

Learner Perceptions of Saudi Arabian EFL College Classroom Environments

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Abstract

Studies in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) have recently become more prominent at universities in Saudi Arabia. This research explores the perspectives of EFL college students in Saudi Arabia on the various classroom settings they experience there. Students' perceptions of EFL college classroom environments in Saudi Arabia. It employs questionnaires and observation techniques for data collection. The questionnaire is structured on the basis of four major research dimensions, including physical, teaching, learning, and motivational dimensions. These are thought to be the most important factors, so the questionnaire is based on them. A sample of 205 male and female students who are currently enrolled in EFL programs has been chosen. According to the findings, both male and female students have similar perceptions of the environments in which they learn EF. Despite this, there are differences that can be seen in certain aspects of the learning dimension. For example, female participants have a higher satisfaction score than male participants do. The learning and motivational dimensions have received lower satisfaction ratings from both parties in comparison to the physical and instructional aspects of the program. Students are not only unhappy with the textbooks that are currently being used, but they also lack interest in the cultural context in which the language is used. The relationship that exists between instructors and pupils was given the highest rating by both sets of respondents. The findings of the study imply that the environment of an EFL classroom should place a greater emphasis on teaching and motivational aspects in order to achieve a higher level of perception on the part of the students.

Keywords: EFL Studies, environmental perspective, classroom ecology, learner perceptions, Saudi Arabian Students

1. Introduction

Recent emphasis in Saudi Arabia has been placed on English language instruction in universities. Diverse efforts have been made to enhance students' proficiency and ability to use English in everyday situations. In addition, efforts have been made to improve the quality of the classroom environment. This is consistent with recent theories on how the classroom environment's ecology can present opportunities and limitations for effective language instruction (Alfares, 2017). Williams and Burden discovered in 1997 that learning at all levels is affected by the classroom environment. At the most fundamental level, the physical and social environments of a classroom have a significant impact on each student's ability to acquire a second language (Bronfenbrenner, 1976). The type of educational system and cultural and national conditions have the greatest impact on the language classroom. In other words, EFL classroom research cannot be limited to applied linguistics due to a number of interrelated factors (Nalliveetil & Alenazi, 2016). Recent years have witnessed a rise in the use of multidisciplinary approaches to broaden the scope of EFL classroom research as well as ecological classroom observations (Nugroho & Atmojo, 2020; Riadil, 2020).

It has become crucial to enhance the classroom environment in order to produce positive outcomes for students. The classroom ecosystem is comprised of the classroom setting, students, and teachers. Although these three elements of the classroom ecosystem are relatively distinct, they are interdependent and interact (Gedamu & Siyawik, 2015). This study examines the conditions of Saudi Arabian EFL college students from four perspectives: physical, teaching, learning, and motivational environments (Ghaith, 2003). The physical environment comprises the classroom's size, equipment, seating arrangement, and lighting. The teaching environment consists of classroom activities, teacher-student relationships, teacher-student interaction, the number of students, modes of presentation, student-centeredness, and instructional strategies (Burden, 2004).

The learning environment encompasses English proficiency, enthusiasm for learning, a textbook section, autonomous learning, and a learning atmosphere (Taguchi, 2008). The motivational environment consists of attitude towards exams and tests, willingness to participate, interest in English, willingness to learn, motivation, study purpose, and target culture (Aljuaid, 2021; Bahous et al., 2011; Fakieh, 2014; Mori & Gobel, 2006; Sakai & Kikuchi, 2009). This study examines the EFL college classroom at one of the most prestigious Saudi Arabian universities. All students at this university are required to enroll in English language courses. Observations of student perceptions of the classroom have been conducted in order to analyze how students perceive the advantages and disadvantages of the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom environment. Also investigated are the criteria for more effective English instruction in Saudi Arabian EFL colleges.

2. Literature

Several studies have been conducted to investigate the students' points of view regarding EFL classrooms. Peng (2015) investigates the feelings and thoughts of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students in the classroom using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The findings highlight the necessity of viewing English classrooms as ecosystems, within which we must consider the English environment as a whole. Peng (2015) found a significant ecosystem is contained within an English classroom. All of the sub-ecosystems—physical, instructional, educational, and motivational—are interdependent on one another and interact with one another. We need to broaden our understanding of the classroom environment from an ecological standpoint in order to create an atmosphere that is conducive to the learning of a foreign language. At the same time, we should place an emphasis on the interaction that occurs between the classroom, the students, and the instructor.

With sufficient exposure is essential for the environment of the classroom. Al-Motairi, (2005). According to Al Asmari (2013), a student's perception of the environment in an English Language Learner (ELF) classroom is extremely important for the development of second language proficiency, particularly in contexts in which English is used as a second language. Multiple studies have shown that understanding the environmental needs of students is an effective method for developing language skills, abilities, and fluency, and leads to various gains in a foreign language, particularly EFL. This has led to a variety of advancements in the field of foreign language education. Al-Issa (2014) A key benefit of the classroom environment for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students is the exposure to sufficient amounts of simple and comprehensible language skills that make learning enjoyable; this exposure leads to various gains in language skills.

It is impossible to create a classroom environment by oneself; rather, it is dependent on collaborative efforts and the learner's perception of several factors Alhawiti (2017), as well as the learning environment, which enables a learner to determine his or her own preferences and pace for learning. The most recent advancements in technology have made it possible to learn in a variety of settings, such as flipped classrooms, online education, and learning management systems. According to Saeed (2021), these developments have given students the opportunity to learn beyond the confines of traditional classrooms, which has given them the opportunity to develop their own sense of autonomy.

In the context of Saudi teaching and learning in schools, teachers were responsible for initiating knowledge and, in some circumstances, spoon-feeding the learners, while the learners learned passively. The students in the classrooms were either given the least concern or were put in the least responsible position for either their success or failure. Al-Qahani (2019). On the other hand, students at universities are expected to take responsibility for their own education and, ultimately, for the success or failure of their academic careers. Students of English as a Foreign Language who enroll in undergraduate programs are presumed to be aware of autonomy and are expected to take full responsibility for their own education (Field et al., 2014). In addition, the researcher notes that the majority of previous research on learner perceptions of EFL college classroom environments has been conducted in either a European or Western context and that very little research has been conducted in the context of Arab EFL learners, specifically in Saudi Arabia. Having discussed the significance of learner perceptions of Saudi Arabian EFL college classroom environments and taking the current situation into account, the present study attempts to answer the following questions:

- (1) What are the perceived satisfactions of Saudi students with the existing physical, teaching, learning, and motivational dimensions in their EFL classroom environments?
- (2) Does there exist any disparities in perceptions of male and female EFL students?

3. Methodology

3.1 Objective

The primary goal of this study is to look into how students at EFL colleges in Saudi Arabia perceive the atmospheres in their classrooms.

3.2 Research Design

A questionnaire was developed to investigate the participants' perceptions of their EFL classroom environments using the four research dimensions of physical, teaching, learning, and motivational factors. These factors were included in the research (Pielstick, 1988; Wu, 2003). Pielstick's (1988) evaluation tool, which acknowledges the physical, social, instructional, and psychological aspects of the learning environment, can be traced back to the development of these dimensions (Peng, 2015). The questionnaire contained 24 statements using the Likert scale, each of which represented one of these four dimensions. There were a total of eight statements that were associated with the teaching dimension, while the physical dimension only contained four statements. The learning and motivational dimensions each had six statements pertaining to them individually. Each statement had a total of five levels: strongly disagree (Level 1), disagree (Level 2), neither agree nor disagree (Level 3), agree (Level 4), and strongly agree (Level 5). The satisfaction of customers was the primary focus of the last stage of data extraction (Levels 4 and 5).

3.3 Data Collection

The research was carried out in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, at a college that specializes in language and translation at one of the universities in Saudi Arabia. The participants of the study consisted of 205 male and female students who were studying English as a foreign language. The sample included people of varying ages, genders, and levels of previous academic experience. Every single one of the participants hailed from a unique region within Saudi Arabia. The sample included students from different study levels, all of whom were taught by instructors who were not native to the country. These students included freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors. There were a total of 565 students enrolled in EFL classes, of which 65 were male and 140 were female. All of the students were enrolled in the English Majors (EM) class, which required them to complete all four fundamental English skills within their first or second year of study. These skills included reading, writing, listening, and speaking. In order to investigate and assess the research question, two different methods of data collection were utilized namely Questionnaire and Observation. The information regarding male and female students was collected in distinct fashions. In addition to gathering data by means of a questionnaire, three classes of EFL students were watched as they were taught. The total amount of time spent observing was fourteen hours. Different teachers were responsible for each of the three classes that were offered. Observing these classes allowed for the collection of data in all four dimensions.

4. Findings and Discussion

In this section, we will discuss the students' perceptions of the EFL classroom environments in terms of four dimensions: physical, teaching, learning, and motivational. These measurements are as follows:

4.1 The Physical Dimension

The table presents the data regarding the classroom's dimensions, seating configuration, available resources, and lighting. These are the four aspects of the physical environment that are being discussed (1). English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students of both genders expressed satisfaction with the lighting in the EFL classroom, as shown in Table (1). 60 percent of female students studying English as a foreign language and 85 percent of male students studying English as a foreign language believe that the teaching equipment is adequate for English classroom instruction. The female students have a much lower level of satisfaction with the equipment than their male counterparts.

However, only fifty percent of students studying English as a foreign language were pleased with the seating arrangements in their classrooms. In response to the statement, "The seating arrangements in my EFL classroom are satisfactory," 45% of students selected the option to "agree," while 30% selected the option to "disagree," and 20% selected the option to "strongly disagree." Only five percent of the students polled gave the response "strongly agree" when asked about their opinion on the seating arrangements that are used in the vast majority of EFL classes in Saudi Arabia. When asked about the statement, "Classroom size is conducive to instructional activities," 85 percent of the students gave a response indicating that they strongly agreed with the statement. While only 1% of students held views contradictory to those expressed in the statement, The students in the English as a Foreign Language classroom environments appeared to be content with the physical dimensions of

the classroom, as revealed by observations of the classroom environments. However, the seating arrangement was not in the best possible configuration.

Table 1. Satisfaction percentage of EFL Students in the Physical Dimension

| Statement | Male | Female |
|---|------|--------|
| My English classroom is airy and has proper light | 91.3 | 93.4 |
| My classroom equipment is updated according to the requirements of modern English language teaching. | 83.6 | 66.5 |
| The size of the classroom is favorable for teaching activities. | 87.1 | 83.2 |
| The seating arrangements in my EFL classroom are satisfactory. | 57.7 | 52.3 |

4.2 The Teaching Dimension

The findings of a survey that asked students to rate their satisfaction with various aspects of their educational setting are presented in Table 2. Table 2 demonstrates that both groups of students are extremely satisfied with all other aspects, with the exception of the teaching methods and presentation styles. Both groups of students have expressed their extreme satisfaction with these other aspects. 47% of male students and 65% of female students in their classes have a favorable opinion of the English instruction that is provided in those classes. 40% of male students and 30% of female students would like to see more chalkboard use. 62% of male students and 53% of female students would like to see more PowerPoint presentations, multimedia devices, and multimedia courseware. Female English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students consistently report higher levels of satisfaction with various aspects of the classroom environment, including student-centeredness and classroom activities, compared to male EFL students.

The aspect of the questionnaire that received the highest number of positive responses was concerned with the relationship that existed between the instructor and the pupil. It is believed by 97 percent of male respondents and 99 percent of female respondents that there is a respectful and friendly relationship between teachers and students. In a similar vein, ninety percent of female students and ninety three percent of male students agree that teachers are patient enough with students. On the other hand, only sixty percent of male students and seventy percent of female students are of the opinion that there is an adequate amount of teacher-student interaction. The vast majority of students have faith that their teachers are able to plan engaging activities for the classroom; specifically, 65 percent of male students and 83 percent of female students hold this belief. Both male and female participants are content with the size of their classes as they are currently configured, despite their individual preferences differing. The participants, on the whole, have a favorable impression of the interactions that take place between the instructors and the students as well as the activities that take place in the classroom. The findings of the observations also suggest that there is a positive teacher-student relationship in EFL classrooms and that students are generally pleased with the teaching method and activities that are being utilized in the classrooms. Teachers use a variety of strategies, including PowerPoint presentations and group projects, in order to keep their students interested and engaged in the classroom.

Table 2. EFL Students in the Learning Dimension

| Statement | Male | Female |
|---|------|--------|
| The teacher and I have a fair, cordial, and harmonious connection. | 97 | 99 |
| My teachers are kind and patient with me. | 93 | 90 |
| I'm happy with the size of the class. | 85 | 77 |
| My teacher is good at planning and coordinating class activities. | 65 | 83 |
| The teacher and I speak with each other frequently. | 60 | 70 |
| I'm happy with how things are being taught right now. | 47 | 65 |
| PPT and multimedia tools should be used by teachers more. | 62 | 53 |
| I like teachers using chalkboard presentations more frequently. | 40 | 35 |

4.3 The Learning Dimension

Table 3 presents the responses of students to a series of questions about their perspectives on various aspects of the educational setting. It is clear from looking at Table 3 that there is a persistent pattern of differences between the male and female participants, with females frequently reporting higher levels of satisfaction. The participants are generally less pleased with the learning component when compared to their satisfaction with the physical and instructional components.

According to the findings, both categories of students are dissatisfied with the textbooks that are currently being used, with the rate of satisfaction for male students falling as low as 27%. Despite this, 51% of male students and 61% of female students agree that the current English textbooks are at the appropriate level of difficulty for their studies. The atmosphere in the classroom does not meet the expectations of either group of students, but particularly the male students. Only 38% of male students report feeling happy and fulfilled with their lives. The percentage of male students who believe that their English skills have improved as a result of classroom activities is 51%, while the percentage of female students who believe this is 65%. It was discovered through the observation of students in EFL classrooms that nearly half of the students were either disinterested in the material or lacked interest in the subject. The content that was presented was laborious and difficult to understand.

Table 3. Satisfaction percentage of EFL Students in the Physical Dimension

| Statement | Male | Female |
|---|------|--------|
| To boost my excitement for learning English, the teacher employs various unique teaching strategies. | 55 | 68 |
| Various classroom activities have significantly increased my ability to use English. | 51 | 65 |
| My English textbooks assist me to improve my level of English proficiency due to their moderate difficulty. | 50.7 | 60.8 |
| The atmosphere of my class is very favorable for learning English. | 38 | 52 |
| The autonomous learning option has become a habit for me and lets me consciously control independent learning. | 44 | 43 |
| English textbooks are up-to-date, consistent with how I learn the language and fulfill my educational needs. | 27 | 52 |

4.4 The Motivational Dimension

The responses of students are compiled in Table 4, which shows how they feel about various aspects of the motivational environment. Students' reactions to the learning component tend to indicate that they are less satisfied with the motivating component than they are with the learning dimension.

Table 4. Satisfaction percentage of EFL Students in the Motivational Dimension

| Statement | Male | Female |
|--|------|--------|
| I'm ready to contribute actively to class activities. | 77 | 83 |
| I want to study English in the classroom. | 74 | 83 |
| I have great interest in English. | 52 | 56 |
| I have a clear understanding of why I am learning English, which gives me a strong sense of motivation to pick up a foreign language. | 49 | 51 |
| I'm internally driven to improve my English. | 47 | 41 |
| Both the target culture and the target language are of interest to me. | 48 | 30 |

The responses of both groups are comparable, with the exception of one question regarding interest in the target culture, to which male students responded with 48% and female students responded with 30%. Other than that, the responses of both groups are the same. According to the findings, neither group of students was interested in learning about the cultural origins of the language; in fact, only thirty percent of the participants who were female expressed any interest in the topic. They have a positive attitude towards the examinations. Students are aware that they are under a great deal of pressure; however, they believe that the pressure of examinations (such as the "CET4", "CET6", "TEM4", "TEM8," and "final exams") motivates them to work even harder on their studies of the English language. They all want to learn English and feel pressured to do so; they want to participate in classroom activities; however, neither the language nor the cultural context of English interests them. They want to participate in classroom activities. It was discovered through observations in English as a Foreign Language classrooms that the students lacked intrinsic motivation.

5. Findings of the Comparison

The findings of the survey indicate that the responses of the two groups share some similarities while also displaying some differences. The similarities suggest that both groups anticipate a similar learning environment in the classroom that is firmly grounded in pedagogical principles and the principles of second-language acquisition (Evertson & Weinstein, 2013). They have expressed a desire to have a significant number of students in each class. In Saudi Arabian EFL classes, male and female students should be treated differently, and there should be different textbooks and materials, as well as different curricula and syllabi, that are consistent with the educational goal of promoting English-language learning among students. Additionally, there should be different textbooks and materials, as well as different curricula and syllabi. As a consequence of this, it is patently obvious that the two groups' perceptions of the constraints that influence the ecological balance of the English language classroom are not congruent with one another (Kourieos & Evripidou, 2013; Sunderland, 1992). These findings were also supported by the findings of the observational research, which revealed a difference in the behavior, attention, and interest of the two groups of participants. We will only be able to improve efficiency in the English classroom and create a more pleasant ecological environment if we remain steadfast in our efforts to remove obstructions (Al-Motairi, 2005).

6. Conclusion

This study investigates the affordances and constraints that students at the most prestigious university in Saudi Arabia perceive to exist in English as a foreign language (EFL) learning environments. (1) According to the findings of this study, common problems center on the methods of presentation utilized by teachers, the seating arrangements utilized, the types of activities utilized, the level of interest shown by students in the culture associated with the English language, and the choice of textbooks. (2) Men and women have similar opinions on seven of the items that received the lowest ratings. (3) The learning of male students is significantly impacted by three major factors, which are the learning environment, the instructional method, and the textbook. In order to improve the overall quality of the classroom experience for the students, it is essential to give appropriate weight to the instructional approach as well as the textbook being used. "Textbook selection" is the most important factor for male EFL students because they do not like using textbooks that have been out of date for a long time. (4) "Target culture" is the most important factor to consider when teaching female students English as a foreign language. The vast majority of them do not demonstrate any level of curiosity regarding the target culture. It would appear that the culture of the language they are trying to learn is not nearly as interesting to them as functional English. According to Montgomery, "freeing English from its association with a particular country and treating it as a skill that anyone can acquire" is one of the most important aspects of promoting English as a language used in the scientific community. English should be regarded as a necessary skill for any academically ambitious researcher, much in the same way that algebra and physics are (Peng, 2015).

The findings highlight the importance of viewing English classrooms, whether they are located in Saudi Arabia or anywhere else in the world, as ecosystems within which the English environment as a whole must be taken into consideration. A large English classroom is analogous to a large ecosystem. Subcultures of motivation, learning, physical activity, and education are all interconnected and mutually influence one another (Qutob, 2018). In order to provide students with an atmosphere that is conducive to the acquisition of foreign languages, it is necessary to broaden our understanding of the environment of the classroom from the point of view of ecology and place an emphasis on the interaction that occurs between the student, the instructor, and the classroom settings as part of the classroom ecosystem. It is necessary to have an ideal learning environment in order for classroom instruction to be successful. "Learning takes place within a variety of contexts that frequently overlap," Burden and Williams wrote in 1997. "Some of these contexts are more conducive than others to the process of cognitive, affective, moral, and social development." Therefore, it is essential for the success of language instruction to have a solid understanding

of the advantages and disadvantages posed by the classroom setting for the various EFL students (Alfares, 2017). The fact that only male and female EFL students were analyzed as part of this study is the primary limitation of the study. EFL students from other major groups need to be included in any future research on this topic.

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