

## A Developmental Paradigm for English Language Instruction at Preparatory Year Programs

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### Abstract

Preparatory Year Programs (PYP) at Saudi universities are meant to narrow the gap between high school and tertiary education. Improving English language proficiency and skills among newly admitted university students is also a major objective of these programs. However, PYP programs do not achieve much outside the ordinary to set students on the road to the university. In particular, low-level English language proficiency and poor language skills are still apparent among most PYP students. Hence, this study is an attempt to conceptualize some of the challenges and obstacles faced by both English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers and students at the PYP program at a Saudi university. The study then develops a paradigm that can improve EFL practices and pedagogies within similar PYP programs. A number of 48 EFL teachers within the PYP program participated in the study, and then challenges were categorized into six subcategories relevant to the context of the study. Teacher participants' feedback was formulated into a developmental paradigm. The study used a questionnaire with open-ended questions. Results were analyzed using a qualitative descriptive research method. Findings of the study can be implemented by policymakers and educators within PYP programs.

**Keywords:** developmental paradigm, English as a foreign language, tertiary education in Saudi Arabia, preparatory year

**Cite as:** Al-Shehri, S. (2017) A Developmental Paradigm for English Language Instruction at Preparatory Year Programs. *Arab World English Journal*, 8 .(3)

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol8no3.28>

## Introduction

Preparatory Year Programs (PYP) were established in most Saudi universities in an attempt to prepare students to the university life, and to enhance their opportunity for success. Students' low levels in most subjects - especially English language - after finishing their high school were of concern for most policymakers and educators in Saudi Arabia. PYP programs are also meant to provide students with new opportunities for evaluation, and to guide them to the appropriate discipline based on new standards that differ from the standards they underwent at the end of high school (Al-Otaibi, 2015). The idea of PYP programs at Saudi universities is consistent with similar foundation programs at international universities in terms of the goal, but different in terms of the content. The preparatory year programs at world universities focus primarily on qualifying the student according to the specialization he/she wishes to join (Yednak, 2016), and designing educational programs that suit their abilities (Scaffolding Programs), and help them to study effectively (Arum & Roksa, 2011). For PYP programs at Saudi universities, developing students' skills in English language and subjecting them to scientific English content that is close to the content studied at high school is the main goal.

Kenedy (2015) believes that PYP programs must adopt a holistic approach that requires all members of these programs including students, professors and administrators to cooperate. Kenedy also suggests that the role of academic guidance, students support programs, and libraries should be enhanced. However, PYP programs at Saudi universities lack a clear vision, and suffer from the inadequacy in adopting scientific models or concepts that can inform the design of these programs. Accordingly, English language programs within these PYP programs are not exempted; policymakers and program planners are required to identify the causes of these problems and to address proper solutions.

## Problem of the study

During his work as PYP Academic Director, and after the attendance of many seminars and conferences related to PYP programs at Saudi universities, the researcher noted that there was a discrepancy in the performance of English language programs from one university to another. In addition, the lack of coordination between universities to share their experiences or experiences of leading international institutions in the same field was also noticed. Therefore, there was an urgent need to explore the difficulties and challenges facing such programs, and ways to improve them. English language programs do not follow scientific pedagogies, and do not adopt effective practices in the management and implementation of similar educational programs. This has led to low-proficient learning outcomes.

This study is conducted with English language teachers in the PYP program to explore their perceptions towards these problems, and to improve developmental paradigm that can inform the English language practices, and to meet the expectations of similar PYP programs at Saudi universities.

## Literature review

### An overview on PYP programs at Saudi universities

The experience PYP programs at most Saudi universities is recent, and thus, few studies explored some of the learning/teaching aspects of such programs. Most of these studies focused on the challenges facing these programs, and suggested few practical suggestions. The PYP

program is the first foundation year for some university majors. PYP programs aim at preparing students with academic and linguistic skills that they would need during their tertiary education. Students can then cope with tertiary standards of knowledge and skills, and can choose from a variety of disciplines according to their expectations and abilities, after passing PYP programs and meeting the conditions of disciplines. Aliyan (2013) summarizes the role of PYP programs at Saudi universities as merely bridging the gap between public education and tertiary education. Meanwhile, he highlights the need to review these programs on regular basis, and to consider students' opinions and feedback to ensure the success of such programs.

As reported by Al-Adwani and Al-Abdulkareem (2013), both PYP students and teachers claim that English, as the medium of instruction, is the major challenge in these programs. Moreover, English language instruction at public schools can be described as inadequate; students usually come to the university with poor English language skills. Thus, many students prefer universities or specializations that do not require passing such programs.

Al-Sultan (2012) also believes that universities should not be responsible for reforming public education through the adoption of PYP programs, which are merely private low-performing institutes that are not subject to any specific criteria. Al-Sultan also claims that these programs have contributed to reducing the pressure on the Ministry of Education to reform public education; high school students can easily obtain high GPAs and therefore be admitted to universities through PYP programs. Thus, admission into university does not reflect students' true achievement. What makes it even worse, as Al-Sultan states, is that expectations of students are exaggerated so that they feel initially admission to the required specialization is reachable. Then students who finish PYP programs with low GPAs would be soon directed to other disciplines or even excluded from the university.

In response to Al-Sultan, Al-Maliki (2013) believes that PYP programs play a crucial role representing a 'middle' stage between public education and tertiary education. Students can learn skills and practices of tertiary education, communication and research skills, as well as proficiency in English language. However, the lack of clear standards, Al-Maliki adds, for PYP programs at Saudi universities would not help to achieve their goals. This is inline with Al-Otaibi (2015) who argues that universities, particularly newly established ones, did not take advantage from older universities' experience, which contributed to the lack of clear objective for PYP programs.

Due to the shortage of faculty members at PYP programs, some Saudi universities signed employment contracts with a number of private sector companies. Contracts included partial or full employment for some PYP courses, and providing faculty members particularly native speakers of English. Hence, education quality was of concern for many Saudi educators. Here, Al-Sameti and Al-Seraji (2016) point out that PYP programs have been transformed into "commercial" programs, in which companies hire low-qualified faculty members. University colleges do not directly supervise PYP programs, Al-Sameti and Al-Seraji continue, which contribute to poor academic support programs. In addition, running PYP programs through the private sector at some Saudi universities, as cited by Al-Otaibi (2015), contributed to lower educational outcomes. Eventually, the implementation of successful international experiences

would be even more difficult, Al-Otaibi continues. Thus, PYP programs has to be run and supervised directly by universities, were strict learning and employment standards are applied.

Relevant to lower educational outcomes of PYP programs, Al-Juhani (2012) conducted a study at the University of Princess Noura. The study looked at the reasons underpinning students' failure and/or withdrawal from PYP programs from the perspectives of both students and faculty members. The study concludes that the main reasons behind failure and withdrawal were the direction of students into unwanted specializations based on their low GPAs, and students' incapability to maintain good English language skills after completing the PYP programs.

For the positive side of PYP programs, Al-Anzi (2015) conducted a study to explore the advantages of PYP programs at Saudi universities, and summarized them into the following:

- PYP programs can be considered as significant leap in education, as they help to improve students' basic skills in science, mathematics, computer science and English.
- PYP programs can improve students' job skills, increase their self-confidence and self-esteem, and break the fear towards tertiary education.
- PYP programs can develop self-learning skills, students' independence and communication skills.
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#### **English language programs in PYP at Saudi universities**

English language programs in PYP programs at Saudi universities are not an exception from the overall programs in terms of the lack of vision, poor educational outcomes, poor academic guidance and student support programs, and the reliance on private companies to operate most of these programs. Furthermore, PYP students are not able to acquire English language skills required for their tertiary study at only two semesters; students finish their high school study with poor English language skills. In addition, Al-Otaibi (2015) summarizes other challenges that have an impact on English language programs. Challenges include the lack of qualified faculty members with good experience in English language instruction, particularly for female students, the lack of curricula appropriate for intensive one year English programs. Al-Otaibi (2015) also asserts that English should be the medium of instruction for all PYP courses so that students can develop good command of English language knowledge that help them succeed in their university study. Classrooms, in particular, should be equipped with instructional technologies needed for effective English language instruction, Al-Otaibi suggests.

As far as English proficiency was concerned, Al-Adwani and Al-Abdulkareem (2013) argue that students' lack of proficiency in English after graduating from high school is a major challenge, which contribute to failure for most PYP students. Consequently, students are not able to pursue their tertiary education in a discipline from their choice in case they did not get qualifying GPAs. The researchers also believe that the choice of English as a medium of instruction for PYP programs does not reflect the actual level of the student; the student may achieve well in specific courses that are taught in Arabic, but English language is still a barrier. This is also confirmed by Al-Juhani (2012) who claims that English language programs at PYP programs did not help to improve students' English language skills, as a result of poor English language instruction at public schools.

Al-Asmari (2013) conducted a study with 176 PYP students at Taif University. The study aims at exploring students' attitudes towards the English language program and the native community of English language in general. The multiple roles of students and teachers and the overall impact of the Arabic language on the learning process were also examined by the study. The researcher concluded that the majority of the surveyed students had positive attitudes toward the English language programs, as well as culture of the English language. The study also found that students had positive motivation to learn English, and that they needed real opportunities to practice English, and to minimize the use of Arabic inside the classroom. In addition, the study highlights the need for active learning strategies as well as instructional technologies.

Motivation strategies was the focus of Alshehri's (2013) study from the perspectives of female students and their professors. The study was conducted with 345 female students of PYP programs at three Saudi universities, and with 96 of their professors. It was found that both students and professors realize the importance of English language programs in promoting students' motivation to learn. However, participants' views on how to promote motivation for learning vary between students and professors: professors believe that motivation to learn is enhanced by the learning outcomes, whereas students think that the motivation is enhanced by the learning process itself, including social communication skills and interaction with native speakers of English.

Students' perceptions towards PYP English language programs were investigated by the study of McMullen (2014). Thy study also explores the impact of sex and geographic location variables. A number of 184 male students and 225 female students from three Saudi universities participated in the study. It was found that there were homogeneous positive opinions among students regarding English in the PYP programs; the majority perceive the importance and feasibility of these programs. Yet, 64% of the students at one university believe that dedicating one year only for English instruction is not enough, and 48% of the students at another university believe that this period is relatively enough. Moreover, the majority of surveyed students believe that the teacher is the most important factor in the development of PYP English language programs.

Difficulties and challenges facing PYP students at Taif University were discovered by Tawalbeh (2014). His study was conducted with 326 students and 55 professors. Challenges were categorized into four types: organizational, educational, environmental, and assessment challenges. The study shows that most professors do not attribute the program difficulties and challenges to organizational factors or factors related to the educational environment itself, while students think that challenges are associated with the educational environment. As for English curricula, the majority of professors believe that students' academic and linguistic needs were not taken into consideration in the design of PYP programs.

It is clear from previous studies that discuss the situation of PYP English language programs, that such programs are not able to improve students' language skills, especially in one academic year. It was obvious that English language itself has become the main obstacle for most students who were admitted with poor language proficiency and limited language skills. Students, after completing PYP programs, may not then be admitted to specializations of their own choice, or may not even get a chance to pursue their study at any of the university programs.

Furthermore, it was also noticed in previously reviewed studies that they are basically 'diagnostic'; they did not actually contribute to formulate proper solutions or developmental paradigms for PYP programs. However, it is worth mentioning that PYP programs are not responsible alone for the improvement of the learning outcomes. Generally, English language instruction at public education stages need substantial developmental steps, so that expectations of PYP programs can be met.

### Methodology

This study is an attempt to conceptualize some of the challenges faced by both EFL students and teachers. The study also draws up a paradigm for the development of PYP English language programs at Saudi universities. The study takes into account findings of previous studies discussed so far, as well as perceptions of teacher participants with whom this study was conducted.

### Context of the study

This study was conducted at King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia. Unlike other Saudi universities, King Khalid University has not established an independent deanship for the preparatory year. Alternatively, PYP programs are managed by a department called the "Joint Programs", so that colleges are responsible for their preparatory programs independently. PYP programs at King Khalid University include three tracks: Health Science, Computer Science, and Engineering. As shown in tables (1,2,3), students should study various subjects such as Islamic Culture, Language Skills, English, Mathematics, Physics, and Biology. English is the medium of instruction for all PYP courses except for Islamic Culture and Language Skills.

**Table 1: Courses of Health Science Track**

First Semester	Credit Hours	Second Semester	Credit Hours
Islamic Culture 1	2	General Physics	4
Language Skills	2	Biology	4
English for Health Sciences	6	General Chemistry	2
		Organic Chemistry	3
		Biostatistics	1

**Table 2: Courses of Computer Science Track**

First Semester	Credit Hours	Second Semester	Credit Hours
Islamic Culture 1	2	Islamic Culture 2	2
Introduction to Computer Science	3	Algebra	3
Mathematics	3	Programming	3
English 1	6	English 2	6

**Table 3: Courses of Engineering Track**

First Semester	Credit Hours	Second Semester	Credit Hours
General Chemistry	4	Islamic Culture 1	2
Calculus	3	Algebra	3
Engineering Drawing	3	Computer Science	3
English 1	6	Physics	4
		English 2	6

### **PYP English language program at King Khalid University**

PYP English language program at King Khalid University is run and managed by College of Languages and Translation. Colleges are responsible for all teaching and academic supervision duties, while management of PYP programs acts as a general supervisor; follows-up student affairs and runs exams. In 2013, and like other Saudi universities, the University co-managed the PYP programs along with a number of private companies. Companies were required to provide English language teachers particularly from English speaking countries, since labor regulations in Saudi Arabia only allow universities to hire faculty members with doctorate degrees as a minimum.

English language programs include multiple intensive courses that range between English for Specific Purposes and General English courses. Students of health sciences study English for one semester, whereas other students study English over the two semesters. Touchstone series, issued by Cambridge University Press, are the textbooks used at all PYP English language programs.

### **Methodology and procedure**

This study was conducted using a qualitative descriptive research method. According to Rajab (2003), "the question in qualitative research is an open-ended question, which cares for process and meaning rather than cause and effect" (p. 18). Furthermore, in a qualitative descriptive approach, "there is no pre-selection of study variables, no manipulation of variables, and no prior commitment to any one theoretical view of a target phenomenon" (Lambert & Lambert, 2012, p. 255). This illustrates the reasons underpinning the choice of a qualitative descriptive approach for this study; no pre-existing set of rules nor specific philosophical or epistemological stance are required for either data collection or data analysis. In other words, the researcher aimed at finding clear conclusions that are not affected or derived by personal experience or specific confection about context of the study.

### **Participants of the study**

Participants of the study include all English language teachers in the PYP programs at King Khalid University. The total number of teacher participants is 48; of whom 18 belong to the University, and 30 teachers who have been contracted through the company operating the PYP programs.

English teachers in the PYP programs at King Khalid University hold American, British, Canadian, or South African citizenships, and Asian citizenships such as Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi. Most native teachers are Muslim and of Asian origins. Faculty of Languages and Translation, from one semester to the other, rotates between teachers to work either at the PYP programs or at the College itself. Most of teachers prefer to work at the College since its located at the main campus, and closer to the city of Abha. Few teacher participants hold either masters or doctorate degrees. Most teacher participants hold diplomas degrees in English methodology and teaching such as CELTA and DELTA.

### **Instruments of the study**

This study utilized a questionnaire with open-ended questions. Open-ended questions were meant to enable participants to elaborate clearly and express their opinions and views freely. It was also intended that participants should get the chance to discuss their experiences and provide meaningful suggestions for the learning context. Questions shed light on some of the difficulties faced by the teachers, as cited in a previous study by Al-Shehri (2016), and then teachers were requested to provide solutions. As mentioned, difficulties have been classified into six categories that include English language proficiency, motivation to learn, the use of technology, opportunities of English practice, teachers' qualifications, and students' support programs. Observation of the researcher during his work at the PYP programs was also used to provide some notes on various stages of the data analysis and discussion.

### **Results and discussion**

The aim of this study is to identify difficulties faced by EFL students and teachers of PYP programs at King Khalid University. The study is also an attempt to provide developmental paradigm that can inform the learning design and process for PYP programs. Teacher participants preferred to analyze the dimensions of these difficulties and connect them with context of the study. Next is an overview of difficulties from perspectives of the teachers, followed by a suggested developmental paradigm for PYP English language programs.

#### **English language proficiency**

Most teachers believed that the low-level proficiency at most English language skills among students cannot be attributed to the nature of the program itself, but rather to students' prior knowledge and skills. Some teachers also stated that textbooks used do not match actual levels of students. In addition, speaking and listening skills, unlike reading and writing skills, are not adequately focused by the textbooks, some teachers mentioned. Some teachers also added that students are not exposed to intensive language content through audio/visual materials in the English labs, which would not promote their speaking/listening skills. Besides, teachers also believe that the large class numbers do not allow them to implement active learning strategies, and then students' characteristics and individual differences are difficult to be focused on.

Teachers also suggested that the English program should consider beginning, intermediate, and advanced levels. Hence, all students should undergo replacement tests and be classified accordingly. The integration of all newly enrolled students into a homogenous class does not reflect their actual linguistic levels, one teacher asserted. Another teacher advised that the University required them to complete all topics as scheduled, regardless of students' skill development or achievement.



To improve students' English language proficiency, a number of suggestions are summarized, based on the feedback of teachers and the researcher's observation:

- Visions and objectives of the English language program should be made clear for both students and teachers.
- More time should be allocated for the English language program, other courses should either be delayed to higher levels or even excluded. Thus, students would find more time to learn and practice English.
- Level-based system and replacement tests should be incorporated in the program.
- Class number should not exceed 20 students as a maximum.
- Activities that promote students' participation and self-confidence, such as oral presentations and class discussion, should be incorporated.
- Activities, curricula, and teaching methods that can create real learning situations, should be integrated.
- More assessment options, rather than just mid-term and final exams, should be considered.
- Teachers should be enabled to reflect on their previous teaching experiences, and how to cope with contextual learning standards and students' background.

Similar to this study, Shamim, Abdelhalim, and Hamid (2016) explored the challenges faced by PYP English language students at the University of Taibah, Saudi Arabia. Their study found that students' English language proficiency was generally low. Researchers add that students tended to translate most of the lessons into Arabic, and wasted their time and effort in translation without developing their English language skills. The study also agreed with the current study in the way that the transition from an Arabic medium of instruction to a full English program is the most prominent challenge, which requires comprehensive review of the overall educational policy.

### **The motivation to learn**

Most teacher participants agree that the lack of motivation to learn among most PYP English language students is a concern. Teachers attribute this to the fact that students are unaware about the importance of the English language, and the lack of proper English language qualification among students before joining PYP programs. Other teachers believe that the PYP English language program does not focus on self-learning skills; students mainly rely on the teacher's role. Moreover, although English is the medium of instruction, English is not officially used in the academic announcements or the University's official communication, which does not help to create optimal educational environment for the English language, one teacher claims. Another teacher adds that most students are anxious about failure, or not achieving the required GPA, which negatively affects their motivation to learn. The majority of students, he adds, focus on what possibly helps them to pass the exams and get high GPAs without taking into account the language itself. Teachers' recommendations for improvement of learning motivation can be summarized into the following:

- Students should be motivated to learn the language for the language itself rather than the sake of passing the exams (integrative motivation).

- Other subjects should be reduced or eliminated, so that students can find the time study English and practice it intensively.
- Students should be aware that English is the medium of instruction for the whole program, not just the PYP programs.
- Enthusiasm to learn and competition should be highlighted by current programs.
- Students need to be allowed to make effective presentations that can enhance their self-confidence, and contribute to the development of their speaking and listening language skills.
- Students' feedback is crucial. Students should be able to evaluate the whole English program, and to be enabled to measure the impact of their feedback on the program.
- Buildings with modern facilities and educational technologies should be allocated for the PYP programs. PYP programs should be transferred to the main campus so that students would be more familiarized with the academic atmosphere and different programs and disciplines of the University.

It can be noted that the weakness among English language students does not only affect their motivation to learn English itself, but extends to other subjects studied in English, which necessitates reviewing all PYP programs, dedicating the whole PYP program for English instruction (Shamim, et al., 2016). On the other hand, Springsteen (2014) emphasizes that PYP teachers at Saudi universities need to fully understand how students learn the language, rather than how the language should be taught from teachers' perspectives. This illustrates the need for PYP teachers to maintain better understanding of teaching methods and strategies appropriate for Saudi students, and how to improve their motivation to learn. This is in line with Liton's (2016) statement that the PYP English curriculum at Saudi universities must reflect the prevailing local culture norms in order to improve students' motivation to learn English.

### **The use of educational technologies**

Most teacher participants agree that there is a shortage of modern educational technologies at PYP classrooms. English language labs, for instance, suffer from poor maintenance and frequent internet disconnections, as teachers state. One teacher also advises that Blackboard, the Learning Management System provided by the University, does not help to improve English instruction; training or professional support before and during the semester are not available. The teacher continues that courses do not cope with the nature of Blackboard, and he recommends the integration of other textbook series that contain online activities or cope with technology. Likewise, teachers suggest that technological tools, that represent students' daily life, and with which students are already familiar including mobile phone applications and social networks, should be implemented. This is consistent with the study of Al-Otaibi (2015) in terms of the need to use non-traditional e-learning environments that stimulates creativity and innovation. Hence, the shallowness of online content and the lack of interactive activities may not contribute to appropriate implementation of available learning technologies. At this point, Atim and Al-Jeriwi (2015) propos an electronic interactive bag for each course similar to what has been applied at King Saud University; bags contain training and activities sessions, presentations, tests, indicators of performance, interactive group discussions, and audio/visual sessions designed for students with special needs.

For better implementation of instructional technology, some teachers advise that proper incentives provided by the University, either financial or otherwise, can inspire the teachers to use learning technologies in an appropriate way.

### **Lack of opportunities for students to practice English outside the classroom.**

Most responses of teacher participants indicate that the lack of meaningful opportunities for students to practice English outside the classroom does not enable students to acquire communication skills. Teachers also find that as a common challenge in most EFL learning contexts. Therefore, available contextual solutions that can inform English language practice must be found, as explained below. Some teachers also feel that most students are anxious about making mistakes while speaking with each other, which negatively affect their desire to use English in informal occasions. In addition, the lack of government or private facilities, where the language of communication is English, is also a barrier to effective language practice. Teachers suggest that:

- 1- Student's clubs or cafes for English language programs should be established. Students can then practice English informally and at no specific times.
- 2- Electronic communication channels between students outside the classroom should be created. Students can find the chance to practice English with each other and with native speakers of English. Teachers' supervision, participation, and guidance are needed in these online environments.
- 3- Better student-student and teacher-student relationships should be maintained. Students can then practice the language in a positive and friendly learning environment.
- 4-

The increase of classes allocated for the PYP English program, as well as the reduction or postponement of other subjects, may help students to develop their language skills. In this respect, it should be noted that the PYP programs at King Fahd University of Petroleum and Minerals will include a summer English program prior to the main program. This summer program aims at developing students' English language skills, and thus helping them to successfully pass the other preparatory programs (Al-Assaf, 2015). Thanks to technology, students at such programs can find the opportunity to directly communicate with each other, with their teachers, and with native speakers of English (Alshehri, 2013). This is consistent with the study of Kadwa (2012), which found that Saudi PYP students have positive attitudes towards the use of online communication tools for learning English after classes, and with users and online communities outside the learning group.

### **Teachers' qualification**

Teachers come from different cultural backgrounds and hold different qualifications from different institutions. Moreover, all teachers are not Saudi citizens and are not fully aware of norms of the local context nor psychology of students. Before collecting data about teaching performance of the teachers, it was anticipated that no accurate answers will be obtained, since teachers will be evaluating their own experience; teachers' evaluation of their own teaching performance is self-explanatory. However, teachers' feedback illustrates that their qualification generally does not meet with the teaching standards of the PYP programs. Feedback also highlights the need for hiring more qualified teachers with better experience, better professional

training, and better knowledge of the learning context. Hence, suggestions that may contribute to improving teaching quality include:

- 1- Teachers should be multicultural and context-aware; there is a need to hire Arabic teachers, or teachers who are familiar with Arabic and the local culture.
- 2- Employment standards of the PYP programs should be adjusted. The program needs to hire teachers with excellent learning and teaching experience, and with higher qualification in the field of English language instruction.
- 3- New teachers should undergo intensive training programs on available educational technologies. They also need to be familiar with the teaching context and students before starting their career at the PYP program.

It should be noted that, through the researcher's work in the PYP program, the contracting committee did not have the opportunity to conduct face-to-face interviews with teachers before they start teaching at the program. Teachers were selected based on the examination of their CVs and their own recorded tracks. The committee sometimes had to contact the candidate through Skype for more information about his qualification, and to ensure that his pronunciation was correct. However, some teachers have been dismissed shortly after starting their work due to their poor teaching performance. In order to solve this, Al-Anzi (2015) asserts that we need to consider strict employment standards similar to what is being applied at university colleges; employment committees usually conduct face-to-face interviews with candidates, and candidates also undergo professional tests. However, the avoidance of the private sector as a provider of teachers, and the reliance on self-management strategies are highly recommended (Al-Yubi & Nu'man, 2015). In addition, PYP programs should make their standards and visions very clear for teachers, and teachers should be informed of what needs to be achieved through these programs, and how their performance will be assessed accordingly (Rice, 2015).

### **Academic guidance and student support programs**

Some teachers believe that academic guidance and student support practices at the PYP programs need to be reviewed on regular basis. Teachers indicate that current student support programs only focus on the distribution and processing of students' timetables, and processing students' withdrawal requests or sick excuses. Additionally, academic guidance practices were merely individual efforts by some of the teachers or PYP administrators, one teacher claims. Thus, a number of suggestions include:

1. The preparation of a comprehensive orientation program for all newly admitted students, so that students will be aware of their educational rights and duties.
2. The allocation of a qualified academic advisor for each group of the students. Advisors are expected to provide the necessary advice to students, and to activate communication channels between students and the academic staff.
3. The implementation of remedial programs to improve students' language and communication skills, and to strengthen their tendencies and trends towards the appropriate specialization.
4. The role that colleges should play in organizing workshops that cover different disciplines, so that students would recognize requirements and description of each discipline.

For the importance of academic guidance and student support programs, the First National Conference for the Preparatory Year in Saudi Universities, held at the University of Dammam in 2015, concluded that students' support programs should: (a) improve students' awareness of the philosophy of PYP programs, (b) improve the use of instructional technology, (c) and benefit from the social media to communicate effectively with students. Besides, Alseweed and Daif-Allah (2012) assert that PYP programs should improve their orientation programs to familiarize students with skills and regulations of the university.

### **A Developmental Paradigm**

After results of the current study are reviewed and discussed, a developmental paradigm is suggested to inform the design and improve the practices of PYP English language programs at Saudi universities. The paradigm consists of two main structures: pedagogical and organizational. Below is a description of what each structure should entail.

#### ***Pedagogy***

The program must ensure the following are maintained:

- Intensive English language programs should be considered. Meaningful methodologies and learning practices need to be designed into a two-semester program. Along with the basic skills of English language instruction, communication and university academic skills needed at students' future disciplines also need to be focused on. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) concepts and pedagogies should also be maintained through intensive implementation of communicative learning strategies.
- Non-English subjects may be eliminated or postponed to higher levels. Eliminating current courses and replacing them with other subjects that support English language acquisition and practice.
- English courses and activities need to be linked to students' contextual environments; students need to feel the connection between English formal instruction and their daily life outside the campus. Students' online spaces such as social networking sites and mobile applications also need to be part of their learning process. Additionally, students should be provided with meaningful opportunities to practice English in informal ways.
- Classrooms and English labs should be provided with smart audio-visual aids. Students also need to be connected with online learning communities to increase their language practice.
- The number of students in each class should cope with learning activities in question, in a way that allows for more interactive and cooperative learning practices.
- English clubs with latest learning resources and technologies should be established. A Learning-Through-Entertainment approach is a priority at these clubs.
- English language programs need to be redesigned for all levels from beginner to advanced. Programs also need to be classified into general and academic taking into account English for Health Sciences, English for Computer Science, and English for Engineering.
- Self-learning and lifelong learning skills should be enhanced by PYP English language programs. Students should realize that English is needed throughout their university study and their future career as well.

### **Organization**

The program must ensure the following are maintained:

- Clear vision, message, and objectives are essential for all PYP programs. Programs also need to meet the global standards of similar foundation year programs, and to adopt practical framework that takes into account local contexts, students and teachers' feedback on the practice, and professional development programs.
- English language programs should be run by dedicated departments that are academically supervised by the university or independent deanships. Colleges should have partial organizational roles in the management of PYP programs.
- Students' support and academic guidance programs along with effective orientation programs should be maintain by PYP programs.
- The private sector does not perform well at most PYP programs. Hence, teaching staff and employees must be provided through the university under strict and selective conditions. Teachers with high qualifications and better experience should be considered.
- PYP programs must promote students' belonging and loyalty to the university. Students can then be more engaged to learning activities. In addition, students' must reflect on the program and experience their own contribution to the learning design.
- More research studies should be conducted at different PYP programs. Performance and practices of the programs should be periodically investigated and reviewed on scientific bases. Students, teachers, and employees should be collaboratively encouraged to participate in these studies, and shared with results and recommendations.
- Detailed evaluation and assessment processes should be carried out. This should include study plans, courses, methodologies, teaching staff, students' support programs, and above all, outcomes of the PYP program.
- Teachers should undergo intensive professional development programs. Professional development programs need to consider the learning context, local culture, teaching methodologies and pedagogies, instructional technologies, and students' learning and thinking pattern.

### **Conclusion**

This study investigated the challenges and obstacles faced by both EFL teachers and students at the PYP program at a Saudi tertiary context. Based on analysis of teachers' feedback, challenges were categorized into subcategories evident in students' language proficiency, motivation to learn, use of instructional technologies, opportunities of language practice, teachers' qualification, and student support programs. As a solution, the study developed a developmental paradigm that can improve EFL practices and pedagogies at PYP programs, and inform the overall learning design.

The present study was conducted with male English language teachers of the PYP program. Future research should consider both male and female students, female teachers as well. Experiences of PYP students will inform any future research work, and provide more results that reflect the educational and pedagogical prospects of the English language programs. However, research tools should be designed in a way that cope with the limited skills and experiences of PYP students. Students at preparatory year programs, as Tawalbeh (2014)

suggests, may lack the knowledge and experience necessary to provide accurate data in accordance with scientific research standards.

It is also suggested that the impact of the surrounding context and local culture are explored in any future work. Contextual factors could successfully draw up features of PYP programs, and to explain how environmental and cultural norms can be implemented. EFL students, PYP students in particular, need to be engaged well with language learning practices, and to be provided with meaningful opportunities to practice the language.

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