



## **Challenges Experienced by Saudi Female Students Transitioning Through Canadian Pre-academic ESL**

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### **Abstract**

Current research is concerned with issues related to female Saudi students who study English in Canada, which may have a negative impact on the development of proficiency in spoken English. A mixed methods approach was used and a questionnaire was prepared that consisted of 38 items. It asked about experiences within the classroom, opportunities to talk to others, level of comfort speaking, and the relative importance of speaking, reading, and writing, and was administered to 61 female Saudi students in Halifax, NS Canada. Additional structured interviews were conducted with four students, two teachers, and two support staff (receptionists) to enrich the knowledge gained from the questionnaire. Results indicated that female Saudi students have problems with self-confidence, shyness, and a fear of making mistakes. Many ESL students likely have similar issues, the issues were more debilitating for female Saudi students than for other females or for male Saudi students. In addition, the current research revealed many unique cultural issues related to female Saudi students studying abroad. For example, Saudi women – even those with university education – are unaccustomed to co-educational classes and male teachers which can cause Saudi women remain silent in the classroom. Similarly, Saudi women are not expected to interact outside the home, or with males, and as such, Saudi women socialize only with Saudi women which limits their opportunities to practice the language with more experienced student or native English speakers.

**Keywords:** Saudi women, female, Saudi, students, English, Second Language.



## **1.1 Introduction**

To understand Saudi women, one must first understand the social structures and cultural norms (status and interactions) for Saudi women in Saudi Arabia. Saudi culture is primarily patriarchal. The father is the center of the family and he is the final arbiter on all matters. Typically, the father is more associated with the public domain. He represents the family in all activities outside the home (shopping, finances, etc.). The mother, on the other hand, is associated with the private sphere (e.g., managing the house, looking after children, etc.). Men are financially responsible for the family, whereas women are not.

In the past, Saudi women have relied on their father to provide their identity. The Saudi woman was believed to be an extension of her father. She did not have her own identity (ID card). Her identity appeared on the identity card of her father, and she had to rely on him to participate in life outside her home: her father was expected to be present to provide that ID should it be requested at any time. After marriage, her name was added to her husband's identity card. If unmarried at the time of her father's death, her name would be added to her nearest male relative. However, beginning in 2001, Saudi women were able to obtain an independent identity card at the age of majority. This created more opportunities for women to work independently outside the home.

In recent years, women have received more education and have entered the workforce to provide for family needs. Household chores are taken care of by maids and servants. Nonetheless, most activities outside of the home (e.g. official transactions) are done with the accompaniment of a male or by the male directly. For example, women rely on a male relative to deal with bills, shopping for groceries, reserving hotels, purchasing flight tickets -- all the responsibilities that need someone to communicate outside of the home.

Breaking this barrier requires education, and a degree of self-confidence that is usually accompanied by the acquisition of education – that is, through higher education. However



much higher education of Saudi citizens is conducted outside of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. For example, Arab News reports 35000 Saudi women are studying abroad (<https://www.arabnews.com/node/1082551/saudi-arabia>). Typically, this requires foreign language skills (e.g., English), so the first experience of many Saudi students is that of leaning (or improving) a foreign language. How do these women fare? Do the unique characteristics of Saudi culture help or hinder their progress?

## **1.2 Research problems**

This is an exploratory study to examine verbal skills and verbal interactions of Saudi female students studying in English Language Institutes (ELI) in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. The number of Saudi female students is gradually increasing in ELI programs in Halifax (Ministry of Higher Education, 2013) and there is an absence of literature relating to the progress and obstacles faced by this group. It is particularly important because such an experience is often the first introduction to the foreign educational system and may be a marker for subsequent success. It is also important because the language skills demanded of higher education are of a necessarily higher level. Therefore, this research explored the experiences of female Saudi students in these programs. The focus is on the development of verbal skills.

## **1.3 Research questions**

This research was designed to address the following main question:

- What are the challenges Saudi female students face in learning English as a Second Language?

In addition, there are several sub-questions, as follows:

1. What are the perceptions of female Saudi students about their conversation with others?



2. What is the importance of writing, reading and speaking in English from the perspective of female Saudi students?
3. What are the oral communication skills of female Saudi students and the interaction in school from the perspective of teachers?
4. What are the psychological and social factors that can affect Saudi female students in preparatory ESL experience in public places?

#### **1.4 Aims and Objectives**

The current research aims to identify the challenges experienced by Saudi female students transitioning through Canadian pre-academic ESL to:

1. identify obstacles that prevent Saudi women from improving their spoken English while they are enrolled in language schools in a Canadian environment.
2. identify some solutions that might mitigate or eliminate those obstacles.
3. provide general background information of relevance to Saudi women studying abroad (or at home) and of relevance to other research on the this topic.

#### **1.5 Women's Education in Saudi Arabia**

Education in Saudi Arabia is now compulsory for all children. However, throughout the country, the education system is segregated by gender where men and women are not allowed to interact with one another in the academic setting. As such, the academic world mirrors the social world. It is important to realize that female students are only taught by women and male students are only taught by men. This does not mean, however, that men and women receive different education. Both receive, fundamentally, the same education: Teachers in both schools follow the same curriculum.

Education for women in Saudi Arabia only started in the 1960s, but currently, Saudi women receive a lot of attention from the government in terms of education. The Saudi



government understands and emphasizes the importance of education to development. The government puts a great deal of emphasis on education and has devoted time, effort and money to improving the educational outcomes of its citizens.

### **1.6 The Challenges Faced by Saudi Females in ESL**

Saudi women face a set of challenges that are not experienced by other groups of women or even, by Saudi men. These challenges may be one of the most important factors affecting Saudi women learning English (or other languages) and in turn, their ability to access the breadth of higher education.

López Rúa (2006) studied social factors that affect the acquisition of ESL and concluded that “It must be added that other social variables (for example, class or ethnicity) may interact with gender when determining foreign language proficiency and therefore alter the expected results.” (López Rúa, 2006, p. 107). Gassama (2012) noted that ESL students often have difficulty adapting to a new culture because of differences in attitudes and values, which then impairs language acquisition. Language and the ability to communicate (to express oneself clearly) is a core part of a person’s identity and identity expression (see, for example, Jamshidnejed, 2011), so a language impairment can affect other aspects of personality and social integration.

There is currently no research in the literature (that we can find) about the experiences of Saudi women in learning English as second language (LESL) abroad. This is an important gap given the numbers of Saudi women entering the social world: for example, according to the Higher Education Statistics Center (2013), the number of Saudi female students who studied in Canada from 2005 until 2013 increased from 423 students to 4404 students. It is also an important issue given the costs and the long term commitment of many educational programs. If a student’s first introduction to a foreign educational



system – the ESL course -- is aversive, it will impair the acquisition of that foreign language, affect all subsequent interactions, and may fail to optimize the whole educational experience

There are studies about the experiences of Saudi students studying abroad (e.g., Barnawi 2009; Shaw, 2010), but these tend to take a male perspective. However the experiences of Saudi women must be studied separately from the experience of Saudi men because of the huge differential impact of culture and norms on female and male personalities and actions.

In the current work, we were more focused on verbal skills because the ability to speak with confidence is likely more important than the ability to write or read. For example, Tan Kim, Mohd Nor, and Jaradat (2012) noted that foreign language learners view learning to speak effectively as an more essential skill than reading or writing. It is also true that speaking is inherently social whereas reading and writing may not be. Thus, Saudi women would be expected to show more barriers in the acquisition of the spoken aspects of a language.

According to a study by Al-Sibai (2005) which focused on Saudi female students in Saudi Arabia, many women in L2 classes were more fearful or nervous when answering a verbal question (in conversational studies) than they were in their other language classes (i.e., reading or writing). He emphasized that Second language (L2) learners have a fear of losing face, insecurity, and a lack confidence, all of which can potentially lead to lowered success in the L2 classroom. Such characteristics would likely prevent students from participating to their full ability in oral communication activities in the classroom. That, in turn, would likely reduce second language use (practice) outside the classroom, which in turn, could further inhibit classroom participation. The net result would be a spiral of diminishing participation and language acquisition. (Al-Sibai, 2005).



Work with non-Arab cultures can be informative. López Rúa (2006) noted that Asian men living in Great Britain are often more proficient in ESL than Asian women. The men go to work outside of their home every day where they are required to listen to and speak English. Asian women – like Saudi women -- are often homemakers and do not have the opportunity to interact with many people using English every day. Saudi women in Saudi Arabia tend to stay at home in their free time (Al-Otaibi, 2004).

Saudi students are separated by gender throughout the educational system, from elementary to high school and even at university (Saudi Arabia Cultural Mission, 1991; Shaw, 2010). The teachers leading the classes are also separated by gender: female teachers teach girls and male teachers teach boys (Al-Otaibi, 2004; Saudi Arabia Cultural Mission 1991; Shaw, 2010). As such, Shaw (2010) notes that when Saudi students study abroad, it is the first time they have been taught by a teacher of the opposite gender in a common classroom.

Self-confidence is the most important element that determines learners' willingness to participate in oral activities in language classrooms (Al-Hebaish, 2012; Al-Sibai, 2005). Al-Hebaish (2012) noted that, “a significant number of studies reported the positive correlation of self-confidence with grades in language courses” (p. 61). Basically, if a student lacks the confidence in their abilities and feel unable to do certain tasks, they will not be able to learn a second language (or first language) successfully (Al-Hattab, 2006; Al-Sibai, 2005; Jamshidnejed, 2011).

The issue of confidence when engaged in a coeducational setting is therefore of particular importance to Saudi women. Saudi women are uniquely unaccustomed to the presence of (unrelated) men. Hence, men in any situation may cause Saudi women to be quiet and reserved. The presence of *Saudi* men, in particular, may add another layer of complexity. Saudi women seem to be even more uncomfortable in the presence of Saudi men because such men can pass judgment. The honor and reputation of a Saudi female is a sensitive



issue that defines the role and behavior of Saudi women in Saudi society. The nature of the Saudi society is to judge families (therefore males) by focusing on the females' behavior.

On the other hand, many studies have shown that social factors have a positive impact in terms of success in ESL for female learners. Francis suggested that “increased ambition, coupled with a feeling that opportunities in the workplace are skewed against them, is what has provided girls with a new motivation for achievement at school” (Francis, 2000, p. 88).

Lopez (2006) also said that girls are encouraged to interact socially, to relate to emotions, and to solve problems via conversation, and that this could play a significant role in their ability and desire to acquire language. Sex-stereotyping is another motivator that might encourage girls to develop a liking for languages, and to seek to improve their proficiencies when learning ESL.

## **2.0 Methodology**

To achieve the research objectives, this research used a mixed methods approach with two phases: a quantitative questionnaire and a qualitative interview. According to Shank and Brown (2007), the two methods, “look at the world in quite different ways” (p.174) and it is worth combining them to get a better understanding of causes and effects. The final section provided an integration of the two sets of data. The work was conceptualized within Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) bioecological systems theory (Bioecological Model)

The quantitative questionnaire consisted of 38 items in five sections: General Information (4 items), Comfort Speaking with Others (8 items), Opportunities to Speak with Others (6 items), Classroom Experience (17 items) and Self Rating of Language Ability (3 items). Participants for the questionnaire consisted of 61 students ranging in age from 19 to 29 years. They had, on average, 11.1 (SD = 12.0) months of instruction in English ranging





from 1 to 84 months. Students had resided in Canada for an average of 12.9 (SD = 11.4) months, ranging from 1 to 42 months, and they had achieved an average level of English proficiency of 4.51 (SD: 2.17) with a range of 1 to 8 (English proficiency certification).

The structured interviews consisted of 25 pre-planned open-ended questions for 4 students, 8 pre-planned open-ended questions for 2 ESL teachers, and 5 pre-planned open-ended questions for 2 receptionists.

### **2.3 Results**

The questionnaire was analyzed item by item and responses were compared between items to get a sense of the data. There are several major findings. Firstly, there was a range of comfort speaking, but those who were the most comfortable in one situation were also the most comfortable in other situations. In addition, Saudi women were not comfortable speaking in front of Saudi men. Secondly, most women understood the need to practice outside the classroom but again there was a range of engagement and those who practiced more in one situation tended to practice more in other situations. Thirdly, the issue of co-educational classes seemed to be divisive in that some women seem to appreciate such classes, whereas others did not. In addition, some women accepted the potential for embarrassment or error when speaking in public whereas did not. There were few differences related to demographics but comfort with the presence of males was somewhat related to the number of years in Canada and language level. Finally, participants regarded speaking as more important than reading or writing.

The interviews were analyzed using qualitative methods (Jeanfreau & Jack, 2010; Madill & Gough, 2008) that identified the common themes regardless of the question that generated the content (i.e., themes were summed across questions).

Across both phases, the general results are summarized. Generally, all Saudi female students from all different level of language were most comfortable and felt more



competent when listening rather than when speaking. That may indicate that there are other obstacles that inhibit their active (speaking) participation. Most participants stated that they speak freely with high self-confidence when they are speaking with someone who has lower English-speaking skills. In fact, this finding is not surprising because the speaker knows that their mistakes are not as noticeable. This would decrease anxiety, which might help to increase confidence.

Saudi female is generally more confident when speaking to non-Arabic speakers. There are two possible reasons for this. Firstly, when speaking to an Arabic speaker, there is a tendency to switch to Arabic when the frustration of mistakes starts to build. This means that they miss the point of practicing English and trying to improve their speaking skills. This likely happens when the content of the conversation becomes more important than the practicing of English. If the speakers want to “finish” the conversation and move on to another, switching to Arabic is faster and less effortful. Secondly, Arabic listeners are not encouraging the Arabic speaker to continue speaking in English.

The most significant appears from this research is that the clear majority of Saudi female student limit themselves to only Saudi girls or Arabic native speakers. They explained that they find it very difficult to make friends with native speakers or get into the social activities that occur outside school.

Through this research, most female Saudi students expressed appreciation for the Canadian educational system in terms of oral presentations, group work, student-centered pedagogy, and dialogue between teachers and students. Most participants preferred to make presentations. It was an opportunity to practice their speaking skills. On the other hand, teamwork was more ambiguous. Most participants liked teamwork, but they all agreed that working in a group of females would be better than working in a group with men.



Many students suggested that there be separated classrooms for Saudi women, particularly at beginner's level. The reasons for this finding are self-explanatory. Saudi females grow up in segregated schools. They have never had to talk to, or work on a group project, with males. Hence, Saudi females, particularly at the beginner's levels, were uncomfortable when interacting with males in general.

All the Saudi women in this study showed the same psychological issues that other ESL learners would have (e.g. self-confidence, embarrassment, fear of making mistakes). However, that issue of self-confidence is of importance given the other issues that Saudi female students face when speaking outside school (in public).

Participants admitted that they felt less confident when they were in a class that other ESL students who had a higher level of English proficiency. In this situation, they committed to silence, because they felt that they might be judged. Finally, the experience of Saudi women with education seems to enable them to be reasonably comfortable in a class of equals (in terms of English proficiency). In such a situation, all students are at the same level of the hierarchy: they know they are all learners.

From the point of view of teachers, they did not notice any specific weaknesses in Saudi women's ability to learn English (speaking, reading or writing). The only problem teachers encountered was shyness, which affected class participation. Several reasons for this have already been discussed. Teachers have explicitly commented that male presence changes the dynamics of the classroom. Men take a leadership role, and Saudi women tend to be more intense and less involved in discussions. However, teachers note that not all female Saudi students are silent and uncooperative in class. There are some Saudi women who are enthusiastic, with strong minds, and do not mind being in the joint.



Teachers also noted that Saudi female student do not voice their opinions when it comes to discussion and debate. They commented that Saudi females need to learn that all opinions are valid.

## **2.4 Conclusion**

This paper is designed to help understand issues that may prevent female Saudi students who are studying English foreign countries from developing English speaking skills. The number of female Saudi students entering ESL courses in foreign countries is increasing and is likely continuing to increase. There is a lack of information in the literature about their experiences. Hence, this study fills an important gap in the literature. Two main themes emerged from this study.

The research showed that these challenges may be related to Saudi students as psychological factors. Include shyness, self-confidence, embarrassment, fear of making mistakes, and fear of misunderstanding.

These challenges may result from the surrounding environment and socio-cultural factors that shape the behavior of female Saudi students and limit their interactions within and outside the classroom. This includes the cultural restraints on socializing, the deference to male opinion, and the need to have mahram to manage all business interactions.

This includes respect for the opinion of males, cultural restrictions on socialization, the need to have a mahram to manage all commercial interactions, sudden exposure to joint learning classes and sudden exposure to male teachers. This also includes aspects of the curriculum. In other words, some of the discussion topics in the chapter were either "out of bounds" or irrelevant (lack of experience), the sudden exposure to co-educational classes and the sudden exposure to male teachers.



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