Attrition of Oral Communicative Ability among Saudi EFL Graduates

A Study in Qassim University

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Abstract

After graduation, many Saudi EFL graduates find themselves losing their oral communicative competence, which could be attributed to the period of their English non-use. To explore such a pressing issue, the following study investigates the effect of English non-use on a surveyed sample of Saudi EFL graduates, and how such disuse correlates with the attrition of their English speaking and understanding abilities. The study also sheds light on the most used language maintenance strategies among the subjects. Situated in Qassim University, the study surveyed 101 female and male Saudi EFL graduates majoring in English fields, using a structured questionnaire design. The quantitative results suggest that the longer the period of language disuse, the more likely the attrition of oral communicative abilities of Saudi EFL graduates will occur. They also suggest that EFL Saudi graduates are more likely to lose their understanding abilities of English than they are to lose their speaking abilities. Finally, it was found that Saudi EFL graduates engage in a variety of language maintenance techniques, such as watching movies and conversing in English with both native and non-native speakers. The study urges employers and decision-makers to help Saudi EFL graduates in making the best use of their abilities as soon as they graduate, as they are more likely to be vulnerable to attrition as the years pass.

Keywords: Saudi EFL graduates, second language attrition, oral communicative competence

1. Introduction

The low employment rate of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) graduates is increasingly recognized as a serious concern in Saudi Arabia. One key factor that contributes to the unemployment of Saudi EFL graduates is their oral communicative competence (Alenazi, 2014). However, various complications are also said to impact Saudi EFL graduates' level of speaking proficiency. Taking Qassim University as an example, it seems that EFL students majoring in English there have limited exposure to the language, often confined to their classrooms. Moreover, their contact with the language within the classroom seems to be restricted, due to the authoritarian role of their instructors. Once they are graduates, the issue of non-exposure gets even more concerning, as they will be prone to language loss. Therefore, there is a need to investigate the issue of the attrition of oral communicative competence in relation to language disuse among Saudi EFL graduates.

1.1 Context of the Problem

Language attrition has been discussed widely since the 1930s, with studies such as Cole's (1929). However, in the Saudi context, second language attrition is a relatively recent and novice area of research. Earlier examples include the study of Al-rishi (1994), who examined the attrition of articles and prepositions among Saudi EFL teachers. Additionally, recent studies in the Saudi literature tend to focus on EFL teachers (e.g., Alharthi, 2014, 2015; Alharthi & Al-Hassan, 2016) rather than graduates. Furthermore, the existing literature explores the attrition of written communicative abilities, such as grammar, lexis, or reading comprehension; as opposed to oral communicative abilities, such as speaking. Having said that, very few studies have examined the impact of English disuse on the attrition of oral communicative abilities among EFL graduates in the Saudi context. Thus, the present study tries to fill this research gap.

1.2 Problem of the Study

Saudi EFL graduates find themselves losing their oral communicative ability due to the low employment rate of NNSs (Non-Native Speakers) in Saudi Arabia; an issue that is presumably tied to the English disuse among Saudi EFL graduates.

1.3 Research Questions

The present study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What is the impact of English non-use on Saudi EFL graduates' oral communicative ability?

2. Which aspect of oral English is more prone to attrition among EFL Saudi graduates: speaking or understanding?

3. What are the most used techniques for preventing the attrition of the oral communicative abilities of Saudi EFL graduates?

1.4 Hypotheses of the Study

Based on the previous research questions, the present study seeks to examine the validity of the following hypotheses:

1. There is a statistically significant correlation between the period of English non-use and the attrition of the oral communicative ability of Saudi EFL graduates.

2. There is a statistically significant difference between the attrition of speaking and understanding abilities among Saudi EFL graduates, in favour of understanding-related items.

1.5 Objectives of the Study

The current research aims to:

1. Survey a sample of EFL graduates in Saudi Arabia to correlate their language non-use with the attrition of their oral communicative ability.

2. Investigate the differences in the attrition of oral communicative abilities among Saudi EFL graduates in speaking and understanding English.

3. Identify the most used techniques by Saudi EFL graduates to maintain their English oral communicative competence.

1.6. Significance of the Study

The present study sheds light on an area of investigation that is of international interest among sociolinguists. In addition, the study not only enriches our understanding of the phenomenon of second language attrition among Saudi EFL graduates, but it also extends the discussion about such a phenomenon by exploring the loss of speaking and understanding abilities among EFL Saudi graduates.

2. Literature Review

In this digest, relevant theory and research are presented to provide a conceptual framework for the study.

2.1 Theoretical Background

2.1.1 Language Attrition

Oftentimes when we discuss language use, we are more concerned with language acquisition than language loss. Yet, language attrition in the 'non-pathological' sense has been an object of research since the 1970s (Weltens, 1987). Language attrition is a major area of interest across multiple fields, such as applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics, neurolinguistics, and language teaching (Gurel, 2004). It is defined as the loss or erosion of any linguistic skill (Moorcraft & Gardner, 1987; Oxford, 1982). In addition, language attrition refers to both the temporary and complete loss of certain linguistic skills (Brown, 1994; Kuhberg 1992), as well as the "difficulty in inverting" such skills (Yoshitomi, 1992, p. 298).

2.1.2 Second/Foreign Language Attrition

Language attrition is also associated with the loss of a second or a foreign language (Moorcraft & Gardner, 1987). A large and growing body of literature has investigated second and foreign language attrition (Alharthi, 2012; Bahrick, 1984; Cohen, 1989; de Bot & Weltens, 1995; Lambert & Freed, 1982; Weltens, 1987, Weltens & Grendel, 1993). More specifically, the term second language attrition has been applied to situations where second language (L2) learners lose their linguistic knowledge upon the cessation of their formal education

(Reilly, 1988; de Bot & Weltens, 1995; Kopke & Schmid, 2004).

2.1.3 Factors Related to Second Language Attrition

Research in second language attrition has classified the factors that lead to attrition into two broad categories: internal and external factors (Kopke, 2007). Internal factors include the learner's age, level of proficiency, motivation, and attitude; while external factors consist of the period of disuse, and the level of training in the second language (Alharthi & Al Fraidan, 2016; Yoshitomi, 1992).

Language disuse, or non-use, is one of the most central factors of language loss (Bardovi-Harlig & Stringer, 2010; Gardner, Lalonde, & MacPherson, 1987; Schmid & de Bot, 2004). Consequently, Kopke (2007) maintains that "the issue of language use and contact certainly needs to be investigated further in the context of attrition" (p. 25). As was previously mentioned, EFL learners who have concluded their formal education, could lose their linguistic abilities due to their language non-use (de Bot & Weltens, 1995).

2.1.4 The Attrition of Productive vs. Receptive Skills

Traditionally, it has been argued that productive skills, i.e., speaking and writing, are more prone to language loss than receptive skills, i.e., listening and reading (Bahrick,1984). Furthermore, Yoshitomi (1992) found that lexical and grammatical attrition have a more lasting impact than phonological attrition. Recent evidence suggests that this is also the case in second language attrition (Hansen, 2011; Szupica-Pyrzanowska, 2017).

2.2 Related Studies

2.2.1 Speaking Attrition in the Second/Foreign Language Context

In 1985, Gardner et al. published a paper in which they investigated the attrition of the four basic skills: writing, reading, understanding, and speaking among 12 graduate French learners. Using questionnaires and can-do scales, the researchers studied the factors of language loss and maintenance among the participants. The results indicated a significant loss across the four basic skills, with understanding-related items being more impacted by language non-use than speaking-related items.

Focusing on the age and level proficiency as factors for language attrition, Hansen (1990) studied the attrition of Japanese as a second language by four English-speaking children. The results were prompted by various tasks, such as oral elicitation tasks, and aural comprehension tasks. The research findings suggest that both age and level of proficiency are central factors in language retention. Conversely, Ostovar-Namaghi and Rahmanian (2017) have studied the maintenance strategies used by EFL Iranian learners. The participants have reported the use of various maintenance strategies, such as watching movies, engaging in discussion groups, and using the internet to communicate in English.

2.2.2 Language Attrition in the Saudi Context

As was previously mentioned, research in second language attrition in Saudi Arabia is scarce and mostly focused on lexical and grammatical attrition. For instance, Al-Hazemi (2000) has investigated the lexical attrition of some Saudi military officers using designed tests. He found a great amount of language loss, i.e., the subjects forgot more than 50% of the vocabulary items they have previously acquired; however, there was no significant difference between the subjects' attrition based on the period of their language disuse. On the other hand, Alharthi (2014, 2015) has conducted a series of investigations on the lexical attrition of EFL Saudi students and teachers and concluded that the language non-use does have an impact on the attrition of the lexical knowledge of the participants across his studies.

More recently, Alharthi and Al-Hassan (2016) investigated the attrition of grammar and reading comprehension among Saudi EFL undergraduate students majoring in non-English departments. The results indicated that the loss of grammatical, lexical, and reading comprehension abilities was correlated with language non-use. In addition, Alharbi's (2019) study has examined the phonological attrition among 60 bilingual Saudi postgraduates, through quantitative questionnaires and tests. The period of language non-use was correlated with the degree of attrition, and was found to be significant among the participants.

Overall, these studies emphasize the need for investigating the attrition among EFL Saudi graduates. More specifically, these studies highlight a lack of investigation of the attrition of oral communicative abilities among EFL graduates, pointing out a gap in the literature, which the current study tries to fill.

3. Method

The study was conducted in the form of a survey, with data being gathered via an online questionnaire. The research has a quantitative design, reporting both descriptive and correlational data.

3.1 Participants

The subjects in this study were 66 female and 35 male EFL Saudi graduates at Qassim University. They were majoring in Translation Studies (N=71), English Language and Translation (N=13), Linguistics (N=11), Literature (N=4), and Applied Linguistics (N=2). The mean age of the participants was (24.72), ranging from 20-35 years. Eligibility criteria required the students to have obtained a degree in English majors from Qassim University. Additionally, the subjects' native language has to be Arabic, and their L2 has to be English. The participants were recruited through convenience sampling, which is a form of non-probability sampling according to Kumar (2011).

3.2 Instrument

Based on the research questions, a questionnaire was developed and distributed to all the participants in English. The questionnaire includes close-ended items and can-do scales (refer to the Appendix). The questionnaire was adapted from Gardner et al. (1985) and Włosowicz (2017). It consists of two main sections: the first includes questions about basic demographic and linguistic data including items about language maintenance, whereas the second section includes a can-do scale of 20 items categorized under two domains: English speaking (1-10) and English understanding (11-20).

Several measures were taken to increase the validity of the questionnaire, including gathering relevant data such as the participant characteristics, and ensuring that the instructions of each question are clear (Mackey & Gass, 2005). Additionally, the alpha coefficient for the can-do-scale items is .891, suggesting that the items have a relatively high internal consistency. The survey was also preceded by a cover letter that explains the nature of the study, the reason for choosing the subjects, and the potential disadvantages or advantages they may encounter through their participation. The questionnaire was then administered in the first semester of 2020 via social media and email groups relevant to the population of the study. Email questionnaires are appropriate since they have the advantage of reaching a larger sample, although at the expense of the generalizability of the research (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015).

3.3 Data Analysis

After collecting the can-do-scale results and tabulating the information obtained from the background questionnaire, data were analyzed using SPSS 22 package program. Significant levels were set at $p<0.05$.

4. Results

4.1 The Impact of English Disuse on Saudi EFL Graduates' Oral Communicative Abilities

To answer the first research question, the following hypothesis will be tested: there is a statistically significant correlation between the period of English non-use (measured by years since graduation) and the attrition of the oral communicative ability (measured by the total speaking and understanding can-do-scales scores) among Saudi EFL graduates. Spearman's Correlation Coefficient test was conducted to validate such a hypothesis.

Table 1. Spearman's Correlation Test of Years since Graduation vs. Can-Do Scale Total Score

Spearman's Correlation Coefficient		
Years Since Graduation		Score
	Correlation Coefficient	-0.705*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001
	N	101
Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)		

As can be seen in Table 1, there is a negative correlation between the period of English non-use and the can-do scale total score ($p = 0.001 \leq 0.05$).

4.2 Speaking or Understanding, Which One is More Prone to Attrition among EFL Saudi Graduates?

To answer the second research question, the following hypothesis will be tested: there is a statistically significant difference between the attrition of speaking and understanding abilities among Saudi EFL graduates, in favor of understanding-related items. A Wilcoxon test was administered to measure the differences, if any, between the scores of the speaking and understanding can-do scales.

Table 2. Wilcoxon test of Speaking vs. Understanding Can-Do Scores

		N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Understanding Score	Negative Ranks	53a	39.15	2075.00
Speaking Score	Positive Ranks	22b	35.23	775.00
	Ties	26c		
	Total	101		
Z		-3.463-		
Asymp.Sig. (2-tailed)		0.001		

a. Understanding Score < Speaking Score

b. Understanding Score > Speaking Score

c. Understanding Score = Speaking Score

As can be seen in Table 2, the Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks test indicates that the Understanding-related score (mean rank = 39.15) was higher than the Speaking-related score (mean rank = 35.23), Z = -3.5, p = 0.001. Although the difference is not greatly significant, there is still a difference between speaking and understanding scores in favor of understanding.

4.3 The Techniques Used for Preventing the Attrition of the Oral Communicative Abilities of Saudi EFL Graduates

To answer the third research question which explores the most used techniques for preventing the oral communicative competence attrition of the subjects, the frequencies of the items related to language maintenance strategies were calculated, as follows:
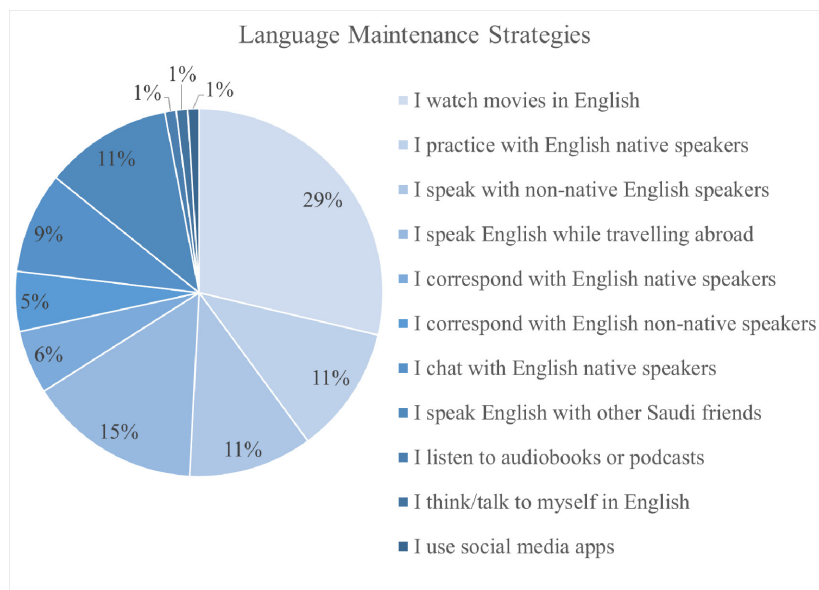

Figure 1. Frequencies of Oral Communicative Competence Maintenance Strategies

As can be seen in Figure 1, the item "I watch movies in English" was the most frequent (29%), followed by "I speak English while travelling abroad (15%). At the same time, some innovative individual strategies were mentioned by some subjects, including "I talk to myself in English" (1%) and "I use social media apps" (1%).

5. Discussion

This study sets out to explore the impact of English non-use on Saudi EFL graduates' oral communicative ability. More specifically, it aims to identify whether speaking or understanding is more vulnerable to attrition among EFL Saudi graduates, and the techniques used to prevent such attrition.

After conducting a Spearman's test to measure the correlation between years since graduation and can-do scale

total scores, the results suggest a negative correlation between the two variables. In other words, the longer the period spent by EFL students after graduation, the more likely they will lose their oral communicative ability. The findings of the current study are consistent with those of Gardner et al. (1987) despite the different contexts, which provides consistency to the results. Similarly, this finding corroborates the findings of many studies in the field of second language attrition (Alharbi, 2019; Alharthi, 2014, 2015; Alharthi & Al-Hassan, 2016; Al-Hazemi, 2000).

To answer the second research question, a Wilcoxon test was administered to measure the differences, if any, between the scores of the speaking and understanding can-do scales. The results indicate a slight difference between speaking and understanding scores in favor of understanding. This means that EFL Saudi graduates are more likely to lose their understanding of English than they are to lose their speaking ability. This finding is in agreement with the findings of Gardner et al. (1987) which showed that understanding-related items are more impacted by language non-use than speaking-related items. However, the findings of the current study do not support some of the previous research (Bahrick,1984; Hansen, 2011; Szupica-Pyrzanowska, 2017). This could be attributed to the controversy surrounding the term "understanding," as the items under such a skill could be considered receptive, yet it is not a fully receptive skill. Therefore, the ambiguity in defining what constitutes 'understanding' might be at play here.

The third question was concerned with examining the most used strategies for second language maintenance. After calculating the frequencies of each strategy, the results indicated that the most used strategies include watching movies and speaking English when traveling abroad; whereas the least used, yet most innovative, methods include talking to one's self and using social media applications. It is encouraging to compare these findings with those of Ostovar-Namaghi and Rahmanian (2017) who found that EFL teachers use a number of maintenance strategies, such as watching movies, and using the internet to communicate in English. This seems to indicate that although the subjects have different educational experience (expert teachers vs. novice graduates), they share the same language maintenance strategies, which are thus assumed to be effective.

6. Conclusion

In this investigation, the aim was to survey EFL graduates at Qassim University to measure the rate of the attrition of their oral communicative competence. Moreover, the study investigated the differences between speaking and understanding in relation to language attrition among the subjects. Lastly, the study reviewed some of the techniques used by the subjects to avoid such attrition. This study shows that there is a relationship between the period of language non-use and the rate of attrition, especially in understanding-related activities. It was also found that Saudi EFL graduates engage in a variety of tried-and-true methods as well as innovative methods to maintain their oral communicative abilities.

Having concluded this research, several limitations to this study need to be acknowledged. First, although the sample size was sufficient for the purpose of the current study, a bigger sample size will lead to more generalizability in the results. Additionally, the scope of this study was limited to Qassim University. These findings are also limited by the use of a cross-sectional design. The project also used a convenience sample that could limit the representativeness of the intended population.

Notwithstanding the research limitations, the study proposes that employers and decision-makers should have an active role in helping Saudi EFL graduates to make the best use of their abilities soon after their graduation, as they are vulnerable to attrition. What is also needed is a cross-national study involving other Saudi universities in different local contexts, to determine whether or not this is an issue of national interest. Further research is also needed to account for the varying factors of attrition, internal or external; other than language non-use. For example, further research regarding the role of L1 would be worthwhile.

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Appendix

The Research Questionnaire

Dear Respected Participants,

The purpose of the study is to investigate the attrition of oral communicative ability among Saudi EFL graduates who have obtained their bachelor's degree from Qassim University. You have been contacted to participate in this study because you fit the research criteria for choosing the subjects of the study.

In this study, you will be asked to complete an electronic survey. The survey should take about seven (7) minutes to complete. Please note that your participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw your participation from this study at any time.

The following survey collects no identifying information of any respondent. All of the responses in the survey will be recorded anonymously. Thus, there are no risks associated with participating in this study.

By completing and submitting this survey, you are indicating your consent to participate in the study. Your participation is truly appreciated.

PART ONE: BIOGRAPHICAL AND LINGUISTIC DATA

- Gender: F__/M__

- Age: _____

- Native language: _____

- Second language: _____

- What was your bachelor major?

□ Literature

□ Linguistics

□ Applied Linguistics

□ Translation Studies

□ Other (please specify) _____

- Year of obtaining your bachelor's degree: _____

- If you graduated less than a year ago, please, indicate the month too: _____

- If you also have a master degree, please, indicate the year and month of obtaining it _____

- What do you do in order to maintain your level of oral proficiency in English? (You can choose more than one answer).

□ I watch movies in English

□ I practice conversation with a native speaker of English

□ I speak English with foreigners who are not native speakers of English

□ I speak English while travelling abroad

□ I correspond with native speakers of English

□ I correspond in English with foreigners who are not native speakers of English

□ I chat with native speakers of English, for example, on Cambly

□ I speak English with other Saudi friends

□ other (please, specify) _____

PART TWO: CAN-DO SCALES

A) Speaking "can-do" items: Please check the boxes that apply to you. I can:

□ Give the current date (month, day, year).

□ Order a simple meal in a restaurant.

□ Ask directions on the street.

□ Buy clothes in a department store.

□ Introduce myself in social situations and use appropriate greetings and leave-taking expressions.

□ Give simple biographical information about myself (place of birth, composition of family, early schooling, etc.).

□ Talk about my favorite hobby at some length, using appropriate vocabulary.

□ Describe my present job, studies or other major life activities accurately and in detail.

□ Tell what I plan to be doing 5 years from now, using appropriate future tense.

□ State and support with examples and reasons a position on a controversial topic (e.g., feminism).

B) Understanding "can-do" items: Please check the boxes that apply to you. I can:

□ Understand very simple statements or questions in English ("Hello," "How are you?," "What is your name?," etc.).

□ In face-to-face conversation, understand native speakers who are speaking slowly and carefully (deliberately adapting their speech to suit me).

□ On the telephone, understand native speakers who are speaking to me slowly and carefully (deliberately adapting their speech to suit me).

□ In face-to-face conversation with a native speaker who is speaking slowly and carefully to me, tell whether the speaker is referring to past, present, or future events.

□ In face-to-face conversation, understand native speakers who are speaking to me as quickly and colloquially as they would to another native speaker.

□ Understand movies without subtitles.

□ Understand news broadcasts on the radio (or online).

□ Understand the words of popular songs on the radio (or online).

□ Understand two native speakers when they are talking rapidly with one another.

□ On the telephone, understand native speakers who are talking as quickly and as colloquially as they would to other native speakers.

You are all set. Thank you so much!

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