

Difficulties of Saudi Arabian Female Students Studying English Abroad

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Abstract

Research on the difficulties of international students has dramatically increased in the last few years. However, there has been very little research on the difficulties of Saudi Arabian females studying abroad. The purpose of the present study is to identify difficulties of Saudi female students studying abroad. The findings clearly indicate that interaction with and the presence of male students in classes is the greatest difficulty for Saudi female students studying abroad. It also shows that family sources are the preferred method used by students to seek assistance to overcome the anxiety of studying with male students in foreign countries. Further research is needed for identifying and suggesting the remedies to overcome the difficulties faced by females coming from conservative backgrounds while studying in western countries. I have used the results of interviews and a questionnaire conducted on Saudi female students who have experience of studying in a foreign country.

Keywords: Culture, English language Motivation, Saudi Arabian female students , studying abroad

Introduction:

The study on the difficulties of international students has increased dramatically in recent years (Alhazmi, 2010; Dorres 2007). Subsequently, there has been a large amount of empirical research directed at identifying these specific cultural difficulties, which has led many educational institutions to adopt an approach to ensure that a strong and positive relationship between educators and international students is formed upon the latter's arrival.

Most research agrees that living in a new culture or country can have an effect on international students and is related to the degree of contact with native speakers, which may occur as a result of this transition (Novera, 2004) or other language challenges. Students must in turn adapt themselves to overcome these problems in order to succeed academically.

Research by Kampman (2011) focused on Saudi female business students, data was specific to a United States environment and specific to students who were already enrolled in university courses. She notes "the presence in the classroom of members of the opposite sex is a hurdle for Saudi students to overcome in order to achieve success in US universities." Students in Kampman's study were more successful in dealing with this difficulty due to the fact that they had interacted with men before through experiences while travelling abroad and understanding the importance of learning to interact with men in the business world.

This study, therefore, investigates female students from Saudi Arabia specifically studying in an English as a second language program. It is the first to investigate females who have not had any previous interaction with men due to the fact that they have never travelled outside Saudi Arabia and belong to a very conservative region in KSA.

Motivation:

- 1- The significant increase in the number of Saudi students studying at universities abroad.
- 2- In recent years, research conducted on the difficulties faced by international students studying English abroad has increased dramatically and widely. However, there has been very little research that particularly focuses on Saudi female students' concerns while studying English abroad.
- 3- Saudi female students grow up in an environment where their friends and teachers are of the same gender. (Saudi female students are unlike most international students who do not come from a sex-segregated educational system).
- 4- The researcher has studied in different universities, in the UK and Australia with Saudi female students in class and noticed two things. Firstly, since Saudi female students have been kept away from male students and teachers, they lack confidence and feel uncomfortable in co-educational environments. For instance, sometimes when they have problems at the airport, university, or anywhere else, they use their first language. Secondly, it is not easy for Saudi females particularly those from conservative areas to socialize and adjust themselves in a totally new academic culture. To support this argument, Alhazmi (2010, P.11) indicates in his article that "Saudi students need to be prepared for the mixed gender experience.

Aim of the study

The purpose of this study is to explore the difficulties that Saudi female students face in studying abroad. Moreover, this study also tries to identify the support and assistance needed for female students to succeed in their life abroad.

Literature review:

Cultural, social and religious norms have a very strong impact on the demeanour of Saudi women. While studying in a foreign land where co-educational classes are common, they face hindrances like not participating in class room activities and remaining silent most of the time due to the presence of male classmates. Altamimi, A. (2014) in her study found Saudi females in the class are unaccustomed to co-educational classes and male teachers. She proves that Saudi women are expected to defer to males. As such, the presence of males in the classroom causes Saudi women to remain silent. She emphasises that Saudi women are not expected to interact outside the home, or with males due to cultural differences. Consequently, Saudi females prefer to socialize only with Saudi women and do not have the exposure of an English speaking environment.

The research carried out by Gassama (2012) entitled "*New comers: The difficulties they encounter learning the target language and possible solutions*", points out that ESL students find it very hard in adapting to a new culture. He reiterates that the difference in attitudes and values is one of the main sources of problems in foreign language learning. "...Culture shock, or lack of cultural adjustment, can prevent students from acquiring the target language" (Buchanan, 1990, p. 83). Another researcher Lopez Rua (2006) has pointed out that in the UK, Asian women, unlike Asian men, are often homemakers and do not have the opportunity to interact with many people in English every day. This happens as a result of carrying one's cultural beliefs into a different country. Similarly, Saudi women in Saudi Arabia tend to stay at home in their free time (Al-Otaibi, 2004).

Insecurity and lack of confidence can hamper the second or foreign language learning. Al-Sibai, (2005) points out that second language learners have a fear of losing face, to be insecure and to lack confidence. According to her such causes can potentially lead to lowered success in a L2 classroom. Such characteristics would more likely prevent students from participating to their full potential in oral communication activities in the classroom (Al-Sibai, 2005). Consequently, that would reduce second language use outside the classroom which would in turn, possibly further inhibit classroom participation. The result would be less participation and diminishing language acquisition.

Nervousness of the foreign or second language learners, particularly of women, can negatively affect their performance in the speaking skill class. Al-Sibai (2005) studied Saudi female students in Saudi Arabia and found that many women in L2 classes were afraid or nervous when answering a question orally than while using other language skills like reading and writing.

Whilst broad similarities occur in research around concepts of isolation and loneliness of students, difficulties faced by international students are the result of multidimensional factors and issues, which differ according to culture and the host country involved.

A study by Blake (2006) of students who study abroad suggests that living in a new cultural environment causes individuals to experience language anxiety, frustration and helplessness. Andrade (2006), Shaw (2009) and Shehry (1989) find that international students are placed under pressures which include; financial instability, social difficulties, speaking, writing, homesickness and difficulties dealing with universities.

Regarding financial pressure, research has also shown that students who have scholarships to study abroad face additional stress when their academic performance on IELTS is not sufficiently high enough to maintain the scholarship (Poyrazli, Arbona, Bullington, & Pisecco, 2001). In contrast, a study by Gauntlett (2006) of Saudi students argued that those who have a scholarship do not pay attention to their studies.

Another key factor was discussed by Robinson (1992) who stresses the importance of host universities assisting international students in language adjustment. He emphasises the importance of educating students to enhance their understanding of culture providing opportunities to develop essential skills for university work, and developing necessary skills and knowledge for their academic classes. This was supported by a study by Barker, Child, Gallois, Jones, and Allahadad (2010) who found that international students of Asian backgrounds faced difficulties when participating in lectures, tutorials and seminars.

Lin (2011) indicates that many Chinese students face problems in conversational English and class discussion, but in their written English they perform well. Most studies recommended international students to use English inside and outside of the class so that they can learn faster which will help them succeed academically. Al-Sibai (2005) urge the international students to adjust rapidly to learn quickly in classroom

Novera (2004) stressed the importance of international student advisers in helping students in their difficulties. In contrast, research by Zhai (2004) suggested that participants preferred to seek help from family or friends rather than from academic advisers, faculty members, classmates, or colleagues to solve personal problems.

This was supported by research from Johnson (1993), who suggested that most students preferred to ask friends and relatives for advice because they did not think the international student services staff would understand their problems.

A key difficulty was proposed by Alhazmi (2010), who found that the biggest problems facing Saudi students in Australia relate to the transition from gender segregated environments in their home country to co-educational institutions in the host country. Most students face problems when they want to learn a second language as a result of their own fears and a slight problem in class will stop them from learning the new language, which is why students frequently avoid conversation in classes that leads to a lack of developed language processing skills. Robertson et al (2000) conclude in their research that most international students feel unhappy in their oral performance while studying in Australia. They indicate that language issues were the main problem still faced by international students.

Additionally, research has identified issues relating to student support, with Saudi females who are studying abroad completely dependent on their husbands for support, both financially and emotionally (Midgley, 2009 & 2011).

In this study, I will focus on conservative culture and how it affects language acquisition by female students whereas previous studies have focused on both males and females. For example, studies by Alhazmi (2010) focuses on both male and female students. Altmimi (2014) studies language acquisition by Saudi women, however, her study concentrates on women from all over the country including more cosmopolitan cities such as Jeddah , Riyadh and Dammam where women have more exposure to Western culture. The aim of this study is to focus on the problems faced by women in one of the most conservative areas of Saudi Arabia .

This study aims to further this research and identify difficulties faced by Saudi female students studying abroad. This study will use quantitative methods to determine which of these difficulties is of most importance. Due to time constraints, information will be collected from a survey while using a more detailed interview format. Research by Andersen (1999) suggests that the use of surveys minimises research duration without sacrificing reliability of results.

Research question:

This study will attempt to answer the following research question:

What are the most significant difficulties for Saudi females studying abroad?

The background of the research:

Before going into the hypothesis, it is necessary to say that certain aspects of the Saudi woman's cultural identity, like covering her head and avoiding interaction with men, can impose difficulties on her learning a second language. At the same time, there are regional cultural differences in Saudi Arabia that need to be considered. Female students from Jeddah (in the southern part of Saudi Arabia) and Dammam (located in the eastern part of Saudi Arabia) are more likely to interact with Western society. Through travelling outside Saudi Arabia, the people of Jeddah and Dammam encounter foreigners from America, Britain, and elsewhere. This situation contributes to building strong conversational language skills in English. Consequently, when they go abroad to study, they may have less difficulties learning academic English and interacting with men in a classroom.

Why Al-Qassim Province ?

Al Qassim, (located in the central region of Saudi Arabia) is an extremely conservative region whose inhabitants are predominantly farmers. Women from Qassim have very limited contact with foreigners. The rural culture is not an open one. Qassim is quite a distinct region regarding gender attitudes and learning. Le Renard (2008) found that central regions of Saudi Arabia are much stricter and more conservative about the enforcement of restrictions surrounding sex segregation than the Eastern Province. Moreover, Hamdan (2005) believe that the role of women in Saudi Arabia is determined more by culture than by religion .

In 1963, girls' education was widely accepted elsewhere in more cosmopolitan areas of Saudi Arabia, like in Riyadh, Dammam, and Jeddah but Qassim presented an entirely contrasting picture.

King Faisal decided to open a school for female students in Qassim, but the conservative religious scholars in the region continued to pressurize society to prevent the girls from attending. The general public also indicated that a Saudi woman's place is in her home. According to Lacey (1981) and Alexander (2011), in September of 1963 the government had to send official forces to break up demonstrations in the city of Buraydah, where much of the opposition to girls' education took place. The citizens of this town had to be forcibly restrained from demonstrations. King Faisal's wife, who pushed enthusiastically for the education of women in Saudi Arabia, wished that women be allowed to learn science, language, and other subjects. Based on the unique situation faced by female students in Qassim, it is expected that these difficulties will be worse for them.

Hypotheses:

The hypotheses of this study is based on the research conducted by Woodrow, (2006) which indicates that passing the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) is the biggest difficulty for international students. The first hypothesis is that the greatest challenge faced by Saudi female students trying to pass the IELTS, results from interactions with male teachers and students in the class due to cultural differences. These differences dictate and limit interactions with male peers. The second hypothesis is that the majority of Saudi female students studying abroad have not been exposed to males before nor are males exposed to them. Additionally, it is hypothesized that time spent studying abroad will have a negative correlation with the severity of these challenges. That is, the longer a student spends time studying abroad, the less intense these challenges will be.

Significance of the Study:

It is expected that the outcomes of this study will be relevant to the Saudi public school system and generally be useful to universities and other institutions in Saudi Arabia, Saudi embassies, and international universities elsewhere.

Method

Participants

The participants in this study are thirty female postgraduate students from Qassim University, Saudi Arabia. Ten participants were interviewed, and twenty participants responded to a questionnaire. The age of participants are between 25 and 35. All of them have had the experience of studying abroad. Additionally, all participants studied in gender segregated environments inside the Kingdom . All participants in this study received scholarships from the Saudi Government for tuition and living expenses, and all participants are married. The study was carried out in Al-Qassim province, which is a religiously and culturally conservative place.

Materials

The research will collect data through an interview and questionnaire. Harris, Brown (2010) indicates that the aim of questionnaires and interviews are to "confirm results despite differences in methods of data collection, analysis, and interpretation".

Firstly, telephone interviews were conducted with ten female students to determine things that obstructed them from learning the English language in their classes. They were asked the following questions: "Would you prefer to have a female or male teach you?", "Do you feel nervous when teachers ask you to speak to male students in the class?" "Do you think that the international students' office helped you solve your problems?" Secondly, the questionnaire was given to twenty participants who completed their studies and graduated abroad.

A demographic sheet has also been provided to show data regarding length of time studying abroad as well as the age of participants.

Design

This study utilises a within-groups design to determine the relationship between difficulties faced by participants and the correlation with the length of time they have studied abroad.

Procedure

Students were contacted through their husbands. The questionnaire and demographic sheet were submitted by the researcher, and students were able to complete them in their own homes. The interviews were conducted by telephone, and the female secretary of the women's college helped the researcher conduct the interviews.

Results

In this section, we are going to discuss the results of the survey based upon interviews and the questionnaire. Saudi female students who had studied abroad gave their feedback on their experiences of studying in an environment where they had to study in mixed gender classes. They suffered from anxiety, which affected their language learning efficiency.

Interview :

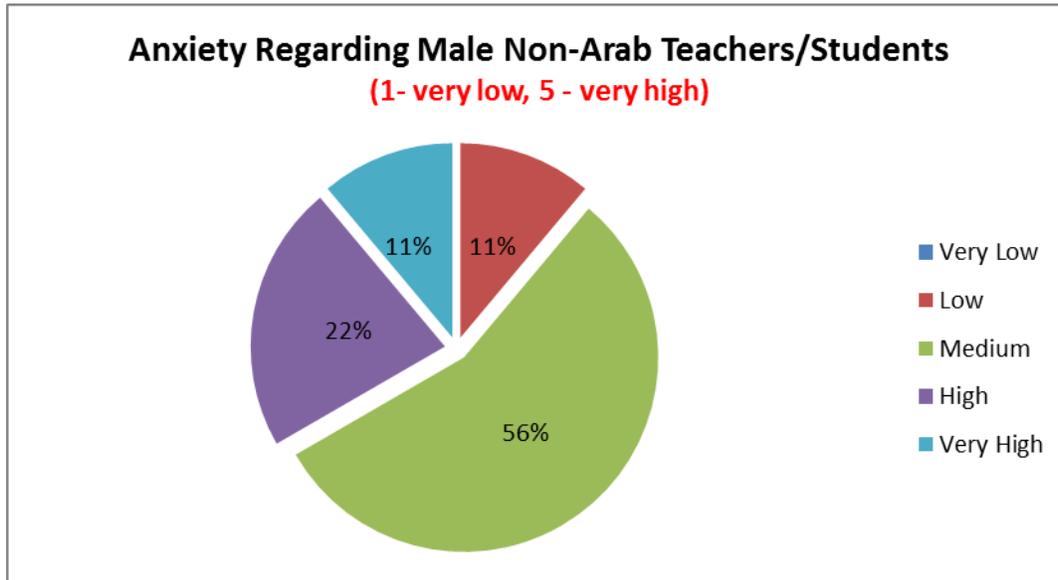


Figure 1. Anxiety Regarding Male Non- Arab Teachers/ Students

Figure 1 shows that the Saudi female students studying in co-education classes feel more anxious when their class fellows are Arab males. However, in case of non-Arab male classmates, their anxiety level is lower than when they are studying with Arab classmates. The above chart clearly indicates the scenario of a co-education class where non-Arab male students are studying with Saudi female students. With non-Arab males their anxiety level is not as high as with Arab male students. Finally, there is proof that Saudi female students studying abroad feel more comfortable and relaxed with non- Arab male teachers and classmates.

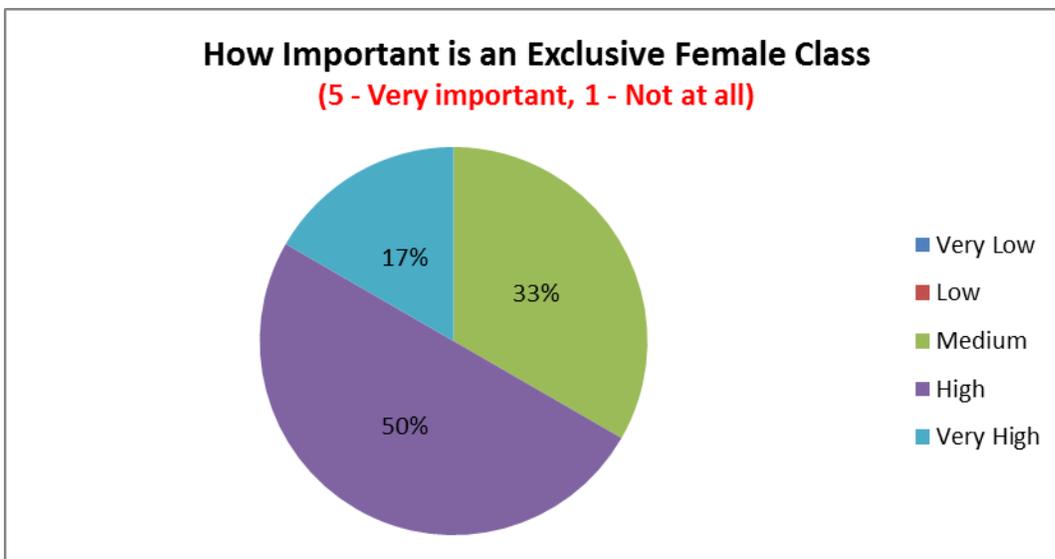


Figure 2. How Important is an Exclusive Female Class

As compared to the previous chart, Figure 2 shows that the Saudi female students studying in co-education classes accompanied by a relative in class feel less anxious. The presence of a relative makes her feel secure socially and culturally. During one of the interviews a female interviewee also stated that "studying in a group of three or four Saudi females makes me more comfortable and relaxed than studying alone." The above chart clearly indicates the scenario of a co-education class where non-Arab male students are studying with Saudi female students while being accompanied by a relative. Their level of anxiety is much less, either because of being accompanied by a relative or because of studying with students of the same gender.

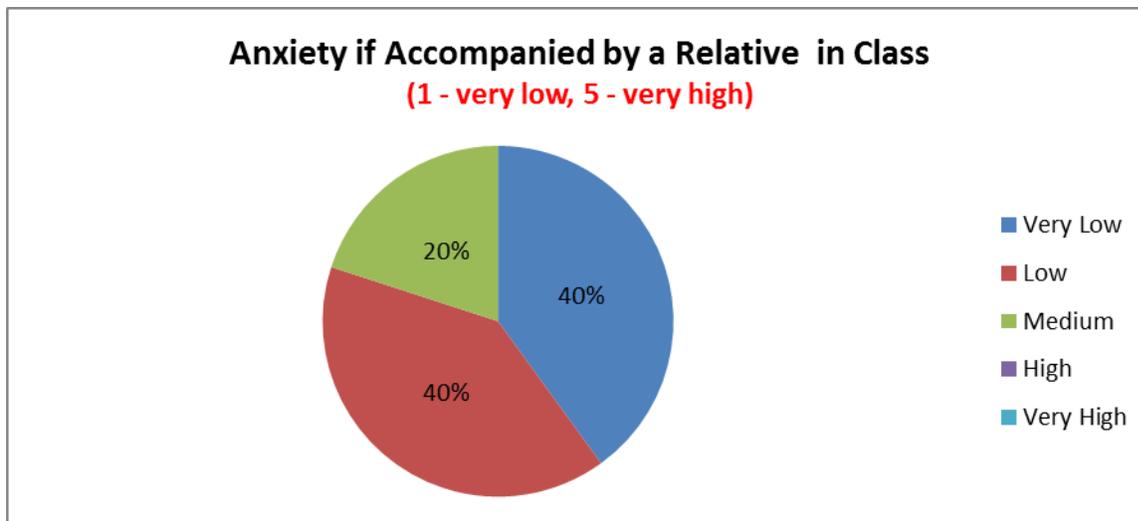


Figure 3. Anxiety Accompanied by a Relative in Class

Figure 3 shows another significant factor regarding the importance of studying in a class that is exclusively a female class of Saudi students while studying abroad. In this case, their comfort level is very high (50%) and participants of the survey said that they were extremely happy and relaxed.

Questionnaire:

This section shows the results of the questionnaire. The findings show trends that prove the point that the longer Saudi female language learners stay in a foreign environment, the more adaptable they become to the new environment. Here the focus is on the comfort level of female Saudi students studying in an environment where male classmates and teachers are present. Their very presence affected the learning of the female Saudi students who had come from a conservative environment which restricted male/ female interaction.

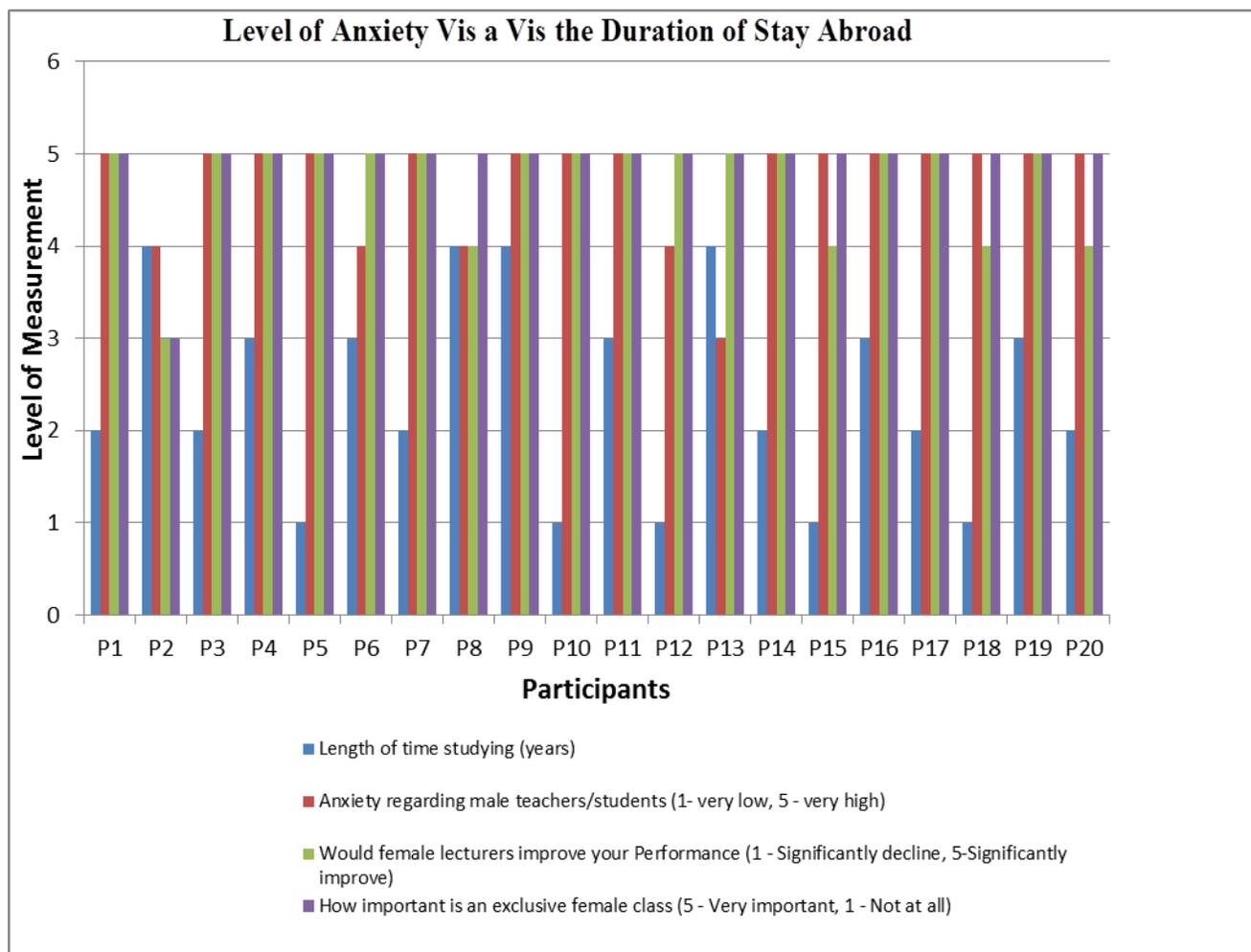


Figure 4. Level of Anxiety Vis a Vis the Duration of Stay Abroad

Six of the twelve questions related to interactions with male lecturers and students, and a comparison of the data with the length of time studied abroad supported the hypothesis that the longer a female student studied abroad, the less significant the issue of different gendered colleagues became. We are now going to explain the results in detail.

Participant No. 1 in the above chart spent two years studying abroad. Her anxiety level regarding male teacher/students was very high. She thought that female lectures would improve her performance significantly. She also felt very comfortable while studying in an exclusively female class.

Participant No. 2 shows a different picture altogether, i.e she spent four years studying abroad. As a result, she became more comfortable in the new environment. Her anxiety regarding male teachers was not as high as that of participant number one. Her preference for exclusively female lectures was also low. Her liking for exclusively female classes was less than participant number one. This shows that the longer Saudi female students spend studying abroad, the more confident they become. With time, they feel less anxious while studying with male classmates or being taught by male teachers.

Participant No. 3 shows the same result as that of participant no 1.

Participant No. 4 displays that the student in question spent three years studying abroad, but her anxiety level while studying with male classmates was still very high. She felt that female teachers would

improve her performance. Her comfort level with female students was also very high. This shows that even after spending three years studying in a different social and cultural environment, she was still shy with male classmates and teachers.

Participant No. 5 in the above chart spent only one year studying abroad, and she did not feel comfortable in the class where she had male classmates and male teachers. She liked to be taught by female teachers. This shows that she was still under the influence of her social and cultural background.

Participant No. 6 spent 3 years in a foreign environment, but unlike participant no. 5, her anxiety level decreased with the passage of time. This means she is an individual who possesses more flexibility in her character. Upon closer inspection, it came to be known that this participant had attended an international school where she had exposure to a co-educational environment at a very early stage of her life.

Participant No. 7 spent two years studying in a foreign country, and her anxiety level regarding male teachers and classmates was very high. Similarly her comfort level with female lecturers and female classmates was also very high. This means she was still under the influence of her native cultural, social and religious background.

Participant No. 8 spent four years outside the kingdom for her studies. Her anxiety level decreased because of spending more time in a foreign environment where she was exposed to the cultural values of the foreign country. Consequently, she became more confident and flexible in adapting herself to being taught by a male lecturer. Still, her preference for an exclusively female class was very high.

Participant No. 9 spent four years in a foreign country studying English, but surprisingly in all the three categories she still felt uncomfortable in an environment where the male element was either dominant or a part of her educational pursuit.

Participant No. 10 spent only one year abroad while studying English. Her anxiety was at the peak regarding the presence of male students and teachers around her, and her comfort level was also very high with female lecturers and students.

Participant No. 11 spent three years in the same environment, but had no effect of three years exposure to studying in a foreign environment. In all the three categories, she was at an extreme high level of anxiety.

Participant No. 12 spent only one year outside the Kingdom. Remarkably, her anxiety level regarding male teachers and students decreased during that one year which is unlike the majority of the other participants. This is not a general trend of the survey. Special individualistic or psychological reasons can be attributed for this character trait of participant no. 12.

Participant No. 13 spent four years outside the Kingdom while studying. Consequently, her anxiety level regarding the presence of male teachers and classmates decreased. This correlates with the hypothesis that the more time you spend in a foreign land, the more adaptable you become to foreign conditions. However, in the other two areas under consideration, she did not show any flexibility or adaptability. This reiterates the point that social and cultural values can stay with a person for quite a long time.

Participant No. 14 spent two years studying in a foreign land, but in all the questions under discussion, the graph shows that she touches the peak. Her anxiety level regarding the male teachers and classmates was very high. Similarly, the level of her comfort regarding improvement of her performance

while studying in an exclusively female class and being taught by female lecturers was very high. This proves the hypothesis that the less time a Saudi female student spends in a foreign environment, the more uncomfortable she will be with male teachers and classmates which will negatively affect the performance of the student in question.

Participant No. 15 spent only one year studying English in a foreign country. Her anxiety level regarding the presence of male classmates and male teachers was very high. However, she showed a remarkable deviation in her attitude regarding the second factor under discussion i.e. female lecturers would improve her performance. In this category, her score is 4 instead of 5 which means she was willing to accept male teachers as well. However, her comfort level of studying in an exclusively female class was still high.

Participant No. 16 spent three years abroad, but her shyness from males touches the peak. Her three years exposure to the foreign environment did not affect her in any of the areas under discussion. She was still shy, felt uncomfortable studying with the males and preferred the exclusive female classes and female lecturers.

Participant No. 17 spent two years studying in a foreign environment where co-education was in vogue. Her anxiety level of studying in the company of the male students and being taught by male teachers is at the peak. This shows that she is still under the influence of her native culture. Consequently, her performance in the class room was affected. Since we are considering the impact of such a scenario on learning English as a foreign language which is difficult in itself, the students' performance is definitely affected in a negative way.

Participant No. 18 studied abroad in a new class room environment where she studied with male classmates for one year. Her anxiety level regarding the presence of male teachers and classmates was the highest, but surprisingly her preference for female lecturers was not as much as the other participants' in question in this survey. However, her preference for an exclusively female class was the highest.

Participant No. 19 spent three years studying in a foreign environment where she had to study with male classmates. Her anxiety touches the highest point. Similarly, her preference for female lecturers and an exclusively female class was also the highest. This indicates that she is still under the influence of her native culture and feels uncomfortable while studying with male classmates.

Participant No. 20 spent only two years in a foreign environment where she had to deal with male teachers and classmates. This was, of course, in contrast to her upbringing in her native land. Naturally, her anxiety level was very high and her preference for an exclusively female class was also the highest. However, her comfort level at being taught by male lecturers was not that bad.

Discussion

The following section will discuss the most significant challenge faced by the participants while studying abroad in their interaction with male classmates. Altamimi (2014) in his research mentions that the reasons which make females unable to perform their studies are: they are unaccustomed to co-educational classes and male teachers, they are expected to defer to males, and they are not expected to interact with men outside the home. The participants under discussion are Saudi female students who studied abroad in a different environment i.e. they were subjected to studying in co-education system with male teachers and students. This was an altogether new experience for them that created a lot of hindrances on their path to achieve academic success in the field of learning English as a foreign language. Students' active participation in a foreign language learning class helps them in achieving language proficiency more easily and effectively. In the presence of male class fellows, Saudi female students were reluctant to participate actively in class room activities. Hence, their anxiety level was very

high in such an environment. Since the participants of this survey are from the Qassim region, which is particularly known as a very conservative area and rigid in terms of their interpretation of Islamic values, customs and traditions, the anxiety level of the participants can easily be understood. Here in Saudi Arabia, religious teachings are the basis of Saudi culture. However, Hamdan (2005) believes that the role of women in Saudi Arabia is determined more by culture than by religion. The researcher slightly disagrees with them on the grounds that culture alone is not the only factor but religion also plays a very important role in determining the social behaviour. This means, Saudi female students from the conservative region of Qassim studying English in foreign countries face problems like lack of confidence and hesitation in class room participation, which is mainly due to their cultural and religious background. The major factor behind this lack of communication in a foreign language learning class by the Saudi female students, was their inability to adapt to cross-cultural interaction. The impact of their native culture is so strong that it hinders their communication in an environment where male class mates and teachers are present. A very interesting point noticed in the survey was that three of the students interviewed were all from Onaizah (a neighbouring town of Buraidah). Buraidah is the capital city of the Qassim province and is under greater influence of cultural and religious restrictions headed by the Mutawa (the religious Islamic Scholars). On the other hand, Onaizah is inhabited by people who are more exposed to interacting with the world abroad. The participants of this study from Onaizah all showed less anxiety than the participants from Buraidah while studying abroad with male students.

Three participants out of twenty showed different results i.e. they spent more time studying abroad, but their anxiety was still high. Discussing research on language anxiety, Cheng and Erben (2011,p.16) note that, "students with the highest levels of foreign language anxiety tended to have at least one of the following characteristics: older learners, higher academic achievers, and those who had never visited a foreign country." As the students responding to the questionnaire had never been in a foreign country previously, and were somewhat older and more conservative in outlook than students in their late teens who were coming to the USA etc. to study for a bachelor's degree, this adds to the fact that the more conservative background a Saudi female comes from, the higher her anxiety would be of studying in a mixed class with male classmates and male teachers.

Limitations:

Several methodological concerns exist with the study , a key concern being the sample size. As such, the results cannot be generalised to the wider population. Additionally, due to existing cultural restrictions, it was not possible for the male researcher to meet directly with participants and, as a result, this research relied heavily on self-reporting, with no additional experimental controls.

Conclusion:

The findings clearly indicate that studying with male classmates and being taught by male teachers is of the greatest difficulty for Saudi female students. Hence, the anxiety level in the students under consideration is high. This anxiety naturally hampered their proficiency in learning English as a foreign language. Active participation in a language class by the language learners is of prime importance in improving language proficiency, but in this case the major impediment was the reluctance of the female language learners to take an active part in the language class due to the presence of male students. The husband is a preferred source to seek help from . Female students feel more confident and protected in the presence of their husbands in a foreign environment. Further research is needed, however, before the use of such materials can be recommended for all students in all subject areas at all levels.

Recommendations :

Future studies should include wider geographical units to improve reliability and validity of results. Additionally, further questions regarding academic performance and data of academic achievement could be included in research to improve both validity and reliability.

To avoid the cultural shock that many first year Saudi female students experience at a foreign university, a key recommendation from this study is for universities to provide better quality assistance to new students to support their induction process. Hellstén (2002) believes that international students have a clear expectation that they would be “taken care of” by their host culture and their university. This may include gender segregated environments on arrival although the researcher acknowledges this would be logistically difficult. Alhazmi (2010) suggests that Saudi Students need to prepare for mixed gender classes. This can be done by setting up an advice hotline for Saudi females or by encouraging them to join university societies, which inevitably will improve their social skills and thereby their English language proficiency.

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