

Challenges of Teaching English Language to English language learners at Private Universities in Jordan

Baderaddin Yassin

Amman Arab University
Amman-Jordan

Abstract

Teaching English language in a foreign environment can be a hard task for both ESL teachers and English language learners (ELLs). The current teaching methods used in some of the classrooms in foreign environments are similar to classical teaching methods. Students sit, listen, and wait for the teacher to explain everything related to class. Therefore, ELLs would agree with their teachers most of the time. The result of such a teaching method is not always satisfactory for students because teachers forget the fact that students have different learning preferences and different cultural backgrounds. Consequently, teaching English in such environment challenges ESL teachers and make teaching process difficult. This paper focuses on some of the major challenges in teaching English language at private universities in Jordan. The finding of this qualitative research study showed that the academic level of ELLs was affected by their cultural backgrounds and their first language.

Keywords: Culture, ELLs, ESL, Middle East, Teaching Methods

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Introduction

Learning a foreign language is fascinating but it is also quite difficult and demands efforts and time. Indeed, it is challenging and time consuming task. Both Language learners (LLs) and (TOFLs) teachers of foreign languages are challenged in classroom. Learning a second language is important so people all over the world look forward to learning a foreign language. For example, English language is the most commonly spoken language in the world. Therefore, it is considered the scientific language in most part of the world. Unfortunately, teaching English language in a foreign environment is difficult and needs time. So, ESL teachers (English as a second language) stress out when teaching Ells (English language learners) a new language such as English. This stress has been an issue for long time and it has been documented by some of researchers over years of research (Markham, 1999). Most of ESL teachers around the world face obstacles in teaching a new language. They face a bigger problem since they are urged to teach ELLs a new language that is totally different from their first language. The language distance also plays another difficult role in learning a foreign language. For instance, Arabic and English language are totally different languages. Each has different language system and different alphabetical system. Consequently, Arab students face difficulty in learning the English language. Moreover, some Arab students learn English in their countries by classical teaching methods, translating word by word (Mohamed, 2014). The system that is common in some of the Arab countries is the teacher centered classrooms; the teacher is the only one who is in charge of the classroom. Therefore, the role of students is not effective in classroom, and some of the English texts and curriculum are locally oriented but Arab ESL students are not familiar with the English/ American culture. As a result, the orientation of the curriculum may lead those students to a lack in the most important factor that is comprehension (Markham, & Green, 1996). Some of the Arab countries do not assign enough hours for ELLs during their primary and secondary schools, and some teachers put more emphasis on one skill that is mastering grammar. But they ignore other language skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing (Sullivan, Johnson, Owens, & Conway, 2014).

It is well known that the exposure to a language is one of the main keys in mastering a language. In the contrary, most of the ESL teachers in elementary, secondary, high schools, and even in colleges are second language learners. The result of a little exposure to the target language and English native speakers may lead students to a great difficulty that results in not following lecturers. It prevents students from asking questions during class time. Little exposure to the target language forces ELLs to think in their first language. Therefore, when Arab students try to speak in English, they think in Arabic and then speak in English. According to Krashen (1982), if you want to teach ELLs a language, the input should be comprehensible. Otherwise, the teaching process may not occur.

Related Literature

Learning a foreign language has always been a major concern for ELLs around the world. It is considered one of the most difficult learning topics that face people who are interested in learning a foreign language. Teaching a foreign language is also difficult. It needs hard efforts and committed ESL teachers. It challenges them especially if they teach a foreign language in a foreign environment. Teachers who teach a foreign language always look for the appropriate pedagogical methods that enable them improve their students' language level. But sometimes, it is difficult and needs extra hard working to achieve acceptable levels.

To achieve effective learning as well as effective teaching, it might be necessary for teachers to become familiar with students' methods and theories of learning (Hunt, 2011; Kumar, & Chacko, 2010). Being aware of such theories and methods is essential for the teaching process of a foreign language. Therefore, ESL teachers need to investigate a huge number of teaching and learning methods to achieve effective teaching in the classroom.

ESL teachers face challenges of providing excellent teaching levels of foreign languages because they have little knowledge about students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Culture plays an important role in learning or teaching a foreign language. ESL teachers should be knowledgeable when they deal with the background of ELLs. Culture is important in teaching and may affect the ELLs motivation to learn a second language negatively.

The environment also plays an effective role in learning and teaching a second language. In an ESL classroom, most of Middle Eastern ESL teachers use their first language to explain the English language. Therefore, the use of the mother tongue is frequent in an ESL classroom. The mother tongue of students makes the learning of a new language is difficult and a hard task to be achieved. English and Arabic language has two different language families. As a result, learning or teaching the English language to Arab students might not be an easy job, so ELLs may not feel comfortable learning it. According to Berg, Petron & Greybeck (2012), mother tongue language affects the learning process of any second language. It might make it a difficult process. Therefore, ESL teachers are challenged in classroom. Some of ESL teachers are encouraged to develop a deeper understanding regarding the academic background of ESL students; and they are also encouraged to analyze the cultural and academic background of ELLs in order to make instruction meaningful and achieve effective language teaching in classroom.

ESL students in such foreign environments do not have access to appropriate second language acquisition resources, so they are sometimes flagged as low achievers (Zimmerman, 2014). In order to help ESL learners to achieve developed levels in learning a foreign language, it important to support them with the necessary second language acquisition equipment that aids them to learn a foreign language. The classroom should be equipped with the appropriate tools to help both ESL teachers and ELLs in classroom. ELLs feel disappointed because of the unavailability of these second language acquisition resources in some institutions. Therefore, schools must create support tools and second language resources to help both ESL teachers and ELLs in classroom (Zimmerman, 2014).

According to DeCapua & Marshall (2011), pedagogy and culture play an important role in the teaching process of ELLs. Factors such as culture affect the language acquisition and challenge ELLs in classroom. According to Aghajanian and Cong (2012), Middle Eastern and Chinese ELLs are affected by outcomes of acquiring the English language. The result of their research showed the difficulty of acquiring a second language. They also recommended on how school and teachers better respond to the needs of Immigrant ELLs from different cultures. Therefore, the culture is vital element in the teaching process of ELLs. It should not be ignored or avoided when teaching Middle Eastern students. Pedagogy is another challenge faced by both ESL teachers and ELLs. The way of teaching is the key of improving the language level of ELLs positively. Teachers in the Middle Eastern schools use the direct type of lecturing. They illustrate the concepts and reading from the text books. Evaluation of the students depends on tests, and most of students depend on memorization to succeed the tests. As a result, Middle Eastern students struggle with communication skills that are required for ELLs (Aghajanian, & Cong, 2012). Oral skill is one of the pillars of succeeding not only in an ESL classroom. Moreover,

students in this part of the world do not feel confident when they are asked to participate in an ESL classroom. So they are shy or afraid of making mistakes in front of their classmates.

ESL teachers can play an effective role in the development of ESL students' academic level through stimulating their language intrinsic motivation. Therefore, ESL students need effective methods of pedagogy in order to be motivated. According to Abrantes, Seabra, & Lages (2007), students learn indirectly to the student-instructor interaction and directly according to their pedagogical affect, interest, and their learning performance. The researchers used a sample of 1000 students. The results revealed that students are directly affected by the used pedagogy in classroom. The study indicated that more interaction between the students and the instructors, higher degree of organization, higher level of instructors likeability, higher level of instructors responsiveness, and higher degree of students learning performance lead to a higher level of pedagogical affects. All of these factors can lead students to gain higher perceived learning level. The finding of this research provided the educators with valuable information because it revealed that students appreciate student-centered methods more than teacher-centered methods in classroom.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to identify the challenges that face both ESL teachers and ELLs in private universities in Jordan. The questions of this research study are designed to determine the problems that make English language teaching process difficult in undergraduate level in some of the Jordanian private universities. The results of the research paper revealed some teaching challenges that are faced by both ESL teachers and students. These challenges were analyzed to give sufficient information and up to date knowledge in order to improve the teaching process of English language in such classrooms.

Methodology

This study employed the theoretical perspective of ethnography. It used qualitative research methods in an attempt to investigate the teaching and learning challenges faced by both ESL teachers and ELLs in classroom at two of the private Universities in Jordan. The aim of this research was to determine the obstacles that prevent students from learning and teachers from teaching in effective methods. This research was interview based qualitative research in an effort to get more knowledge and understand the reason behind these challenges.

An in-depth interview strategy was used for data collection. Interviews were chosen from ESL students whose first language is Arabic. All of the participants were students majoring in English at two of the Jordanian Universities. All of ELLs and ESL teachers were interviewed individually. Each interviewee was asked to answer three open-ended questions. ESL instructors were asked to answer the following questions:

Question 1: How many years have you been working as a university teacher?

Question 2: What are the academic challenges in teaching English language in classroom?

Question 3: Do students ask questions during class?

ESL students were asked to answer the following questions:

Question one: What are the challenges you face in classroom?

Question two: Are you afraid of asking questions during class?

Question three: Do instructors encourage you to cooperate with other students in classroom?

Participants

All of the participants for this research study were drawn from two private universities located in the Jordan. A total of five ESL instructors and 30 ESL students participated in this research study in the fall semester of 2014. The first language of the participants is not English. All of students and instructors speak Arabic language as their first language. Arabic language does not belong to the English language family. Arabic belongs to the Semitic language family, thus it has a different alphabet and a different grammar system. Arabic language has 28 consonants and 8 vowels but English language has 24 consonants and 22 vowels. Grammar and word order of both languages are also different. Consequently, the language distance between English language and Arabic language is not close. Therefore, students face some challenges to learn the written and spoken English language.

Procedures

Contacts were made with the deans of Arts and Science colleges at target private universities. They were contacted to gather information about the number of ESL students and instructors as well. ESL instructors were interviewed and they were asked the following questions:

Question 1: How many years have you been working as a university teacher?

Question 2: What are the academic challenges in teaching English language in classroom?

Question 3: Do students ask questions during class?

The students were also interviewed. They were asked to answer three questions. The researcher talked about anonymity, confidential treatment of participant responses in the cover letter, and translation into native language combined to help improve the response rate. ESL students were asked the following questions:

Question one: What are the challenges you face in classroom?

Question two: Are you afraid of asking questions during class?

Question three: Do instructors encourage you to cooperate with other students in classroom?

Results

Data were collected through interviews of both ESL students and teachers. As an answer for question number one, it was found that participant teachers had a variety of years of experience at private universities with an average of three years. One of the instructors spent ten years in teaching in private universities, another one with an experience of four years, and the rest of the instructors ranged within two years scale as shown in table 1.1. Of the five ESL instructors, three were male and two were female instructors.

Table 1. 1

Teachers' Experience Status

Gender		Years of Experience			Total
Female	male	(1-3)	(4-6)	(7-10)	
2	3	5	2	1	5

Table 1.2 illustrates the total response rate of 30 ESL students. Of the 30 participants, 12 were male and 18 were female as shown in table 1.2. Of the 30 ESL students, 8 were freshman, 14 were sophomore, 6 were junior, and 2 were senior.

Table 1. 2

Students' Gender and level at collage

Private University	Gender		College Level			
	Male	Female	Freshman	Sophomore	Junior	Senior
	12	18	8	14	6	2

The answers of ESL instructors to question two revealed the following teaching challenges.

The main teaching challenge faced by instructors is that most of students were raised to become fully dependent on teachers. According to the interviewed ESL teachers, the majority of ELLs in this region wait for the teachers' correct answer instead of trying to do it. Unfortunately, some of the educational systems in the Middle East encourage students to depend mostly on teachers, so when teachers try to apply the cooperative teaching methods in the classroom, some students become uncomfortable and unresponsive. According to ESL teachers, some of the teachers quit using those methods and switched back to the traditional method, the teacher is the controller of classroom, because some ESL students were not comfortable with these kinds of cooperative activities.

Question two also revealed a significant result. All of the participant instructors agreed that they face the same difficulty when asking for students' feedback. In other words, the majority of students in those counties agreed with instructors most of the time. This result is a lack of discussion in classroom. When teachers need to check the students' comprehensibility, they ask students a simple question that is "is it understood?" most of students reply by saying "yes". Sometimes, silence controls the classroom after asking such questions. Unfortunately, some teachers assume that students really understood the lesson but it was not the case all of the time. If the students say "yes" or if they nod their heads, the teacher will go on to the second lesson. According to participant teachers, sometimes the results of the exams are not expected and sometimes low grades are shocking.

Teachers must not count on "nodding heads" or saying "yes" because according to Arab ESL students, they are shy to say "no". The culture plays an important role in this region; it is impolite to disagree with the teacher. Students have always to respect teachers and not to look him in the eye, so most of the ESL students will be quiet in classroom.

In regard to question three, four out of the five teachers agreed that ELLs in those classrooms are not willing to ask questions during classroom. On the contrary, they ask questions after class or during the office hours. According the ESL teachers this action is related to the cultural background of students. Students are somehow shy and quiet when this is related to ask questions in front of their classmates (Gi-Zen, 2005). They are terrified to ask questions and then to discover that his or her question is silly. Therefore, students start whispering and nodding their

heads to express disappointment. According to ESL instructors in those private universities, the percentage of students who dare to ask question in classrooms is very low.

Thirty ELLs were also asked to answer another three questions. The result of question number one revealed that students were faced with the following challenges. More than 65% of ELLs approved following challenges.

- 1- Low Tawjihi GPA (General secondary examination grades).
2. The teaching methods that are used in classrooms.
3. The frequent use of the first language in English classes.
4. The lack of accommodations in classrooms.
5. Being afraid of asking questions during class.

The answers of ELLs to question two revealed that they are not willing to ask questions in classroom. Out of the thirty students, twenty six of them argued that it is not easy to ask questions because they do not feel comfortable and they feel shy and quiet. When ELLs asked why they feel shy and not comfortable to ask questions in classroom, they said this related to culture. ELLs are afraid of making mistakes in front of their classmates. Therefore, they are terrified to ask questions and then to discover that his or her question is silly.

In regards to question number three, nineteen ELLs agreed with the idea that ESL teachers do not encourage them to cooperate with other students in classroom. Moreover, ESL teachers leave them to listen and observe during the class. Out of the thirty ELLs, eleven students supported the idea that teachers encourage them to communicate in classroom.

Discussion

This paper presents some of the major challenges in teaching English language in two of the private Jordanian universities. It is well known that teaching English in a foreign environment can face potential difficulties especially in private universities in Jordan. It is somehow problematic for the following reasons. Private universities accept low Tawjihi grades (General secondary examination grades) compared to the governmental universities. As a result, teachers face some challenges in teaching this type of students because of the students' low grades in Altawjihi. Other reasons are students' cultural background, teaching methods, and the environment of such schools. We all agree that teaching or learning any second language is not a stress-free task but it is a serious challenge. To learn or teach another language that is different from your native one is a challenging task for both ESL teachers and students. Being a teacher of ELLs is not an easy job. It is really very difficult to teach ESL students especially if they do not have a background in the target second language. It is more difficult when ESL teachers do not also have any background of the students' first language.

Knowledge of the students' first language might make teaching a second language easy and simple but the extensive use of the first language in an English class can make teaching of a second language a poor process. It is true if students do not know how to ask questions in English, they will ask ESL teachers by using their first language but when they always use Arabic to communicate in a bilingual ESL classrooms, their exposure to the English language will not be enough to learn English. Moreover, teachers use their first language (Arabic language) to translate English into Arabic in a college level. This method of teaching deprives Arab ESL students from learning English.

The second challenge is the teaching methods that are used in some of the Arabic private universities. Some of these teaching methods lack professionalism and teaching commitment. Some of the methods that are used in those private universities are traditional methods. For example, the time factor is not used as it should be in classrooms; teachers talk for a long time in classrooms depriving students from having the opportunity to participate and practice their English language. The classrooms in those private universities are mainly teacher-centered classrooms. The students listen most of the time to the teachers and to a limited number of students chosen by the teacher him/herself. Some of ESL teachers who want to teach these students in a modern way claim that it is very difficult to apply new and effective teaching strategies. According to the participants in this research, the reason behind this difficulty is that students are not ready for these strategies. They are used to the traditional methods for long time. This is why new methods that called for students centered classrooms are not taken seriously. Furthermore, the discipline issue will be harmed as much as you imagine.

Because we really need students to be effective in classrooms, we have to encourage them to participate and cooperate with other students. Instructors must insist on the idea that their duty must be a facilitator not controller. If ESL students want to improve their spoken and written English skills, they should be encouraged to expose themselves to the target language most the time through participation. One of the key factors that makes students competent in a second language is the exposure to the target language. Student cannot and should not be allowed to sit and listen only to the teacher. On the contrary, they have to be effective members in classroom.

The third challenge in teaching Arab ESL students is the frequent use of the first language in English classes. Most of the ESL teachers and students are still influenced by the behaviorism theory. They believe that memorization, recitations, and repetition are the most effective activities in teaching students. Teachers who are influenced by the behaviorism theory believe learning habits can be formed easily by memorization. In this traditional teaching scenario, students will miss the cooperative activities part inside these kinds of classrooms which can lead teachers to lose the practical side of teaching process. But participant teachers claimed that, students are used to this kind of teaching method. When they try to switch to the cooperative methods, students may not accept that and the result is chaos.

Using the first language to answer any English question is a serious challenge for ESL teachers. Using the first language to clarify some difficult English words is a good strategy but not all the time. Students in these classes want to use the first language to explain anything in the second language. Teachers may solve this problem by encouraging students not to be afraid of using the second language and minimize the use of the first language.

The fourth challenge is the lack of accommodations in classrooms. It causes ESL learners to be confused and make comprehension difficult in ESL classrooms. The lack of using different teaching methods also leads teachers not even to try to be clear and concise in their instruction but it can make the whole learning process very difficult to students to comprehend and even not to be motivated to learn a second language.

The fifth challenge is being afraid of asking question in classroom. It is a common problem in Arab countries. As an ESL teacher, it's important to encourage students to speak in

English, and only English. However, if students begin conversing in their first language, the teacher has to move closer to the students and ask them direct questions like "do you have a question?" ESL teachers have to encourage ESL students to use the second language more than the first language in ESL classrooms. For example: if a student is 'caught' using their first-language for long time, they will have to do extra home work for the class. Since it is an English class, students have to be encouraged to use English language most of the time and not to use their first language in ESL classes. Applying this rule in that type of classroom is a challenging task for ESL teachers.

Conclusion

Teaching English language in a foreign environment is not a smooth process. It is difficult, time consuming, and faced by many challenges. Most of the interviewed instructors in this research paper agreed that teaching English to ESL Arab students in private universities requires hard teaching efforts, and it is loaded with teaching challenges.

Instructors in those private universities face such teaching challenges because of the cultural background of Arab ESL students, the traditions in such society, and the learning methods of ELLs in classroom. The culture plays an important role in the life of ESL Arab students. According to Lim (2009), a culture is important in the lives of ESL students. It affects their social and academic life enormously. In this research study, ELLs are afraid of asking questions in classroom because they are afraid of making mistakes in front of their classmates. ESL instructors assume that most ELLs comprehend in classroom whereas most of them are shy to ask questions. According to ELLs, the used teaching methods in such classrooms are not effective and they do not help them learn a new language smoothly. On the contrary, some of the used teaching methods make learning English language a hard task to achieve. Therefore, ESL instructors should be very patient with those kinds of students and ready for a bigger teaching task.

About the Author:

Dr. Baderaddin Yassin works at Amman Arab University in Jordan. Prior to coming to Amman Arab University, he was a teaching assistant at the University of Arkansas, USA. He holds a Ph.D. degree from the University of Arkansas in English as a second language (ESL), Curriculum and Instruction. He also holds a master degree of Secondary Education from the University of Arkansas in 2009 with emphasis on ESL; and a bachelor degree in English Literature from Yarmouk University in 2000.

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