A Study of Factors Responsible for Low Motivation level for Learning English as Second Language Level in Saudi Female Students

Zeinab Aslam
University of Dammam
zaaslam@ud.edu.sa

Abstract- English is hailed as one of the most popular second language among people living in different parts of the world, where it does not enjoy the status of the native language. Countries in the middle east especially Saudi Arabia has made noticeable changes in their education system, nearly at all levels to accommodate teaching of English in the curriculum. They are striving hard to make programs of teaching of English as Second language (ESL) a success. Despite all these continuous efforts low motivation level among the English learners especially females is a cause of worry for educationist in countries like Saudi Arabia. The present study is focused to look at some of the possible reasons for low motivation level in the female learners of Saudi Arabia, who study English as a second language at post-secondary level. The present study is based on personal experience, continuous observation and interaction with the students of various level and faculty members of College of Education for two years, in the capacity of an English Teacher. The College of Education Jubail is situated in the Eastern Province of Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Key words- Female-Learners of Saudi Arabia; Learning Second Language (L2); Post -Secondary Education; Low Motivation Level

IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE
The need to communicate and share the ideas, urged the mankind to evolve a systems of signs and sounds called language. Language is the basic tool required by every living being to sustain in this world. Man needs language to express his emotions, his needs and to share his knowledge and thoughts. A child starts acquiring the knowledge of the language unconsciously from the day he learns to speak. He picks up the vocabulary, grammar and sentence-structure by repeated exposure to the language which is his mother tongue also sometimes referred as L1 by the linguist. This acquisition of the first language is effortless and is a part of development of cognitive abilities along with his physical development. Once he develops proficiency in speaking, reading and writing skills follow without much difficulty. The child is already aware about the sentence-structure, grammar and vocabulary of the native language and it is ingrained in his cognitive domain thoroughly. The formal schooling helps him to become proficient in the reading and writing skills under the guided supervision of his teacher or instructor. In most of the countries the medium of instruction at primary level is the mother tongue of the pupil, so he does not take much time to learn how to assemble the signs or alphabets to read and write the language. But as he grows up and his social circle expands, there arises a need to learn a second language to relate to the ideas and the people who do not speak his mother tongue. To recruit people who possess expertise in different fields irrespective of their citizenship has become a global phenomenon these days. Therefore the necessity to learn a second language to interact with the colleagues is one of the challenges which and individual faces, when he steps into the professional world. He needs to mingle with the people of the outside world other than his native country and carve a niche for himself. Thus acquiring a second language becomes indispensable need. When the linguist refers to second language, English usually enjoys the privilege of being called the second language (L2) in most of the countries of the world.

STATUS OF ENGLISH
The rapid globalization has made English to gain the prestigious position of second language or L2 in most of the Middle Eastern and developing countries that look up to the western countries for progress and development, where English is used as a native language. English, in today’s times has undeniably attained the status of ‘lingua franca’. According to Oxford online dictionary it is “A language that is adopted as a common language among speakers whose native languages are different”. The knowledge of English gives it’s learner an edge over others in many different ways like acquiring job, getting enrollment in prestigious courses offered by universities in western countries, interacting with people belonging to different socio-culture groups besides giving a boost to their career. It is an accepted fact that English has become the bridge to connect the whole world. The need to promote learning of English as a second language (L2) had
been felt strongly by the educationist in Saudi Arabia also, a country where Arabic is widely used in all spheres of life. At the same time the country has a large workforce of expatriates serving in almost all sectors. In order to interact and work with these expatriate the natives have strongly felt the need to learn English for smooth running of day to day business. Teaching of English has gained significance over a period of time in Saudi Arabia, where learning of English was not considered important till a few decades back.

With the changing trends knowledge of English language is now seen as a key factor to help the natives of Saudi Arab to keep pace with the fast globalization. The need to teach English as second language to the Saudi students is seen as the one of the important aims to be achieved to help the higher education institution in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to come at par with other universities of the world. There is an increasing demand to develop curriculum of subjects like science, engineering and technology in English, so that the Saudi students develop the competitive edge and provide much needed boost to the countries development. Saudi Arabia has the potential and resources to become a major world power, but sometime lack of knowledge of English in her citizens doesn’t allow her to keep up with the pace of the fast moving world.

**EFFORTS TO PROMOTE ENGLISH BY THE SAUDI GOVERNMENT**

Measures like hiring teachers who specialize in teaching English as second language, adding English as vital part of the curriculum and using customized books based on the needs of the students are few of the steps taken by the Saudi government and various other educational institutions to facilitate learning of English language in the country. The government of Saudi Arabia is now encouraging females to be a part of the education system. Besides learning other subjects as essential part of the curriculum an emphasis is also laid on learning English as a second language at college level in nearly all the female colleges situated in different parts of the kingdom. A close observation of the female students attitude and behavior in English classes in the capacity of English teacher lead to realization that most of the L2 (English) female learners showed lack of interest in attending English classes, completing the English assignments or participating in class activities related to L2(English) learning. The results of the continuous assessments also revealed poor performance of the L2 (English) learners. Most of them were passive listeners in the class and did not actively participate in the class activities. All indicators of low motivation level for learning English. Despite the fact that the students of Saudi Arabia well acclaim the unrivaled position of English in today’s world, they lack motivation towards learning English especially females. According to (Gömleksiz, 2001, pg.220)“Motivation is one of the important aspects of second language acquisition.

Motivation is a kind of desire for learning. It is very difficult to teach a second language in a learning environment if the learner does not have a desire to learn a language.”

The focus of our present study is to investigate the reasons behind the low motivation level in female student for learning English as a second language at post-secondary level in Saudi Arabia.

**SOCIAL FACTORS**

Though it is accepted by most of the female students that knowledge of English helps in breaking new grounds and attaining new height in their career, but at the same time most of them are of opinion that they have little or no interest in learning the English language. A study of the socio cultural background of the females studying at the college revealed that they hail from a closed and conservative society, they do not mingle much socially and their interaction is limited to family, close relatives and friends. They are heavily dependent on the male members of their family for outside needs. For this minimal interaction with the outside world they do not feel the need to learn L2 (English), since their mother tongue Arabic is sufficient to meet their communication needs. They hardly have a chance to come in contact with non-Arabic speakers. In fact the non-Arabic speakers living and working in Saudi Arabia pick up Arabic to deal with the natives at public places like hospitals, banks and malls. Thus, the possibility of getting motivated to learn English by the Saudi females further diminishes. These days in some of the developing countries fluency in English is looked up by the youngster among the friends as a matter of honor, thus the students who do not have well developed skills in English try to develop them in order to influence people in their social circle. This trend is yet not popular among young Saudi females. They are usually shy, and show no eagerness to adopt a foreign tongue as means of communication other than their own mother tongue. They do not get much support at home when it comes to usage of English since some of them are first generation learners. They fear if they would use English at home with their family or friends they can be mistaken to be arrogant. People in their friend-circle would ridicule them because of their lack of proper knowledge of the English language. This anxiety even affects them in classroom situation, where they do not speak about their problems related to English learning. With the minimal knowledge of the language the student fails to communicate the problem to the teachers who are often not bilingual. The fear of using erroneous English demotivates her from being articulate in class-room.

**LOWER STANDARD OF ENGLISH TAUGHT AT SECONDARY LEVEL**

Also most of the students who move to the college level after completing their school have insufficient knowledge of English or rather very low proficiency level in English.
The reason for this low level of proficiency in English can be attributed to the general objectives of teaching English in Saudi schools set by the Saudi ministry of education. (Alarabi, qtd. in Al Zayid, 2012, pg. 7) explains that according to Sixth Grade Elementary Pupil’s English Book , “the general objectives of the EFL curriculum teaching of English in Saudi Arabia are intended to equip students with the linguistic competence that enables them to acquire basic language skills(listening, speaking, reading, and writing), develop their awareness of the importance of English as a means of international communication, present and explain the Islamic concepts and issues and participate in spreading Islam, present the culture and civilization of their nation, acquire the linguistic bases that enable students to participate in transferring the scientific and technological advances of other nations to their nation, and much more”. The teaching and learning of English at primary and secondary levels is not taken as a serious task in Saudi Arabia. There is no emphasis laid on learning of English or it’s importance at school level. Based on this study it can be concluded that a student who enters post-secondary education system in the Kingdom has only basic knowledge of the English language.

The college which was the focus for the presented study primarily caters to the need of the student aiming to become teachers or instructors. Arabic is used as medium of instruction for most of the educational courses. The students are required to pass courses related to English literature and linguistics to acquire the degree, to teach English at school level.

The students who join the college with only basic knowledge of L2 (English), find it difficult to cope with the new jargon related to literature and linguistic aspects of the second language. The teachers at college level discourage using Arabic in English classes so as to develop student’s proficiency level in English. After the students enter college they face a sudden demand of mastering the skills of speaking, writing, reading English in the class. They are expected to be thorough with the rules of grammar and syntax in a short period of time. The wide gap that exists in their previous knowledge of English and the required knowledge of the language is difficult for them to cover as language proficiency cannot be achieved in a day. This sudden and steep elevation in the course level can be covered only by only a handful of students. The obvious result is poor outcome during assessments highlighting the problems like limited vocabulary, and lack of understanding of linguistic aspects of English as second language. As a result the students develop hostility towards learning of English because they see it as an additional burden in the curriculum. They are unable to clear their English exams even after several attempts. Also the thought that the knowledge gained is hardly applicable in their present education system where they would serve as future teachers acts as a deterrent, and they are not motivated to learn English. They think that it is unnecessary hurdle placed between them and their achievements.

**ENGLISH CURRICULUM AT POST-SECONDARY LEVEL**

A study of the curriculum designed for an education college reveals that a student has to offer a number of English courses including skills and literature, beside courses related to educational field which they are expected to pass in a short duration of one semester. The student who already lacks proficiency in the language comes across various English literature courses which demands additional knowledge language and vocabulary related to literature. Number of the other courses related to English focus on theories of English language, study of morphology and syntax in English, which leaves very less room for enhancing English skills in real sense. Students who are still in the process of honing their basic skills of English find it difficult to understand the complexities attached to the theories of English language. The students find these difficult concepts uninteresting and beyond their comprehension, thus loose interest in language. These dry subjects related to the theories and concepts of language learning further discourage these students from developing any interest in learning English. English classes instead of becoming popular among the students as means of acquiring new medium of communication, they are seen as an aimless activity which bears no fruitful results. Each of the English course is taught for less than six month of duration, as the session is divided into two semesters of six months each. The student doesn’t have much time to focus, so only motive that acts as a driving force is to pass the examination to reach the next level. Most of the Saudi female students follow the method of memorization and rote learning, the strategy they apply to learning of English as well without any discretion. The English subjects requires rigorous practice of all the skills, but the time constrain forces the students to memorize portion just enough to clear the exam without gaining real understanding of the subjects. They find the English subjects tough and incomprehensible thus fail to retain their interest in learning of English. Since scoring marks is the motto in a short span of time therefore the objective of gaining knowledge of English for self-improvement is not a part of their motives.

In the classroom the students are largely dependent on power point presentation and handouts given to them by respective subject teachers. They believe that learning is teacher based and the entire responsibility of disseminating the knowledge lies with the teacher. Thus students hardly show any enthusiasm to learn English or use other available sources of teaching and learning. The students show lack of self-reliance for completing the assignments and largely depend on outside sources like internet or professional help to meet their needs. These kinds of paid services which are now available easily discourage the students to take any interest in completing their assignment themselves because they find themselves incompetent in completing the given task with their inadequate knowledge and most of the times fail to find a
comprehensive help or guidance to clear doubts and are not able find the much needed help in their vicinity, they become weary of the subject itself. The idea of attending tuition classes or coaching classes to facilitate learning of English is still new to the female students residing in the Saudi Arabia. The notion which is not endorsed by most of the elders in their family as far as females are concerned, due to social stigma attached to females moving out freely and too often.

The time constrain, anxiety of failing in the examination, fear of being mocked by the peer group or the teacher, discourages them from actively participating in English classes or making extensive use of knowledge they have of the English language. For them learning English is no different from learning any other subjects where learning is limited to memorizing few answers and writing them on the answer sheet for the sole purpose of scoring marks.

TEXT BOOKS USED FOR ENGLISH TEACHING

The other factor that affects the English learner is the English books prescribed for teaching English skills generally cover topics related to the western world and cultures, which the female Saudi students cannot relate too due to less exposure to the outside world. Such topics fail to evoke interest in the students for learning English because they cannot connect with the ideas given in the books. The vocabulary is new to them and difficult to remember; as a result they rarely feel interested in reading or browsing the English books. The problem which aggravates the issue is the habit of referring to library books was not inculcated at primary and secondary level. The practice which if implemented at primary and secondary level could have helped the Saudi students to develop acquaintance with the English vocabulary with ease at an early stage, and maintained their interest in learning the English language. At school level they are rarely motivated to read fairy tales, adventure tales and other kind of children literature in English, which helps to evoke interest in language learning. A mandatory exercise practiced in schools in most of the developing countries to develop fluency and acquaintance with the vocabulary and sentence structures of English. Most of the Saudi female students also lack basic daily reading habit like reading of newspaper at home, which helps an individual to familiarize with terminology used in day to day life by nonnative speakers of English in other countries, irrespective of the fact that English is not their native language.

ABSENCE OF EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Extracurricular activities like extempore, elocution, dramatics, spelling bee and poetry recitation need to be integrated with English learning to help the students drop their inhibition. Unfortunately these activities do not find much place in the present day higher Education system in Saudi Arabia. These activities could be instrumental in developing interest in the students for learning English, also to increase their participation and much needed self-reliance in English learning. It would also give a vent to their creativity and boost up their confidence. They contribute toward better learning outcome in the language learning process.

LESser JOB OPPORTUNITIES

The female students aspiring to become teachers find little or no practical usage of English in the forthcoming teaching career, which further reduces their interest in learning English. Teaching sector in Saudi Arabia does not have very stringent criteria for hiring English teachers, even little knowledge of English for the job aspirant is considered sufficient to fulfill the criteria for acquiring a job. There is are no set of standard rules for judging the proficiency level of the candidates being hired as English teacher by most of the schools in Saudi Arabia. The professional world offers little or no competitive environment to the female candidates seeking jobs. Thus the female students do not want to put in much effort in acquiring or honing their English skills. The contribution of females to the family income or to the Saudi economy is also limited. The demand to work after completion of education is also less due to the stable financial conditions of most of the students. Saudi Arabian market does not have demand for female workers to be engaged in field like trading and business engineering, architecture or IT, which often require competency in English (L2) as one of the job requirements. Most of the female who come forward to join the professional world are confined to the professions of teaching or medicine who believe that their knowledge of English is adequate to meet the job requirements, in a country where female professional growth is already stunted due to lack of job opportunities. The job market is dominated by the males because of the conservative societal setup. This problem inflicts the psychology of the female English learners at university level who think it is not worth the effort to learn a language whose knowledge would not make much difference either to their career or to their personal life in the long run.

CONCLUSION

Looking at the above mentioned factors it can be concluded that the female learners at college level do not get the required exposure to English, as means of communication in their native settings. They lack professional opportunities which demotivate them from learning of English as second language. The complex subjects which focus on theories and concepts of language learning rather than acquiring language as skills fails to lift their spirits or develop positive attitude towards learning of English. The objective of teaching English as second
language at higher education level should aim towards helping the students in mastering their skills rather than aimless teaching of only concepts and theories. There is a growing need to introduce English at primary and secondary level in schools in Saudi Arabia, so that students develop acquaintance with the language and vocabulary at an early stage. At post-secondary level they can be encouraged to learn English, if the courses are tailor made to meet their needs. Efforts should be made to reduce the existing gap between secondary and post-secondary education in terms of the curriculum of English. It is generally observed that females are serious and focused learners, creating more job opportunities in all fields for them can act as a motivating force to improve their level of English. The curriculum design should be more realistic in terms of the student’s previous knowledge of the subject and time allotted to complete the course. The topics covered should be interesting and related to the settings of the Saudi learners.

The focus of English language teaching should be application based learning. Conducive environment needs to be created at home and at school, where these females student get a chance to use the language more frequently and confidently.

Learning of English can be enhanced by introduction of extracurricular activities; they can be used as tools and teaching-aids in class to motivate more students to learn English, and to direct the language learning process in a new direction. Someday these measures would indeed lead to reversal of the present negative attitude towards learning English in the female students of Saudi Arabia.

REFERENCES

