The Effect of Universal Design for Learning on the Proficiency of English as a Foreign Language Students’ Acquisition of Reading and Vocabulary Skills

Rashed Zannan Alghamdy
College of Education, Al-Baha University, Al-Baha, Saudi Arabia
Email: rz000@hotmail.com

Received:01/05/2023 Accepted:04/15/2023 Published:06/24/2023

Abstract
A mixed-method study was conducted for six weeks during a preparatory year at Al-Baha University in Saudi Arabia to investigate the influence of Universal Design for Learning on the competency and proficiency of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students’ acquisition of reading and vocabulary skills. The participants were 45 male students from Al-Baha University’s preparatory year, aged 18–21. The participants were subjected to standardized interviews and English achievement tests to gather qualitative and quantitative data respectively. The study’s results showed significant statistical variances between the post-test scores and the average scores of the EFL students using the Universal Design for Learning and the traditional method to acquire reading and vocabulary skills. This shows that the use of UDL has a statistically significant impact on students’ competency and proficiency in acquiring English reading and vocabulary skills. The findings of this study also revealed that UDL serves all needs of learners, boosts their motivation to gain more English skills, assists the students to break the barriers between themselves and the teacher, makes positive relationships among all students, provides varieties of materials for teaching, and gives options for the assignments.

Keywords: Academic achievement, reading skills, Saudi students, Universal Design for Learning, vocabulary skills

DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol14no2.11
Introduction

The majority of educational institutions, workplaces, and other environments are diverse in terms of background, culture, gender identity, first language, socioeconomic status, age, talents, learning preferences, and a variety of other traits (Burgstahler, 2021). Each individual has a multifaceted identity that intersects with a number of these distinctive aspects. According to Burgstahler (2021), blind people, those who are deaf or have hearing issues, autistic, have mobility issues, attention deficit, learning challenges, and other health impairments are just a few examples of those who have traits that are referred to as ‘disabilities’.

The Universal Design for Learning (UDL) was developed in the neuroscience sector to ensure diversity in the classroom. The program was created to help a diverse group of students with various language, motor, cognitive, affective, and sensory abilities (Hitchcock & Stahl, 2003). The UDL program considers the adaptability of online platforms, educational research, and neuroscience research to provide a design framework for instructing different groups of students. Therefore, according to Meyer, Rose, and Gordon (2014), the UDL program for learning is mainly persuasive for the virtual teaching of the English language to international students.

The purpose of UDL is to create structures devoid of barriers, according to the Center for Excellence in Universal Design’s (2012) description of the idea. In the United States (US), UDL is acknowledged in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004). Mandlawitz (2007) posits that the program is also referred to as a concept or idea used to design and deliver usable products and services by people with the broadest range of functional capabilities. This comprises both directly practical services and products and those made practical with technology.

How can teachers create lessons, so every student learns as much as possible? How can businesses design workplaces that encourage everyone’s productivity? How can IT specialists find and develop products that anybody can use and access? A broad audience is considered during design approaches via some practical methods addressed in the literature. The approaches entail inclusive design, universal design, design for everyone, barrier-free design, accessible design, and functional design. Among those in existence, there are no practical design approaches that address user diversity more than Universal Design (UD).

The study's primary purpose is to identify how applying the universal design provides and enhances more lessons enjoyable by learners while significantly increasing English EFL outcomes in vocabulary and reading skills acquisition. Therefore, applying the method of Universal Design learning may be the solution since students can learn and acquire English vocabulary everywhere, whether inside learning institutions or outside, aiding them in learning English quickly. In these studies, the researcher is entitled to seek new methods to assist learners in increasing their goals and achievements, making them quickly learn English skills anytime, anywhere. This research addressed the following research questions:

1- What is the impact of the Universal Design for Learning English vocabulary on Saudi university students’ achievements?
2- What is the impact of the UDL English reading skills on Saudi university students’ achievements?
3- What are the experiences and perceptions of Saudi university students in applying the UDL English skills?
Literature Review

Because it considers the adaptability of online platforms, educational research, and neuroscience research to provide a design framework for teaching a diverse group of students, the universal design for learning framework is specifically persuasive for the virtual teaching of English to international students (Meyer et al., 2014). According to Segura-Castillo and Quiros-Acua (2019), the universal design for learning UDL was developed in the neuroscience sector to enhance diversity in the classroom. It was created to help a broad spectrum of students with various verbal, sensory, motor, cognitive and affective skills (Hitchcock & Stahl, 2003).

To be able to provide people with structures free of barriers, the Center of Excellence in Universal Design (2012) described the idea of universal design within architectural models. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) and the Assistive Technology Act (1998) refer to universal design for learning as an idea or concept used to design and deliver practical products and services for people with a diverse range of functional competencies. The functional competencies include directly practical products and services and products and services made usable with technology (Mandlawitz, 2007). Burgstahler (2021) defined UDL as an approach used to teach and learn about products and environments, which are to be used by all persons, to the maximum degree probable, without the need for any distinct accommodations.

Because it offers flexible ways of representation, expression, and participation, a universally designed curriculum is accessible to the broadest range of students (Rose & Meyer, 2002). Even while UDL is well-known in architecture and other industries, it is still relatively new in education (Rose et al., 2006). It generally focuses on removing obstacles through early designs that consider the needs of varied persons instead of overcoming hurdles afterward through individual adaptation (Rose, Harbour, Johnston, Daley & Abarbanell, 2006).

In 2009, the National Center on Universal Design Learning outlined a flexible approach that can be customized and adjusted for individual needs. The approach is designed to generate instructional goals, methods, materials, and assessments that work for all students. Rose and Meyer (2002) indicated that a universally designed curriculum is approachable to the widest range of students because it offers adaptable platforms for representation, expression, and participation.

The definition of UDL is based on the idea that some students find it challenging to access the regular curriculum because their learning preferences and needs differ from those of the typical learner (Meyer et al., 2014). As a result, it is acknowledged that individuals come in a wide range of abilities, skills, interests, needs, and physical and mental prowess. Researchers McGuire-Schwartz and Arndt (2007) discovered that a model for curriculum design known as universal design for learning underpins learners by giving teachers various options for presenting information and content in the curriculum that maximizes student learning among diverse students.

According to the universal design theory, everyday objects should serve a range of users. Additional examples comprise word processing programs, closed captioning on televisions, and icons for restrooms and other public amenities, which are accessible to the most significant number of people. The universal design of learning and the digital divide are two distinct ideas that do not seem to have anything in common. However, a strong demonstration of a variety of curriculum and instruction delivery methods is required before the UDL can be seen in action in schools. One way of taking a varied approach to teaching is through the use of technology.

The ideas of universal learning design are based on Vygotsky’s (1978) work on apprenticeship learning, scaffolding, and zone of proximal development. Additionally, the concept
of UDL is also based on Gardner’s theory of Multiple Intelligence (1993). Theoretical support for universal design for learning principles also includes learner differences discovered through brain research (Rose et al., 2008). Understanding how learning is distributed among the three interrelated brain networks of learning will help us better understand different learners’ distinct strengths and limitations (Rose & Meyer, 2002). The National Center on Universal Design for Learning (2019) acknowledges the recognition networks (the ‘what’ of learning), strategy networks (the ‘how’ of learning), and affective networks (the ‘why’ of learning) as the brain networks.

The UDL is a branch of universal design. UDL becomes a framework that aims to provide instructional material in a variety of ways that embraces a diversity of learning styles and educational needs. UDL addresses the main barrier to fostering expert learners within instructional environments. Center for Applied Special Technology [CAST] (2011) outlines three guiding concepts: the rules’ foundation. The first principle is to give students various ways to represent what they are learning. Principle two offers students various ways to behave and express themselves (the ‘how’ of learning), and principle three provides a variety of interaction opportunities (the ‘why’ of learning).

**Multiple Means of Representation**

The standards for different modes of representation place particular emphasis on how the teacher presents the subject and how the students take in and understand it: What exactly do students learn? According to UDL, it is ideal for providing course material in some methods, including through written words, teacher-spoken speech, and video, as this will enhance the possibility that students will understand what is being taught (Clark & Shastri, 2021). Identifying learning difficulties in the English language necessitates an educator’s sensitivity, knowledge, and expertise to recognize the many ways in which English language learners may absorb and process information (Harry & Klingner, 2014; Macswan & Rolstad, 2006).

Language components, including signs, words, and grammar, need explicit explanations. Students should be encouraged to use decoding techniques that help them improve their language abilities. Students will be able to internalize the course material through comprehension techniques such as activating existing knowledge, identifying patterns, and optimizing transfer (Clark & Shastri, 2021). When many representations are employed, recognition learning happens because it enables students to connect ideas both within and between topics (Rose & Meyer, 2002). By making sure that important information is perceptible, clear, and understandable to all learners, CAST (2011) argued for the lowering of learning barriers among English language students. Giving learners options for representation is crucial, especially for those learning the English language for the first time.

**Multiple Means of Engagement**

The recommendation for diverse forms of interaction encourages observing students’ motivation and self-control. According to Clark and Shastri (2021), teachers should consider why this task is being given to students and provide context for the solution. Because students’ attention spans and areas of interest vary, it is crucial to have multiple approaches to pique students’ interests that consider inter and intra-individual variances. A starting point for engaging students is choosing authentic and relevant content while reducing dangers and distractions (CAST, 2011).

Once the fundamentals are implemented, encouraging partnerships, offering pertinent feedback, allowing student managing mechanisms, and repeating objectives and goals can help
sustain and increase engagement (Clark & Shastri, 2021). Learners have a higher chance of developing abilities and maintaining interest and understanding when engagement ties background information with strategic or recognition tasks (Rose & Meyer, 2002). Teachers can set prospects or expectations that inspire students, encourage student reactions, and assist students in developing personal coping mechanisms, helping learners self-regulate and adopt their participation (Clark & Shastri, 2021).

**Multiple Means of Action/Expression**

The National Center for Universal Design for Learning (2012) indicates that students behave and express themselves differently in a learning environment, necessitating a lot of planning, practice, and organization. Multiple modes of action/expression, the last category in UDL, focus on the issue of how students learn. Teachers can promote student-centered active learning by extending student access to resources and technologies of creation, communication, and composition by offering numerous methods of expression or action such as visual or audio, written, or picture-based (Clark & Shastri, 2021). Differentiating the methods by which students can convey what they know through strategic learning involves multiple forms of action and expression (CAST, 2011). Due to each learner having a unique optimal learning route for developing strategic abilities, teaching methods and resources must be modified for each student. In English language education, the three main concepts of UDL are intriguing. UDL rules are readily available to teachers from a practical aspect. Clark and Shastri (2021) provided that the three phases of typical ELT lesson plans are mirrored by the vertical flow, from access to build to internalization: teacher presentation, guided practice, and individual practice.

UDL also aims to change the way teachers see students’ difficulties. UDL proposes that the course design contributes to student failures rather than presuming that a shortfall is the students’ failing, as standard non-UDL course designs might. For instance, if students cannot comprehend the instructions for an assignment, this may be due to poor course design (Clark & Shastri, 2021). The UDL seeks to create a more comprehensive, varied, adaptable, and focused curriculum, encouraging removing obstacles to learning and involvement within the student body. In that regard, higher education institutions welcome students with varied points of view, experiences, talents, backgrounds, interests, histories, and socioeconomic levels, to name a few, and the fact that the population of university students is becoming more diverse (Buzzard et al., 2011).

**Method**

Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected. The instruments used to gather data included pretest and posttest English tests as well as interviews with English as EFL learners.

**Participants**

The whole process of this study implied forty-five male university students with ages ranging from 18-21 in the preceding year 2022 at the University of Al-Baha. This practice was done by randomly assigning different classes to one of two conditions, in which one class was identified randomly and assigned to the experimental group. In contrast, another class was again chosen randomly and assigned to the control group. Thus, there were twenty-three University students in the experimental and twenty-two in the control conditions. Lastly, two male English
teachers from the prior year were summoned to take part and experience the study process. English teachers were local speakers who have attained bachelor's degrees in teaching English.

**Research Instruments**
The research included ten students randomly chosen from practical classes for practical classes. The researcher interviewed them to identify how they responded to incorporating Universal Design learning experiences concerning the English language environment. The researcher then sorted out to gather the EFL students' perceptions about the English skills promoted by Universal Design learning. This also was done by the research to formulate the various semi-structured interview questions. The researcher also recorded the video as each participant did the interview alone.

The researcher used an inductive data analysis approach, in which themes were identified through coding and transcription (Creswell, 2020). It was also possible for the researcher to review the data and determine whether such themes accurately represented the data interviewed. The themes were identified by their sentences, phrases, and keywords during the interview. The researcher then pre-examined, separated, and categorized the phrases into different themes from the data analysis.

**Research Procedures**
The lecturing material for both the control groups and experiment was textbooks from the University of Al-Baha. Learners handle various tasks like vocabulary tasks, and reading exercises. The researcher concentrated on three lectures where the EFL students learn different English skills. Both teachers of the control and experimental classes trained one class each and delivered the same content in both classes for a stipulated time.

The researcher arranged two workshops, one for the teacher training Universal Design learning skills and the second for the teacher handling the traditional classroom. The students undergoing traditional learning skills were not able to receive training on implementing Universal Design Learning.

The researcher welcomed two English teachers from the University of Al-Baha to take part in the research at the start of this study. The researcher persuaded two classes from the prior year to participate in the research, in which one class was set for Universal Design learning. At the same time, the other was designated for traditional learning. They used the English skill test that was achieved as both pre-test and post-test investigating the effect of Universal Design learning which was on the EFL students, yielding thirty-six multiple-choice questions. The test has two parts, one for vocabulary skills and another one for reading skills (18 items for vocabulary, other 18 items for reading skills).

The pre-test evaluated the previous achievements of the participating learners in English, which was distributed to experimental and control groups before the start of the study. The pre-test intended to access the backdrop of the learners’ knowledge considering vocabulary and grammar English skills. The test's reliability was top, achieving an Alpha-Cronbach of eighty-four. The same pre-test was accorded after the research study as a post-test, helping in the evaluation of the achievements of participants in English skills. The post-test purpose was to assess the effect of both the experiment and the control conditions on the achievement of the students.
Results and Discussions
Findings of Quantitative Data
To determine whether there were differences in the students’ achievement marks in English tests in the two conditions, an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was performed. The means and standard deviation of the English achievement pretest total score and posttest total score are shown in the following table one:

Table 1. Means and standard deviation for the total pretest and the Total post-test Scores for the experimental and control conditions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pretest Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scores Experimental</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>14.1739</td>
<td>3.08445</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>14.3182</td>
<td>3.28614</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>14.2444</td>
<td>3.14899</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posttest Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scores Experimental</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>20.6087</td>
<td>3.05613</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>17.8636</td>
<td>5.05489</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>19.2667</td>
<td>4.33485</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To determine the differences between the pretest and posttest total score results, one-way ANOVAs were conducted. As illustrated in Table two, although there were no significant differences between the experimental and control conditions at Time one, there were significant differences at Time two.

Table 2. Tests of between-subject effects for pretest and posttest total scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ANOVA</th>
<th>SS</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pretest Total</td>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>17.200</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.234</td>
<td>.023</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>572.779</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>10.141</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>589.979</td>
<td>47</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Posttest Total</td>
<td>Between Groups</td>
<td>364.320</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>84.731</td>
<td>4.910</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Within Groups</td>
<td>247.492</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>17.257</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>611.813</td>
<td>47</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table one highlights that there are no statistically significant differences, $p = 0.88 \ (p > 0.05)$, between the mean scores of the EFL learners who were taught English in the UDL environment (the experimental group) and those who were taught English using the traditional method (the control group) in the pretest.

However, Table two reveals certain differences, $p = .03 \ (p < 0.05)$, between the mean scores of the EFL learners who were taught English in the UDL environment (the experimental group) and those who were taught English using the traditional method (the control group). Thus, the posttest is in favor of the experimental conditions.

To determine if there were differences between the conditions on the reading skills questions and the vocabulary skills test at Time Two, one-way ANOVAs were conducted. Table three, which follows, presents the means and standard deviations of the student’s scores on the reading skills and vocabulary skills separately at Time Two.
Table 3. Student mean score and standard deviations on the listening task test and the vocabulary task test at the posttest

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading Skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>12.913</td>
<td>2.333</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10.227</td>
<td>.7975</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary Skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(1) Experimental</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>10.087</td>
<td>2.295</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Control</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>8.0455</td>
<td>2.567</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To determine if there were differences between the conditions on the reading skills questions and the vocabulary task test at Time Two, one-way ANOVAs were conducted. As can be seen in Table four, there were significant differences in reading skills questions in favor of the experimental condition. Moreover, there were significant differences in the vocabulary skills questions between the experimental and control conditions. The results are shown in Table four as follows.

Table 4. Tests of between-subject effects for two different scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DV</th>
<th>df1</th>
<th>MS</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading Skills</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>81.110</td>
<td>8.431</td>
<td>.006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary Skills</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>46.864</td>
<td>9.045</td>
<td>.004</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As indicated in Table four, the condition predicted significantly larger differences in scores for reading skills questions responses, $p = .006$ ($p < .05$). Furthermore, there were significant differences in scores with the vocabulary skills, $p = .004$ ($p < .05$).

Findings of Qualitative Data

Benefits of UDL

The first of the themes that emerged from the data was the benefits of UDL. In UDL, there are many options for the assignments, whereas in traditional learning there is only one choice with which to do the assignments. One student revealed that “I am very happy with my assignments, I have many choices to select and also to answer it.” Another student declared that:

In traditional learning, we have only one way to complete the homework and it is so boring to us. As we use UDL, we have lots of choices to do the assignments. We can make a video or a podcast to show the assignments or we can draw a picture.

Moreover, in the UDL classroom there are many varieties of materials and presentations. For example, students have many options for reading. One student highlighted that “we have many methods to read a text such as digital text, audiobooks, printing books, and we have text to speech.” Another student added, “For example, there are many options in digital text. We can have enlargement for the text, transcripts for the audio, captions for the videos, and screen color.”

Furthermore, UDL serves all needs of learners. It is a teaching method that aims to reach all needs of each learner in the classroom. Some students have attention issues or difficulty in hearing or seeing, and others have problems moving or participating in classroom activities. One
student claimed that “UDL assists me to hear all lessons clearly; it has different materials that can suit each one of the students.” Another student confirmed “To be frank with you, the previous time I did not hear and understand my teacher very well. Now, I can hear the lessons because they provide me headphones at the same time the teacher writes on the smartboard.”

As an additional goal, UDL seeks to alter educators' perspectives on students' challenges. Rather than assuming that students' shortcomings are their fault, which is a key weakness of the non-UDL course design, UDL suggests that the course design adds to student failures rather than their intrinsic limitations. Inadequate course design could be to blame if, for instance, students are struggling to understand the assignment's requirements (Clark & Shastri, 2021). Furthermore, UDL provides comprehensive design ideas to meet the demands of a diverse student population. A student-centered approach takes into account individual differences in cognitive ability, linguistic proficiency, and cultural background, as outlined in the universal design for learning principles (CAST, 2011). Teachers can encourage student-oriented learning by providing students with a variety of opportunities to express themselves through multiple mediums, including but not limited to oral, written, and visual presentations (Clark & Shastri, 2021). Additionally, UDL provides detailed design ideas to meet the demands of a diverse student body. UDL principles provide a student-centered approach that takes into account linguistic, cultural, and cognitive diversity (CAST, 2011).

**Learning Outcomes**

The second of the themes that emerged from the data was that of academic achievement in UDL. Many students highlighted that they learned more through the new teaching method and that they were satisfied with their grades. When the students were involved in UDL and followed its principles, their opinions were so positive that UDL increased their learning outcomes. One student declared that the “UDL method assists us to gain more English skills.” Another pupil added that “Shifting to UDL increased my achievement of the curriculum.” A third student stated, “UDL helped me to develop my speaking skills and also assisted me to improve my communication skills, it was very useful for all my colleagues.”

Additionally, another EFL learner highlighted that “I have a chance to communicate with my teacher and my classmates at any time, even outside school time, as a result, I noticed my English is getting better.” Another student revealed, “It was a fantastic method because it enabled us to communicate with the teacher outside the school and let us contact our classmates, share different ideas, answer the assignments together, and make our projects.”

The students revealed that using the UDL method increased their comprehension and assisted them to gain a better understanding of the curriculum. One student highlighted that the “UDL method linked us to the English book.” Another one added, “This method increased our desire to learn English skills and to read the different topics of the lesson.” A third student stated, “Definitely, this teaching method enabled us to learn more and assisted us to get new English skills.”

Learning is substantially enhanced when there is an environment of support and cooperation in the classroom. As demonstrated by Kimani (2014) in her research, both the experimental and control groups of library students outperformed their classroom counterparts. As a result of these findings, designers of educational materials should give classroom layouts serious thought, perhaps even as a universal design component. More research is needed to establish whether or not certain classroom features should be incorporated into the UDL framework.
According to Rodrigo et al. (2021), students instructed in UDL have higher mean values compared to their peers. Preschoolers, training recipients, and women in general report higher levels of confidence in their UDL skills than their male peers. Based on these findings, it is recommended that initiatives and instructional materials be developed to alter negative perceptions of UDL, especially among males.

**Motivation**

The third theme that has been seen from the data was the motivation of the students when learning English via UDL. Most students expressed the belief that implementing the new UDL boosted their motivation to gain more English skills such as writing, reading, speaking, and vocabulary; one student commented, “I prefer to learn English via this method, it was new to me but it was the best.” Another student highlighted: “Many years ago, I didn’t like to learn English because my teachers used boring methods. Now I like to learn and speak English because of this new method.”

Moreover, most students claimed that they were enthusiastic to learn different English skills via UDL. One student declared: “UDL was a great method, now I can study at my home and contact either my teacher or my classmates so that we can study together, write paragraphs, and learn new vocabulary.”

Teachers can help students learn to self-regulate and become more engaged in class by establishing goals and expectations that motivate them to respond and learn to cope with challenging situations on their own (Clark & Shastri, 2021). Once the basics are in place, sustaining and increasing engagement can be achieved through fostering relationships, providing relevant feedback, and restating goals and objectives (Clark & Shastri, 2021). Students’ self-control and motivation can be observed more easily if they are given a variety of opportunities to connect. Clark and Shastri (2021) suggest that to help pupils solve this problem, teachers should explain the purpose of the assignments given to them. To engage learners who have widely varying interests and attention spans, it is important to employ a variety of strategies that take these differences into account. When students are actively involved in the learning process through the integration of contextual knowledge with recognition or strategic activities, they are more likely to acquire and retain knowledge (Rose & Meyer, 2002).

**Positive Relationships and Friendship**

The fourth theme to occur from the data was that of positive relationships among all students and their English teachers in the classroom. Many students confirmed that using the UDL method helped them to make excellent relationships with their classmates. One student claimed: “I am a shy student and do not like to participate with my classmates and my teacher. Now, I feel very comfortable to discuss with them many topics.” Another student revealed that the “UDL teaching method gives us a chance to answer the homework together with our classmates and gives us assignment choices.”

Some learners stated that they gained useful social skills while learning English skills via UDL, such as confidence and accepting others’ suggestions. One student revealed that “through time, I feel more confident and like others’ ideas.” Another one added: “I totally agree with my friend, now we accept different ideas and feel more comfortable during our discussions.”

UDL promotes the elimination of barriers to learning and student engagement to develop a curriculum that is more extensive, flexible, and targeted. As a result, universities encourage and celebrate the increasing diversity among their student bodies, which includes differences in
ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity, family structure, socioeconomic status, and geographical location (Buzzard et al., 2011).

Comfortable and Confident

With time, the pupils became familiar with the new approach and understood their roles in the classrooms, which made them more comfortable and confident as a result of UDL. After implementing UDL for weeks, the pupils noticed a number of changes in the classroom, and they welcomed them. One student declared that “I noticed a big change in my learning. I can feel comfortable learning new skills at any time either at school or home.” Also, Khalid stated that “I and my classmates are now more confident because our teacher gives us many choices to do the homework and classroom activities.” A third student stated that “the teacher role has changed from giving lectures to working as a facilitator, as a result, we feel more confident and comfortable.”

The EFL learners showed their happiness with the new method of UDL. They have learned different English skills, such as writing, speaking, and, particularly, presenting many topics in front of their classmates and teachers. One student highlighted: “I faced difficulties in presenting new topics in front of others and strangers, now I can present many topics without hesitation.” Another student declared: “The most important advantage that I learn from UDL is the ability to present topics either in class or outside the class via my iPhone.”

EFL learners were generally of the view that UDL assists them to be more confident to talk to the teacher and breaks down the barriers between themselves and the teacher. Also, they can meet the teacher online from their houses. One student related that “our teacher gives us more chances to correct the assignments and our mistakes, we can discuss many issues with him and we do not feel shyness.” Another student added: “I can contact my teacher via my iPhone from my house and ask him some questions about the lessons.”

Meyer et al. (2014) argue that the UDL learning framework is most compelling when applied to the online instruction of English to non-native speakers. The field of neuroscience pioneered the UDL to accommodate students with a wide range of learning styles and needs. UDL was created to support a wide range of students’ linguistic, physical, sensory, affective, and cognitive skills.

Universal Design for Learning and Traditional Learning

Using a UDL approach in the classroom allowed the students the opportunity to see the differences between teaching methods. Many students complained about the previous teaching methods, particularly the traditional learning method, and they preferred to use UDL rather than traditional learning. One student revealed: “I do not like the traditional learning method, teachers keep talking all the time and we feel bored. Another student added: “During the traditional method we do not have the chance to participate or move in the classroom.” Another pupil revealed: “I totally agree with my friends. Teachers give the lecture and they do not give us a chance to talk.” Another one highlighted: “Giving the students a chance to select the teaching methods in the classroom would be great and more interesting for them.”

The students welcomed the new teaching method of UDL. One student highlighted: “The UDL method was very excellent for me because we have many choices and freedom for learning.” Moreover, one student revealed: “I prefer UDL rather than traditional learning, the teacher uses many ways to present new lessons and it is very enjoyable and interesting.” Furthermore, a third student stated: “I want my teacher to use UDL all the time and quit traditional learning because
UDL gives us equal opportunities to learn new skills and enables us to learn either inside the school or outside.”

Recent studies show that UDL training improves university students' opinions about themselves compared to their untrained peers. This suggests that acquiring knowledge and being able to put it to use allows one to manipulate their environment through self-developed pathways (Kohler-Evans et al., 2019). Consequently, future educators may find it useful to advocate for accessibility in UDL-related content to help students reach their academic potential (Laurian-Fitzgerald & Fitzgerald, 2017). The UDL program takes into account the malleability of digital and research resources (Hitchcock & Stahl, 2003).

Discussion

The goal of the research was to determine whether incorporating Universal Design into EFL instructions improved students' ability to acquire reading and vocabulary skills. The post-test results demonstrated statistically significant differences ($p = .03$, thus $p < 0.05$), between the mean scores of the experimental and control groups. The experimental group demonstrated remarked improvement in post-test means scores. The results of the Pre-test showed no statistically significant differences between the experimental and the control groups. There are a variety of factors that can cause the UDL to change (Schreffler et al., 2019). Retrospectively, variations in UDL may be modulated by factors such as the form and character of the courses offered, the nature of instruction, the setting in which lessons are delivered, and the evaluation methods used (Al-Azawei et al., 2016). A corpus of studies shows that preschoolers experience multiple variations of the UDL compared to other groups. It has been suggested that the higher level of development in UDL learners is because the inculcation of UDL principles can lead to more accessible and inclusive educational environments for all students (Dez-Villoria & Fuentes, 2015). Recently, numerous authors including Nieminen and Pesonen (2020) have pointed out that UDL is commonly utilized to foster accessible learning settings in higher education to enhance the efficiency of students' continuous training.

Students gain from this in several ways, including knowledge development, social skills, change of mindsets, and acquisition of values of diversity and inclusion. They also benefit from better training, improved workplace conditions, improved student competencies, and guidance for professional and vocational development (Alba et al., 2014). University students who have received training in the UDL demonstrate higher learning abilities compared to non-UDL-trained peers, suggesting that such instruction is beneficial for students. According to Kohler-Evans et al. (2019), individuals can manipulate newly learned skills/knowledge via their mechanisms of understanding after successful knowledge acquisition and application. In light of this, it seems that future educators may find it useful to advocate for accessibility in UDL-related content to help students reach their academic potential (Laurian-Fitzgerald & Fitzgerald, 2017).

Vygotsky (1980) highlights that interacting with others is crucial to the development of cognitive skills. He further opines that knowledge acquisition is a social process that begins in a social context and then moves to a personal level. Moreover, the period of intrapersonal development in which knowledge is internalized occurs during this period. Individuals’ current degree of development is the result of their respective efforts, while future development depends on the amount of knowledge acquired with the help of other people (Vygotsky, 1980). In contrast to the prospective development level, which is attained through problem-solving in collaboration with others or with adult supervision, Vygotsky contends that the distance from the current
The developmental level is dependent on independent problem-solving. Since the nature of the contemporary classrooms necessitate not only educated and trained staff, but also the relevant infrastructure to meet the demands of current education, higher education institutions must emphasize the UDL. The underlying premise is that the design of processes, elements, products, and spaces should be optimized to allow as many people as possible to utilize them with minimal or no accommodations. Institutions of higher education have a responsibility to accommodate students from all backgrounds by providing equal access to educational opportunities (Villoria & Fuentes, 2015). As a result, UDL has to be embraced by practitioners, policymakers, and researchers in the field of education to adequately provide the diverse student population with culturally responsive education (Israel et al., 2014).

**Study Limitations**

One important limitation of this experimental study was that the sample size was small (25 learners for the experimental group and 23 learners for the control group). Furthermore, the research was applied in the context of only one learning unit in the Al-Baha preparation year course, so it is necessary to use it with a full course.

**Conclusion**

To sum up, the findings indicated that significant statistical variances exist in the post-test when comparing the average scores of the EFL students who learned vocabulary and reading English skills using the Universal Design for Learning method and those who were taught English using the traditional method of learning, thus favoring the group under the experimental strategy environment. Further, the results of this research showed that Universal Design for Learning is a highly useful teaching method and has many benefits for learners. Universal Design for Learning increases the students’ motivation and assists them to break the barriers between themselves and the teacher. It gives different materials for teaching and options for the assignments.

**About the Author:**

**Dr. Rashed Zannan Alghamdy**, is an associate professor at Al-Baha University in Education College, Saudi Arabia. His research focuses on Applied Linguistic, Teaching English as Foreign Language, Mobile language learning, Verbal Interaction, discourse analysis, learning process. [OCCiD ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8891-0679](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8891-0679)

**References**


The Effect of Universal Design for Learning on the Proficiency of English


The Effect of Universal Design for Learning on the Proficiency of English


