

A Critical Analysis of Attitudes Among Preparatory Year Jazan University Students Towards English

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Abstract

This study focuses on a critical analysis of attitudes amongst preparatory year Jazan University students in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia towards English in a predominantly Arabic Language Context. The purpose of this study is the gage whether these attitudes are positive. This is done by conducting questionnaires and focus group interviews with my students from the preparatory year of the Engineering College. Three themes are predominantly covered here; namely the importance of English as a precursor to positive attitudes among students, the role of the education system on their attitudes and lastly socio-linguistics and its role in the development of positive attitudes. The attitudes were generally found to be positive. There were however some reasons for not harboring positive attitudes. Many of them were found to be sociolinguistic in nature such as the rural versus urban binary and the lack of immersion in society. For reasons of graduation and employment, many students generally found that English was of importance. This study will enable course designers and educators to customize their lessons for many Saudi students.

Keywords

Attitudes, English, Arabic, Urban, Rural, Students, Education, Positive

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1. Introduction

This study will focus on a critical analysis of attitudes amongst preparatory year Jazan University students in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia towards English in a predominantly Arabic Language Context. It ushers the question "are the attitudes of Jazan University students towards English generally positive? Three overarching themes will be the focus of this research, namely the importance of English as a precursor to positive attitudes among students, the role of the education system on their attitudes and thirdly socio-linguistics and its role in the development of positive attitudes. From my research, hitherto there has not been any research done particularly on this subject matter. I have structured this paper in the following

manner: literature review, research methodology, results, analysis, discussion and conclusion.

2. Language

The official language of the Kingdom is Arabic. It is not only the MOI, it is also used for all forms of communication, including government and professional matters. This language also dominates the media.

3. Challenges

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) was initiated in Saudi schools for the purposes of global usage. It was necessary as a state actor on a global stage. However, the presence of

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English in the Saudi Arabian education system has disenchanted many students from seeking and obtaining a graduate education. The level of English among Saudi students is generally very poor. Many of them are of the view that English is unnecessary in their context. In my view, this study is of value for this very reason.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Moores-Abdool, Yahya, and Unzeuta conducted research on learning preferences of Saudi University female students. Students generally felt that Native English speaking teachers were more approachable from "varied approaches in delivering instructional materials." [12] Positive attitudes ensued. Students also espoused that some factors rendering their attitude was shyness, self-confidence, tribal culture and low proficiency skills. The authors advance that the learning experiences of students will be contingent on their learning experiences. They cited that both native English teachers and non-natives alike should be employed as long as they follow a student-centered approach to education.

Salwa Al Harthi wrote a paper on "The impact of positive views on language learning and pupils' construction of L2: Imagined communities, possible selves, and investment in language learning." This research particularly delves into the shaping of attitudes of female Saudi students by enabling them to imagine their role in an English language speaking community. Perhaps this imagination of sorts will act as a source of motivation or impetus for students to develop better attitudes towards English. This study crosses the psychology of students in respect to their identification in the linguistic community. In other ways, it plays a role in the social sphere, particularly in the arena of sociocultural theory and inclusion in an English language community. One setback of this study is that it focuses on females only. Therefore, it is gender-specific and only addresses them accordingly. Another drawback is that the usage of student text messages and photographs may not exactly convey their attitudes as many elements in Saudi Arabia may not welcome this type of expression. Perhaps the interviews may have been a good support for them.

Another salient study in the arena of motivation and second language learning in the Kingdom was authored by none other than Hamid Ali Khan Eusafzai. He hails from the English Language Centre, Colleges and Institutes Division in Yanbu. In this study, Eusafzai investigates motivation of preparatory year Saudi students in respect to language learning. Three of them were salient for my research, namely attitudes towards learning English, English anxiety and value of studying English. [7] He also noted that a monotonous teaching routine was a factor for not enjoying English.

In a language learning context, attitudes of students are of

importance. Attitude according to one expert "is defined as an idea charged with emotion which predisposes a class of action to a particular class of social situation." [5] Albeit other factors such as motivation, learning environment, textbooks, classrooms and teachers are all meritorious and interrelated. De Bot, Lowie and Verspoor state that "teachers, learners and researchers will all agree that a high motivation and a positive attitude towards and second language and its community help second language learning." [5]

Gordon found that attitudes towards language were "the best indicator of English learning achievement among schools and colleges..." [1] Karahan notes that positive attitudes towards a language enable learners to have a positive orientation towards it. [1] Bartley found that students with less favourable attitudes towards learning generally had less language competence and lower aptitude scores. [1]

The foreign language-learning situation may prompt favourable attitudes amongst language learning students. According to Dornyei and Csizer, "when students learn a foreign language at school without having direct contact with native speakers of that language this has an adverse effect on their willingness to communicate and leads to less oral communication." [1]

4. Method

This study will be held on the new campus of the University. The target group will be conducted with semester 1 entry level students in the Engineering College of preparatory year. Five were repeat students. I taught all of these students. Purposive sampling was the method employed instead of convenience sampling. Medical, Dental, Pharmacy, Engineering and Arts students hold the best command over English than other faculties ie. Science, Education and Business Administration. The Engineering and Arts colleges' results can be representative of the faculties with exceptional students who can excel with both Medical, Dental and Pharmacy colleges and also have lower grade students to match Science, Education and Business Administration.

4.1. Participants

Fifty students were selected from three level 1 preparatory year groups from the Engineering College between the ages of 18 and 22. Forty-five students were fresh graduates from secondary school. Five were repeat students.

4.2. Data Collection

Each of the fifty students were handed multiple-choice questionnaires. A questionnaire "...measures opinions and is probably the single most widely used research type in educational research." [16]. The survey was conducted in

English with minimal oral Arabic translations as students were expected to have some command over English. According to Wallace (1998), a pilot project should be conducted with five students. Convenience sampling was employed here by selecting my most astute students for the pilot. They were asked to supply feedback on how to improve the questionnaire. Categories were then formulated according to Background of Participants, English usage in comparison to Arabic and attitudes towards English in juxtaposition with Arabic. Thereafter, I asked students from these 5 groups of 10 to engage in group interviews as closed ended questions from the questionnaire were not adequate alone. This method produced higher response rates. The purpose of this discussion was for students to elaborate on the results of the data collected in the questionnaire. I asked students to speak in English and use Arabic only when necessary. Unstructured interviews were used so that I can probe student's attitudes.

4.3. Limitations of the Study

The study is restricted to the groups that I teach in Jazan University. A larger sample size for this survey may have rendered the results more conclusive. Perhaps these questionnaires and class discussions could have been coupled with personal interviews instead of a group setting. Some students may not feel comfortable expressing alternative views among their peers, especially in the Saudi context. Furthermore, diversifying the questionnaire to avoid response set should have been observed. Moreover, students from other colleges should have been surveyed. To some extent, this study may have fallen into the arena of convenience sampling in that only Engineering students that I taught were selected. Albeit the motivation was purposive sampling which the author feels was done successfully for reasons already stated. Furthermore, the results of this study may have been altered if there was more representation from urban areas. These students were outnumbered by their rural counterparts. There may have been more affinity towards learning English under predominantly urban circumstances. In a rural context, the attitudes towards English may not be as favourable. Perhaps this may be the subject-matter for future studies in the Kingdom.

5. Results

The results from the questionnaire coupled with group interviews consisted of three parts: participant background, attitudes towards Arabic compared to English and lastly attitudes towards English. The results engendered the following findings: English as a precursor to positive attitudes among students, the role of the education system on their attitudes and lastly socio-linguistics and its role in the

development of positive attitudes. Some of the key findings related to the subject matter will be presented here.

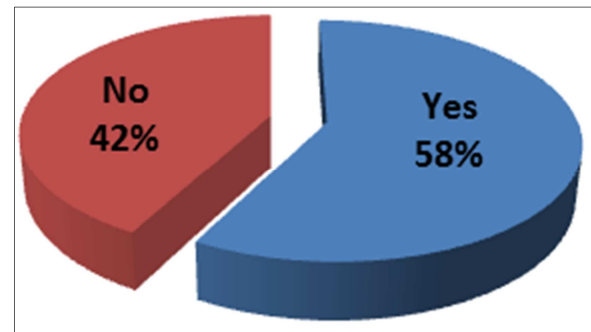


Figure 1. Importance of English Language in KSA.

As shown in figure 1, the English language was of importance among students. 58 per cent of respondents vouched in favour of this viewpoint. In other data collected for this study, 42 per cent of students code switch between English and Arabic and the remaining 58 per cent did not. When asked whether English was important for their future careers or businesses, 50 per cent replied favourably and 48 per cent replied otherwise. 100 per cent of participants were of the view that Arabic was important for their future careers.

68 per cent of respondents advanced that English is the language of the future. 26 per cent responded that it was the language of the past. There were no students that noted that Arabic was a language of the past compared to 94 per cent of them who espoused that it was the language of the future.

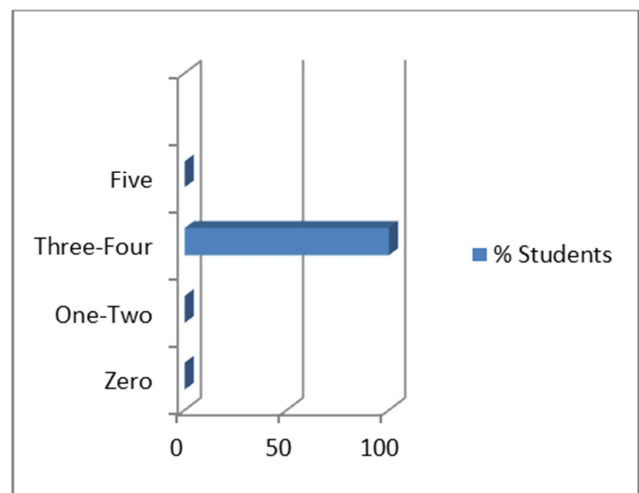


Figure 2. Hours of Instruction per Week (Middle/Secondary Schools).

According to figure 2, students had undergone 3-4 hours of instruction in middle and secondary schools. 60 per cent of students noted that English was a language for Saudi students to learn and 26 per cent noted English as a language for foreign nationals. Only 8 per cent of respondents related that Arabic was for foreign nationals compared to 92 per cent

who asserted that it was for Arab students to learn.

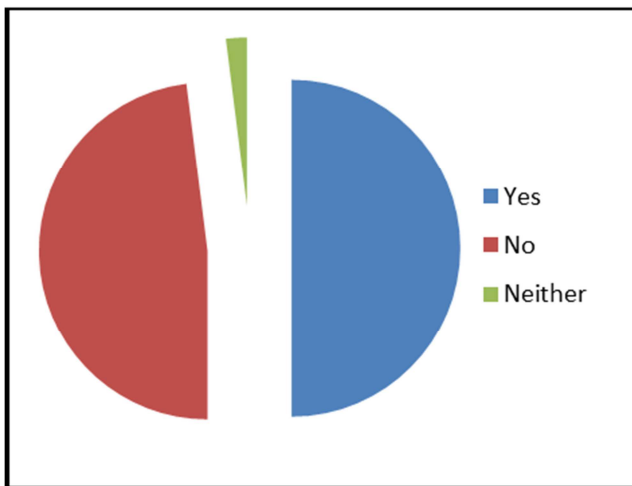


Figure 3. Importance of English for Student Careers.

When asked whether English was important for their future careers or businesses, 50 per cent replied favourably and 48 per cent replied otherwise. This is illustrated in figure 3 above. 100 per cent of participants were of the view that Arabic was important for their future careers.

6. Discussion

The main themes that came to the surface from this research were the importance of English as a precursor to positive attitudes among students, the role of the education system on their attitudes and socio-linguistics and its role in the development of positive attitudes. The statistics formulated for this study were predominantly inferential and in some cases descriptive from nominal data. Categorical variables were employed. I asked why 42 per cent of students code switch between English and Arabic and the remaining 58 per cent do not. Some of them told me that words such as 'cancel', 'hello' and 'okay' are used with their daily Arabic. Therefore, they all speak some level of English. Others felt that these words were later integrated into Arabic so they can be considered part of the Arabic language. Also from the discussion, participants did not necessarily have any disdain per se with English like some Saudis of the previous generation. English is scarcely used in their interaction with their family and friends, in the education system and at work. Outside of school, they also feel embarrassed speaking English for fear of stigmatization from some members of their community as well as their poor fluency levels. Some students disagreed with the above sentiments. They felt that communicating in English credits them as educated and an asset in society. Some students also expressed that they do use English at the mall or with English instructors for practice.

Secondly, 60 per cent of students held that English was a language for Saudi students to learn and 26 per cent noted English as a language for foreign nationals. Only eight per cent of respondents related that Arabic was for foreign nationals compared to 92 per cent who contended that it was for Arab students only. To a lesser extent in Jazan, there is a small population of students attending Saudi Universities who are not of Saudi nationality. From the class discussion, students held that the reason for this response was that English is imperative to take part in international markets. Many of them plan to pursue post-graduate degrees abroad ie. Masters Degree. Some of them desire to travel to parts of the West for tourism. Others wanted to understand English used in Hollywood films.

Another problem that substantially contributed to negative student attitudes was the medium of instruction from elementary to secondary levels. There was not sufficient attention reserved towards English in their schooling system. According to the group interviews, students were taught English in Arabic. As reflected in figure 2, 100 per cent of students agree that the medium of instruction was English. Students also lamented on the fact that the course coverage was very poor. Some asserted that teachers would refuse to teach or even failed to come to class regularly.

On another note, 68 per cent of respondents advanced that English is the language of the future. 26 per cent responded that it was the language of the past. There were no students that noted that Arabic was a language of the past compared to 94 per cent of them who espoused that it was the language of the future. From the class discussions, students felt that cultural hegemony of the United States and other nation-states in the West via popular culture has shaped their views of the language. Competing entertainment industries have not rivaled Hollywood by way of example. Attitudes towards English were largely positive. Perhaps the negative views towards English emanate from the classroom setting. Proponents who argued that English was the language of the past put forward that English is not as dominant on an international stage as it was 10-20 years ago. Other languages are sharing popular currency now according to them. Some participants who opposed this viewpoint maintained that English is still the dominant business and online language internationally.

The next question dealt with whether English is important only for English-speaking countries. Figure 1 illustrates that 38 per cent of students agreed on its importance whilst 58 per cent agreed that it was equally important for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. From the discussion, many students who travel abroad for post-graduate education require English examinations such as TOEFL and IELTS as a prerequisite. These exams require a decent command over English. Some

careers may also require interaction on an international stage. English is indispensable to pursue these prospects.

When asked whether English was important for their future careers or businesses, 50 per cent replied favourably and 48 per cent replied otherwise. 100 per cent of participants were of the view that Arabic was important for their future careers. According to some of the students, they felt that it may be advantageous for them to learn English as it will award them a better designation and perhaps even some lucrative promotions. Others were content with graduating with minimal knowledge of English and entering the labour market as such. Students are starting to realize the urgent need to learn English as many Engineering firms in the Kingdom conduct interviews in English. Candidates who are less fluent may not pass the interview process.

7. Conclusion

Saudi attitudes towards learning English still remains poor to some extent. This compelled Shehdeh to assert that Arab learners are not motivated in general to learn English. [14] Marcus held that there was an impact on students' achievement and performance in language learning, both

socially and emotionally, when they have strong views of the language in acquisition. [1]

Perhaps Al Harthi's approach may be a source of encouragement here. As stated above, she proposes that the imagination of students in an English language context will empower them to enhance their English. In this way, English will play a role in their setting. In the Saudi context, the following observation is necessary for consideration,

"The role and functions of English language are believed to be determined by the people's attitude towards it. There is a positive feeling among the people of KSA towards English. A great majority of Saudi population believes that English is very important to the future prosperity of the country, and that this language is required in various domains of development." [3]

Saudis generally share positive views about English from movies, music and popular culture. This essentially reinforces the following reference:

"... a number of empirical studies carried out in the last two decades on the Saudi people's attitude toward English language in general and learning it in particular show a high percentage of acceptance to it." [13]

Appendix

Participant's Background

Where are you from?

- a) inside Jazan province (36) b) outside Jazan province (14)

What was the medium of instruction from elementary to secondary levels (MOI)?

- a) Arabic (50) b) English (0)

Where were you born and raised?

- a) Saudi Arabia (44) b) Yemen (2) c) Other (4)

Are you of Arab descent?

- a) Yes (48) b) No (2)

What was your length of residence (LOR) in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia?

- a) birth to present (47) b) age one – age five to now (3) c) age five and over (0)

Do you live in an urban or a rural place?

- a) urban (21) b) rural (29)

Do you live in an urban area and speak English outside of the classroom?

- a) Yes (14) b) No (36)

Do you live in a rural area and speak English outside of the classroom?

- a) Yes (7) b) No (43)

In elementary school, how many English classes did you have every week?

- a) None (0) b) 1 – 2 (0) c) 3 – 4 (0) d) 5 – 6 (0) e) other (0)

In middle school, how many English classes did you have every week?

- a) None (0) b) 1 – 2 (0) c) 3 – 4 (50) d) 5 – 6 (0) e) other(0)

In Secondary school, how many English classes did you have every week?

- a) None (0) b) 1 – 2 (0) c) 3 – 4 (50) d) 5 – 6 (0) e) other (0)

Use of Arabic Language compared to English amongst participants

What language do you speak predominantly at home with your family?

- a) Arabic (48) b) English (0) c) Other (2)

What language do you speak with your friends?

- a) Arabic (50) b) English (0) c) Other (0)

How well do you speak Arabic?

- a) Fluently (43) b) Very good (7) c) Satisfactorily (0) d) Poorly (0)

How well do you speak English?

- a) Fluently (2) b) Very good (7) c) Satisfactorily (20) d) Poorly (11)

Do you ever switch between Arabic and English conversation?

- a) Yes (21) b) No (29)

Attitudes towards the English Language compared to Arabic

What is your first language?

- a) Arabic (48) b) English (0) c) Other (2)

Circle the statements that best describe your sentiments toward the English language. (Select as many statements as you want)

- a) English is a language for the foreign nationals (13)
 b) English is a language for Saudi nationals (30)
 c) English is the language of the future (34)
 d) English is the language of the past (13)
 e) English is for English speaking countries (19)
 f) English is equally as important in Saudi Arabia (29)
 g) English is important for my career/business (25)
 h) English is not important for my career/business (23)
 i) None of the above (15)

Circle the statements that best describe your sentiments toward the Arabic language. (Select as many statements as you want)

- a) Arabic is a language for foreign nationals (4)
 b) Arabic is a language for Saudi nationals (46)
 c) Arabic is the language of the future (47)
 d) Arabic is the language of the past (0)
 e) Arabic is a language for Arab speaking countries only (40)
 f) Arabic is equally as important for other countries (9)
 g) Arabic is important for my career/business (50)
 h) Arabic is not important for my career/business (0)
 i) None of the above (4)

Do you think that English should have more importance in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia?

a) Yes (34) b) No (16)

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