

## Reticence among Jazan University students: A Critical Analysis

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### **Abstract**

For Universities in Saudi Arabia, standards in language learning from the onset have suffered tremendously. Students for the most part have not been able to excel in English language courses largely due to student reticence. At Jazan University, students are no stranger to this predicament. This study focuses on a critical analysis of factors that engender reticence among level 1 preparatory year students at Jazan University, Saudi Arabia. This ushers the question, what are these factors are that engender reticence? The research was conducted by questionnaires and group interviews. There were many salient factors that were of relevance, namely role of teachers, anxiety, lack of motivation, attitudes, curriculum development, culture and classroom environment. A needs analysis was also conducted so as to advance recommendations for educators, administration and policy makers. This study supplies a ranking of these factors as well.

**Key Words:** anxiety, Saudi, reticence, language, learning

## Introduction

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is home to many schools, colleges and Universities. As a state actor in international relations and trade, the need for the English language as a lingua franca has been realized to a large extent in the Kingdom. All Universities offer courses in English for their preparatory year programmes. Elementary to secondary schools also offer courses.

This study will focus on a critical analysis of the factors that produce student reticence amongst preparatory year level 1 Jazan University students in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in a predominantly Arabic Language Context. It ushers the question "What are the factors that engender reticence among level one preparatory year Engineering College students of Jazan University?" The researcher conducted a concise needs analysis so as to put forward recommendations for educators as well as administrators in this area of endeavor. In this original work, I also do a juxtaposition of seven universities with Jazan University in the Kingdom, namely, Tibah, King Saud, King Abdul Aziz, Najran, Effat and Northern Border. There are also references to King Khalid University. I do this to ensure that some of the phenomena related to student reticence are pervasive in the Kingdom.

## Student Reticence

Reticence denotes that students prefer to remain silent in the classroom. There are many factors for this condition such as anxiety, lack of motivation, learning environment, role of teachers and personal attitudes. Confidence is another contributing factor. Many of these factors will be discussed in further detail later in this paper. Williams and Burden stated that behavior of students in second language learning "depends on a complex set of interacting factors, such as motivation, anxiety and personal attitudes ..." (Williams & Burden, 1997, cited in Alhmadi, N., 2014, p. 49) Many preparatory year level 1 Engineering students are faced with the same fate. All of the above factors are omnipresent in many of these students. Furthermore, Arnold also found a connection in different personal attitudes such as motivation and anxiety. Alhmadi (2014) also notes that students in Tibah University lack both knowledge and confidence, especially when speaking English. This will hinder students from performing effectively and may even lower self-confidence levels. My observation in the preparatory year context of Jazan University was essentially exacted by Gardner (2001) in the following passage,

the majority of students studying the English language feel very motivated and anxious in beginning. He explained that when they come to class and the teacher involves them in speaking activities due to their lack of self-confidence. (Gardner, 2001, cited in Alhmadi, N., 2014, p. 49)

Henceforth, one can conclude that the burden of language learning and acquisition can be drawn from personal traits and characteristics of the student. Having noted this, a customizable needs analysis is indispensable. Educators should be aware of them and make careful observations from the onset. Language practitioners should be inquisitive as to why learners are learning English and they should also be duly concerned with students who are privy to reticence. Concerning this matter, Alhmadi (2014) notes that teachers should continue to employ teaching methods and textbooks but not to the neglect of enhancing speaking skills. There are many remedies for student reticence that should be noted here. These procedures should prompt

students who are reticent to have better learning outcomes, especially in terms of oral communication.

According to Khan (2007) cited in Alhmadi (2014), obstacles that confront students are manifold. Among them are pedagogical, personal, psychological, parental, motivational, social, cultural and attitudinal. (Khan, 2007, cited in Alhmadi, N., 2014, p. 46) Rogers (1987) is of the view that such factors become "integrated with student's attitudes to learning" and academics should work with other departments to rectify these roadblocks. (Rogers, 1987, cited in Alhmadi, N., 2014, p. 46) Ezza (2012) noted some of the factors that influence Saudi students' attitudes in universities and colleges. Some of them are social and others can be seen as environmental. The following are some factors stated: anxiety about learning the curriculum, coping with the course text, lack of motivation, peer pressure and negative attitudes towards the university or college. (Ezza, 2012, cited in Alhmadi, N., 2014, p. 49) Students are also forced by attendance policy to attend full days of classes, not only in Jazan University and Tibah University, but across the Kingdom. A new attendance policy was enforced in Tibah University that is not present in Jazan University. Once students attend the first class, they have to attend the rest of the day. Otherwise they are rendered absent for the whole day. This decreases the number of students that attend classes. (Alhmadi, N., 2014, p. 49)

## Method

This study will be held on the new campus of Jazan University. The target group will be conducted with semester 1 level students in the Engineering College of preparatory year. I taught all of these students. Purposive sampling was the method employed instead of convenience sampling. Medical, Dentistry, Pharmacy, Engineering and Arts students hold the best command over English than other faculties i.e. Science, Education and Business Administration. Students holding the best grades enter these colleges. The Engineering college results can be representative of the faculties with exceptional students who can excel with both Medical, Dental and Pharmacy colleges and also have lower grade students to match Science, Education and Business Administration.

### 1. Participants

Seventy students were selected from four level 1 preparatory year groups from the Engineering College between the ages of 18 and 21. All students were fresh graduates from secondary school.

### 2. Data Collection

Each of the seventy students were handed Likert scale questionnaires. A questionnaire "...measures opinions and is probably the single most widely used research type in educational research." (Wiersma, 1995, p. 113). The survey was conducted in English with minimal oral Arabic translations as students were expected to have some command over English. According to Wallace (1998), a pilot project should be conducted with five students. I however chose to follow the University of Sunderland course manual on interviews for ELTM03 and have 10 in each focus group. (Barnett, J. et al., 2005, p. 16) Convenience sampling was employed here by selecting my most astute students. They were asked to supply feedback on how to improve the questionnaire. Categories were then formulated according to background research that I conducted. From the literature reviewed, I came across some common themes related to this

subject-matter such as beliefs and attitudes, motivation, student reticence and curriculum development. This study will supply a ranking of these factors. Thereafter, I asked students from these 7 groups of 10 to engage in group interviews as closed ended questions from the questionnaire were not adequate alone. This method produced higher response rates. Interviews "can reach the parts that other methods cannot reach... allowing a researcher to investigate and prompt things that we cannot observe like interviewee's thoughts, values, prejudices, perceptions, feelings and perspectives." (Al-Harhi, S., 2014, p. 75)

The purpose of this discussion was to encourage students to elaborate on the results of the data collected in the questionnaire. I asked students to speak in English and use Arabic only when necessary. Unstructured interviews were used so that I can probe student's attitudes. Confidentiality of students was strictly observed in the questionnaire and interview phases of this study. Each group interview lasted between 5-10 minutes in duration.

### 3. Limitations of the Study

The study was restricted to the groups that I taught at Jazan University. A larger sample size for this survey may have rendered the results more conclusive. Perhaps these questionnaires and class discussions could have been coupled with personal interviews instead of arranging groups. Some students may not have felt comfortable expressing varying perspectives among their peers, especially in the Saudi context. Furthermore, diversifying the questionnaire to avoid response set should have been observed. Moreover, students from other colleges should have been surveyed. To some extent, this study may have fallen into the domain of convenience sampling in that only Engineering students that I taught were chosen. Albeit the motivation was purposive sampling which the author feels was done successfully for reasons already noted above.

## Results

**Table 1. Factors that contribute to student reticence**

	Attitudes	Anxiety	Beliefs	Classroom Environment	Curriculum	Motivation	Role of Teachers
<b>Strongly Agree</b>	28	41	19	9	33	19	37
<b>Agree</b>	25	12	22	31	16	37	20
<b>Neutral</b>	2	3	8	11	7	10	3
<b>Disagree</b>	8	8	11	10	4	2	8
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	7	6	10	9	10	2	2

**Table 2. Factors that contribute to student reticence (percentage)**

	Attitudes	Anxiety	Beliefs	Classroom Environment	Curriculum	Motivation	Role of Teachers
Strongly Agree	40	31	27	13	47	27	53
Agree	36	50	31	44	23	53	29
Neutral	3	10	12	16	10	14	4
Disagree	11	4	15	14	6	3	11
Strongly Disagree	10	4	14	13	14	3	3

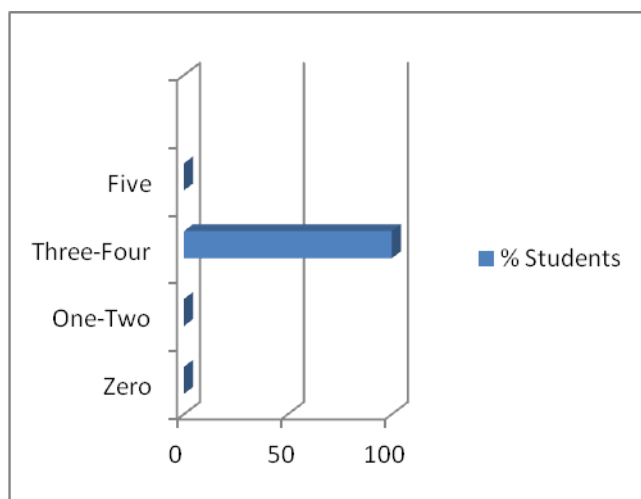


Figure 1. Hours of Instruction per week in middle and secondary schools

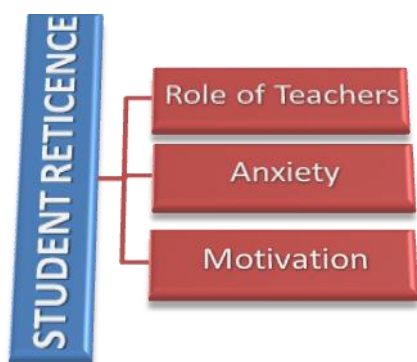


Figure 2. Top 3 factors that provoke reticence

## Discussion

The results of this study corroborate many of the findings from other studies done in the Kingdom. Many of them have been referenced above in the literature review. The statistics formulated for this study were predominantly inferential and in some cases descriptive from nominal data. Categorical variables were employed.

### 1. Role of Teachers

The needs of students can be etched out from the factors that render students in a state of reticence. Figure 3 displays the top 3 factors that induce reticence. Among them, the role of teachers ranked as the number one reason for student reticence. This was somewhat surprising given that in many studies students and not teachers are culpable for reticence. The data from the chart in figure 1.2 showed that 82% of students either strongly agreed or agreed to this sentiment. A nominal 14% either strongly disagreed or disagreed. In general, a teacher's skill set should generally include professionalism, punctuality, learner-focused teaching, knowledge of the context, fervor for teaching, understanding of content and at the very least language proficiency.

From my observations in Jazan University, teachers are assigned by skill, either listening, speaking, reading or writing. Henceforth they teach one skill to 3 or more different groups. Students essentially see each teacher 5 hours per week. This removes some possibility of monotony. In other universities however, there is one teacher assigned to a group for a whole semester. This was referenced above in the literature review. From the group interviews, the other problem that may be common to all Universities in the Kingdom is the representation of non-native teachers. Many of them, particularly in Jazan attempt to import grammar translation methods that do not work in the Saudi context. They may have been educated in English from these methods and hence the reason for its usage. Students generally prefer relevant education to their cultural setting. This was a common concern expressed by students. Albeit, many students were also silent on the matter due to fear of deduction of marks or calling into question the status quo on policy development in the education sector. Another problem that students spoke about was the nature of non-native teachers in fostering a culture of slave-master binary between teachers and students. They felt that this is an obstacle to learning English. They remarked that most native speakers were pragmatic and befriended students so as to make learning a symbiotic relationship. Lessons were customized and made more relevant to their needs and context. They also felt that native speakers were easier to understand from their exposure to Hollywood movies. On this wavelength, the more astute students even argued that they were not teaching them English properly per se. They had many errors in their speech and writing. Personally, I have observed that many non-native teachers in Jazan University make such errors frequently in pronunciation, syntax, grammar and even in spelling. According to Shah et al, they also possess a tendency to

Feel unequipped to handle certain pedagogical and socio-cultural issues which crop up during the learning and teaching process. In this way, the crucial role of socio-cultural context determines the teacher-learner relationship and the success of pedagogical process (Shah, S. et al., 2013, p. 105)

From my observation, an understanding of the socio-linguistic realities of the Gulf and particularly Saudi Arabia is essential for effective teaching. The other factor that prompts some

level of bewilderment among teachers and learners is that fact that students, teachers and textbooks all emanate from different socio-linguistic backgrounds in many cases. The teachers cannot relate to the students and vice versa. Students cannot understand textbooks and teachers may also have problems relaying information from texts that defy their method of teaching. Perhaps there should be more cultural awareness before teaching in the Kingdom. Shah notes that the classroom cannot be separated from the sociocultural context." (Shah, S. et al., 2013, p. 106) Candin and Mercer argue that "Since language teaching is tied to its social context, teaching and learning cannot take place in a classroom which is removed from the experiences and personal engagements outside the classroom." (Candin and Mercer, 2001, cited in Shah, S. et al., 2013, p. 107)

In this light, many students are experiential learners. Customizing lessons on this basis may enable students to gravitate towards language learning. The cultural traits are not part and parcel of the curriculum and nor are they emphasized by educators. According to student expectations, teachers should supply full cooperation on this matter. It should be noted here that students do not fully understand their teacher's cultural attributes either. This dynamic erects barriers in this teacher-student binary. In addition, many teachers in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere are not independent to select course content. They are somewhat confined by the Ministry's policies as well as social conventions. This may impede the creativity of an educator in respect to conducting a lesson.

Furthermore, there was not sufficient attention reserved towards English in their schooling system. English was taught from middle to secondary school for 3-4 hours per week. This is corroborated in figure 2 above. The hours of instruction offered now are unprecedented at all levels. It is also worth noting that the medium of instruction generally was in Arabic. The grammar translation method was also used. Thus, opportunities to learn English essentially went in vain. Furthermore, students also spoke of irregular attendance on the part of many of their English teachers in the schooling system.

On another note, students argued that technology serves their cause to a great extent. However, according to students, many teachers lack diversification in their lessons and resort only to technological aids. In essence, their role as a teacher is veiled by electronic devices.

## **2. Anxiety**

The next factor that affects student reticence is anxiety. 81% shared this viewpoint by either strongly agreeing or agreeing. 8% either strongly disagreed or disagreed. This is an indication that many students are confronted with this problem. From my last 3 years as an educator in Jazan University, many students fear mockery on the part of other students. This prevents them from speaking in class or asking questions that they may have in respect to lessons covered in class. They are in some way or rather traumatized by their inability to excel in English. From the focus groups, I ascertained that many students yearn to learn the language but they feel that their lack of proficiency prompts them to improve in their language skills. In other words, they feel English for them is a lost matter. This evokes them to procrastinate and become tardy. They will make every effort to just barely pass English in levels one and two so that they can meet the minimum requirements for graduation. Some students disagreed with the above sentiments. They felt that communicating in English credits them as educated and an asset to

society. Some students also expressed that they do use English at the mall with clerks or with English instructors at college for practice.

### 3. Motivation

Motivation or the lack of it ranks next in the factors that affect student reticence. Students generally devoid of this factor will undoubtedly exhibit characteristics of reticence. Related to the study, 80% of students either strongly agreed or agreed that students lack motivation. Another 6% either strongly disagreed or disagreed to this data. Therefore, the majority of students feel that students can be privy to reticence due to a lack of motivation. From the focus groups, most students have proven to be either extrinsically motivated or amotivated. They appear extrinsically motivated for graduation and acquiring employment. From the class discussion, students held that the reason for this response was that English is imperative to take part in international markets. Many of them plan to pursue post-graduate degrees abroad ie. Masters Degree. Some of them desire to travel to parts of the West for tourism. Others wanted to understand English used in Hollywood films. In Saudi society, it is those with fluency in English that “possess economic, social, cultural and political power and status” (Talbot et al., 2003, p. 274). Many students who travel abroad for post-graduate education require English as a prerequisite. TOEFL and IELTS require a decent command over English. Some careers may also require interaction on an international stage. English is indispensable for these prospects. Candidates who are less fluent may not pass the interview process. Henceforth, English supplies students with “linguistic capital” (Bourdieu, 1976, 1997; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, cited in Talbot et al., 2003, p. 275) which “like other forms of capital (e.g. cultural, human, economic, political) has exchange value in a market economy” (Talbot et al., 2003, p. 275). From my class interviews, each group acknowledged the need of English for graduation and promotions. Some felt however that they could be successful Engineers without it. This was not a question in my survey so there is no data available on it.

There is ample evidence that English is a language in demand in Jazan and across the Kingdom. From the group interviews, students attested to the fact that institutions that teach English such as *Direct English* and *Wall st.* reach full capacity on a weekly basis.

Some of them were amotivated and just preferred to barely graduate with nominal results, seek employment without upwards mobility and watch English movies with Arabic subtitles. Furthermore, they felt that many teachers were also not motivating them and fulfilling their cause. Many, if not all of these factors are somehow interrelated. Here the role of teachers plays an instrumental role in the motivating students. Perhaps the educator may have the aptitude to even assist students in becoming more intrinsically motivated. Moreover, these students generally end up repeating English multiple times. As Liton (2012) noted the progress has been slow.

Another reason for this is that students are not regular in terms of attendance. Exposure to English lessons for many students is necessary to learn the language. A few astute students may have the talent to understand course content from textbooks alone. The attendance policies instituted may also have some impingement over amotivation among students. Educators are mandated to complete the curriculum with half of the class absent in many cases. One teacher from another Saudi University remarks,



If the student is absent for 18 or 20 hours, he is not supposed to take the exam and repeat the course. However, that's always not the reality. In some cases the student can take the exam and get promoted to the next level even if he exceeds the absence limit. Students take advantage of this leniency (Shah, S. et al., 2013, 116)

In my observation from Jazan University, the attendance policies are rigorously adhered. I am yet to see a deprived student admitted to take part in an examination. However some other Universities may have arbitrary exemptions as noted above. The fact is that many students who only attend enough classes to be eligible to write the exam will not learn properly from course content.

#### 4. Attitudes

Attitudes were the fourth factor that inspired reticence among students. Students generally had positive attitudes towards English as a language. From the class discussion, students felt that cultural hegemony of the United States and other nation-states in the West via popular culture has shaped their views of the language. Competing entertainment industries have not rivaled Hollywood by way of example. Attitudes towards English were largely positive. They were however negative in the context of the classroom as per the questionnaire and follow up interviews. 76% of students strongly agreed or agreed that they possessed negative attitudes towards English. Only 21% strongly disagreed or disagreed to this sentiment. Again one of the contributing factors was the role of teachers. Perhaps this is the reason it was the most detrimental factor for reticence among students. Many of the students have expressed a lack of understanding in accents and fluency that are not on standard with native speakers of English. They were not motivated for sociolinguistic reasons as well. Some of them told me that words such as 'cancel', 'print' and 'okay' are used with their daily Arabic. Therefore they all speak some level of English. Others felt that these words were later integrated into Arabic so they can be factored into the Arabic language. Also from the discussion, participants did not necessarily have any contempt per se with English like some Saudis of the previous generation. English is rarely used in their interaction with their family and friends, in the education system and at work. Furthermore, there was not sufficient attention reserved towards English in their schooling system. Outside of school, they also feel embarrassed communicating in English for fear of stigmatization from members of their communities. In contrast, some students disagreed with the statements above. They felt that communicating in English credits them as educated and an asset in society. Some students also expressed that they do use English at the mall or with English instructors for practice.

#### 5. Curriculum Development

The curriculum was the next area of improvement. In fact, 70% of students strongly agreed or agreed that the curriculum should be related to and cater to needs of students. 20% either strongly disagreed or disagreed. According to the focus groups, some students felt that the curriculum is too intensive for them. They felt that the curriculum should be simplified and taught to allow them to supply basic communication in speaking and writing as well as reading and listening. They do not see the utility for it in their setting other than rare usage in the workplace. Other students would not remark on the matter or elaborate on their selection on the likert scale. Perhaps the reason for this is that the culture or jurisdiction may not welcome reproach in an academic setting or any other context for that matter unless otherwise requested.

Some students were of the view that the success of the curriculum is proportional to the aptitude of the teacher in delivering it. Again a recurring matter resurfaced about the role of teachers.

## 6. Beliefs

Beliefs followed in the next ranking of factors. Some of them shape the way students view English. Other factors such as attitudes and motivation are provoked by it. For example, beliefs can be motivated to be positive by some external factors. It also has a role in the development of attitudes. 58% of students either strongly agreed or agreed that beliefs shaped their understanding of English. 29% strongly disagreed or disagreed to this a factor.

As we saw before, some students had favourable beliefs about English but their sentiments about learning English in the classroom context was not as favourable. Strangely enough, if beliefs are essentially the impetus to motivation and are intertwined with attitudes, there seems to be a discrepancy with the results. They should be complimentary with that of attitudes and motivation. I asked my focus groups about this apparent contradiction. They agreed that it may seem to be the case but not exactly. Their beliefs are essentially ideas inherited or some beliefs that may be present in their communities. Some of these sentiments are that English is a threat to their language and culture. These have been inherited by parentage or even found in the culture.

## 7. Classroom Environment

The last factor that affects student reticence is classroom environment. 57% either strongly agreed or agreed to it. Another 26% either strongly disagreed or disagreed to this view. The classroom discussion should be set up in such way that is conducive to language learning. The seating arrangement relative to the instructor is integral for communication. It is also dependent on the type of lesson conducted. For example, a class discussion with students facing the teacher may not be amenable to this arrangement. Perhaps students seated in a circle may be more fitting. The arrangement should also be adjusted on a weekly basis so as to remove homogeneity from the lessons. Furthermore, infrastructure such as laptops, projectors, speakers, smart boards, white boards should be equipped for the lesson at hand. Jazan University is equipped with state of the art infrastructure. Unfortunately, the maintenance is very poor. In many classes, the equipment malfunctions are common. The switch for air conditioners is located beyond my reach in many of my classes. So the classroom becomes extremely hot. This can be a roadblock to learning.

## Conclusions

A review of my hypothesis is necessary for the conclusion of this study: The aim is to critically analyse the factors that produce student reticence amongst level one Preparatory Year Jazan University students in a predominantly Arabic Language Context.

After analyzing the data from the questionnaire and classroom discussion, the evidence suggested that the factors of reticence among entry level preparatory year students in Jazan University towards English were prevalent.

The results of this study produced a ranking of the factors that provoke student reticence. Among them were role of teachers, anxiety, motivation, attitudes, curriculum development, beliefs and lastly classroom environment.

The survey showcased that all students were taught English in Arabic. Many respondents preferred Arabic over English for this very reason. The poor level of education coupled with weak teaching methods and a curriculum that is not relevant in many cases are obstacles to communicating in English.

### Recommendations

From my needs analysis, the following recommendations were put forward:

- Seminars and Manuals on cultural awareness should be supplied to educators so as to inform them how to adapt to context
- Selection of useful resources according to contextual demands is imperative
- There should be use of libraries, language labs, discussion clubs and field trips arranged during class hours to encourage learner's participation
- Teachers should also not feel threatened in the classroom. Observations should be conducted by an external body that is impartial and qualified. There should be a separate body of trainers who can take on the task of holding seminars for teachers who are in need of improvement. Trainers should conduct one-on-one workshops after observing the context of both students and teachers.
- Teachers should be granted greater autonomy over education of students. Compliance to institutional policies and procedures may be detrimental for these purposes. Henceforth personal initiative and responsibility should be underscored.
- Competence of students should be developed by the implementation of curricula that promote self-regulated learning. When students are grades-oriented, they tend to be more teacher-dependent. They want to satisfy the required course coverage so that they can score amicable results on the examination. These students show no interest in subject matter beyond it.
- The classroom culture should steer away from grades. The focus should be on learning. For example, announcing grades or identifying a student merely by his grades will inevitably breed a culture of amotivation.
- Activities that stimulate critical thinking and decision-making faculties should be emphasized. Examples include games, simulations, role-playing, interaction with peers and experiments.
- An upsurge of teaching standards is necessary in the Kingdom from the seven Universities referenced in this paper. As such, the recruitment process must be tweaked and adjusted so as to supply students with an optimal education.
- Teachers can help students as Al Harthi (2014) notes to develop images and expectations of self- image connected to the language community. Holding a role in this community may supply students with a sense of purpose.
- Language audits are integral to measure the needs of students on a larger scale. Jazan University can employ external agencies for this purpose.

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