

## Students' Attitudes and Perceptions towards Learning English

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### Abstract

This paper studies the attitudes and perceptions of Foundation Year (FY) students towards learning English, at the English Language Institute (ELI) of King Abdulaziz University (KAU) in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. English is one of the required courses, the rest of which are primarily taught in Arabic. The researcher attempts to find out the students' opinions regarding the importance of English, whether they think it is difficult or not, and where the difficulty lies. The author also endeavors to examine the ways by which they try to improve their English and the frequency and areas of their use of the language. After the selection of a random sample of 47 female students of levels 3 and 4 (pre-intermediate and intermediate levels), who represent the largest majority of the students during the time of the study, a questionnaire was developed and students' responses were tabulated and analyzed. The study shows that most students have a positive attitude towards learning English and that they try to improve their English and to use the language even though there are a lot of demands on their time and few opportunities to practice their English. The study also reflects on the obstacles confronting the students and their suggestions to facilitate the learning process.

*Key words:* attitude, EFL, learning English, perception

## Introduction

With the increasing need and ceaseless interest in learning English as a second language, it is important to study and understand the factors that can affect the learning process. Among some of the most prominent factors are participants' attitudes and perceptions towards the foreign language. According to *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*, attitude is a "settled behaviour, as indicating opinion", or a "settled mode of thinking" (Sykes, p.56). Baker (1992, p.10) defines attitude as "a hypothetical construct used to explain the direction and persistence of human behaviour." Similarly, İnal, et al. (2003, p. 41) state that "attitude refers to our feelings and shapes our behaviors towards learning". Thus, behavior is tied to attitude, as the latter highly affects and manifests itself in the former. Hence, attitude plays an important role in second language learning as it determines to a large extent the learners' behaviors, i.e., action taken to learn, or efforts exerted, during the learning process.

Attitudes can be instrumental, utilitarian and pragmatic; or integrative, social and interpersonal; or both (Baker, 1992). Most importantly, Baker (1992, p.10) declares that the fact that "attitude is an important concept lies in its continued and proven utility. That is, within education and psychology, it has stood the test of time, theory and taste". Likewise, several researchers stress the significance of attitude in language learning. For instance, İnal, et al. (2003) assert that identifying the attitude of the students is important for both the learner and the academic program.

In the same way, Abu-Melhim (2009, p.686) concludes that although there is a lot that the teacher can do, "at the end of the day, it is all up to the students whether or not to participate positively in the lesson. In other words, it all boils down to your attitude." Agreeing, Al-Tamimi, et al. (2009) state that attitudes towards a certain language affect a learner's motivation in learning that language. Buschenhofen (1998) affirms that educators not only hold attitudes highly accountable for the degree of learners' responses, but they also believe that they predict achievement and contribute to it.

Closely related to attitude is perception, which can be defined as regarding something "mentally in [a] specified manner" (Sykes, p.761). Despaigne (2010) elaborates on the relation between perceptions and attitudes, explaining that perceptions are centered on the inner unconscious feelings from which students' attitudes towards learning a language emanate. Thus, attitudes can be defined as the behavioral outcomes of perceptions.

In light of the consistent emphasis of former research on the importance of attitudes in language learning, and driven by the need to understand the local students' attitudes and perceptions towards learning English, the researcher hopes to contribute to the body of previous research on these vital issues in language learning. The researcher also hopes to fill the gap in present research by studying the attitudes and perceptions of FY students at the ELI of KAU in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, as no similar study targeting this population has been found.

The study tests four hypotheses:

H1: It is expected that most students like English and think it is important.

H2: It is also expected that students find English language difficult.

H3: It is likely that students attempt to improve their English, but their efforts are affected by some factors.

H4: It is likely that they rarely have a chance, if any, to practice their English.

### Literature Review

Attitudes and perceptions in second language learning are evidently lively topics, which have attracted the interest of many researchers. For example, Al Mamun, et al. (2012) examine the attitude of the undergraduate students of the Life Science School of Khulna University towards English language and conclude that their attitude is generally positive and instrumental. Similarly, in a study on 40 Saudi students, learning English at an American university, Alfawzan (2012, Abstract) finds that “instrumental motivation” is the main “driving force” for those students. Also, Al-Tamimi, et al. (2009) find that instrumental motivation plays a primary role in learning English, and that students have positive attitudes towards the English language and its culture, and the use of English in social and educational contexts.

Negative attitudes towards English or its courses appear in some studies. For instance, Abd Aziz (1994, p.98) declares that “UKM [Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia or the National University of Malaysia] students had shown positive attitudes towards speaking English in general...[,but they] had negative attitudes when it came to the courses offered [at their university]”. Likewise, Abu-Melhim (2009) examines the reasons behind choosing English as a major by Jordanian college students at Irbid University and concludes that unexpectedly about half of the students hold negative attitudes towards learning English. Also, Despaigne's study (2010, p.55) on students learning English at two Mexican universities show their negative perceptions and attitudes which he associates with “Mexico's colonial past and the effects of linguistic imperialism.”

As for factors affecting attitudes, Dennis Soku, et al. (2011, p.22) state that “gender had a significant effect on students' attitudes to the study of English” while “background had a significant effect on students' attitude to the study of French”. Also, Buschenhofen (1998) compares attitudes towards English between 12-year-olds and final year university students, and his study indicates that both groups have a generally positive attitude towards English. However, there are some expected differences of attitudes regarding language context which mirror the changes in society, education and language that students go through as they grow up.

In their paper, “Greek Young Learners' Perceptions about Foreign Language Learning and Teaching”, Joycey and Sougari (2010) conclude that there are differences in these perceptions that teachers should observe in order to achieve the learning outcomes. On the other hand, Thornton (2009, p.84), in a study of the perceptions of college students and their instructors, uncovers the reasons behind teachers and students' beliefs about second language learning and arrives at the conclusion that “all beliefs are inhibitive and facilitative, at the same time, because they are dependent on the individual's needs.”

Some studies connect attitude to achievement. For example, in their study on final year high school students in eastern Turkey, İnal, et al. (2003, p. 49) emphasize the idea that “there is a high relationship between attitude and achievement”. Likewise, Al-Mansour (2007) concludes that having positive attitudes towards Arabic speakers and spending enough time in an Arabic-speaking country are factors that help to acquire the best pronunciation in Arabic.

The present study contributes to previous research by exploring the attitudes and perceptions of the FY students at the ELI of KAU. It also attempts to identify the areas of difficulty for the students, and the ways they improve their English. Moreover, it encourages the students to give their suggestions to as what can make them learn English better in an attempt to find solutions and recommendations that can help enhance their achievement in learning English.

The study addresses the following questions:

1. Do students like English and think it is important.

2. Do they think it is difficult? If yes, where does the difficulty lie?
3. Do they try to improve their English?
4. Do they use English outside the classroom?

### **The Study**

English, in addition to other subjects, is compulsory for FY students at ELI, KAU. The students must pass four levels of general English courses in one year, or one and half year maximum, if needed, before they are allowed to enroll in different colleges. These intensive courses are taught in four six-seven-week modules, which translate into 18 hours a week. A placement test is administered in the summer prior to the beginning of the academic year to place the students in their appropriate levels. Therefore, students can be exempted from one to three levels, according to a set of cut scores that are carefully designed to match the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference). They can also be totally exempted if they score the required marks in IELTS, or TOEFL.

The study included 47 FY science and arts students. The sample was randomly selected from levels 3 and 4, as these represent the majority of the students in the module when the study took place (module 3). The participants answered a questionnaire which was carefully developed to address the research questions. Some of the statements/questions were adapted from previous literature and the rest were devised by the researcher.

The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part, which had 17 statements, utilized the Likert scale, asking the students to choose one of the following responses as appropriate for them: Strongly Agree, Agree, Don't Know, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. The second part had four questions and an open-ended question in the form of a statement that required completion. Questions 18-21 allowed the students to choose one or more from a list of responses. Also, in questions 18 and 21, the option 'Other, specify.' gave the students the chance to add their own responses. Statement 22 asked that the students complete the statement with their own ideas about what could make them learn English better. The questionnaire was translated into Arabic to ensure optimal understanding among all students and to eliminate any potential language barrier that could prevent them from expressing their full opinions. A pilot study was carried out on a small scale to make sure that the questions were clear and elicited proper responses.

The data collected were of two types, i.e. quantitative (statements/questions 1-21) and qualitative (statement 22). For the quantitative part of the data, the responses were analyzed, tabulated and the percentages were calculated. As for the qualitative part of the data, which consisted of students' completions of a statement, responses were translated into English, listed, then categorized into sections, according to the theme to which they are related. The qualitative method was chosen for this part because its main purpose was to explore students' ideas and suggestions to enhance their achievement in learning English.

### **Results**

For the purpose of analysis, statements and questions in the questionnaire were divided into four parts on the basis of their relation to the research questions.

#### ***Research question 1: Do students like English and think it is important?***

As shown in Table 1 below, most of the participants agreed that learning English is fun (93.62%); only a very small percentage of the students disagreed, while the percentage of those who strongly disagreed, or said that they did not know was 0%. Similarly, the percentage of the

participants who agreed that they like to listen to people speaking English (91.49%) was much larger than the percentage of those who disagreed (2.13%), or said they did not know (6.38%). Moreover, no student strongly disagreed. Likewise, a large percentage (76.60%) of the participants strongly agreed that they really wanted to learn English; 19.15% agreed, and an equal percentage of 2.13% said that they did not know or disagreed. Furthermore, as in the responses to the previous statements, strong disagreement remained 0%.

The statement "I dislike English" elicited 21.28% of agreement (an equal percentage of those who strongly agreed and those who agreed), compared to 70.21% of disagreement, while 8.51% of the participants said that they did not know. The statement "I only learn English because its courses are compulsory in the Foundation Year" elicited more disagreement (65.96%) than agreement (17.02%). Interestingly, the total number of those who agreed and those who strongly agreed matched the figure of those who said they that did not know (17.02%).

As for the image of those who spoke English, 48.94% agreed that when someone spoke English, it showed that he/she is educated, while 36.17% disagreed. The 12.77% difference was equal to the percentage of those who stated that they did not know. However, most of the participants strongly agreed, or agreed, that speaking English well could create a good impression with the total high percentage of 82.98%. The percentage of those who did not know or disagreed was only 17.03%. As for strong disagreement, the case was similar to that in questions 1-3 (0%). Moreover, all participants either strongly agreed, or agreed, that learning English was important for their future, with a higher percentage of those who strongly agreed (87.23%).

Similar to the responses of the previous statement, virtually all the participants agreed that learning English could help them find better job opportunities, with a higher percentage of those who strongly agreed (93.62%) and a total percentage of 97.88% representing general agreement. Only 2.13% said that they did not know, and no disagreeing responses were registered. Also, a large proportion of the students (80.85%) strongly agreed that learning English was essential for their undergraduate and post graduate studies, which made the total high percentage of 95.74% agreement. On the other hand, only 4.26% disagreed; there was no strong disagreement, or did not know responses. Furthermore, there was an overall agreement among participants that they needed English when they travelled abroad, and the percentage of those who strongly agreed (76.60%) exceeded that of those who agreed (23.40%). However, the total number of the participants who expressed disagreement to the statement 'I need English when I search the internet' (31.92%) was virtually half the number of the participants who chose agreement (61.70%). A small number said that they did not know (6.38%).

**Table 1. Responses to statements 1- 12**

No.	Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	Learning and speaking English is fun.	26	18	0	3	0
		55.32%	38.30%	0%	6.38%	0%
2	I like to listen to people speaking English.	20	23	3	1	0
		42.55%	48.94%	6.38%	2.13%	0%
3	I really want to learn English.	36	9	1	1	0
		76.60%	19.15%	2.13%	2.13%	0%
4	I dislike English.	5	5	4	18	15
		10.64%	10.64%	8.51%	38.30%	31.91%
5	I only learn English because its courses are compulsory in the Foundation Year.	3	5	8	21	10

		6.38%	10.64%	17.02%	44.68%	21.28%
6	When someone speaks English, it shows that he/she is educated.	10	13	7	12	5
		21.28%	27.66%	14.89%	25.53%	10.64%
7	Speaking English well can create a good impression.	19	20	6	2	0
		40.43%	42.55%	12.77%	4.26%	0%
8	Learning English is important for my future.	41	6	0	0	0
		87.23%	12.77%	0%	0%	0%
9	Learning English can help me find better job opportunities.	44	2	1	0	0
		93.62%	4.26%	2.13%	0%	0%
10	Learning English is essential for my undergraduate and post graduate studies.	38	7	0	2	0
		80.85%	14.89%	0%	4.26%	0%
11	I need English when I travel abroad.	36	11	0	0	0
		76.60%	23.40%	0%	0%	0%
12	I need English when I search in the internet.	13	16	3	14	1
		27.66%	34.04%	6.38%	29.79%	2.13%

**Research question 2: Do they think it is difficult? If so, where does the difficulty lie?**

Table 2 below shows that the total percentage of the participants who strongly agreed, or agreed only, that English was difficult, was 36.17%. A slightly higher percentage disagreed (42.6%), while 21.28% said that they did not know. Noticeably, the figures were somewhat balanced: the percentage of those who strongly agreed was close to that of those who strongly disagreed. Also, the percentage of those who agreed was close to that of those who disagreed; and they were both close to the percentage of those who did not know. However, when it came to grammar and structure, more than half of the participants (57.54%) either agreed, or strongly agreed that English grammar and structure were difficult for them. The total percentage which represented disagreement in general was 29.89%, about half of the percentage that reflected agreement in general. The percentage of those who did not know added to that of those who generally agreed made up 70.22% of the participants. A large proportion (74.47%) of the participants either strongly agreed, or agreed that lack of vocabulary made understanding and communicating in English difficult. The rest of the participants (25.53%) represented both strong disagreement and disagreement. Noticeably, the percentage of those who said they did not know was 0%.

**Table 2. Responses to statements 14, 16 and 17**

No.	Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly Agree
14	Learning English is difficult.	5	12	10	14	6
		10.64%	25.53%	21.28%	29.79%	12.77%
16	I find English grammar and structure difficult	5	22	6	7	7
		10.64%	46.81%	12.77%	14.89%	14.89%
17	Lack of vocabulary makes understanding and communicating in English difficult	12	23	0	7	5
		25.53%	48.94%	0%	14.89%	10.64%

As for skills, it can be seen in Table 3 that most participants thought that speaking was difficult (59.57%); writing came second (38.30); listening came third (27.66%); while reading came last.

**Table 3. Responses to Q.19 (What do you consider as a difficult skill in English? You can tick more than one.)**

Writing	Reading	Listening	Speaking
18	8	13	28
38.30%	17.02%	27.66%	59.57%

**Research question 3: Do they try to improve their English?**

As can be seen in Table 4, almost half of the participants (48.94%) strongly agreed that they could improve their English. A slightly smaller proportion also agreed (42.55%), which made the percentage of general agreement 91.49%. Only 8.51% did not know and no disagreeing responses were found. Almost half of the participants (48.93%) agreed that they did not have time to improve their English. The number of those who disagreed was slightly smaller at 34.05%, while those who did not know represent 17.02% of the participants.

**Table 4. Responses to statements 13 and 15**

No.	Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
13	I think I can improve my English.	23	20	4	0	0
		48.94%	42.55%	8.51%	0%	0%
15	I don't have time to improve my English.	8	15	8	10	6
		17.02%	31.91%	17.02%	21.28%	12.77%

As shown in Tables 5 and 6 below, when the participants were asked to choose the option(s) that suit(s) them, or write their own responses, most of them said that they looked up new vocabulary and checked pronunciation (68.09%). A slightly smaller proportion said that they watched English programs (61.70%). The third popular choice was reading simplified English books (42.55%), while the fourth was practicing the correct pronunciation and new structures with friends and/or family. The percentages for choices number 3 (I keep a notebook with all new vocabulary and practice writing them in sentences.), number 4. (I review the new grammar points after class.), and number 9. (I take extra English courses.) were close, 25.53%, 23.40 and 27.66%, respectively. The highest percentage was for choice number 9 and the lowest was for choice number 4. The number of those who said that they read articles on the internet was equal to that of those who wrote other options (6.38%). The options that were written by the participants were the following: 2 participants said: "I watch English movies."; while 1 participant said: "I read English novels." The percentage of those who said that they did none of the above was only 4.26%.

**Table 5. Responses to Q. 18 (What do you do to improve your English? You can tick more than one, choices 1-6.)**

1. I read simplified English books.	2. I watch English programs.	3. I keep a notebook with all new vocabulary and practice writing them in sentences.	4. I review the new grammar points after class.	5. I practice the correct pronunciation and new structures with my friends and/or family.	6. I read articles on the internet.
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20	29	12	11	16	3
42.55%	61.70%	25.53%	23.40%	34.04%	6.38%

**Table 6. Responses to Q. 18 (What do you do to improve your English? You can tick more than one, choices 7-11.)**

7. I listen to native speakers reading and/or speaking on the internet.	8. I look up new vocabulary and check pronunciation.	9. I take extra English courses.	10. None of the above.	11. Other, specify.
19	32	13	2	3
40.43%	68.09%	27.66%	4.26%	6.38%

**Q.22: I think I can learn English better if.....**

Five participants did not complete the statement; while many wrote several suggestions, and some elaborated, providing examples and/or explanations. The responses were translated into English, analyzed, and compiled into the following main themes.

1. The need for more practice
2. The need for an English speaking environment/community
3. The need for more speaking practice, in particular
4. The KAU system of teaching English to FY students
5. The intensive nature of the English courses
6. Supplementary materials and facilities
7. Teacher and teaching methods
8. Personal efforts, attitudes and problems

**Research question 4: Do they use English outside the classroom?**

As shown in Table 7, most of the participants said that they “sometimes” used English (44.68%); about a third of the participants said that they “rarely” used English (31.91%). Those who used English “a lot” outside the classroom were 12.77% of the participants, a figure that was slightly higher than the one which represented those who “never” used it outside the classroom (10.64%).

**Table 7. Responses to Q. 19 (How often do you use English outside the classroom?)**

<b>A lot</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>Rarely</b>	<b>Never</b>
6	21	15	5
12.77%	44.68%	31.91%	10.64%

Tables 8 and 9 show that when the students asked where they used English, choice number 3 (When I travel abroad) generated the highest percentage among all the given options (61.70%). Choices number 1 (In cafes and restaurants in Saudi Arabia), number 2 (When I go to the hospital and/or at the doctor's), number 4 (In some shops and malls), and number 7 (In some of my other university subjects) elicited about half of the responses (51.06%, 53.19%, 51.06%, and 57.45%, respectively). The highest percentage was registered in choice number 7; and the lowest in choices number 1 and number 4 which had the same percentage; choice number 2 came in the middle. Choice number 6 (With my friends in and outside Saudi Arabia) attracted only 21.28% of the responses. The percentage of those who used English only in the classroom was equal to those who wrote other responses (8.51%). The options that were written by the participants were the following: one participant said, “on the internet”; one said, “I speak English well and enjoy

it, but outside class"; and two participants wrote similar responses: "When I talk to my family sometimes," and "At home, sometimes, with my family". The choice that attracted the least number of responses (one participant, 2.13%) was number 5 (At the hairdresser's and /or the dressmaker's).

**Table 8. Responses to Q. 21 (Where do you use English? You can tick more than one, choices 1-5.)**

1. In cafes and restaurants in Saudi Arabia.	2. When I go to the hospital and/or at the doctor's.	3. When I travel abroad.	4. In some shops and malls.	5. At the hairdresser's and /or the dressmaker's.
24	25	29	24	1
51.06%	53.19%	61.70%	51.06%	2.13%

**Table 9. Responses to Q. 21 (Where do you use English? You can tick more than one, choices 6-9.)**

6. With my friends in and outside Saudi Arabia.	7. In some of my other university subjects.	8. Only in the English classroom.	9. Other, specify.
10	27	4	4
21.28%	57.45%	8.51%	8.51%

## Discussion of Results

### *Research Question 1: Do students like English and think it is important?*

The responses indicate that students have a positive attitude towards learning English. They like to listen to people speaking English and they really want to learn the language (statements 1, 2, 3), a finding that supports the literature which the researcher found on this topic. Statement 4 (I dislike English) and statement 5 (I only learn English because its courses are compulsory in the Foundation Year), which were used to counter check students positive responses towards learning English, elicited 70.21% and 65.96% of disagreement, respectively. Although the researcher expected to find even smaller percentages of agreement to these statements, especially since the percentage of strong disagreement to the first three statements was 0%, this can be explained, in the case of statement 4, by a general dislike of the English courses themselves. As for statement 5, the total percentage of agreement, which is 17.02%, can also reflect students' aversion to having to take four intensive courses in one year. Both justifications can be supported by students' responses to question 22, which will be discussed later. This finding is similar to that of Abd Aziz's study (1994) on UKM undergraduates.

When it came to the social image of those who spoke English, statement 6 generated a general agreement of 48.94%, while statement 7 generated a total of 82.98% agreement. This noticeably large difference reflects an awareness between students that speaking English does not necessarily reflect an educated person. However, the responses show that most of the students realize that speaking English well does create a good impression (statement 7).

Moreover, students had no doubt that English was important for their future, and that it was a necessity when one travelled abroad, as seen in the responses to statements 8 and 11. Also, virtually all of them realized that English could help them get better job opportunities (statement

9); and that it was essential for their undergraduate and post graduate studies (statement 10), with agreeing rates of 97.88% and 95.74% respectively. The small percentages that said that they did not know in response to statement 9, or disagreed in response to statement 10 are expected. The former (2.13%) may represent students who do not plan to work in the future. The latter (4.26%) may represent those who intend to specialize in fields that do not require much proficiency in English, especially since the sample in the study included arts students, who will not need to have high proficiency in English, at least not in their undergraduate studies, or for those who do not intend to go on for post graduate studies. Nevertheless, a comparatively smaller number agreed that they needed English when they searched in the internet (61.70%). This can be due to the fact that Arabic remains the first language at KAU for most of the subjects and to the availability of translations and information in Arabic on the internet, covering most of the knowledge fields needed by the students.

A comparison of the responses of statements 6 and 7 with those of statements 8-11 shows that the social motivation is not as important as the utilitarian one and that students' positive attitude towards learning English is mainly instrumental. This finding is consistent with several of the previous studies, some of which are cited in the literature review of this paper. All in all, the findings prove the first hypothesis: students like English and think it is important.

***Research Question 2: Do they think it is difficult? If so, where does the difficulty lie?***

The responses to statement 14 show that the percentage of those who disagreed (42.60%) did not reach 50%, and that there was only 6.43% difference between it and that of those who agreed (36.17%). Thus, a considerable number of the participants stated that learning English was difficult, and so, one can say that some students consider learning English difficult, while some do not. Therefore, the hypothesis that students find learning English difficult is only half true.

In answer to the second part of the research question, more than half of the students (57.45%) found English grammar and structure difficult (statement 16). However, when it came to vocabulary (statement 17), the percentage of general agreement was much higher (74.47%), and interestingly, the percentage of those who said they did not know was 0%, which means that the issue is much clearer to students. Lack of vocabulary does pose a more serious and prevalent problem than grammar and structure. It impedes communication and the students are aware of it.

As for the difficult skills, expectedly the productive skills were considered more difficult, than the receptive ones, with speaking coming first and writing second. This finding connects to the lack of vocabulary issue, which most students acknowledged as a problem, and to the difficulty that more than half of the participants faced in grammar and structure, since productive skills demand sufficient active vocabulary and competence in grammatical structure. As for the receptive skills, which were considered less difficult, listening came first and reading second, which means that reading is the least difficult skill among all.

***Research Question 3: Do they try to improve their English?***

Students' responses show that most of them believed that they could improve their English with a general agreement of 91.49% to statement 13 (I think I can improve my English). Interestingly, the percentage of disagreement/strong disagreement is 0%, while only 8.51% said that they did not know. This reflects students' general confidence in their ability to improve their English language. Nevertheless, while this can be encouraging to English teachers, a considerably large percentage of the students (48.93%) said that they were challenged by the lack of time, which

hindered their efforts to improve their language, as seen in their responses to statement 15. This is understandable as FY courses, including English, take up their time from early morning to late afternoon.

However, most students do attempt to improve their English, as seen in the responses to question 18. Only two students (4.26%) said that they followed none of the options mentioned to improve their English. These two also did not write any alternatives which they used to improve their English. A fair number (27.66%) actually took extra classes to improve their English (option 9).

As for the ways students follow to improve their English, most of them (68.09%) chose option 8 (I look up new vocabulary and check pronunciation). Option 2 (I watch English programs.) came second with a slightly lower percentage (61.70%). The first choice connects to the finding in research question 2, which indicates that vocabulary is one of the main difficulties that students confront as they learn English. The second is expected as learning is mingled with entertainment when watching programs, particularly if the program is of interest to the student, and especially with the easy access to some interesting English programs on TV and the internet. Therefore, expectedly among the three students who chose option 11 (Other, specify), two (4.26%) wrote: "I watch English movies.", which is in line with students' general preference of option 2.

Eliciting 42.55% of the responses, option 1 (I read simplified English books.) came third. A similar response to option 1 was written by one (2.13%) of the students (I read English novels). Moreover, 6.38% of the students said that they read articles on the internet (option 6). Thus, the total percentage of students who used reading to improve their language is 44.68%. This result shows that a considerable number of students do read and/or enjoy reading in English. It also matches with the findings of Question 19 where most students regarded reading as the least difficult skill. However, there is an obvious preference to reading from books than from the internet.

Option 7 (I listen to native speakers reading and/or speaking on the internet.) generated a percentage that was close to the one of option 1 (40.43%). This relatively high percentage fits with the results of Question 19, as listening came third in the scale of difficulty, considered as a relatively easier skill.

Around one third of the students (34.04%) said that they practiced the correct pronunciation and new structures with their friends and/or family (option 5) and though this is not a high percentage, it still reflects a generally positive attitude towards learning English, especially given the fact that they live in an Arabic-speaking atmosphere. Furthermore, this connects to students' responses to statements 16 and 17 regarding the difficulty of English grammar and vocabulary as students followed option 5 to support their grammar knowledge in realistic situations and practice the pronunciation of new words in an effort to add them to their reservoir of active vocabulary.

Options 3 (I keep a notebook with all new vocabulary and practice writing them in sentences.) and 4 (I review the new grammar points after class.), which are also relevant to statements 16 and 17, attracted 25.53% and 23.40% of the responses, respectively. These results not only fit with the findings of the previous statements, but they are also comparable with them in another aspect as the percentage is higher when the issue concerns vocabulary than when it deals with grammar, emphasizing students' conviction that vocabulary is more of an impediment to learning English than grammar.

Students' responses to the incomplete statement, "I think I can learn English better if .....", revolved around several inter-related factors that they viewed as vital to the success of the learning process.

### ***1. The need for more practice***

Most of the students believed that what could really help them learn English better was more practice, highlighting the problem of the need of getting sufficient practice of the language. Key words in their responses were "everyday life," "daily," "vocabulary" and "new words". They were convinced that their English would improve if they could practice English in their everyday life with others, especially those who spoke English well, and if they were trained in understanding people who spoke English, which in turn means that they need more listening practice. Vocabulary appears once more as one of the areas of high concern for the students. They emphasized their need to expand the range of their vocabulary, learn good pronunciation and have sufficient drilling and practice on using the new words.

### ***2. The need for an English speaking environment/community***

Students' need to practice English is very much linked to their need for an English speaking environment/community for this practice. Thus, a considerable number of the participants believed that they could learn English better if they travelled abroad, lived in an English-speaking country, used English on a wider scale, and interacted with native speakers in real life situations. This, they said, could train them to "think" in English which would facilitate the use of the language. Of course, they also thought that having a foreign friend with whom they could speak English would be very helpful.

### ***3. The need for more speaking practice, in particular***

Although it goes without saying that the "speaking" skill is part of the needed practice and use of the language which the students mentioned in the previous points, some of the students' responses focused on specific suggestions for improving the speaking skill, in particular, which they said that they needed the most. For instance, students proposed that the institute devote more classes for teaching speaking together with its closely related problematic component, vocabulary. They expressed their regret that they were mostly evaluated on grammar and suggested that more marks were given to speaking.

### ***4. The KAU system of teaching English to FY students***

Some students maintained that one of the hindrances to learning English was the KAU system for FY, where the main purpose of learning English was passing exams and achieving high marks, not practicing the language and using it for educational development. Thus, they believed that they could learn English better if marks were not the first and main concern. Moreover, they also suggested that a special period of university years was devoted exclusively to learning English, the whole first year, for example, before they started other subjects.

### ***5. The intensive nature of the English course***

A significant number of the students expressed their dissatisfaction with the intensive English courses and the long lectures. They thought that they could learn English better if the curricula were spread over a longer period of time, for example, if each level were taught in six months, as one student suggested, because this would give them more time to learn. Most importantly, many respondents complained of the long hours and said that they pressurized and exhausted them. For instance, one of the students declared: "Frankly, the time assigned for English lectures is too long and exhausting. It makes us hate English. It's unbearable and tiring." Another confirmed: "more attention" should be "paid to the time assigned to learning English at the institute. Daily

lectures should not take longer than an hour or two maximum, so that negative effect, which turns joy to boredom, is avoided.”

#### **6. Supplementary materials and facilities**

A small number of students said that they could learn English better if they had special English labs. This may stem from students' conviction that they need more interactive exposure to the language. Taking some of the classes in labs could also provide useful variation in learning activities. Some suggested adding some extra-curricular imaginative stories and assigning a special time to read “inside” class, a suggestion which shows that they realize that reading is important and that they are willing to read in order to improve their language if they see the relevance of the material. The ELI curriculum includes reading circles in which the students discuss a certain story in groups, but the reading is done at home and the choices of the stories are restricted by several factors like culture, time, topic, etc. It seems that these circles/stories neither satisfy the needs of the students, nor trigger their interest.

#### **7. Teacher and teaching methods**

A few of the responses were related to the teacher and teaching methods, stating that the learning process could be more successful if there were more fun in the class, if the teacher had a good rapport with the students and if there were more time for open discussions between the teacher and the students. These suggestions partially echo the findings of Al Noursi (2013, p.26) who asserts that it is not teacher's nativity, but rather “teaching methods” and “learning atmosphere” that can really affect “the type and the degree of attitude”.

#### **8. Personal efforts, attitudes and problems**

A relatively large number of the responses focused on students' own personal efforts, attitudes and problems. Some students said that if they exerted more efforts (reading, studying, watching English movies and programs, and practicing), their English would improve. Others admitted that they could learn English better had they had the motivation/desire to learn, or had they loved/liked the language. Some, however, explained that they needed to overcome personal problems that prevented them from practicing and learning English, such as shyness and lack of confidence and being unable to concentrate in the lecture. The latter problem could be due to the long teaching hours and the number of classes that are required, which students complained about in point 5.

Thus, the hypothesis, which states that students try to improve their English, but their efforts are affected by some factors, is true. Despite the lack of time, most students attempt to improve their English, but they are faced with a number of various obstacles, which they pointed out in their responses to question 22. The fact that all students, except only 5 (10.64%), responded to this statement (some of them wrote more than one suggestion) actually shows the students' eagerness to improve their English and their awareness of those obstacles.

#### **Research Question 4: Do they use English outside the classroom?**

The responses to question 20 (How often do you use English outside the classroom?) indicated that the highest percentage of the students (44.68%) “sometimes” used English outside the classroom, which certainly does not provide enough practice of the language. Moreover, a glaring figure of 31.91% “rarely” used English while 10% “never” used it. Students who used the language “a lot” outside the classroom made up only 12.27% of the participants.

When asked where they used English (question 21), option 3 (When I travel abroad) came first (61.70%). Travelling abroad as an opportunity to practice and improve English was mentioned in several of the responses to question 22, as well, which is not surprising as being in an English-speaking country pushes the student to learn and use English. But also options 1, 2 and 4 which

mentioned cafés and restaurants, hospitals, and clinics, and shops and malls inside Saudi Arabia elicited relatively high percentages (around 50%). In contrast, option 5 attracted only 2.13% of the responses, expectedly because Saudi Arabia is after all an Arabic speaking country and foreign employees at the hairdresser's and/ or the dressmaker's tend to learn Arabic quickly to be able to understand and satisfy all customers. Therefore, regrettably students do not need to use English in these feminine settings which would be a good opportunity if they did. Nevertheless, the percentage of students who chose option 7 (57.54%) reflects the importance of English in their other subjects.

The percentage of the students who had friends with whom they could practice English was comparatively small (21.28%), a finding that echoes one of their responses to question 22 (if I had a foreign friend to speak English with). Nevertheless, the percentage of those who used English only in the classroom was small (8.51%).

The other options which the students wrote include "with my family" and "on the internet." The former supports the findings of research question 3 as it reflects their attempts to improve their English while the latter emphasizes the need for more internet-based learning activities to be implemented. One of the students declared that she spoke English and enjoyed it, but outside the classroom. This attitude can be explained by some of the responses to question 22 as students complained from the long hours, intensive course and the pressure of marks.

Therefore, research hypothesis 4 (It's likely that they rarely have a chance, if any, to practice their English.) is very close to reality since about a third of the participants rarely used the language outside the classroom, a finding which, in turn, connects to students' responses/suggestions to improve their English as they emphasized their immense need for practice and for an English-speaking atmosphere/community.

### **Limitations of Study**

The study covered 47 female students from the FY of the ELI at KAU. Its results are context-specific to some extent. There are, of course, other private and government institutions, colleges and universities in Jeddah and Saudi Arabia that teach English as a foreign language, following different systems and utilizing a variety of curricula. Most other universities follow a semester-based system. Some teach general English, then introduce English for Special Purposes (ESP), in which the curriculum is geared towards students' needs in their future majors.

### **Conclusion**

Students generally have a positive attitude towards learning English. Although some of them find it difficult, they are willing to improve their language. Yet most of them, unfortunately, do not have the sufficient time required, especially with the pressure of the intensive course, long hours and the demands of other subjects. The large number of vocabulary items and grammatical structures that need to be taught in the English courses during a short period of time leave very little room for practice. Furthermore, although the science students' tests in math, chemistry, statistics and biology are in English, the courses are primarily taught in Arabic. The students concentrate on the terminology and they are tested on their information, not their language, through multiple choice questions. All in all, despite the limited chances of practicing the language, students attempt to use it and their responses reveal an interest in improving their English.

### **Recommendations**

The findings of this study suggest that it would be helpful if the institute adopted a more flexible, less intensive curriculum and reconsidered the teaching hours to arrive at a maximum of two-three-hour-daily lectures in order to preserve students' positive attitude and render it effective in

learning the language, and allow teachers' sufficient time for reflection, creativity and adjusting to their students' needs. These recommendations coincide with Bassyony and Cooper Jr.'s (2012, 149) advocacy of the use of "flexible course content" which allows "more creativity, more teacher observations, and more learning opportunities". They also agree with Zainol Abidin's (2012) recommendations as he believes that in order to rectify students' negative attitude, curriculum should be reviewed to accommodate the needs of the learners and teachers should adopt a more communicative approach and utilize more attractive teaching methods and supplementary materials.

The researcher also recommends that more emphasis be given to teaching vocabulary and speaking, allowing students sufficient time for practicing and recycling the new words. Helping the students build a solid base of vocabulary will hopefully not only give them more confidence in speaking, but it will also improve their writing skill. The ELI has a forum for speaking and another for reading, in which students present a topic, or talk about a book, but what students need is more practice on realistic, everyday interactions. In other words, they need conversations, not presentations.

### **Suggested Research**

Further research can be conducted to compare the attitudes and perceptions of arts and science students. Also, research can be done comparing the attitudes of samples of students as they progress from one level (module) to the other, or comparing the attitudes of different levels of students in one module. Such studies can help in identifying and differentiating the expectations and the needs of the students, and devising a suitable curriculum for them, a separate one for each major, if needed.

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