Factors Impacting EFL Teaching: An Exploratory Study in the Saudi Arabian Context

Sayyed Rashid Shah
King Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia

M. Athar Hussain
King Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia

Omar A. Nasseef
King Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia

Abstract

This paper explored factors which influenced EFL teaching in the Saudi context, and identified various teaching techniques employed by qualified teachers to handle those factors. The research utilised semi-structured interviews to elicit qualitative data from five purposefully chosen EFL teachers. The participants shared their experiences and ideas about factors that influenced the pedagogical process in a positive or a negative way. The findings of the study highlighted that EFL teaching is challenged by three major factors comprising social, cultural, and religious sensitivities; lack of learners' motivation; and unfavourable institutional policies and procedures, thereof. However, with keen awareness of Saudi culture, thorough understanding of the learners' needs, and professional competence, the unfavourable effects of these factors might be neutralized or minimised. The present study attempted to offer considerable insights to course designers, teacher trainers, policy makers, and prospective EFL teachers working in Saudi Arabia and raise the consciousness of TESOL community at large about the issues broached in its contents.

Keywords: Teachers' Self-efficacy; EFL teaching; Classroom challenges; Saudi EFL context

1. Introduction

Teaching, in general, is an arduous profession always seeking professionals 'who understand' the niceties and nuances of pedagogy (Shulman, 1986, p. 4). However, English language teaching is a more painstaking vocation demanding 'a high degree of professional consciousness that is informed by relevant specialist knowledge and explicit values' (Leung, 2009, p. 55). With the global acceptance of English as an international language and its implementation as a compulsory academic subject in all the gulf countries, Saudi Arabia has granted a privileged status to English language teaching in educational institutions across the country. Hence, on one hand, the English language teachers working in the Kingdom are assailed by multiple challenges of this highly professional discipline (TESOL, 2003); on the other hand, it has opened a vista of research opportunities for researchers and policy makers in the fields of TESOL/EFL.

EFL teaching in the Gulf States in general and Saudi Arabia in particular has attracted researchers to probe into issues predominantly linked to classroom instructions, learners' performances and teacher development. In this regard, Saudi Ministry of education has generously invested in EFL teaching and learning to improve learners' proficiency and enhance teachers' pedagogical skills. Nonetheless, it experiences tardy progress particularly at university level where compulsory Preparatory Year Programme (PYP) is run for new students (Liton, 2012). Rehman & Alhaisoni (2013) have also highlighted the tremendous efforts made by various educational bodies to ameliorate EFL teaching standards and student achievement, however, the situation of teaching English in Saudi Arabia has been far from being satisfactory. Teaching in Saudi Arabia is believed to be a challenging phenomenon, specifically for non-Arab EFL teachers. Despite holding significant teaching qualifications and experience, EFL teachers occasionally feel unequipped to handle certain pedagogical and socio-cultural issues which crop up during the teaching and learning process. In this way, the crucial role of the socio-cultural context determines the teacher-learner relationship and the success of pedagogical process (Freeman & Johnson, 1998). In an EFL classroom, teacher, learner and the course book may share three different social and cultural backgrounds. In such a scenario, teachers have to interact with learners in a wider social context (Hall, 2011), catering to the needs of individuals and making local and immediate decisions acceptable to learners (Johnston, 2003). However, teaching materials or textbooks being used in Arab countries hardly reflect the learners' cultures (Shehdeh, 2010), and thus, non-Arab EFL teachers, who lack cultural awareness end up facing unexpected and provocative situations in the classrooms. These teachers, lacking cultural awareness, also experience immense difficulty in modification and customisation of the teaching materials in accordance with the learners' needs, curriculum objectives and lesson aims.

Apart from the various social factors, the attitude and response of learners in language and skills acquisition becomes a significant problem. The negative attitude of Arab learners towards English language limits their chances to interact in English and to achieve communicative competence (Shehdeh, 2010). Consequently, EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia usually find unmotivated and uncooperative learners in their classrooms who lack exposure to L2 and speak very little English (Rahman & Alhaisoni, 2013). Most of the studies conducted in Saudi context focus on learners' issues and put the blame on the learners for their low achievement in learning English (Liton, 2012). However, a study by Khan (2011) presents a different but convincing view, and holds the teachers in Saudi Arabia responsible for their language teaching related problems. He points out that teachers' challenges mainly emerge as a result of their irrelevant teaching qualification, lack of training as EFL teachers, inexperience as

bilingual teachers (in Arabic context), misperception of Arab culture, and dearth of awareness of the learners' needs. Notwithstanding his clear stance on this issue, he neither discusses any impact of these challenges on teachers' classroom performance nor does he suggest any way forward to cope with such challenges. Therefore, to raise our consciousness on these issues and their impact on EFL teaching in the Saudi context, research at hand elicits answers to the following two **research questions:**

1) What are the factors which impact EFL teaching in the Saudi context? What are teachers' perceptions about these factors?

2) What efforts do these teachers make to minimise the impact of factors which negatively influence the teaching and learning process?

These questions will explore factors which either make EFL teaching challenging or facilitate instruction in the Saudi context. Moreover, they will identify different teaching techniques employed by the teachers to effectively address those factors. In our view, it is important for the EFL teachers to have awareness of their teaching context and its challenges in order to develop their own repertoire of teaching strategies for improving their professional practice. This study will be of help to the curriculum designers, teacher trainers and policy makers on existing teaching constraints faced by the EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia. What is more, it will raise pedagogical awareness by helping less experienced teachers to reflect on their teaching practices, and informing prospective teachers to consider these factors and develop skills for adaptability accordingly.

2. Literature Review

This section of the paper reviews key factors which could have meaningful impact on EFL teaching. In the first place, a concise review of the literature is presented that demonstrates the influence of socio-cultural factors on language classrooms. Secondly, the factors which involve teachers and their classroom challenges are highlighted, and next the factors regarding the learners' motivation are addressed. In the end, the impact of teachers' self-efficacy on their EFL teaching is surveyed.

2.1 Sociocultural Factors Impacting EFL Instruction

The educational process in any context is considered as a set of conventions and an exchange of information between teachers and learners; and these conventions are made by social and cultural norms within that particular context. The crucial role of the social context indicates that "…classroom is a socially defined reality and is therefore influenced by the belief systems and behavioural norms of the society of which it is part" (Tudor, 2001, p. 35). These social and behavioural norms are indicative of classroom's unique complexities. For instance, the beliefs and expectations of parents, institutional managers and policy makers, and the relationships between the participants in the classroom are all determined by the sociocultural norms of a particular context which influence the classroom environment, and make it more complex and diverse.

Sociocultural context plays a pivotal role in the development of learners' L2 as it influences teaching practices, classroom environment and learners' progress. Language cannot be restricted to any periphery of the classroom because learning occurs through social interaction within specific contexts (Fagan, 2008). Stern (1983) notes that for language teaching 'society and culture are more than background and even more than context', what happens in a language classroom is inseparable from its sociocultural context (cited in Hall, 2011, p. 200). Since language teaching is tied to its social context, teaching and learning cannot take place in a

classroom which is removed from the experiences and personal engagements of learners outside the classroom (Candlin & Mercer, 2001). Hence, the wider context of life outside the classroom has a significant impact on what takes place in these interactions between learners and teachers, and among learners. It is also believed that many learners do not learn languages in classrooms: In fact, they learn them more or less well or badly, on the street, in the community, and in the workplace, however, such opportunities are rarely found in the Saudi context (Khan, 2011). Consequently, the teachers have to plan classroom activities with an authentic language touch, reflecting Saudi cultural attributes. It is a prerequisite in the Saudi context as EFL curriculums lack certain features of local culture and are not well coordinated to the sociocultural spirit of the target language (Liton, 2012). Hence, it is of great importance to bridge the gaps, and strengthen the cultural ties between the learners' L1 and L2 to achieve the desired pedagogical goals.

Socially diverse and pedagogically complex in nature, the L2 classroom is a place where the 'local' and 'global' come together. In Saudi Arabia, teachers often experience the interference of social taboos in their classrooms. To avoid frustration and drastic consequences, non-Arab teachers in general and Western teachers in particular refrain from discussing religion, politics and opposite gender in classrooms. Li (1994, p. 24) gives two reasons for the cross-cultural frustration among the Chinese EFL teachers: first, they fail to understand each other's culture and educational philosophies; second, they expect complete accommodation from the other party. Similarly, Yeh (2010) notes discrepancies across various cultures and concludes that teaching cannot be excluded from the social contexts and the implementation of new approaches must require modifications according to social and cultural demands.

From sociocultural perspective, language teachers teaching in unfamiliar contexts need to acquire the appropriate contextual knowledge which will develop not only their teaching skills but also the norms of practice expected of them in an educational institution, both inside and out-side the classroom (Richards, 2010). Thus, teaching involves understanding the dynamics and relationships within the classroom and the rules and behaviours specific to a particular setting.

2.2 Factors Involving Teachers and Their Classroom Challenges

In addition to the social and cultural factors in language teaching, there is another set of challenges encountered by the EFL teachers, which has a direct impact on classroom learning and teaching. These challenges include limited instruction time, large class sizes, mixed ability classes and various development needs, high expectations from students and parents, lack of resources, inappropriate textbook material, students low proficiency, odd contact hours, and lack of effective and efficient assessment instruments (Chen & Goh, 2011; Drew, Oostdam & Toorenburg et al., 2007; Li 1998; Peng, 2007; Wu, 2001; Yeh, 2010; Yu, 2001; Zheng & Davison, 2008). Shehdeh (2010) on the other hand notes lack of authentic environment, irrelevant teaching materials, and lack of professional training as challenges confronting teachers in Arab countries. Owing to these challenges, teachers may not succeed in providing learners' with favourable learning environment and achieving curriculum objectives by implementing the prescribed syllabus.

In EFL classrooms, teaching practices are influenced by restrictions imposed by institutional authorities. Teachers are not autonomous to pick and choose their teaching methods. In fact, they are bound by social conventions, learners' expectations and school and ministry's policies about how to teach and what methodology to follow (Hall 2011, p. 116). For these reasons, they constantly switch between pedagogically and socially oriented behaviours and try to meet the learning and social needs of the learners. Thus, EFL teachers imparting various skills find it quite challenging to choose the right method that would suit the learners' needs and their

learning style. Like Saudi Arabia, other EFL contexts also demand teachers to adopt communicative methodology. However, EFL teachers in the Arab world often employ traditional methodologies. Shehdeh (2010) and Rehman & Alhaisoni (2013) call them inadequate teaching methodologies which are mainly teacher-centred. In the Saudi context, teachers' prefer to adopt traditional methods and find the application of communicative methodologies difficult due to various socio-cultural and institutional constraints (Rahman & Alhaisoni, 2013). However, EFL teachers in Asian context are often encouraged to incorporate communicative elements into their teaching, which poses specific challenges to the EFL teachers such as the differences in the values, beliefs and cultural norms in the east and the west (Mak, 2011). In most cases, teaching materials are imported from English speaking countries which have no relevance to the local contexts and thus, are difficult to implement. According to Savignon (2007), this approach requires appropriate selection of materials and profound analysis of the tasks to match the teaching goals and contextual demands.

2.3 Factor of EFL Learners' Motivation

In EFL classrooms, dealing efficiently with learners is one of the core factors which challenge teachers' skills and abilities. Learners, who show no interest in classroom activities, usually underperform and underachieve. Such learners often lack motivation and resist classroom participation. It is argued that EFL teachers, particularly Western teachers often ascribe learners' achievements or disappointments to the presence or absence of motivation (Hall, 2011; Li, 1994; Yeh, 2010). Dornyei (2001) considers it the most complex issue that challenges the language teachers. Less motivated learners avoid participation in classroom activities, cheat more creatively than they learn, expect answers from the teachers and use go-betweens to confront their teachers (Li, 1994). Liton (2012) finds that Saudi EFL classes suffer from sheer lack of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Similarly, Shehdeh (2010) states that in Arab countries, teachers face serious issues with learners' aptitude, initial preparedness and motivation. They often complain regarding the low proficiency of their students and claim that the students are not interested in learning English.

However, for some scholars underachievement on part of the learners is caused either by a mismatch between learning and teaching styles or a gap between pedagogical plan and learning procedures (Allwright, 1984; Jing, 2005). Another reason could be the learners' lack of exposure to L2 which is commonly found in the Arab world (Shehdeh, 2010). Lack of exposure can affect learners' language proficiency, and they may resist active participation (Shamin, 1996; Yeh, 2010). In a nutshell, the EFL learners' lack of motivation poses a serious challenge to teachers who aim at developing learners' interests in language learning, conducting interactive classes and achieving their lessons' aims. Indeed, uncommunicative and uncooperative learners will not help the teachers to fulfil their teaching goals.

Motivated learners take the responsibility of their own learning. Their positive attitude towards the target language helps them become more autonomous (Holec, 1981). Furthermore, their autonomy enhances the diversity and individuality of a language classroom. However, autonomy is a culturally specific Western concept that is inappropriate in non-Western settings (Little, 1999). Hence, teachers might experience difficulty in sharing decision making and pedagogic responsibility with learners, which may run counter to their pedagogic beliefs, professional training and established classroom practices.

2.4 Factors Involving Teachers' Self-efficacy

EFL classroom is the manifestation of teachers' skills and expertise demonstrated in their handling of various issues. Richards (2010) has highlighted the significance of some core

dimensions of teachers' skills and expertise which include; language proficiency, content knowledge, teaching skills, contextual knowledge, learner-focussed teaching, and professionalism. EFL teachers in any context require these skills to make their efforts worthwhile and exert their effectiveness in EFL classrooms.

Teachers with positive attitude towards teaching often strive for better performances. Their beliefs and perceptions about their teaching skills have a strong impact on their teaching effectiveness (Knoblauch & Woolfolk, 2008). According to Wheatley (2002), teachers' effectiveness, which helps them influence student learning outcomes, is called 'teachers' efficacy'. Heigaard, Giske & Sundsli (2012) define teachers' self-efficacy as teacher's beliefs about if and how they organise and execute courses of actions and successfully implement a particular task/activity in a specific context. In this study, we have used the term teachers' self-efficacy to refer to the teachers' individual beliefs about their abilities to perform particular teaching tasks and achieve specific results (Dellinger et al. 2008; Pajares 1996).

Findings suggest that teachers' self-efficacy beliefs have considerable influence on instructional practices and classroom behaviour as well as on learners' achievement and motivation (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk,). It is believed that teachers with high self-efficacy beliefs manage negative experiences better than teachers with low self-efficacy beliefs. Furthermore, highly self-efficacious teachers are more sensitive to learners' needs, they teach enthusiastically (Allinder, 1994), and work efficiently with unruly learners (Hoy & Woolfolk, 1990). On the contrary, less self-efficacious teachers owing to lack of confidence hesitate to take necessary and decisive actions, and it negatively impacts their cognitive functioning as practitioners (Shawer, 2012).

The broad literature review for the present study has highlighted the key factors which could influence ESL/EFL teaching for a better or worse learning and teaching process. We have presented four major themes in this literature review, which provide an initial conceptual framework for the study.

3. The Study Design
3.1 Context of the Study
With the emergence of English as a global Lingua Franca, it has acquired the status of a mandatory foreign language in Saudi educational domain. The new Saudi education policy has enforced English as a medium of instruction for all science departments in the national universities. In order to meet the policy objective, all the universities have established new departments, centres or institutes to run a Preparatory Year Programme (PYP) focusing on EFL. The current study is conducted in the English Language Institute (ELI) of a Saudi university. The ELI runs the PYP catering to the English language learning needs of about 6000-7000 students each year. The faculty of the ELI comprises around 200 language teachers from 25 different countries with various L1 backgrounds. The ELI provides intensive instruction of English as a Foreign Language to Foundation Year students in order to enhance their English language skills and facilitate their academic progress.

The PYP consists of four modules with seven weeks each. In each module, a level-based student textbook and workbook are covered following a weekly pacing guide. Ahead of enrollment in the PYP, students have to take the Oxford Placement Test designed by the University of Oxford following the Common European Framework (CEF), which helps stream the students into suitable levels starting from Beginner (A0) to Pre-Intermediate (B1). After

successful completion of a module, students are promoted to next level. The ELI has adopted the New Headway Plus (Special Edition) as main syllabus resource for the past two years now.

3.2 Methodology

The current exploratory study, situated in interpretive paradigm, yields a research design which is emergent, qualitative and focused on the subjective realities of the participants. It explores the perceptions, experiences, and multiple socially constructed realities of EFL teachers in a Saudi university. Marshall & Rossmans (1999, p. 57) have also underscored that "for a study focusing on individual lived experiences, the researcher could argue that one cannot understand human actions without understanding the meaning that participants attribute to these actions, their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values, and assumptive worlds". Therefore, employing the interpretive approach enabled us to interact with the participants in their workplace and discover their views about the research phenomenon.

This inquiry has grown out of our years of personal experience as non-Arab EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia. Over the years, we have observed enormous challenges encountered by non-Arab teachers which triggered our interest in this area of research. Our role in this study served as investigators and participant observers, as explained by Borg and Gall (1983) that "by being actively involved in the situation that the researcher is observing, the researcher often gains insights and develops interpersonal relationships that are virtually impossible to achieve through any other method" (p. 26).

3.3 Method of Data Collection

In order to gain fuller understanding of the target phenomenon, the study utilised qualitative techniques for data collection (Jupp, 2006). Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore teachers' perception of those factors which impact their classroom instruction. Qualitative interview is "a uniquely sensitive and powerful method for capturing the lived experiences and lived meanings of the subjects' everyday world" (Kvale, 2007, p. 11). Scott and Usher (2006, p. 147) also highlight that "the core issue for researchers who use interviews in qualitative research is to seek in-depth understandings about the experiences of individuals and groups, commonly drawing from a small sample of people, selected purposively. Such types of interviews are called semi-structured."

We have used semi-structured interviews for two reasons: Firstly, its flexible structure gives the interviewees more freedom to express their viewpoint (Flick, 2002), secondly, it allows the researcher and the interviewer to develop unexpected themes and issues which emerge during the conversation (Cohen et al., 2007; Mason, 2002). For the interviews of our study, open-ended questions and probes were mainly written in the light of the literature reviewed on the topic. We also drew on our personal experience and observation of the phenomena being researched.

The interviews were conducted in English language. Since all the five interviewees had solid English academic background, they eloquently expressed themselves in English which allowed us to easily understand and transcribe their viewpoints. Each interview took approximately sixty to eighty minutes. All the five interviews were audio recorded and transcribed word for word. For each interview, a separate MS-Word file was created with the pseudonyms of the interviewees.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data were analysed inductively using the interpretive phenomenological analysis approach (Patton, 2002; Silverman, 2011). We developed a framework by repeatedly reading through the interview transcripts to make sense of the interviewees' viewpoints and establish patterns. "Reading, reading, and rereading through the data, once more, forces the researcher to

become intimately familiar with those data". (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 158) On first reading, we highlighted important relevant information which could inform the research questions. An iterative and inductive approach was followed throughout the analysis process. The data were manually coded which rendered a large number of codes and categories. Later, the codes were condensed into 38 loose categories (see appendix 1). Initial categories were derived from the reviewed literature that recognised challenges such as limited instruction time, students' lack of motivation for developing communicative skills, lack of English proficiency, lack of teaching resources, and lack of authentic materials (Li, 1998; Peng, 2007; Wu, 2001; Yu, 2001; Zheng & Davison, 2008). We deliberated at length to ensure that the coding categories were data-led rather than predetermined or constrained by previous research (Dornyei, 2007). The outcome of this data analysis exercise conferred in-depth understanding of the data on us, which facilitated the process of further condensing of the categories. Finally, these categories were collapsed under 4 main themes and 14 subthemes. These four major themes effectively covered the categories that freshly emerged from the data as well as some of those derived from the reviewed literature. The categories that fitted well with the data were retained, for instance, learners' lack of motivation. The categories that seemed superfluous or redundant were dropped, for example, large classes and teachers' low efficacy. Some of the new categories that came to surface included 'absenteeism' and 'classroom observation'. These categories were re-examined, interpreted, and further conceptualized in the discussion in the light of research questions.

3.5 Participants

There were five participants in this study who were interviewed at separate timings suiting their schedules. The selected participants were all English language instructors at English Language Institute of a Saudi Arabian University from English and non-English speaking countries.

We used *Purposive Sampling* strategy for the current study in order to access qualified teachers with recognised teaching qualifications (e.g. CELTA, PGCert TESOL, TESOL/TEFL diploma, MA TEFL/TESL/TESOL/Applied Linguistics) (Patton, 2002). The participants had a minimum 5 years of language teaching experience in the Saudi EFL context. Purposive sampling paved way for seeking in-depth information from those experienced teachers who were in a strong position to divulge it (Cohen et al., 2007).

Figure 1. *Teachers' Details*

Teachers' Details

Teacher #	Teacher's Pseudo name	Nationality	Teaching Qualifications	Country of Education	Teaching Experience	Teaching Experience in Saudi Arabia
Teacher 1	Khan	South African	MA Linguistics & CELTA	South Africa & UK	10 Years	7 Years
Teacher 2	Fahad	Pakistani	MA Applied linguistics & CELTA	UK	17 Years	10 Years
Teacher 3	Star	British	PGC in TESOL	UK	7 Years	4 Years
Teacher 4	Mark	American	MA Education & DELTA	US & UK	13 Years	7 Years
Teacher 5	Lakshman	Indian Canadian	MA TESL	Canada	8 Years	5 Years

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethics is a crucial consideration in any type of educational research. We considered all the essential ethical conventions in the process of data collection. First, the completed 'Certificate of ethical research approval' request form was submitted to the Chair of the School's Ethics Committee for permission to start data collection. Then, we sought permission of the Vice Dean (Research) of the ELI to carry out our project on the site. Afterwards, the rationale behind the research and its expected benefits were shared with the participants. While obtaining their informed consent to participate, they were communicated their right to withdraw from the research at any time. Moreover, the anonymity and confidentiality of their views were guaranteed along with the choice to use pseudonyms for privacy purposes (Neuman, 2006).

3.7 Limitations of the Study

The current research study has certain limitations. Firstly, it was conducted with male teachers: The perceptions of female teachers regarding the factors impacting their EFL teaching might have been different which could have enhanced the data. However, due to social restrictions, female participation was not possible in our study. Secondly, only qualitative interviews were utilized for data collection: A combination of interviews and observation could have enriched the data.

4. Findings and Discussions

The factors explored as a result of semi-structured interviews are divided into four major categories, followed by various data led sub-categories. Three of the four main categories highlight factors having negative impact on classroom teaching whereas fourth category which is 'teachers' competence' mainly encompasses positive factors with regard to the teachers' ability, skills, and classroom performance. To establish validity and reliability of the findings as well as give greater visibility to the data, chunks of the teachers' responses are quoted and contextualized in the findings and discussion.

Figure2. *Factors impacting EFL teaching*

4.1 Social, Cultural and Religious Sensitivities
4.1.1 The Conservative and Religious Nature of Saudi Society
Language classroom is considered a socially defined reality which is influenced by the belief systems and behavioural norms of the society (Tudor, 2001). These beliefs and behavioural norms affect classroom practices, especially when teachers are unaware of the learners' social, cultural and religious sensitivities. In Saudi Arabia, EFL learners with religious and conservative bent of mind not only influence teachers' choice of teaching material but overall classroom environment. Therefore, it becomes essential for the teachers to understand the teaching/learning context and know how to effectively deal with social, cultural and religious factors (Murphy-O'Dwyer, 1996). All the five interviewees mentioned the conservative and orthodox nature of the Saudi society which certainly affects their efficacy in the classrooms.

In Saudi Arabia, there are cultural and social issues that certainly affect our classroom teaching. We'll have to be well aware of its social, cultural and religious norms. For example, religion is very sensitive here in Saudi Arabia. You shouldn't devise activities that contradict their social and cultural norms and must take them into consideration while planning a lesson (Fahad).

However, the participants in this study seemed fully cognizant of the students' sensitivities and know how to dilute their unfavourable impact on EFL teaching in the classrooms.

I am aware of the cultural sensitivities. Moreover, I always try to connect every classroom activity to the culture to make it familiar and more understandable to the students (Khan).

4.1.2 Discouraging Societal Behaviour towards Education
The teachers' experience and their background knowledge of the culture usually help them overcome sociocultural challenges in pedagogy (Khan, 2011); however, they could do little about the negative attitude of the society towards modern English education. Similar to the findings by Nishino (2012), teachers in this study have highlighted the socio-educational and psychological conditions of the Saudi society.

Psyche is what creates a very distinctive set of an educational environment. From a psychological view, the actual value they are putting on education is minimal. I never received parents asking about the progress of their kids or expressing their expectations of the child (Lakshman).

The above quote reflects the situation of parental role in education in Saudi society. Learning environment and family background both contribute to the success of learning process. However, in Saudi Arabia, majority of the people are not well educated, and parents lack interest in giving good education to their children (Khan, 2012). Thus, lack of parental support is on the basic reasons and a demoralizing factor in language teaching.

4.2 Learners' Negative Attitude towards English Language Learning
4.2.1 Lack of Motivation
Ellis (1997) believes that motivated individuals, who integrate both linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes of the learning experience, will attain a higher degree of L2 proficiency. Learners' lack of motivation leads to various other factors which cause teachers' frustration and impede classroom teaching. As seen in the literature, learners' motivation is 'the most complex and challenging issue facing teachers today' (Scheidecker & Freeman, 1999, p. 116). Similar to the findings by Liton (2012), teachers believe that learners' lack of motivation is the crux of the problems which influences teachers' performances and learners' outcomes. However, they make

a conscious effort to reduce its negative impact by developing rapport with their learners, bringing variety to their classrooms and providing them with a friendly classroom environment.

> *I believe, for me the biggest challenge in Saudi context is learners' motivation. It's a real challenge for me to motivate my students, so whatever I do, the key question I ask myself, will this motivate the students, I make a lesson plan, I make an activity, multiple choice questions, anything I do, the thing in my mind, driving it all, will this motivate the class (Mark).*

Interviewees have evinced their disappointment about the learners' lack of interest in English language which '*poses significant number of challenges for the teachers*' (Lakshman). *They don't have the reading habits. They lack interest in learning English (Mark).*

4.2.2 Learners' Preferences and Goals

More than clear majority of Saudi EFL learners' attitude towards exams and assessments is primarily grade-driven. Their ultimate learning goal is to achieve good grades and certificates, and they divert all their energies for this purpose with little attention on real learning and academic growth.

> *Grades are the prime motives behind coming to the class (Khan).*
>
> *Students expect to get 10 out of 10 in all the exams. They don't care about their natural ability and performance but they keep an eye on these grades (Star).*

These findings confirm Shehdeh's (2010) assertion that Arab learners lack motivation and have a poor attitude towards English language. They are also in line with Candlin & Mercer's (2001: 18) claims that learners' preferences, beliefs and educational attainment influence their classroom performances. Since English language is not required for most of the tasks they perform outside the classrooms, their main objective remains to achieve certificates and get promoted. Consequently, the teachers' job turns out to be more challenging. They are forced to think out of the box, vary their lessons and create learners' interest in the lessons.

> *I use different activities for different purposes. In all my classes I let the learners do activities individually, in pairs and in groups. My every lesson has Lead-in, for motivating and engaging the students. I always make the theme relevant to their understanding. Visual scaffolding, audios, posters, photos, games, role plays and dialogues help me personalizing the tasks (Star).*

The above quotation affirms the teachers' proactive attempt to provide learners with authentic and dynamic learning environment. It shows their strong drive for giving interactive and learner-centred lessons. Also, teachers' use of various activities, strategies and techniques ensure lively classroom atmosphere where learners find themselves engaged in meaningful tasks. Despite the challenging EFL context of Saudi Arabia, the teachers endeavour to get their students involved in communicative activities and encourage them to speak with and listen to other learners.

4.2.3 The Phenomenon of Repeaters

Above all, the factor of 'repeaters' poses enormous challenge to the teachers. They believe that learners who have failed and repeated the same level more than 2 or 3 times have no motivation to learn English, but to get promoted without any academic performance.

> *Teaching repeaters is just like banging your head against the wall. There is hardly any suitable methodology for such learners (Fahad).*

Such students are found almost in every class, and teachers have to deal with them in a very efficient manner enabling them to learn and pass the exams. They need a lot of attention and encouragement.

> *You have to be strict with the repeaters but the thing is that it's a challenge (Mark).*

I encourage them to use English. I also urge them that it's not necessary for you to use full sentences, it's not necessary for you to speak but do not feel afraid of making mistakes. Everybody makes mistakes, nobody is perfect. But what I think you should speak phrases, even words if you can (Fahad).

4.2.4 Absenteeism and Its Toll

Among other unseen factors that negatively influence classroom practices in the Saudi context, 'absenteeism' is a big problem experienced by the teachers. Lacking any teeth or autonomy in this regard, they feel helpless and frustrated.

We start teaching in week one, students don't show up. They start coming to classes in week two and three or week four. The teacher is not that powerful to force them to stay in the class. He has to start covering the course next day, no matter how stressful it is for the teacher or students (Khan).

Absenteeism shrinks learners' chances of getting exposure to English language through classroom environment, which ultimately affects their proficiency. Research shows that poor language proficiency of EFL learners is due to their lack of exposure to L2 ((Matsuda & Gobel, 2004, cited in Amengual-Pizarro, 2007; Yeh, 2010; Shehdeh, 2010). Likewise, data supports the findings of Chen & Goh (2011) that teachers find it hard to prepare activities and apply them successfully due to the learners' limited vocabulary and poor grammar. In our context, this problem arises due to poor attendance of the students.

They don't have background knowledge of some very common things, so while activating their prior knowledge or developing schemata, I really face a challenge because they lack in the basic vocabulary, they lack in the basic structure, they don't know what to say, how to say and when to say (Star)

English is not a dominant language. Learning English doesn't have practical benefits. People have limited exposure through the lenses of TV, music and movies (Lakshman).

This commonly observed problem in EFL contexts has been tackled by teachers in different manners. Generally, similar types of strategies are employed to deal with repeaters and low proficiency learners. Although, teachers try to avoid the use of learners' L1, but to avert communication breakdown with lower level learners, L1 comes into play.

I use Arabic when there is a complete breakdown of communication especially with the lower levels. I believe if a student gets an equivalent of an English word or concept in Arabic, it's a pleasurable activity for him. Moreover, the use of some Arabic takes the strangeness of the new word away (Khan).

4.3 Institutional Policies and Procedures

4.3.1 Attendance Policy

Teachers have to comply with the institutional procedures and policies. Institutional pressures may force them to adopt practices that contradict their cognitions, beliefs and established practices (Almarza, 1996). They are not completely free to pick and choose how they teach; they are bound by social convention, learners' expectations and school and ministry's policies (Hall, 2011, p. 116). Similarly, participants in this study highlighted various policies which affect their classroom teaching in one way or another. For instance, the attendance policy is heavily criticised by the teachers which is never modified. Some teachers believe that no such policy has ever existed. Nonetheless, they are bound to stick to the pacing guide and cover the prescribed syllabus in a limited time period, even if more than half of the class is absent.

If a student is absent for more than 18 or 20 hours, he is not supposed to take the exam and repeat the course. However, that's always not the reality. In some cases a student

can take the exam and get promoted to the next level even if he exceeds the absence limit. Students take advantage of this leniency (Khan).

The above quote indicates loopholes in the system of the ELI which students exploit to their benefit.

4.3.2 Modular System vs Semester System

Another intriguing factor that impacts classroom teaching is the modular system adopted by the ELI. The brief time frame of a module which is 6-7 weeks creates inevitable hurdles for teachers to achieve curriculum objectives, to teach the prescribed syllabus, to develop rapport with learners and to assess the learners' progress. The challenge of limited instruction time is also found by Chen & Goh (2011) and Yeh (2010) in other EFL contexts.

Actually, I kind of prefer the semester system. I prefer it in a sense that you are with the same teacher. In module, you change the teacher. Then you change the book also. In semester you have only one book. In two modules you have two books. You're not acquiring the skills. Education is about learning the skills, learning one skill and then another. So you can't really master one book in such a short time. You don't have that much time to build the relationship with learners too (Mark).

If they (students) don't show up during the first week, then suddenly in week 2 an email may pop in a night before, saying, can you just cram and squeeze those week 1 objectives into week 2? (Star)

Teachers find themselves in testing situation here. The modular pattern is an idea that contradicts their pedagogical beliefs; however, skills like adoptability and flexibility earn them some success.

Being a qualified and skilled teacher, I have to adopt and adapt in modular system and I have to increase pair work, increase group work so I can assess them quickly and also assess my own teaching (Lakshman).

4.3.3 The Element of Threat in Classroom Observations

Teachers do not consider the environment of the ELI congenial for the expatriate teachers. They perceive the role of the Professional Development Unit (PDU) quite hostile towards expat teachers, especially in classroom observations. Teachers believe that observations (formal/informal), which are mostly conducted by unqualified and untrained observers, are mainly meant to 'hire and fire'. The element of threat remains on top of the teachers' heads that leads to teacher burnout and demotivation.

When the observation begins a cold shiver runs down everybody's spine (Khan).

Prima facie, this is quite a dissuading and discouraging aspect of the ELI, wherein, teachers experience a continuous stress throughout the academic year. In addition, unannounced visits by the officials to classes further pressurize the teachers who are subject to a lurking job uncertainty. Moreover, lack of autonomy and sense of insecurity affect teachers' performances who fail to utilize their teaching abilities with desired freedom.

4.3.4 Lack of Authentic Environment and Resources

Teachers also consider the unauthentic environment of the institute an obstacle in their classroom teaching. Candlin & Mercer (2001) believe that learners' experiences and their personal engagements outside the classroom in EFL contexts have a strong impact on classroom teaching and learning. Since, English is not a local medium of communication in Saudi Arabia (Khan, 2011), students do not practice it outside the classroom, and thus fail to achieve the linguistic competence. For Hall (2011), "the school, institution or educational system provides the immediate environment for the language classroom". The lack of authentic environment

affects learners' language proficiency, a problem commonly seen across the Arab world (Shehdeh, 2012).

> *Outside the classroom, students don't practice English language not even in school or university and use their first language, Arabic. So EFL context is very limited in Saudi Arabia (Lakshman).*

The participants also specify other influencing factors caused by institutional policies such as lack of resources, lack of authentic materials, and irrelevant textbook materials which support the findings of studies by Chen & Goh (2011), Yeh (2010), Li (1998), Peng (2007), Wu (2001), Yu (2001), and Zheng & Davison (2008). Nonetheless, large classes with learners of various needs are issues seen in the literature, but not expressed by the teachers in this study. It may be due to the fact that students, based on Oxford placement test, are streamed into appropriate levels at the start of the academic year. Also, the classroom strength is restricted to 25 students which is considered manageable strength.

> *I feel frustrated when I see the material is not relevant, i.e like that Big Ben example. I mean why this material is here? I try to relate, like if Michal Jackson is there with Mohammad Abdu, Meradona with Yasir Qahtani, something like that. I try to make them relevant to the students. I make my own stuff, i.e. how to get a job, Saudi mountain climbing in America etc. (Star).*

4.3.5 Odd Contact Hours

Contact hours or class timings also affect teaching practices (Drew et al., 2007). Class duration of 80 minutes per lesson is seen a problem by the teachers. Teachers believe that normal classroom duration should be 50 minutes to avoid learners' fatigue. Moreover, 18 hours language classes per week with odd and unfriendly class timings may not support the learners' mood and preferences. For example, the classes that begins at 2:30pm and finish at 4:00pm are not endorsed by the teachers.

> *The students feel very much demotivated as they are forced or coerced to attend the 18 hours of language classes per week (Khan).*

> *Classes starting at 2:30pm, I would prefer them to be a bit earlier, because students in the morning are more motivated and active, they are more energetic, in the evening they are all sleepy. 50 minutes class is good enough for language teaching (Mark).*

4.4 Teachers' Competence

4.4.1 Professional Knowledge of Teachers

Findings reveal strong indicators of teachers' classroom practices, reflecting their accurate observation and good understanding of the teaching context that shape their classroom behaviour and goal setting (Chen & Goh, 2011). Drew et al. (2007) believe that teachers' knowledge and competence have a definite impact on classroom practices. Similarly, participants in this study believe that teaching qualifications earned them self-confidence and enabled them to experiment new things in classrooms in order to achieve their teaching objectives. Unlike studies by Liu (2007) and Li (1998) which reflect EFL teachers' own language proficiency and inadequate pedagogical knowledge (Chen & Goh, 2011) as sources of problem, the participants of our study are well proficient in English and possess up-to-date knowledge of language teaching and the origins of their problems lie elsewhere. These findings also support the core dimensions of teachers' skills and expertise suggested by Richards (2010).

I have an absolute belief in my knowledge and experience. I have full command of the language. I always plan my lesson. While planning the lesson, I keep in mind the students' level, their culture, time slot, their needs and lesson objectives (Lakshman).
I don't find my pedagogical knowledge inadequate to teach my learners (Star).

4.4.2 Teachers' Effectiveness

Previous studies indicate that teachers' self-efficacy beliefs affect their instructional behaviours in various ways including the effort they put in teaching and the goals they set up for themselves and for their students (Chacon, 2005; Knoblauch & Woolfolk, 2008; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy 2001). In this study, teachers' self-efficacy beliefs and their positive image of themselves enable them to deliberate on the lower level learners' needs, repeaters' expectations, and unmotivated learners' goals. Only highly self-efficacious teachers can accept the challenge of teaching such 'difficult to teach' learners.

In addition, their beliefs and perceptions about their teaching skills have a strong impact on their teaching effectiveness (Knoblauch & Woolfolk, 2008) which are indicated through their will to adopt and overcome ineluctable classroom challenges. For example, other studies by Schutz (2001, cited in Nishino, 2012) and Ehrman (1996 cited in Jing 2005) show that mismatch between teachers' teaching style and learners' learning style might cause frustration to EFL teachers, and the choice of methodology may also affect EFL teaching (Drew et al., 2007). However, such concerns were not conveyed by qualified and competent teachers participated in this study.

Being a professional teacher, I'm not influenced negatively by the students' practices. There is not much mismatch between my teaching style and learners learning style because in week one I try to research different inventory methods to get to know students learning style. For example I try to know whether the students learn individually much better, in groups or in pairs and secondly, I try to know whether students feel much more comfortable with the grammar lesson, reading or listening lesson, then I try to design my activities that go with the students interest and learning style (Fahad).

4.4.3 Prerequisite Qualifications of Teachers

It is generally considered that teacher training courses, workshops and seminars help teachers to upgrade their teaching knowledge, enhance their teaching skills and keep them abreast of latest developments in ELT. The findings of the current study contradict Khan's (2011) stance that in the Saudi context "the background and training do not contribute much, but a well-equipped teacher may minimise the learning difficulties". Khan (2011) further contends that courses like CELTA, DELTA, TESOL, EFL, ESL, ESP, B.Ed., M. Ed etc. are generally found less effective because these do not match the needs of the local teachers and specific classroom situations. However, the participants' views in the context of this research were found in favour of these teaching qualifications, i.e. CELTA/DELTA or MA TESOL, which they considered pivotal in their effective teaching to Arab students.

I would suggest that CELTA is the key to tackle the classroom dilemmas. I use CELTA techniques for students of all levels and the outcome is brilliant (Mark).

5. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, some recommendations can be put forward to EFL teachers, policy makers, administrators, course designers, and teacher-trainers working in the present research context.

5.1 Social, Cultural and Religious Sensitivities

- To understand the social, cultural and religious norms of the Saudi society and avoid cultural-shocks or frustration, EFL teachers new to Saudi context should be given orientation sessions. Also, they should be provided with a booklet outlining and explaining social demands, institutional procedures and learners' expectations.
- Course designers should make teaching materials culturally relevant, however, authentic in nature.

5.2 Learners' Negative Attitude towards English Language Learning

- Experienced teachers should provide support to novices in their efforts to teach lower level learners, repeaters or unmotivated students. They should be of great help in lesson planning, customising the materials and devising culturally appropriate classroom activities to minimize or neutralize the effect of learners' negative attitude.
- To create an authentic learning environment, language labs, libraries and discussion clubs should be set up to encourage learners' active participation. The issues of lack of resources at the ELI should be resolved with the establishment of a well-stocked teacher resource centre.

5.3 Institutional Policies and Procedures

- The ELI should come up with a realistic and practical attendance policy. Teachers should be given the mandate to implement the policy and achieve the desired outcomes.
- Teachers' evaluation system needs to be overhauled and the threat element in classroom observation has to be removed. Moreover, well-trained, professional, qualified, and impartial observers should run the professional development unit with the objective to improve the teaching standards at the ELI.

5.4 Teachers' Competence

- No one can deny that EFL learners have the right to be taught by qualified and trained teachers, and the field language teaching is a professional discipline that requires specialized training' (TESOL, 2003). Therefore, a stricter teacher selection procedure should be adopted to hire well-qualified and competent teachers in order to raise the teaching standards and student achievement.
- The teacher-trainers, who are usually alien to the place they go for training the local teachers, should consider the classroom realities and adapt their courses according to the teachers' actual needs and demands.

6. Conclusion

The present study is an attempt to raise consciousness about the factors affecting EFL teaching at a Saudi university. We believe that teachers in EFL countries such as Saudi Arabia face many obstacles in their bid to effectively teach EFL learners. The first research question was informed that classroom teaching is impacted by various factors which encompass social, cultural and religious sensitivities, lack of learners' motivation, and effete institutional policies and procedures. The findings informing the second research question have revealed that the teachers' ability to deal with these factors is developed through proper qualification and training. Despite the fact that the factors discussed in above sections which hinder classroom teaching and retard teaching and learning outcomes, teachers in this study seemed competent in coping with them. They expressed confidence in their teaching skills, excellent language proficiency, background knowledge and experience of Saudi context, and in their adaptability to meet the

learners' and administrators' expectations. However, some factors were beyond their control, which negatively influenced their teaching in the EFL classrooms.

Notwithstanding the limitations and caveats, we believe that our study contributes to the relevant literature by raising teachers' awareness of the challenges in Saudi context. It provides a detailed insight into factors which either negatively or positively influence classroom teaching. However, more research of this kind may further enlighten teachers working in Saudi Arabia, neighbouring Gulf countries and elsewhere.

About the Authors:

Mr. Sayyed Rashid Shah is a lecturer in English at King Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia. He earned a master degree in TESOL from Sheffield Hallam University, UK. He is currently enrolled on EdD TESOL programme at University of Exeter, UK. Mr Shah's research interests include language teacher development, TESOL pedagogies, and EFL classroom teaching and learning.

Mr. M. Athar Hussain is a lecture in English at King Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia. He has master degrees in English literature and ELT. He is currently working on his doctoral thesis at University of Exeter, UK. Mr. Hussain's research interests include culture and language, L 2 motivation, TESOL methodology, teacher learning and professional development, and professional excellence.

Dr. Omar A. Nasseef is an associate professor of MIS and Dean of English Language Institute at King Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia. He obtained his Ph.D. from the Newcastle University, UK. Dr. Nasseef is also a certified trainer and visiting instructor in number of international organizations. His interests are: MIS, E-Learning/Distance Learning/M-Learning, E-Syllabus designing, and Artificial Intelligence.

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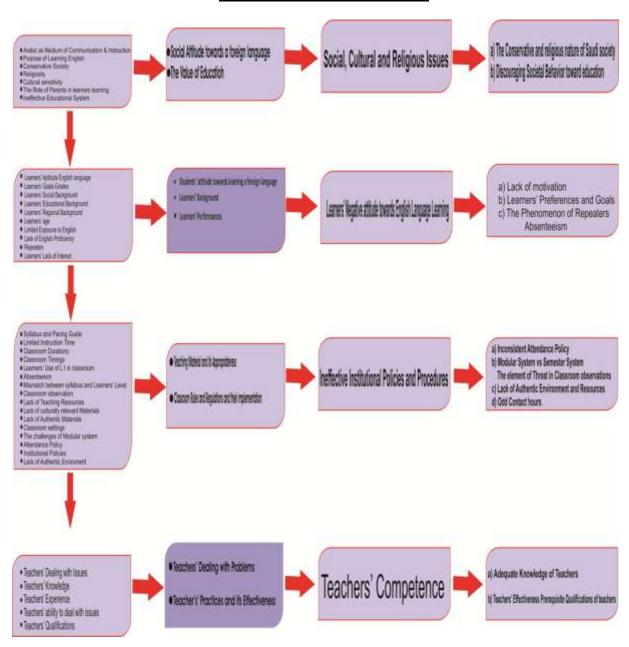
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(Appendix 1)
<u>**Codes, Categories and Themes**</u>