transferring these features of Arabic speaking from their existing sociolinguistic foundations as they interact or communicate in English. Another example of inappropriate transference is the style of apology used by native Arabic speakers, particularly Saudis. Saudis are less direct and apply more nuanced strategies than do Americans, who prefer less elaborate strategies. Al-Shammari (2015) examined the directness and indirectness of speech acts in requests among native American speakers of English and native Saudi speakers of Arabic, revealing that, in most situations, Saudis are likely to use direct requests either when addressing their intimate friends or when making requests of their subordinates in a professional setting. However, Americans prefer indirect requests, including allusions and contextually embedded meanings when addressing those with whom they are not well acquainted or when addressing their superiors. Thus, depending on the circumstances, transferring the Arabic convention of making direct requests into English-speaking contexts may be deemed inappropriate. Al-Otaibi (2015) also investigated Saudi EFL learners' knowledge of interlanguage pragmatics when making requests, revealing that, compared to native English speakers, Saudi learners showed limitations in their use of appropriate direct strategies and syntactic and lexical modifiers. Similarly, El-Dakhs et al. (2019) explored speech for complaint behavior among Saudi EFL learners and found that they prefer indirect and non-confrontational complaint strategies, and tend to use a variety of initiators and modifiers to redress the negative impact of complaints.

The two examples and the results of the above-cited studies demonstrate that Saudi students tend to transfer features of Arabic sociolinguistic patterns into English and, as a result, deviate from English conventions, which can result in cross-cultural misunderstandings, a sense of impropriety, or pragmatic failure. Pragmatic transfer, wherein sociocultural patterns are transferred from one language to another as a major explanatory variable, as Mizne (1997) discussed, engenders misunderstandings between speech participants and can cause serious breakdowns in communication and unconscious lapsing into the norms of Arabic, thereby causing to unintended offense. Ellis (1991) argued that language learners often enact pragmatic transfer in ways they best understand to mitigate or avoid threatening behavior; thus, such problematic phenomena may not resolve during the language acquisition process alone.

The final challenging factor is that Saudi EFL classrooms offer poor stimuli for the development of

sociolinguistic competence and its incumbent skills. This holds particularly true for the different aspects of sociolinguistic competence, whose final aim is the understanding and transmission of socioculturally and contextually sensitive language. Saudi EFL teachers believe that sociolinguistic features and sociocultural aspects of communicative competence are acquired incidentally; that is, they often leave learners to acquire these features independently through experience. Saudi teachers also claim a lack of sufficient materials on the sociolinguistic aspects of English, and that sociolinguistic features and skills remain too cumbersome to teach to EFL learners. In addition, the sociolinguistic aspects of a given language are understood implicitly (being subconsciously encoded by the brain), which adds another layer of complexity for EFL teachers to unravel. Indeed, Omaggio (2001) found that sociolinguistic competence is rarely treated as indispensable to language teaching, which the author attributed to manifold factors. One such factor is that language educators often cite time and workload constraints for the lack of teaching of socioculturally enlightening material. In addition, teachers may lack confidence in their abilities to properly teach such nuanced sociocultural aspects. This may be further compounded by the necessity, when teaching sociocultural competence, of coping with students' who may be resistant or unmotivated to understand the logic of the target culture.

19. Challenges Saudi EFL Learners Face with English Pronunciation

Pronunciation skills directly affect English learners' communicative competence and performance. Acquiring native-like pronunciation is the most significant challenge Saudi EFL learners face because it requires recognition of English nuances and their accurate reproduction. Many Saudi EFL learners struggle with certain English vowel sounds, consonant sounds, and consonant clusters, making these less intelligible to native English speakers as a result of mispronunciation. This section discusses specific pronunciation challenges and identifies major contributing factors, namely L1 interference, Arabic and English phonological differences, poor development of intra-language systems, and inconsistencies in English sound production. The section also highlights how the limited daily exposure that Saudi EFL learners have to English, and the current practices for teaching English pronunciation, exacerbate the influence of these factors.

Pronunciation is a global construct that consists of segmental features (consonants and vowels) and suprasegmental features (vocal effects that extend over more than one sound, such as stress, intonation, rhythm, and pitch). Both sets of features pose challenges for Saudi EFL learners. With respect to segmental features, Saudi EFL learners generally have difficulty pronouncing five consonant phonemes (/p/, /ʒ/, /v/, /tʃ/, and /ŋ/). Thus, they often replace the voiceless bilabial plosive /p/ with its voiced counterpart /b/, and replace palato-alveolar affricates /tʃ/, palato-alveolar fricatives /ʒ/, and labio-dental fricatives /v/ with the sounds /ʃ/, /dʒ, ʃ, or z/, and /f/, respectively. For example, learners might replace the sound /tʃ/ in *cheap* with the sound /ʃ/ in *sheep*, and replace the sound /v/ in *vine* with the sound /f/ in *fine*. They might also replace *heating* (/hi:tiŋ/) with /hi:ti-n-g/, and replace *visiting* (/visitiŋ/) with /visiti-n-g/.

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Although Saudi EFL learners have fewer difficulties with the alveolar plosives /t/ and /d/, they pronounce these as interdentals rather than as alveolar plosives. They also tend to pronounce /d/ in the final position as /t/; *bed*, *head*, and *mad* become *bet*, *heat*, and *mat*, respectively. Hago and Khan (2015) attributed this to the allophonic difference between Arabic and English. In English, the consonant /d/ at the end of a word is often unreleased but retains its voicing. In Arabic, however, the /d/ is invariably released and is voiceless in this position.

English consonant clusters, such as syllable-initial consonant clusters or those in syllable-medial or final positions, constitute another set of challenges for Saudi EFL learners. As previously noted, these learners tend to insert a short vowel sound to interpose consonant clusters to facilitate pronunciation when speaking English. In other words, they intersperse certain English clusters with an anaptyctic vowel at the onset of syllables or in certain syllable codas. For example, Saudi learners may pronounce *stand* as /ɪstand/, *street* as /ɪstiriːt/, and *spring* as / ɪsprɪŋ/ or /sɪprɪŋ/.

Likewise, these learners struggle with English vowel sounds. According to Power (2003), the /ɪ/ vowel is lengthened and lowered to /e/, often producing /ɜ/ as /i/ or /æ/. In addition, they substitute the /a/-/æ/ variation or /u/ for /ʌ/. Furthermore, as Ali (2015) has demonstrated, they have difficulty deciphering and pronouncing vowel sounds in multisyllabic words, particularly those that involve relationships between vowel names and vowel sounds. Similarly, certain pairs of vowels, as in /ɪ/ and /e/ in *sit* and *set*, and /ʌ / and /ɒ/ in *luck* and *lock*, are deemed challenging.

With respect to the suprasegmental features of English phonology, or its "prosodic features," Saudi EFL learners confuse intonation and stress patterns. In particular, they mistakenly stress unstressed syllables in individual words, stress the wrong word in a thought group, and omit syllables in connected speech (Ali Bin-Hady, 2016). In terms of intonation, the influence of Arabic results in the use of rising tones rather than structural markers to denote questions, suggestions, and offers far more frequently than is used by native English speakers. They also have difficulty using appropriate intonation in sentences.

20. Arabic and English Sound Systems and L1 Interference

The predominant cause of English mispronunciation evidenced by Saudi EFL students is attributed to the differences in the sound systems of Arabic and English and to L1 interference. The Arabic and English phonological systems vary enormously in many respects. For instance, English consonant sounds differ in number and in the place and manner of articulation, and some phonemic segments and patterns that are present in English phonology are absent in Arabic. As previously mentioned, the English consonants /p/, /ŋ/, and /v/ are non-existent in the Arabic sound system. Even consonants that seem similar to some Arabic consonants, such as /t/ or /k/, differ in the manner, and even the place, of articulation (Abdulwahab, 2015).

L1 interference commonly occurs when learners attempt to navigate these phonological differences. For instance, Saudi EFL learners normally fail to recognize English speech sounds that do not have an

explicit Arabic equivalent. In such cases, they often replace English sounds with Arabic sounds or use Arabic phonological categories to decode and represent the English phonology. At other times, learners may have difficulty reproducing the English sounds accurately and may opt to replace English phonemes with Arabic phonemes. They substitute sounds that are absent in Arabic with sounds that share the highest resemblance in place of articulation, thereby applying their Arabic phonemic inventory to a language with a different inventory. For example, English has two distinctive bilabial plosives, /p/ and /b/, whereas Arabic only has the latter; thus, Saudi EFL learners replace /p/ with /b/. Similarly, English has /oʊ/ and /ɔ/, whereas Arabic has only the /o/ sound; accordingly, Saudi EFL learners have trouble distinguishing between, for example, *whole* and *hall.*

Furthermore, while the placement of word stresses is consistent and predictable in Arabic, in English, this placement changes according to the grammatical class of the word. Saudi EFL learners tend to transfer Arabic stress patterns when pronouncing stressed English words. However, primary stresses occur more frequently in Arabic, and unstressed syllables are pronounced more clearly. Although the unstressed syllable has neutral vowels in both languages, these vowels are "swallowed" in English. Thus, Saudi EFL learners often make pronunciation errors by incorrectly applying the patterns they have internalized from their L1.

21. Practicing English Pronunciation

Another pertinent causal factor for the English pronunciation challenges that Saudi EFL students face is the current, ineffective practice of teaching pronunciation in Saudi EFL classrooms. Pronunciation holds little importance in the current teaching activities in the Saudi EFL classroom, and remains the most neglected aspect of English language teaching. The current Saudi English curriculum for public schools at all educational levels does not consider pronunciation as an important skill to master for attaining satisfactory English proficiency and does not treat pronunciation as a major learning area. Accordingly, the curriculum does not extend beyond the introductory level of presenting the English alphabet, its phonology, and its phonetic discrimination for the purposes of rudimentary pronunciation. As Ahmad and Muhiburrahman (2013) found, although proper pronunciation is one of the basic tenets of learning EFL, Saudi EFL classrooms fail to devote enough attention to teaching and practicing the English sound system, particularly in terms of covering a range of features from basic sounds (vowels and consonants) and syllable structures to word accents, stresses, intonation patterns, and rhythms.

In fact, many Saudi EFL teachers question the importance of pronunciation as an instructional focus, or even whether it can be explicitly taught at all; consequently, less time and attention is devoted to the subject. According to Al-Samadani and Ibnian (2015), who examined the relationship between Saudi EFL learners' opinions on learning English and their academic achievement, learners complained that their instructors did not provide corrective feedback for mispronunciations, nor did they sufficiently explain these errors. Students further indicated that their teachers failed to provide adequate individualized attention for refining their pronunciations. Accordingly, Al-Tamimi (2015) regarded the

attitudes of current Saudi EFL teachers toward teaching pronunciation as one of the major factors that negatively affect Saudi EFL learners' pronunciation skills. Most Saudi EFL teachers also lack specialized training in this area, lack necessary tools and resources, are unfamiliar with relevant instructional strategies, and seem to lack solid theoretical grounding and up-to-date knowledge of proper English phonology. Without sufficient training in teaching English pronunciation, Saudi EFL teachers often resort to intuition-based teaching (Al-Ahdal et al., 2015).

Another adverse instructional practice implemented in Saudi EFL classrooms is the use of an articulatory phonetics approach to teaching pronunciation, which features articulatory explanations, charts of the vocal apparatus, contrastive information, imitation, and the memorization of patterns through drills and dialogues. For example, Al-Tamimi (2015) found that Saudi EFL learners are taught proper pronounciation of some English words exclusively via repetition drills by focusing on both the discrete word and the phrase level, or by providing the learners with pronunciation rules and guidelines. In such classrooms, teachers pay considerable attention to correction without providing contextualization, and no key tools for teaching pronunciation exist that emphasize segmental and suprasegmental features. Clearly, Saudi EFL teachers favor the intuitive-imitative and analytic linguistic approaches to teaching English pronunciation. However, although these teachers fail to augment the accuracy of learners' pronunciation, approximately 70% of the English teachers surveyed in the study by Ahmad and Muhiburrahman (2013) agreed that Saudi EFL learners receive insufficient instruction on pronunciation in their English classrooms, and that the time devoted to pronunciation is insufficient for the development of adequate pronunciation skills. This result was confirmed by Nazim (2014), who found that 80% of participants reported having received no instruction in English pronunciation in their classrooms. These problems are further compounded by other issues. Naser and Hamzah (2019), for instance, found that pronunciation difficulties were the direct result of the Saudi EFL teachers using their mother tongue (Arabic) to teach English.

22. Exposure to English

Saudi EFL learners' lack of exposure to English-speaking environments further exacerbates the challenges they face in mastering proper English pronunciation. Such mastery depends on both the duration of time spent in English-speaking environments and on how frequently English is practiced in daily life. Unfortunately, Saudi EFL learners currently have minimal meaningful and continuous exposure to English; they only hear English spoken in their English classes for a few hours each week, and they lack sufficient opportunities to practice its use in the classroom. They also have very little contact with native speakers and few chances to interact with them. In other words, there are hardly any opportunities for Saudi EFL learners to take active roles in English outside of their classrooms, resulting in missed opportunities to familiarize themselves with the sounds and melodies they are attempting to imitate. They also have exceedingly limited access to authentic, comprehensible language stimuli, further protracting their ultimate mastery of English pronunciation. Hago and Khan (2015),

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Al-Sobhi and Preece (2018), and Al-Otaibi (2018) attributed the pronunciation problems Saudi EFL students face as being in large part due to the absence of any kind of exposure to native English environments and, in particular, to the lack of formal exposure to authentic spoken English.

Saudi EFL students are not exposed to any English-speaking environments except for those of their classrooms and have very few opportunities to use the target language in real-life environments. Therefore, they are not given sufficient opportunities to immerse themselves in the learning process and reflect on their own learning experiences. In this respect, Al-Tamimi (2015) indicated that the low level of exposure and limited opportunities to use English in real-life situations impede the refinement of pronunciation skills among Saudi EFL students. In addition, a study by Al-Kaff (2013) found that only 10% of the participating Saudi EFL learners regularly used English outside of the classroom; such a small amount of practice clearly hampered students' abilities to achieve good English pronunciation. Overall, the reality that learners have insufficient or no exposure to the language because of limited opportunities to use English outside the classrooms, interferes with the goals of Saudi EFL learners to reach their full potential, with particular reference to English pronunciation, and deters them from developing satisfactory English competence in general. This is because good pronunciation is an integral part of successful communication, which requires exposure to English beyond the classroom as well as a willingness to look for chances to practice English inside or outside of the school boundaries.

23. Closing Remarks

Saudi EFL learners encounter numerous challenges when learning EFL. Many factors contribute to each English language learning challenge they face, particularly in the areas of English spelling, reading, writing, sociolinguistic competence, and pronunciation. These challenges create barriers to Saudi EFL learners' development of English language proficiency.

One common cause of the main challenges these learners face is L1 interference, wherein either Saudi EFL learners transfer features from Arabic to English or their prior knowledge of the Arabic language system interferes in the English acquisition process. However, L1 interference cannot be considered the main culprit of all the language learning difficulties Saudi EFL learners face. L1-based factors, inconsistent English linguistic features, ineffective instruction, inappropriate teaching methods, unsupportive conditions for teaching and learning English, and Saudi EFL learners' limited motivation for development and attainment also influence learners' achievements. Insufficient opportunities to practice English and limited exposure to English sources and materials outside the classroom, which are the bedrock of language acquisition, further compound these issues.

A number of measures should be considered to help Saudi EFL students overcome these distinguishable challenges. First, after identifying specific difficulties within each of the identified challenging areas, there is a need to develop tailor-made instructions and activities that effectively tackle those difficulties. Furthermore, strategies need to be developed and taught to Saudi EFL learners to compensate for their specific learning difficulties. It is equally important to encourage students to

find their own ways of overcoming the constraints of learning EFL. Second, learners should receive ample opportunities to practice English in real-world contexts, as exposure to constant practice is paramount to mastering English. They should also be encouraged to maximize their exposure to English through extensive reading, listening, and writing. Third, work needs to be done to cultivate learners' awareness of the differences between Arabic and English and assess learners' progress as they bridge these differences. Teachers can accomplish this by identifying comparable features and then helping learners compare the forms and meanings in the two languages to identify similarities and differences. Fourth, Saudi EFL teachers need to be adequately prepared to teach the English language and language-related skills effectively. Specifically, teachers need to demonstrate an understanding of the English language system, familiarity with current theories regarding the main factors of L2 learning, and knowledge of existing language teaching methods, particularly modern methods. Finally, teachers should allocate more time and effort to the instruction of elements that learners find more difficult so that learners can learn English effectively and efficiently. Teachers should also convince their students of the value of learning English. Implementing appropriate strategies should help Saudi EFL learners meet and overcome these language learning challenges, thereby enabling them to function at full capacity.

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