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**Attitudes of Saudi Foundation Year Students towards
Learning English: A Qualitative Study**

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Attitudes of Saudi Foundation Year Students towards Learning English: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Learning English in Saudi Arabia can be a challenging experience. This is not only because learning another language is inherently difficult but also because the culture in Saudi Arabia is dissimilar to the western one, commonly associated with English. Despite this, many people in Saudi Arabia believe that acquiring a strong command of the English language allows for access to better opportunities in employment and life. By the time the students enter universities, they have all had at least some English schooling at primary and secondary schooling levels. At university, they are often required to take pre-requisite programmes in English to gain a higher level of proficiency. This study investigated the attitudes of students enrolled in this prerequisite programme at a leading university in Saudi Arabia, examining their feelings, emotions, and attitudes, while attempting to link this information to student academic performance. In total, fifteen male and fifteen female students were interviewed through semi-structured interviews and asked to complete written narratives and diary entries about their language learning experience over the course of the programme. The qualitative and socio-constructivist nature of this study provided space for the emergence of each participant's story, thereby highlighting the factors that motivated them and the challenges they confronted over their year long journey through the course of the English foundational programme. Findings from this study suggest that participant motivations to learn English are primarily related to socio-economic reasons, for instance the students believed that English would allow for better job prospects or for the development of the proficiency to pursue study abroad. In addition to these reasons, students were particularly motivated to learn English when they were encouraged by their families and by 'good' teaching. However, despite these findings, a link could not be established between these attitudes and student performance on the four-course assessments. This study contributes to existing research by examining a context that has previously not been studied. More research in this area is required to determine why this discrepancy occurred.

Keywords:

Introduction

The English as a Foreign language (EFL) teaching and learning reforms launched in 2008 by the State in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) have led to massive transformations in pedagogy and learning within educational institutions. While appearing to be progressive, these reforms have given rise to many challenges for educators within educational settings. For example, educators were placed under pressure to produce positive results rapidly. Further, the new teaching methods imposed upon the teachers were unclear, and the application of the methods demotivated students and teachers alike. This was especially a matter of grave concern given that Saudi Arabian teachers at all levels of education have been observed to be averse to taking responsibility or displaying enthusiasm for teaching their students (Altayar, 2003, cited in Alnahdi, 2014). The reforms additionally generated concerns about student attitudes as a potential hurdle to the effective implementation of the reforms (Jenkins, 2008). Indeed, in the current Saudi EFL context, the difficulties experienced in the effective implementation of EFL reforms could be traced back in large part to student demotivation in EFL learning. This situation in itself has been linked back to a number of societal and cultural factors (Jenkins, 2008), which are related to language.

As language is the single most “important channel of social organization embedded in the culture of the community where it is used” (Dörnyei, 1998: 118), when learners undertake to learn a second language, their attitudes and learning are influenced by their L1 culture as well as the culture of the L2. There are many reasons to explain this. For instance, as Dörnyei (1998) has pointed out, language is not only a system for communication that is taught at school but it is also integral to the identity of the learners in almost everything they do. In sum, language is “also socially and culturally bound, which makes language learning a deeply social event that requires the incorporation of a wide range of elements of the L2 culture” (Dörnyei, 2003: 3). This is the crux of the issue insofar as the social nature of language learning is concerned, and it is hugely significant therefore in the case of Saudi EFL learners who attempt to negotiate two very different cultures, including the culture of their birth and that of the second language they are learning. Due to the divergence between their language and culture and that of English, Saudi EFL learners may indeed experience considerable ambivalence and difficulty in learning English. The fear is that they may be compelled to view “learning a new language [as requiring the] learning [of] a new culture and thus a new way of seeing the world” (Spackman, 2008: 3). The above discussion lends ballast to the idea that the attitudes of Saudi learners are shaped by the imaginable challenges of adjusting to the new ‘culture’ and worldview associated with learning English. This also suggests that learner attitudes and motivations may play a large role in the failure or success of EFL teaching and learning reforms. Against this backdrop, it was seen as essential to map the impact of learners’ attitudes stemming from the social and cultural contexts of English language learning. An in-depth understanding of this was viewed as being of vital importance to the academic literature relating

to Saudi learner attitudes for the purpose of ascertaining of how the negative role of attitudes may be minimised in the Saudi EFL learning context. Hence, this study examined the attitudes of Saudi students enrolled on EFL programmes by way of exploring their experiences, perceptions, and motivations.

Literature Review

EFL learning is significantly more than the sum of simply acquiring a “new code” (Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009: 32). Rather, it entails creating an understanding of the learners’ own ‘situatedness’ in their own language and culture and the recognition of the same in others” in addition to comprehension of how “this recognition influences the process of communication within their own language and culture” (Scarino & Liddicoat, 2009: 33). At the heart of these understandings is the importance of culture, language, and interaction to EFL learning. Constructivism recognises the learner’s active role in the personal creation of knowledge, and it holds that because of the interjection of the self, and hence of the personal perspective, knowledge creation differs in its representation of reality. These four fundamental principles form the foundation for basic principles of the process of teaching, learning, and knowing as described by constructivism (Garrison, 1998). In other words, constructivism is a theory of learning, which contends that learners actively build knowledge and meaning from personal experiences (Fosnot, 1996; Steffe and Gale, 1995). According to this theory, only through personal experience can one know reality, and even if it does exist outside a person, the personal reality is the only real one for any individual. Hence, beyond what is personally experienced, reality is merely subjective. Von Glasersfeld (1984, 1990) also suggests that knowledge is not passively acquired and that it is acquired when a person is thinking actively, also positing that behavior is transformed through cognition so that individuals are able to function irrespective of the environment they are located in. Thus, thought processes organise and give meaning to experiences (Garrison, 1998). As Mvududu and Thiel-Burgess (2012) maintain, the constructivist approach is commonly acknowledged as a means of prodding comprehension levels in children and upholds the construct that such comprehension is not static or fixed. It can develop into high thinking levels. The understanding offered by Kanselaar (2002, cited in Amineh and Davatgari, 2015: 15) suggests the delineation of the constructivist approach into two specific pathways. These are respectively the constructivist perspective and the socio-cultural perspective, also known as the socio-constructivist perspective.

Within this perspective, language learning attitudes play an important role. Many researchers (e.g. Gardner, 1985; Ushida, 2005; Yu & Watkins, 2011) have defined “attitude” from a socio-cultural perspective. Research has led to the consensus that L2 achievement is influenced by attitudes, although this influence is mediated by motivation (Gardner, 2010 in Alrabai & Moskovsky, 2015: 79). In early research, attitudes were defined as “mental and neural state of readiness, organized through experience,” (Allport, 1954: 54), which influenced how the

individual responded towards related subjects in addition to situations. Later definitions defined attitudes as acquired tendencies to respond in terms of the desired behaviour (Zimbardo and Leippe, 1991). It has been argued by some researchers that attitudes may be biologically derived (e.g Eagly and Chaiken, 1993), while others have theorised that these are learned and hence susceptible to modification (Simmons & Maushak, 2001). According to Orey (2010: 94), attitudes are systems or constructs, which are made up of “affective responses, cognitions, behavioral intentions, and behaviors,” varying in terms of positivity or negativity of direction, degree, and intensity. Together, these early examples perhaps reflect a more cognitive strand to the definition of attitudes. An exception to such a perspective is Chambers (1999: 27), who acknowledges the contribution of socio-cultural influences on attitudes to language learning through defining attitudes as a “set of values which a pupil brings to the FLL [Foreign Language Learning] experience” that are shaped by anticipated psychological benefits and benefits of learning the target language. The values held by the learners may be manipulated by a range of factors including the language learning experience, the community to which the language being learned belongs and the attitudes towards the target language demonstrated by parents and peers of the language learner.

The significance of learners’ beliefs as an effective variable on their individual discernments, actions, and learning success has been focused upon extensively in second language acquisition academic literature on language learners’ conceptions of learning (e.g. Barcelos, 2003; Barcelos and Kalaja, 2011). According to Zheng et al. (2016) who draw upon Benson and Lor (1999: 459) learners’ language and language learning conceptions may be thought of as a “higher level category conditioning specific beliefs”, thereby implying that such beliefs represent learners’ thoughts regarding their language learning, which might also be construed as reflecting their attitude to learning a language. This paper posits that in the same way as learner beliefs are congruent with attitude development, learner motivation forms the mechanism whereby which attitudes influence the successful learning of a foreign language. Thus, there is an overall consensus in current research that attitudes do indeed affect foreign language learning success (e.g. Dörnyei, 1994, 2005; Alrahaili, 2014) and that motivation has a key role to play in this process (Gardner, 2010). In particular, this position is supported by Gardner’s Socio-Educational Model (1985) that views learners’ attitudes to foreign language learning as comprising one part of their motivation to learn the language. In extension, research has found that positive learner attitudes towards foreign language learning and towards the learning context enhance learners’ achievement in the target language (Gardner, 2001; 2010). Indeed, Gardner could easily be considered as the pioneer of motivation research in foreign language learning success.

Against this backdrop, a number of pedagogical approaches, some of which are rooted in the idea of social interaction, have been advanced as being key to developing positive language learner attitudes have evolved. A survey of these explicates the role each approach has to play in enabling language learners to develop positive attitudes towards learning English. In the first instance, family-school partnerships are believed to represent approaches that focus on the child

within a framework of cooperation, coordination and collaboration established between families and educators so as to improve opportunities for “children and adolescents across social, emotional, behavioral, and academic domains” (Kim et al., 2012: 3-4). Kim et al. point out that these bi-directional relationships between caregivers and educational institutions have been purported to enhance “student outcomes through the development of cross-system supports and continuities across settings.” Looking at the impact of such partnerships upon the language learning of English learners, Waterman and Harry (2008 :15), found that “parents of ELLs represent[ed] a vital source of support for increased student engagement and achievement [as] they br[ought] skills, values and knowledge that would benefit both students and teachers”.

Peer collaborations too have the potential to influence learner attitudes as “learner perceptions and experience of peer attitudes [...] foreign language learning in general or the learning of a particular language in question may exert considerable influence on the individual’s own FLL orientation, attitudes, and motivation” (Young, 1994). Given that learner motivation is “socially distributed [and] created within cultural systems of activities involving the mediation of others” (Rueda and Moll, 1994: 131), social interactions within the language learning situation are believed to be of great significance to language learning (Gonzalez, 2004: 61). Hence, the utility of peer collaborations as a pedagogical approach for shaping learner attitudes is self-evident to an extent.

With social interaction and relationships being so central to pedagogical approaches to shaping learner attitudes, Cooperative Learning (CL) is another approach that is thought to be useful for positively influencing EFL learner attitudes. This is defined as a group learning activity that is dependent upon “the socially structured exchange of information between learners and in groups in which each learner is held accountable for his or her own learning and is motivated to increase the learning of others” (Olsen and Kagan, 1992: 8). The approach is considered valuable for “improving attitudes toward the subject” as well as “lowering anxiety and prejudice” (Oxford, 1997: 445), which can influence how language learners feel about language learning. For instance, studies such as those conducted by Azizinezhad, Hashemi and Darvishi (2013) with Iranian EFL learners have found support for the idea that “cooperative learning helped significantly to enhance [learners’] motivation towards learning English” (Azizinezhad, Hashemi, and Darvishi, 2013: 138). This is line with Al Kaboody’s (2013: 45) understanding that motivational strategies highlighted within motivation literature “can help learners adopt more positive language learning.” Given that this understanding is derived from Dornyei’s view that motivation “provides the primary impetus to initiate learning the second language and later the driving force to sustain the long and often tedious learning process” (Dörnyei, 1998: 117), approaches such as CL are likely to influence EFL learner attitudes positively.

Another pedagogical approach considered to be useful in improving EFL learner attitudes comprises the fostering of learner autonomy, which has been defined in terms of “becoming aware of and identifying one’s strategies, needs, and goals as a learner and having the opportunity to reconsider and refashion

approaches and procedures for optimal learning” (Thanasoulas, 2000: 11). Thanasoulas (2000) contends that language learning is more than a matter of cognition, and success in the task does not depend on the learners’ reflection upon the language input received or the most effective strategies required to accomplish language learning goals alone. Significantly, according to Thanasoulas (p. 6), the success of the task depends “upon [the] learners’ stance towards the world and the learning activity, in particular, their sense of self, and their desire to learn.” Hence, this view implicates not just the importance of the role of learners’ motivation towards the activity but also their attitudes towards the task (2000: 6). Therefore, learner autonomy, or the ability to take charge of one’s own learning through a variety of means, including goal setting and learning strategies, becomes foregrounded as “a key element in language learning process which enables the learners to act more effectively” (Salimi and Ansari, 2015, p.1106)

A further pedagogical approach that has been recommended for improving EFL learner attitudes is the use of instructional technologies and the Internet. The integration of educational technology as a pedagogical approach to influencing learner attitudes towards EFL learning positively is supported by literature. Murphy (1997: 3) notes that technology represents the “optimal medium for the application of constructivist principles to learning (Murphy, 1997: 3). Such an approach to learning is supported by the World Wide Web because the constructivist approach to learning encourages learners “to navigate, create, and construct their unique knowledge base” (Conceição-Runlee and Daley, 1998: 39) through accessing the content, learning experiences and collaborative tools designed (1998: 41) around the Internet. As Brown (1998) contends, web-based learning can stimulate learners to engage in learning through “creative and collaborative activities that promote knowledge construction” by encouraging “self-directed learning, collaborative learning, and critical analysis by expanding the environments from which knowledge is constructed.”

The fifth approach thought to be of considerable usefulness in influencing EFL learner attitudes is that of Extensive Reading (ER). The ER approach is described by Day and Bamford (2002) as being “key to unlocking the all-important taste for foreign language reading among students.” Within this approach, learners are encouraged to read texts reflective of their level of ability, with the aim being to stimulate the desire to read. All kinds of suitable texts are made available to the learners to match the variety of the purposes learners may want to undertake the reading for. Importantly, within this approach, learners have the freedom to choose the texts they want to read, similar to the kind of choice they may enjoy in their first language as well as the freedom to stop reading a text they do not find interesting or too difficult to read. Within the ER approach, learners not only read as much as possible with the aim of their reading being to fulfill their particular purpose (e.g. gaining information, enjoying the story) but also read for pleasure. This allows reading to become its own reward.

The ER approach is believed to have a number of benefits for effective language learning. Maley (2009, paras. 4-10) provides a useful summary of these. According to Maley, the ER approach develops learner autonomy because it allows learners to choose the reading material as well as to stop and start a text

whenever they wish, while reading at speed they are comfortable with. In addition, it offers comprehensible input providing expansive and repeated exposure to a language the learners may not encounter very much outside of their learning contexts as well as enhancing their general language competence, developing general knowledge and extending, consolidating and sustaining lexis development. The ER approach also allows the learners to improve their writing via the priming of their language acquisition mechanism that produces the language the learners are gaining exposure to through reading in speech or writing.

Methodology

This study made use of the phenomenological qualitative research approach. According to Creswell (2007: 57), “a *phenomenological study* describes the meaning for several individuals of *their lived experiences* of a concept or a phenomenon” (emphasis in original), and the focus of phenomenology is on “what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon.” Phenomenology is essentially a qualitative approach, as it is “based on a paradigm of personal knowledge and subjectivity, and emphasize[s] the importance of personal perspective and interpretation” (Lester, 1999: 1). In the context of this study, the phenomenon universally experienced by the participants is that of learning English as a Foreign Language within the Saudi context. Langdridge (2013) contends that phenomenology focuses on the lived human experience and on descriptions, rather than on explanations of this phenomenon. Key philosophical perspectives in phenomenology cited by Creswell (2007: 58-59) include: (1) reconceptualization of the approach as “a search for wisdom” rather than exploration of the world through scientism, (2) suspension of all philosophical presuppositions about what is real (3) promotion of the idea that reality does not consist of the separation of subjects and objects, and (4) assertion that reality of an object can only be apprehended within the lived human experience.

Since the focus of the research was on eliciting the participants’ descriptions and perspectives, a descriptive phenomenological approach, rather than an interpretive phenomenological one, was selected. This was because interpretive phenomenology factors in preexisting researcher knowledge and understandings to reveal meanings in the data in order to produce a rich text-based representation of the studied phenomenon (Kleiman, 2004, cited in Penner and McClement, 2008), whereas descriptive phenomenology does not intrude upon the raw data for interpretation purposes. The latter therefore permitted the categorization of the participant descriptions into significant statements of the nature of their EFL experiences and attitudes towards language learning (Penner and McClement, 2008).

The study employed semi-structured interviews, diaries and life histories, and the language used was Arabic. The data collected were also transcribed and coded in Arabic, where applicable. Extracts included in the Discussion were

translated into English for the purpose of this article. Thirty students enrolled on the Foundation Year programme (FYP) at a leading Saudi university were selected to take part in the study. Aged between eighteen and, fifteen of these students were male and fifteen were female; they studied at separate, gender-segregated campuses. None of these students had experienced previous learning contexts in which English had been used as a medium of instruction. Although these students had enrolled on programmes ranging from sciences to humanities as entry-level students, they all required the foundation year programme of study, which necessitated that the learners study the same subjects. The students belonged to a similar socio-economic background and were taught by both native and non-native EFL teachers during the course of the first foundational year, hence making for a considerable homogeneity of English learning experiences. This particular study utilised the flexible design method for sampling the students. The aim was to collect relevant data to improve the individual learning environment, methodology, setting and/or approach depending upon what the findings showed (Lumley, 2011). Sampling was conducted through convenience sampling, which means that subjects or units are selected “for examination and analysis [...] based on accessibility, ease, speed, and low cost. Units are not purposefully or strategically selected” (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). This means that the participants were chosen on the basis of their being located on campus that was convenient for researcher access and proximity. The data from all three sources (interviews, diaries, and life histories) were collected from the same sample of students. Hence, a single sampling strategy for participant selection was used at the outset.

Data Analysis

In this study, the data collected took the form of phrases and body language that provided insight into the experiences of the participants and served as the basis for the formation of theme categories and coding methods. Kvale (2007), Turner (2010: 12) show that “these themes or codes are consistent phrases, expressions, or ideas that [are] common among research participants.” In this study, Streubert’s procedural steps (Streubert, 1991, cited in Streubert and Carpentar 2011: 81) in analysing the data collected from the interviews were followed. These are provided below:

1. I explicated a personal description of the phenomenon under study.
2. I bracketed my presuppositions.
3. I interviewed participants in unfamiliar settings.
4. I carefully read the interview transcripts to obtain a general sense of the experience.
5. I reviewed the transcripts to uncover essences.
6. I apprehended essential relationships.
7. I developed formalized descriptions of the phenomenon.
8. I returned to participants to validate descriptions.

9. I reviewed the relevant literature.
10. I distributed the findings to the academic community.

Spiegelberg (1975: 57) explains that descriptive phenomenology involves “direct exploration, analysis, and description of particular phenomena, as free as possible from unexamined presuppositions, aiming at maximum intuitive presentation”. Spiegelberg (1965, 1975, cited in Speziale, Streubert and Carpenter, 2011: 81-82) has also identified a three-step process for descriptive phenomenology, which is illustrated explicated below:

A. *Intuiting*

The first step consisted of immersion in the phenomenon of how Saudi EFL students learned English, and acquaintance with the experiences of the participants as conveyed in their personal descriptions. An effort was made to exclude all “criticism, evaluation, or opinion” focusing only on the phenomenon being studied and how it was described (Spiegelberg, 1965, 1975). In my role of ‘researcher as instrument’, I collected and listened to the individual descriptions of the interviewees’ learning experiences and perceptions, studying the data as they were transcribed and iteratively reviewing what the participants had described (Speziale, Streubert & Carpenter, 2011: 81-82).

B. *Analysing*

The second step consisted of identifying the “essence of the phenomenon” (Speziale, Streubert, and Carpenter, 2011: 81-82) being studied based on how the data were presented. As the different constituents were distinguished, the data’s interconnectedness with adjacent phenomena (Spiegelberg, 1965, 1975) was examined, which allowed for “common themes or essences” to emerge, with the aim of distilling a “pure and accurate description” (Speziale, Streubert, and Carpenter, 2011: 81-82).

C. *Describing*

In the final step, phenomenological description with the aim of generating a classification or grouping of the phenomenon was undertaken, whilst ensuring that this did not result in the premature description (Spiegelberg, 1965, 1975). The aim herein was to ensure that all critical elements or essences that characterized the learning of EFL by Saudi students were identified and described, including their relationships to one another (Speziale, Streubert, and Carpenter, 2011: 81-82).

D. *Thematic Analysis*

The obtained data was analysed thematically. The benefit of thematic analysis rests in its flexibility. According to Braun and Clarke (2006: 5), “through its theoretical freedom, thematic analysis provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data”. Especially relevant to this study, with its aim of informing programme development and policymaking, is the fact that thematic analysis “can be useful for producing qualitative analyses suited to informing policy development”

(Braun & Clarke, 2006: 37).

However, the flexibility of this method can be problematic when attempting to develop specific guidelines for higher-phase analysis. Meanwhile, Braun and Clarke (2006: 27) argue that “another issue to consider is that a thematic analysis has limited interpretative power beyond mere description if it is not used within an existing theoretical framework that anchors the analytic claims that are made”. Hence, both the advantages and the disadvantages of using thematic analysis in this study were considered, and extra steps were taken to ensure that the validity of the identified themes was clearly supported by the primary data. These included appending the primary data in the final report so that the reader could see the raw data upon which the findings had been made (Key, 1997). A list of the newly formed concepts was kept at hand as the second transcript was read in an effort to determine if the same concepts were also present in the second set of data. The second list of concepts was created for the second set of data and merged with the first list of concepts creating a master list that “constitute[d] a primitive outline of classification system reflecting the recurring regularities or patterns in [your] study. These patterns and regularities [became] the categories or themes into which subsequent items [were] sorted” (Merriam, 2009: 181).

Each piece of data was analysed in this manner until a point of saturation was reached. Once this point was reached, the efforts shifted from being inductive to being deductive; meaning that further data was tested against the tentative theme scheme. Once a tentative set of themes was created, all evidence matching a specified theme could then be sorted accordingly. Some of the identified themes in open coding were: influence of friends and family on students’ attitudes towards learning English; the influence of education on attitudes towards learning English; influence of finance on attitudes towards learning English, and motivations for learning English. Conceptual or thematic labels were attached to almost every line in the interview transcript to capture what every participant had said. From this point, themes were defined and named, and a report on the findings created utilizing NVIVO.

NVIVO 10 is a qualitative data-analysis software programme that enables the coding and analysis of text, image, audio and video data. The audio coding in NVIVO 10, like document (text) or video coding, required the creation of internal source files within the ‘Sources’ tab. For example, in this study’s audio, ‘Internal Source’ files were created by importing the interview recordings in WMA format into NVIVO 10 and labeling them according to the participant code. Once the ‘Internal Sources’ were created, several applications become available such as Nodes, Memos, Sets, Queries, Models, Links, and Classifications. Nodes are essentially codes, or the topics or themes created to which data chunks or portions of the audio recording or sections of a written document can be attributed (Auld et al: 2007). The imported audio files appeared in audio waveform, which could be listened to and divided into audio excerpts. The audio excerpts were assigned ‘Timespan’ notes, typed into the ‘Content’ column for purposes of identifying the excerpt and were then assigned to a Node. For instance, 1.55 min to 2.30 min (Timespan) was coded as ‘Family and Friends Influence’ (Node) with

the note, “discussing the effect of family and friends influence on attitudes towards learning English” as the “Content.”

In the NVIVO 10 analysis, the phenomenological data in the form of narrative, diary texts and interview audio recordings were analysed for the 15 male and 15 female participants. First, nodes were set up for each participant and each source coded to the participant. The initial thematic nodes were then defined based on the research questions and theoretical concepts from the literature review, research questions, and objectives. Next, each participant’s sources were reviewed, and relevant additions to thematic nodes were coded, accompanied by examining each source, checking of the completion of thematic coding, and revising and adding new interpretations.

The data modeling section of NVIVO 10 was then used to sort the thematic nodes into hypothetical relations and then into manageable clusters. In some cases, nodes that turned into closely related themes or ideas were merged. Themes, names, and definitions were then reviewed and revised. The coding of the interviews was a critical part of the data analysis process, especially for capturing the information in the interview data, to learn how the participating students made sense of their English language learning experiences. Coding was the first step in the data analysis, helping in the transition from particular statements by the respondents to more abstract interpretations of the interview data. Through open coding, also called ‘line-by-line coding’, it was possible to identify the main phenomena under study and produce a list of themes and sub-themes of importance to the interviewee. These labels or VIVO codes corresponded closely to the interview context. Codes were assigned to participants’ words and statements to develop concepts, constituting the start of the analytic process. The detailed and meticulous line-by-line coding helped open up the text and interpret the transcript in new and unfamiliar ways, further helping to test the research assumptions.

There was a greater focus on abstract coding than open coding, referred to as focused coding or selective coding in which codes were applied to several lines or paragraphs in a transcript with the most telling codes representing the interviewees’ voices being chosen. The research also relied on ‘axial coding’, in which the categories or themes identified earlier were related to sub-themes such as high GPA scores, the need to communicate with others and desire to work abroad, for the main theme of motivation, and which added depth and structure to the main themes. Through axial coding, data that had been treated separately during line-by-line coding were combined. Theoretical coding was also used to establish and explore the relationships among the themes and the sub-themes identified from the interviews and narratives.

In analysing the collected data, the research relied on grounded theory methodology. In line with this, personal experience and knowledge were bracketed and put aside. The collected data was deconstructed to reveal the emerging themes and sub-themes and to build a sound theory that would explain students’ attitudes towards learning the English language. Following each interview, the audiotapes were transcribed and summarised for each participant’s narrative by identifying all the crucial elements of their stories. The entire transcript was then entered into

the qualitative data management programme called NVIVO 10 and each paragraph coded into themes and sub-themes, using the participant's language wherever possible.

The analysis methodology for the narratives made a distinction between actual events and participants' narratives because the narrative is often based on participants' perceptions or observation of real events in the process of learning the English language. This process entailed an analysis of participants' biographical data, thematic analysis, reconstruction of the case history for the participants, analysis of individual texts, and a comparison between the narratives and the participants' experiences. The first to be analysed were the participants' biographical details, such as their age when they started learning English and their gender. Thematic analysis of the data was conducted, followed by the coding of significant sentences, paragraphs relating to themes, narratives about specific incidents, the structure of the interview, and by the entire interview. The analysis relied on the NVIVO 10 computer programme in the coding and analysis process, especially in data management. At this stage, the life history of each participant was constructed by reducing and re-ordering their narratives into a brief summary of their stories, as told in his/her own words. The individual pieces of text were then analysed. The narratives were grouped according to common core concepts in relation to the construction of a sense of self. This process produced the main group narratives and sub-narratives and the intertwined themes. Bearing the greatest importance in the analysis process was the summarization of each participant's story in a few pages and coding the data into themes and sub-themes using participants' language to describe the themes.

Findings and Discussion

The aim of this research was to determine the attitudes and emotions of students studying English at a particular foundational year programme. This study sought to examine the impact, specifically the impact that English language learning had on students working towards specific goals in their quest for higher education. There are particular complexities of teaching EFL in the Gulf States (Constantinou, 2009; Jalalah and Ali, 1993; Zafar Khan, 2011) and in Saudi Arabia (Ahmed and Abouabdelkader, 2016). Therefore, it was essential for this research to examine the issues connected to the EFL classroom, specifically about learner performance and teacher development. Under this framework, four research questions were addressed:

1. What are the main declared attitudes of Foundation year students at a leading Saudi university towards learning English as a foreign language?
2. What are the factors, according to foundation year students, which shape their attitudes towards learning English as a foreign language?
3. What, if any, is the relationship between the attitudes of students in EFL classes and their wellbeing and performance?

4. Is there a correlation between the students' attitudes and academic achievement in EFL classes?

This research was considered necessary because of the way resources were being funneled by the government into programs that facilitated English language learning. Specifically, the Saudi Ministry of training encouraged the improvement of EFL teaching and learner accomplishments (Al-Seghayer, 2005). One of the focuses of this strategy has been to place considerable emphasis on evaluation while encouraging teachers from outside the Kingdom to teach the classes (Al-Omrani, 2008; McMullen, 2009). This initial strategy was deemed to be problematic because it did not consider the socio-cultural differences and pedagogical foundations (e.g. the teachings of Islam) within the pedagogical processes (Ali, 2009; Freeman and Mason, 1998; Liton, 2014). This study was undertaken with the intentions of benefitting educational programme designers, instructional coaches and strategy producers - all of whom are responsible for improving the quality of EFL education within the Saudi context.

The overarching theme reflected consistently in the data collected through the various means already discussed was the necessity for learning the English language. This did not suggest that each student felt they 'needed' English, but many felt they had to learn it, based on some further justification that being able to communicate in English would benefit them later in life. For some, this 'benefit' was an entry into their programme of choice. For others, it might have been perceived as being linked to a better paying job. Some students felt that English would help them as they traveled the world or studied abroad, whereas others wanted English to help them better understand English media, books, or culture. Not every student liked English, and some even admitted to hating it. The bottom line, however, was that at the end of the Foundation Year Programme, all the students who participated in this study were successful in their completion of the programme, regardless of their feelings towards learning English.

Attitudes

Language learning has been highlighted by Dornyei (2003) as a profoundly social event, wherein knowledge is constructed. Sociocultural components, such as history, culture, and L1 context, provide the foundation whence EFL learning can develop. Allport (1954) suggests that attitudes are learned and relate directly to these sociocultural components. The findings indicated that students were not only able to express their attitudes but that these attitudes could be attributed to specific categories, including cognitive, affective and behavioural; limitations could be placed on each category to code participant responses appropriately. Outcomes from the cognitive attitudes section focused on the importance of learning English, which was to some extent focused on its necessity. Responses could be classified as positive, negative, or neutral. Overall, there were more positive responses than negative or neutral ones, though numerically, because of the small sample size, this is not particularly relevant. What was perhaps more useful was the diversity in the positive cognitive responses. This diversity-related

in part to the idea of the 'self.' In Dornyei's model (2003), 'self' is identified in three ways: the ideal L2 self, the ought-to-be L2 self, and the L2 learning experience. Under the cognitive framework of attitudes, students were able to demonstrate all three notions of 'self' and how these intertwined to offer prospects of success (regarding the necessity of English). Affective and behavioral attitudes were also identified to include how much each participant 'liked' (or hated) English and how these were related to specific outcomes. Once again, the focus of students was of necessity, whether that was for the short term or the long run. The participants were likely to portray certain attitudes because of internal or external pressures along with the personal justification that they required (or felt they needed) English to be successful upon completion of the FYP programme.

Factors Affecting Attitudes

The literature has identified several factors that are thought to influence attitude. Many of these included familial obligations and pressure, financial implications, higher education achievements and travel/study abroad. Many of these initial findings were consistent in the Saudi context within the participant group of this study. Within this study, motivation was seen to be inherently linked to such factors. It was categorised into instrumental, integrative, and developmental motivation and considered many of the elements that were present in the previous findings from the literature. There did not seem to be a large difference between the way that male and female informants responded. While some differences were discernible, there was not enough evidence to conclude that one gender demonstrated attitudes that were significantly different from those of the other gender. Beyond the motivational factors, it was the role of teachers and pedagogy within the participants' past experiences when learning English that emerged as an important theme. Participants were able to highlight particular teachers and events that contributed to their own learning experiences. In some instances, participants who were able to recall positive experiences from their past seemed to have more motivation to learn English during the FYP versus the students who could recall negative experiences. This did not necessarily suggest that positive teaching experiences in the past led to higher levels of motivation; it could simply be that students with high levels of motivation tended to recall positive teaching experiences from their past more easily than students with negative attitudes. However, more research is required in this area to determine the full extent of this relationship.

There also seems to be some link between the way the material was taught and student motivation. For example, students suggested that when the language material was taught through active learning, games, or other interactive activities, there was a higher motivation to learn that same material. Yulin (2013) suggests that technology integration in the classroom were strongly and positively associated with the desire and motivation. As the Saudi context often takes into account a more prescriptive, lecture-style approach in tertiary education, there are questions surrounding whether this pedagogical method might be updated to include more innovative approaches to teaching EFL in the classroom.

Relationship between Attitude and Performance

One area of interest within the findings of this research related to the wellbeing of the participants. In the coding and the framework of my project, wellbeing largely centered upon the feelings of the participants. Wellbeing could be divided into positive, negative, and neutral components. Participants were specifically asked during the interviews whether or not they felt that there was a relationship between their feelings and their performance. Participants who were able to suggest a positive correlation scored better on the final assessments than the students who indicated a negative correlation. However, given the relatively small sample size of the participant group, more research is required to advance the correlation more conclusively. In some of the existing literature, emotions and wellbeing have been linked to stress (Inam, 2007). In these instances, students experiencing higher levels of stress are more likely to exhibit negative emotions and feelings. In this study, stress was not examined explicitly (i.e. participants were not directly asked about their stress levels), even though it was likely that pressures surrounding academic success and acceptance could have played considerable roles in their stress levels. It would be interesting to examine whether or not the relationship indicated by the participants reflected on their academic achievement over a longer period and with more standardized or rigorous examination of the testing instruments, as both of these factors could have considerable influence on the final outcomes.

Attitudes and Academic Achievement

The findings from this study include the marks that participants received on each of the four assessments that they were required to write to pass the FYP programme. These results suggest that a link could not be determined between student achievement on the assessments and their motivation or attitudes towards learning English. This seemed particularly puzzling, and it is discussed below as a possible avenue for future research. The students that participated in this research all scored particularly high on all of the assessments. This raised questions as to the validity of the evaluation in terms of determining the level of academic English demonstrated by students. One of the final research questions aimed to determine whether or not there was a correlation between the students' attitudes and academic achievement. The findings from this study suggest that no correlation could be demonstrated but that future research on the topic is warranted.

Recommendations for Further Research

While the study addressed the questions it set out to do, it also led to new questions being raised as a result. This section seeks to offer possible expansions and pathways under which future research studies could be conducted (see Allen et al., 2008). First, in response to the small sample size used in this research,

the number of participants could be increased. This could be achieved by assembling larger groups of students at other universities within Saudi Arabia, or it could be accomplished by sampling groups of students from any of the dozens universities located in the Kingdom. By creating a larger sample size and maintaining similar research questions, a more generalizable understanding of student attitudes within the FYP could be determined. Another aspect of this research study that could be addressed in future research is the utilization of a qualitative model alone. While the qualitative framework was considered as the most appropriate for this study as the researcher sought to achieve depth in participant responses, there is also value in the utilization of a mixed methods approach. Future researchers might want to consider validation of the assessment tools used in FYP study. The current research project could not find a relationship between the assessments used and the attitudes and the emotions of students. One of the reasons why this might have occurred is due to the inaccuracy of the test or because of the teacher's desire to 'teach to the test' as opposed to a desire to increase communicative fluency among the students. As these are only two of several possibilities, more quantitative analysis associated with question design would be beneficial.

There are also possibilities to expand this research beyond the student perspective. Within this research project, one significant finding indicates that students had very vivid memories about past teaching experiences (both good and bad). It may also be possible to examine the attitudes of teaching professionals currently employed in Saudi Arabia within the field of EFL. While some previous research has indicated that teachers may not be culturally equipped to work in the Saudi environment (see Literature review), much of this research is outdated and assumes that the teacher is not of Saudi nationality (thus creating the cultural conflict). As more and more Saudi teachers have been educated to higher levels, there is room for further analysis of how these teachers are functioning in the classroom along with the attitudes and emotions they bring to the context. It may also be beneficial to examine pedagogical teaching approaches, as new and innovative strategies might not only benefit the students but the teachers who are working within these classrooms (e.g. so that teacher burnout is avoided).

It may also be possible to examine students over a longer period. Many of the reasons that the participants in the current study suggested as motivation for their desire to learn English were linked to necessity (i.e. entrance into a degree programme, future job opportunities, travel/study abroad, etc.). It would be interesting to examine whether or not the students were able to achieve these goals and possibly if their attitudes or emotions changed over the course of any future study or employment periods. There is also room to negotiate what is meant by 'attitude' or 'emotion'. While this research carefully examined the definitions of both attitude and emotion, conflicting definitions are surrounding this area of study. By considering attitudes and emotions from a different perspective, it is possible that different findings would emerge.

These are only some of the many possibilities that could be pursued by future researchers. As the context of this topic keeps on changing, future research could build upon particular findings from this research in various ways. This can include

changes to the research design, development of a new framework or model surrounding assessment, providing a new (or longer term) context (Trochim and Donnelly, 2001), and by examining a larger population within various locations across the Kingdom.

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