

Examining the Impact of Gender and Students' Parents on Attitudes towards English: The Case of Saudi Arab Students and Their Parents in Al-Kamel College of Science and Arts

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Abstract—Measuring attitudes towards English language has been proven decisive for improving the teaching of the language and its appealing to learners. Therefore, this study aims to examine male and female Saudi students' attitudes towards English and the attitudes and perceptions of parents on the importance of English. Two instruments were used to accomplish the research objectives: 1) Students' questionnaire; and 2) Parents interview. The findings of the study indicate that both students and parents have positive attitudes towards English. Means and standard deviations show that male students have more positive attitudes towards English than their female counterparts. The findings also reveal that parents perceive English positively as the international language of science, technology and business. However, this perception was not found in line with their children's attitudes towards English as a foreign language (EFL). The major conclusion of this study is that parents' involvement in their children education and the adoption of new approaches in EFL teaching and learning such as, the English for specific purpose (ESP) approach might be significant to raise students' awareness of the world language and improve students' proficiency level in English.

Index Terms—Attitudes, gender, parents .

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the kingdom of Saudi Arabia has witnessed an unprecedented growth in the field of economy, health, science, and technology. The nation's important role in the global oil market and its successive steps towards further regional and global economic integration has made English "an indispensable tool for overcoming linguistic barriers" (Reithofer, 2010) between the country and its global business partners. Policy makers, teachers, administrators and parents have spent a great deal of time and money to help learners have a great command of English. Despite these efforts, English language learners are still far from the desired level of proficiency in English. Female learners are usually seen as better English language learners than their male counterparts. Parents are also considered to have rare or marginal involvement in their children's education. These facts may raise serious concerns for practitioners interested in attitudes to language in general and English language teaching in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in particular. Indeed, as the twenty first century has seen a move towards learner-centered

education, great attention should be paid to the social, contextual, affective and personal factors that impact the ways and pace of learning/acquiring English in Saudi Arabia. Among these traits, learner's attitudes towards language can be considered as an important factor that influences second/foreign language acquisition. Gender is also found by many researches such as, Oxford, 1993; Young and Oxford, 1997 to have a significant impact on how students learn a language (cited in Zafar and Meenakshi, 2012). In addition, parents play a significant role in shaping their children's attitudes towards language learning (Obadare and Deji-Afuye, 2015). Therefore, Examining students' attitudes towards English language and their parents' perception of its use in different domains should occupy pride of place, if we want to improve teaching quality and attain respectable proficiency levels.

II. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The present study attempts to examine male and female attitudes towards the English language and its use in the Saudi context, and their correlation with parents' perception of the importance of English language.

A. Questions of the Study

The present study attempts to answer the following questions.

- 1) What are the general attitudes of foundation year students towards English and English language learning in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia?
- 2) What are the parents' attitudes towards English and how do they value its importance for their children.
- 3) Is there any statistically significant difference in the attitude of Al-Kamel's male and female learners towards English language learning?
- 4) How is English language seen by the Saudi learners?
- 5) Is there any correspondence or disparity between students' attitudes towards English and their parents' perception of the language?

In this regards four hypothesis were tested.

B. Hypothesis

H1: Saudi students and parents have positive attitudes towards English.

H2: Parents have positive attitudes towards English and wish their children to master the global lingua franca.

H3: Female learners have more positive attitudes towards English than male learners.

H4: English is related to professional success in Saudi Arabia

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H5: Parents perception of the English as foreign language is in line with their children attitudes towards the language.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Attitude

Sarnoff defines attitude as "a disposition to react favourably or unfavourably to a class of objects"(cited in Garrett, 2007).According to Gardner and Lambert, integrative orientation to learn a language is attributable to positive attitudes towards the language itself. Such positive attitude is also found to be "a significant correlate to success"(cited in Brown, 2007). According to social psychologists, three components constitute attitudes: the cognitive, the affective, and the behavioral. The cognitive component is a set of beliefs about the attributes of the attitudes' object and its assessment is performed using paper-and-pencil tests. The affective component that includes feelings about object and its assessment is performed using psychological indices. Finally, the behavioral component pertains to the way people react toward the object and its assessment is performed with directly observed behaviors (Salta and Tzougraki, 2004).

B. Related Studies

A considerable amount of research has been conducted to examine students' attitudes towards English. Soku, Simpeh and Osaf-Adu, (2011) performed a study to examine students' attitudes towards the study of English and French in Ghana. The researchers selected a random sample of 130 participants. Out of the 130 students 69 were males and 61 were female. After the study was accomplished the researchers concluded that gender had a considerable effect on learners' attitudes to the study of English. The results revealed that females showed a better attitude to both English and French languages than their male counterparts.

Karahan (2007) examined the relationship between language attitudes towards the English language and its use in Turkish context. The researcher administered a questionnaire to a sample of 190 eighth grade students of a private primary school in Adana, asking them about their attitudes towards the English language and its use in Turkish context. The findings show that Turkish students have overall positive attitudes. Female learners in Karhan's study were also found to have a much more positive attitude towards English than male students. The study also revealed two conflicting issues. Students realize the significance of the English language. However, they do not show a strong tendency towards learning the language. They are also intolerant to Turkish people using English among themselves.

In a relatively similar study, Gajalakshmi (2013) administered a standardized questionnaire to examine Puducherry's high school students' attitudes towards learning English language. A random sample of 600 IX standard students was selected and the findings revealed that there existed a significant difference among Puducherry students based on gender, location of the school, sort of school and sort of management.

In Saudi Arabia, multiple recent studies investigated differences in the students' attitudes towards English. Al

Samadani and Ibnian (2015) attempted to explore Umm Al-Qura University students' attitudes towards learning EFL as well as the factors that influence their attitudes towards learning English. A randomly chosen sample of 112 English major students was chosen to respond to a questionnaire designed to measure the students' attitudes towards English language learning. Some other English major students were also interviewed by the researchers to inquire into the reasons which affect their attitude towards EFL. The findings showed a general positive attitude towards EFL among learners. The results also demonstrated a strong correlation between students' GPAs and their attitudes towards learning English. Students with high GPAs showed more positive attitude towards EFL than low GPA students.

In another study which has strong affinities with the study at hand, Aldosari (2014) examined the entwined effects of attitude, motivation and gender on EFL Learning. The researcher administered a questionnaire to a sample of 25 male and 25female students. The results obtained revealed that In terms of attitude, motivation and tendency towards learning the language, female learners responded more positively than their male counterparts. The researcher admitted that there exist a slight difference between males and females in terms of motivational pattern. On the other hand, he found that their attitudes closely resembled to each other.

Al-Qahtani and Al zumor (2016) believe that parents' attitudes play a significant role in their children education. Therefore, they conducted a research to explore Saudi parents' attitudes towards using English as a medium of instruction (EMI) in private primary schools. The researchers collected both qualitative and quantitative data via a questionnaire that was distributed to a random sample of 68 Saudi parents to explore their attitudes towards using EMI in international private schools. The finding of the study revealed positive parental attitudes towards using EMI. The participants also showed an awareness towards the significance of teaching their children the English language as it is used for communication, trade, business and travel.

IV. METHODOLOGY

The data for this study was collected via a written questionnaire which was administered to both male and female Students in Al- Kamel College. Given that I work and live in Saudi Arabia, I conducted a structured interview with some Saudi parents here. While questionnaires provided quantifiable information about students' attitudes and opinions about English use in the Saudi context, the interview was used to account for parents' perception and value of English language learning for their children. Thus, both quantitative and qualitative measures were used to analyze the data.

A. Participants

A sample for the present study consisted of 58 Saudi male and female students who study English for an intensive one year program in the College of Science and arts in Al- Kamel was selected to respond to the questionnaire. A number of 14 Saudi parents from the same context were also invited to participate in the study. The ages of students ranges between

18 and 22 years old. While the ages of parents ranges between 30 and 53 years old. 23% of the students are from Jeddah, 36 % from Al- Kamel and 41% didn't mention their place of residence.

B. Instrument

The instrument used to collect data is: a questionnaire adopted from Karahan (2007) which was slightly changed to suit the objectives of the study. It comprises 23 items which was administered to students. In addition, a qualitative interview consisted of 10 questions was completed by 14 Saudi parents. The questionnaire employed a 4 point Likert Scale. The responses ranged from (1) "strongly disagree" to (4) "strongly agree". The neutral item was avoided in order to elicit answers. The 23 items of the questionnaire are included in the following constructs: the status of English in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the instrumental value of English, English language use and cultural identity traits, the students' orientation towards English, the value of English and English culture and inconvenience about Saudi speaking English.

The interview questions were stated according to the following points: parents' feelings towards English, their perception on the value of the English language in the context of Saudi Arabia and the parents' attitudes towards the importance of English for their children.

C. Procedure

The questionnaire and the interview questions were initially written in English then translated into Arabic and the reason is that the selected sample may include students who had different levels of English and it could be difficult for some of them to understand the items of the questionnaire. Parents are also selected randomly and received a translated version in Arabic of the interview because different cultural aspects may lead them to understand the interview questions differently. The head of the English language unit and the teachers were contacted in advance and asked for cooperation. The male and female participants were contacted by their teachers to ask for their consent to participate in the study and informed that the purpose of the research is purely academic. Later on, their teachers gave them copies of the questionnaire and asked them to tick their responses. A number of 14 parents were contacted by an administrator who called them to ask for their approval to participate in the study. They were also informed that the purpose of the questionnaire was purely academic and their participation is voluntary. As soon as he got their consent, the researcher emailed them the interview and asked them to provide a full answer for each question.

D. Data analysis

The data concerning the students general attitudes towards English, the status of English in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the instrumental value of English, English language use and the destruction of cultural identity, the students orientation towards English, the substantial value of English and the English culture and the inconvenience about Saudi speaking English were analyzed. The mean scores between males and females were calculated via SPSS software. The results are shown in table 1 and 2, respectively. Parents' answers regarding their feeling towards English language, the

importance of English language learning in general, the benefits their children are given by learning English were analyzed using content analysis.

V. RESULTS

The present study aims at investigating attitudes of Saudi male and female students towards English and its use as well as the extent to which these attitudes are correlated with their parents' opinion about English. The seven sections mentioned above were examined to understand such attitudes.

TABLE I: GENERAL ATTITUDES TOWARDS ENGLISH AND ITS RELATION WITH GENDER

		A mark of an educated person	Increases self-esteem and confidence	Interesting
Male	Mean	2.6000	6.3000	18.2667
	N	30	30	30
Female	Mean	2.8571	5.7857	18.2143
	N	28	28	28
Total	Mean	2.7241	6.0517	18.2414
	N	58	58	58

The table above shows an overall positive attitude towards English among students (2.72). Students found English interesting besides, it contributed greatly in increasing self-esteem and confidence. However, they moderately agreed that English was a mark of education. These results are similar to those reported by Fong Peng Chew (2013), Karahan (2007) and Al Samadani and Ibnian (2015) which found that students have positive attitudes towards learning English, but they did not see it as a mark of an educated person.

With regards to gender difference, contrary to what was expected Al-Kamel College male students were found to have more positive attitudes towards English than their Female counterparts. Means results show that, Males S1= 3.07, S6=3.03 while Females S1= 2.68, S6= 2.86. Although female learners' degree of attitudes towards English as a mark of education is slightly higher, male students were found to have more positive attitudes towards English as being interesting and increases self-esteem and confidence. These results contradict the findings of Aldosari (2014) who found that female students have more positive attitudes towards language learning than males.

Means and standard deviations show that students' attitudes towards the use of English in Saudi Arabia is generally positive either for males or females. The participants favored the frequent use of English as a foreign language in the Saudi context (S1). They strongly agreed that the command of English helps understand expatriates and their cultures. Participants' responses also show that they believe that their English speaking ability raises their self-esteem and brings praise and approbation of others (S5 and S6). Furthermore, both female and male students strongly agreed that the command of English helps them find a good job (S7).

Despite their agreement on the social and instrumental value of English, Students' orientation towards the language is found to be contradictory. The means and standard deviation results indicate that the majority of students opined

that English should be the medium of instruction especially in math and science (S2). However, they have slightly favourable attitudes towards reading magazines and watching

English speaking TV programs (S12 and S19). The participants also disagreed on statement 8, learning English helps drive economic development.

TABLE II: ATTITUDES OF SAUDI STUDENTS IN AL- KAMEL COLLEGE TOWARDS THE USE OF ENGLISH

GENDER		S1	S2	S3	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	S11
Male	Mean	3.07	3.43	2.6	3.27	3.03	3.43	2.8	1.87	2.3	2.37
	N	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30
	Std. Deviation	0.91	0.77	1.19	0.87	0.85	0.67	0.81	0.9	0.79	1.22
	Median	3	4	3	3	3	3.5	3	2	2	2
Female	Mean	2.68	2.89	2.86	2.93	2.86	3.18	2.64	1.71	1.89	1.75
	N	28	28	28	28	28	28	28	28	28	28
	Std. Deviation	0.91	0.88	1.04	0.81	1.04	0.90	0.83	0.81	0.83	0.75
	Median	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	2	2
Total	Mean	2.88	3.17	2.72	3.1	2.95	3.31	2.72	1.79	2.1	2.07
	N	58	58	58	58	58	58	58	58	58	58
	Std. Deviation	0.92	0.86	1.12	0.85	0.94	0.79	0.81	0.85	0.83	1.06
	Median	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2	2	2

GENDER		S12	S14	A15	S17	S18	S19	S20	S22
Male	Mean	3.07	3.43	2.6	3.27	3.03	3.43	2.8	1.87
	N	30	30	30	30	30	30	30	30
	Std. Deviation	0.91	0.77	1.19	0.87	0.85	0.67	0.81	0.9
	Median	3	4	3	3	3	3.5	3	2
Female	Mean	2.68	2.89	2.86	2.93	2.86	3.18	2.64	1.71
	N	28	28	28	28	28	28	28	28
	Std. Deviation	0.91	0.88	1.04	0.81	1.04	0.90	0.83	0.81
	Median	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2
Total	Mean	2.88	3.17	2.72	3.1	2.95	3.31	2.72	1.79
	N	58	58	58	58	58	58	58	58
	Std. Deviation	0.92	0.86	1.12	0.85	0.94	0.79	0.81	0.85
	Median	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	2

S= statement

Regarding gender differences, the result obtained show that the mean scores for males and females are slightly different from each other. Male students have more favourable attitudes towards the use of English than their female counterparts. Boys strongly favor EFL to be used frequently in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia ($M= 3.07$) while girls Mean scores is slightly lower ($M= 2.68$). The same results obtained concerning S2 and S3. Females slightly agree that English should be used as the medium of instruction in the college of science and arts of Al- Kamel ($M= 2.89$) whereas, males strongly agree on the item ($M= 3.43$). Means and standard deviations also show a stronger agreement among male participants on the social and instrumental status of English (S5, S6 and S7) than their female counterparts. On the other hand, females were found to have more tolerant attitudes towards Arabs using English among themselves (S9, S10 and S22). Another important point to note is that both male and female students slightly agreed on the use of external sources to learn English such as watching English speaking TV programs or reading newspaper and magazines in the Arab context.

A. Content Analysis

1) Parents' attitudes towards English in general

The survey sent to parents included six content questions. In the first questions parents were asked about their level in English based on a scale from 0 to 10 (0= not speaking English at all, 10= very proficient in English). In the second question, parents were asked about their general attitudes towards English. The third question asked them whether they found any difference in English language proficiency between their male and female children. The fourth question asked parents about the benefits their children are given by learning English. These questions were developed around three main topics; (1) parents' background; (2) parents' attitudes towards English; and (3) parents' views towards their children's English language learning.

2) Parents' background

The total number of parents who answered the interview questions is 14. The ages of participants range from 28 to 53 years old. Two females and thirteen males participated in the study. Three participants have high school diplomas, five hold a bachelor's degrees, four have earned masters' degree

and three had completed their PHD. The participants' average level of English proficiency is Pre-intermediate. 40% of the parents said that their children spent more than two years studying English.

3) Parents' attitudes towards English

Parents' answer to the second question of the interview revealed positive parental attitudes among Saudis towards learning English. All of them agreed that English language has become very important. Ibrahim said "English language has become the language of business, science and technology". Khalid states that the English language has become crucial in everyday life. He added "English language has become an essential tool for the advancement in science and technology. Bamasood also mentioned that the vast majority of scientific studies are published in English. Mustapha, Ftini and others said that the English language is beautiful and wish that they could speak it fluently and accurately. Therefore, all of them reported that their children should have good command of English.

4) Parents views towards their children's English language learning

One of the interview questions was: what advantages your children might gain from learning English? Most of the survey respondents said that English language is very important for their children. Eight parents agreed that a good command of English language can help their children have better job opportunities in the future. One of the parents said that English has become the global language of computing and technology. He adds "it is one of the main operational languages of most technological devices". Therefore, he asserts that his children's high proficiency level in English can help them develop the 21st century skills and thrive in today's high-tech world. The other participants reported that English is essential for their children to learn and understand new sciences and that the language is important for traveling and communication with overseas people. The results obtained in this areas are supported by Al-Qahtani and Al Zumor (2016) and Hosseinpour, Sherkatolabbasi & Yarahmadi (2015) findings where the parents said that their children English language learning is of great importance, because they realize the significance of the global language that can open a great deal of opportunities for their children.

5) Examining correlation between students' attitudes towards English and their parents' opinions about the language

The research results provide evidence that students' attitudes towards English language and its use in general correlate with their parental view on the importance of learning English. Parents' perceptions of English language as the language of computing strongly agreed with their children views of English language as a facilitating tool to understand and know how to use computers. However, parental conviction that English is the language of science is not in line with their children who were very much in favor of studying science and mathematics in Arabic (The mean and standard deviation results show that the vast majority of students prefer studying science and mathematics in Arabic, Total Mean= 3.17, S2). Parents positive attitudes towards English being the

lingua franca of business and commerce is not also found in line with their children who slightly agree on the importance of English to drive economic growth (Total Mean= 2.72, S8).

VI. DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to investigate AL- Kamel College male and female students' attitudes towards English language and its use in the Saudi context along with its correlation with their parents' view towards the language. The results of this study show that both male and female students have positive attitudes towards English. However, means and standard deviation as they appear in table 2 show the opposite of what was expected. Male students were found to have more positive attitudes towards English than their female counterparts. These results reflect the fact, the more students are exposed to the language and its culture, the more they perceive its importance. In the kingdom of Saudi Arabia, outside the classrooms, male Saudi students are more exposed to the English language whereas females have a limited opportunity to use English outside the classrooms. Birjees (2015) considers the most important factor that decelerates the English language acquisition among Saudi female novices, is the lack of exposure of English language.

The second part of the study dealt with students attitudes towards the use of English language in the Saudi context. The results obtained show that almost all students were tolerant towards Arabs speaking English among themselves. In addition, mainly all participants disagree that the use of English would diminish their cultural identity. They also showed strong awareness of the importance of English in understanding other non- Arabic speaking people and their cultures. Therefore, they strongly wished to speak fluent and accurate English. On the other hand, students did not agree on the use of English in science and mathematics. Furthermore, they did not consider the good command of English language to be crucial for economic growth. This may be explained by the fact that the syllabus designer may have failed to choose the appropriate curriculum for their students (ur Rahman & Alhaisoni, 2013). Indeed syllabi should be designed in accordance with students needs and take into consideration the status of English in the context of Saudi Arabia and worldwide.

VII. CONCLUSION

Generally, parents and their children's attitudes towards English language and its use in the Saudi context were found mildly positive. Students realize the importance of English language to understand expatriates and their cultures, its important role in facilitating the use of technological gadgets and in opening doors into the job market. As opposed to what was expected, male learners in Al-kamil College of Science and Arts were found to have more positive attitudes towards English than female students. Parents were also found to be positive towards English language. They also value English language learning for their children. However, their perception of English and its role as a lingua franca of science, business and technology is not transmitted to their children

who expressed disagreement on the idea that the good command of English could be a powerful economic tool. Therefore, the research suggests that there is a need for more cooperation between teachers and parents to identify areas of knowledge deficiencies, misunderstanding and misconception about the global role of English.

A. Limitation of the Study and Recommendation for Further Study

Although this study has come up with some important findings, it has not investigated other factors affecting students' attitudes towards English such as, students' place of residence, learners' ages, and parents' social status. All the students who responded to the questionnaire were studying an intensive foundation program and students from other departments such as Engineering, Information technology were not invited to participate in the study. In addition, the majority of Saudi parents who participated in the survey were from Jeddah and the researcher couldn't contact parents from other rural contexts whose children studying in Al-Kamel College. Therefore, the results are considered preliminary and a further study might be needed. English for specific purposes (ESP) approach as an effective approach in EFL contexts, Parents children relationship and parents' involvement in their children education should also be examined in relation with learners' proficiency in English.

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