

## **Involve Me, and I Learn: Preparing English Language Intensive Program Students to the Demands of their Academic Programs**

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### **Abstract**

This study aims to identify Saudi English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' perspectives towards using the English language in their studies. The study explores students self-confident and its association with students' actual performance in English course in their different academic programs. A multimodal methodology was used to fulfill the research purpose and answer the research questions. A 25-item survey questionnaire and final examination grades were used to collect data. Two hundred forty-one students agreed to participate in the study. They completed the questionnaire and agreed to release their final grades to be a part of the collected data. The data were coded and analyzed by SPSS software. The findings indicated a significant difference in students' performance in English courses between participants' academic programs on the one hand. Students' self-confidence in their English language skills, on the other hand, was not significantly different between participants' academic programs. Data analysis also revealed no correlational relationship between students' self-confidence level and their language skills and their performance. The study raises more questions about other vital factors such as course instructors' views of the materials, faculty members of the target department, family belief in the usefulness of the program, protentional employers. These views and beliefs shape the student's preparation process and therefore, should be explored further.

**Keywords:** English language intensive program, English skills, language proficiency, performance, self-confidence

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## Introduction

The government of Saudi Arabia introduced its ambitious 2030 vision to create a healthy, thriving generation within a stable country. The vision consists of three main pillars; a vibrant society; a thriving economy, and an ambitious nation. Education is a vital element to convey the country into the future as introduced in the first and second pillars, vibrant society, and a thriving economy. The vision seeks to reshape the educational system to establish and empowering health and social care systems. That will calibrate to build a vibrant society. Advancing educational system is the second component of the vision to provide university and vocational institutes graduates with the necessary academic discipline knowledge and soft skills (linguistics competence, and communication skills) to obtain rewarding opportunities. That is "the skills and competencies of our students are one of the most important and cherished assets" (Vision 2030, 2016a, p.36).

The Saudi government held focused sessions for identifying national priorities, challenges facing public developmental and economic sectors (Vision 2030, 2016a). The Saudi government developed the National Transformation Program 2020 (NTP 2020) to track the progress towards achieving its short-term goals and concurrently fulfill the 2030 vision aims at a yearly basis (Vision 2030, 2016b). The Ministry of Education identified six threats facing its work and commenced eight immediate objectives for 2020 aligned with the Vision 2030 goals. Enhancing the educational system's capability to address development requirements and labor market demands are amongst these eight strategic objectives of the Ministry of Education.

Most of Saudi universities graduates attributed their lack of employment to low English proficiency and lack of communication skills. Recent IELTS and TOEFL standardized exam results revealed the weak performance of Saudi graduates in all professions. The private sector companies reported low English Proficiency levels and limitations in their employees' abilities to exchange information, read instructions, and to resolve conflicts in the workplace context (Kermode, 2017).

Research demonstrates a growing need for graduates with higher English skills (Benzie, 2010; Burdett & Crossman, 2010; Thomas, Piquette & McMaster, 2016). This study is an exploratory in nature, aiming to prepare students to meet the demands of their academic programs. It seeks to identify the extent to which Saudi EFL first-year students are self-confident in their English skills. And how it is enhancing their actual performance in the English course in their various academic programs.

## Related studies

The recent decade witnessed surge research exploring using English as a medium of instruction in Non-English instruction universities in Europe and Asia (Macaro, Curle, Pun & Dearden, 2018). Researchers examined the advantages of using English at higher education to achieve Saudi government goals in terms of globalization and internationalization. Also, they investigated students and faculty members perceptions and attitude toward the implementation of English in their institutes. Most of the existing research focused on students' and lecturers' general attitudes toward English courses (Jensen and Thøgersen, 2011); effectiveness of English courses in improving students' English proficiency (Lei & Hu, 2014; Wilkinson, 2013) and the difficulties posed to students and lecturers in learning and teaching courses in English and their respective

coping strategies (Evans & Morrison, 2011). The findings of these studies revealed inconsistency between EFL students in different geographical locations and even within the same country.

For instance, Majid et al. (2011) found that approximately 53% of Malaysian students referred to their lack of interaction with lecturers to their English Low proficiency level. The findings of Beckett and Li (2012) study also indicated no in-depth communication between students and their professors for one side and between the students from the other side in a Chinese university. Beckett and Li attribute that to students' low proficiency level. Another research conducted in the Japanese EFL context revealed the basic English proficiency level among university-level students in Japan. Cho's (2012) study disclosed that Korean students complained of minimal listening skills with some claiming to understand only 60% of their lectures. Another survey by Kang and Park's (2005) examined a large-scale Korean students' sample with heterogenous proficiency levels. The findings indicated that English language proficiency level impact on students' ability to communicate with their peers and instructors; to participate in class discussion and inevitably affects their comprehension of third lectures.

A study conducted in higher education in the Basque region of Spain indicted institutes policy to prevent some students from participating in class discussion. The researchers impute that to students' anxiety "dare" to speak up in English in classes (Doiz, Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2011). These findings congruence with the results of Dalton-Puffer, Huttner, Schindelegger & Smit, (2009) in their study of vocational engineering classes in Austria, which revealed that some students "felt intimidated by having to use English" (p.24).

At the Arabian Gulf region, few studies examined students' perception towards using English at the university level. Saudi EFL student revealed positive attitudes towards using English in the classroom (Shamim, Abdelhalim, & Hamid, 2016). However, the researchers acknowledged several challenges facing Saudi EFL students, mainly due to learners' low proficiency in English and the decent size of the sample. Qatari students also, believed they were learning considerably less well than if they had been studying through Arabic (Ellili-Cherif & Alkhateeb, 2015).

On the other hand, some researchers have identified students' positive attitudes toward English programs, showing that courses would effectively help in improving their English proficiency (Belhiah & Elhami, 2015). Also, the findings of two studies at the Asian EFL context revealed similar results.

Most of the students in Taiwanese universities perceived an improvement in their English proficiency. This improvement was in receptive skills such as listening but less so in writing ability (Yeh, 2014). A finding similarly reported in Hong Kong (Evans & Morrison 2011) where students expressed confidence and joy via making greater use English.

The review of pertain literature disclosed controversial conclusions towards using English in a university preparatory program from the students' perspective. The findings of these studies encourage the researchers to examine the current phenomena in Saudi EFL context by targeting a large sample of students at their preparatory year in a Saudi university.

## Research Questions

This article explores students' perspectives towards using the English language in their studies. The studies aim to answer the following questions:

1. How confident are Saudi EFL students in their English language skills?
2. Are there any significant differences in confidence between disciplinary fields?
3. Does Saudi EFL students' confidence in their English skills correlate with their performance?

## Research Design

### Study Context

The pivotal course of this study was the English Language for science and engineering. The course was available to 2017-2018 admitted students (freshman) based on their majors' study track (i.e., Engineering, Computer science, science, medicine, applied medical studies, English, and Business). Students are expected to: (a) frequently produce and use expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance; (b) Communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters ; (c) Describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and issues in areas of urgent need; (d) Write short comprehensive paragraphs on general topics, and (e) recognize the formation and meaning of terminology in their academic field (science, computer science, engineering, business, medicine and medical science). The courses were taught for fifteen weeks and 12 teaching hours per week. The students took two-term exams out of 20 during the seventh and eleventh week and, two quizzes out of 10 during the fifth and tenth weeks. Listening and speaking term exams out of 10 are assigned on the thirteens and fourteenth weeks. The remaining ten marks are for assignments and classroom participation. The final exam contains oral exams out of 15 and written exam out of 35. The textbooks used in teaching are presented in Table1.

Table 1. *The English Language course teaching hours and textbooks*

Course	Teaching hours/week	textbook
ENG 101	8 hours/week	New Headway Plus Special Edition Student's Book. Elementary
ENG 101	4 hours/week	New Headway Plus Special Edition Workbook. Elementary

## Participants

The researchers contacted the students' academic advisors to encourage the students to participate — more than 3500 students registered in these three courses on the main campus and the three surrounding branches. Invitation emails to participate in the study sent to the students. They were asked to complete an online questionnaire. The students were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary. The email included a summary of the study goals, and the collected information will be confidential and used for the research purpose. Three hundred students answered the questionnaire. The participants were young adults aged between 17 and 19 from various socio-economic backgrounds and different academic programs (Table 2). All the participants had studied English as a foreign language in a public school for six years. Thirty-two students reported they had been studying English abroad, and therefore their answers were excluded from the data coding and analysis. Two hundred forty-one complete questionnaires were

included in the data coding and analysis process. Incomplete questionnaires or those in which the same answer had been chosen for every question, were excluded (54 in total).

Table 2. *Participants' gender and Academic number*

Participant's Gender	Participant's total number	Academic major
Female	61	Science
Male	24	Engineering
Female	28	Applied Medical studies
Male	27	Medicine
Female	49	Business
Male	35	Computer Science
Female	138	224
Male	86	

### Data collection Instruments and procedures

A multimodal methodology was used to fulfill the research purpose and answer the research questions. These data collection methods included a survey questionnaire and English course final examination.

*Survey questionnaire.* This research used an online survey for data collection. A 25-items questionnaire, including the Foreign Language Self-confidence Scale (FLSES) developed by Hassan (2001) was used (See the Appendix). The survey explores students' perceptions of their English language proficiency level (linguistic competence); and communication skills (intercultural competence). The survey embraces three parts. The first parts consist of five questions aiming to solicit students' demographic information (age, gender, academic major, years of studying English in Saudi Arabia and abroad) and permission to collect their English language course final grade. The second part includes self-assessment of confidence in (a) their English skills level, and (b) their communication skills. The third part of the questionnaire was an invitation for the students to participate in a semi-structured interview. The call indicated that their participation is optional, and their identities will always be anonymous, and the collected data will be used for research purposes.

The questionnaire was piloted on a small sample similar to the target population. The analysis process revealed that the questionnaire is Cronbach's alpha coefficient scores of 0.74. The results indicated that all the scales denoted good internal consistency values about the items in the survey instrument in line with the generally accepted standards of social science; that is, above 0.60. The online survey questionnaire was conducted at the end of the 2017-2018 academic year.

*English course final examination grades.* The participant's results out of 100 were provided by the English program at the end of the 2017-2018 academic year.

### Results

The results of the research questions are discussed below in interpreting the students' level of confidence in their English skills and instigate differences in their confidence levels according to

their academic majors. Moreover, finally, students' confidence level influence on their performance in the English course.

### ***Q1. How confident are students in their English skills?***

The descriptive statistics of the students' confidence revealed slightly positive level with a mean score of the participants was (3.15), and participants' standard deviation was (0.075) Table 3. The analysis reveals that more than half of the student's confidence in their English language skills (52.5%). The remaining students have either neutral confidence in their abilities (24%) or low confidence in their English language skills (22.5%).

Table 3. *Confidence level descriptive statistics disruption*

Variable	N	MEAN	SD	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Confidence	241	3.15	0.075	High (4-5)	128	52.5%
				Neutral (3)	61	25%
				Low (1-2)	55	22.5%

Further analysis of the data is conducted to reveal the students' confidence level within their academic field (Figure 1). The findings revealed that science and business students have a high confidence level in their English language skills (59.5% and 55.2%), respectively. Applied medical, and medical students, on the contrary, have low confidence in their English skills among the other academic majors (0.48%, 0.42%) respectively. A noticeable percentage of students are neutral as in business, science, and medicine, ranging from 33% in medicine to 17.4% in business.

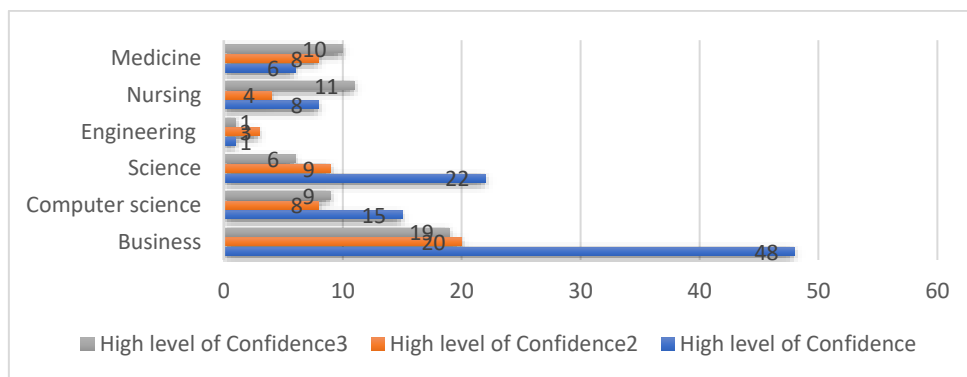


Figure 1. *Students' confidence level in their language skills based on their Academic majors*

### ***Q2. Are there any significant differences in students' confidence and performance between the Academic programs?***

The descriptive statistics of the students' performance in English course revealed that most of the students (191 students) passed their English courses (79.9%). More than half of the students' sample (53%) lied in the 60s and 70s range of marks (128 students). The analysis also reveals that



the remaining students (65 students) have performed very well in their courses getting *As* and *Bs* (27 and 38 students, respectively). Almost one-five of the sample failed, Table 4.

Table 4. *Students' Performance in English courses*

	Frequency	Percent
<b>A (90-100)</b>	27	11.2
<b>B (80-89)</b>	38	15.8
<b>C (70-79)</b>	50	20.7
<b>D (60-69)</b>	78	32.4
<b>F (below 60)</b>	48	19.9
<b>Total</b>	241	100.0

A further look at the students' performance data indicated that nine medicine program students' gain the highest marks in English course (37.5%). Computer science students' performance was, on the contrary, the worst (39.1%), respectively, Figure 2.

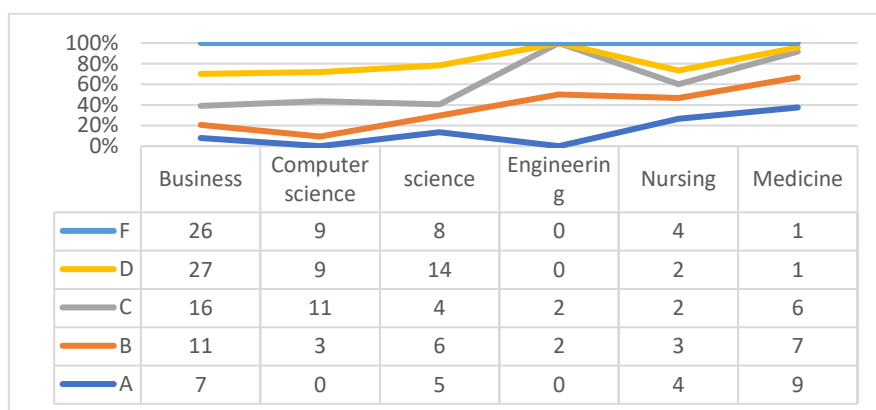


Figure 2. *Students' Performance in English courses based on their Academic majors*

The multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVAs) were conducted to test the differences among the academic programs in English skills confidence and performance. The Box's Test of Equality checks the assumption of homogeneity across academic programs. Box's M (18.68) was not significant,  $p (.539) > (.001)$ , indicating that there are no significant differences between the covariance matrices Table 5.

Table 5. *Box's Test of Equality of Covariance Matrices*

Box's M	18.68
F	4
df1	.932
df2	18
Sig.	921.0
	37
	.539

Therefore, the assumption is not violated, and Wilk's Lambda is an appropriate test to use. Wilks's  $\lambda = 0.84$ ,  $F(12, 466) = 3.58$ ,  $p < .001$ . The multivariate  $\eta^2 = .084$  indicates that approximately 1% of the multivariate variance of the dependent variables is associated with the academic program's variable, Table 6.

Table 6. Wilks' Lambda

Effect	Value	F	Hypothesis	Error	Sig.	Partial	Eta
Academic Programs	Wilks' Lambda	.838	3	12.000	466.000	.000	.084

Univariate one-way ANOVAs indicated that performance in English courses was significantly different between participants' the academic programs,  $F(6, 234) = 4.21$ ,  $p < .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .1$ . However, Students' self-confidence in their English language skills was not significantly difference between participants' academic programs,  $F(6, 234) = 3$ ,  $p > .001$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .07$ .

Table 7. Univariate one-way ANOVAs

Source	Dependent Variable	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	Confidence	6	3.830	2.991	.008	.071
	Performance	6	788.873	4.211	.000	.097
Intercept	Confidence	1	903.842	705.8	.000	.751
	Performance	1	493982.2	2637.005	.000	.918
Academic programs	Confidence	6	3.830	2.991	.008	.071
	Performance	6	788.873	4.211	.000	.097
Error	Confidence	234	1.281			
	Performance	234	187.327			
Total	Confidence	241				
	Performance	241				
Corrected Total	Confidence	240				
	Performance	240				

### Q3. Does Saudi EFL students' confidence in their English skills correlate with their performance?

The findings in Table 8 show that there is no correlation between students' confidence and performance ( $r = -.012$ ,  $p = .86$  and  $n = 241$ ). The findings show no relationship between students' confidence and performance and therefore, not a potential predictor of their performances.

Table 8. Correlation between students' confidence and performance

Spearman's rho	confidence	Performance
Correlation Coefficient		-.012
Sig. (2-tailed)		.859
N		241



### Discussion and conclusion

The findings of this study explored the self-confidence level of Saudi EFL students in their English Language skills. The results indicated that performance in English courses was significantly different between participants' academic programs on the one hand. Students' self-confidence in their English language skills, on the other hand, was not significantly differencing between participants' academic programs. Data analysis also revealed no correlation relationship between students' self-confidence level and their language skills and their performance.

The findings are controversial. On one side, barely consistent with the previous study where more than half of the sample population (128 students) expressed confidence in their English language skills (Evans & Morrison, 2011; Yeh, 2014; Belhiah & Elhami, 2015; Shamim et al., 2016). On the other side, the data revealed students' English skills low proficiency level despite the high self-confidence level that can be seen in the Business students. The findings indicated English language proficiency level impacts on students' ability and inevitably affects their comprehension and performance (Kang & Park, 2005; Dalton-Puffer et al., 2011; Doiz et al., 2011; Majid et al., 2011; Beckett & Li, 2012; Cho, 2012). The study revealed no direct influence of self-confidence on the students' performance.

The modest number of participants, the study findings contribute to our understanding of Saudi EFL self-confidence level and the influence of the academic program on language skills confidence level and their performance despite the lack of association in the current study. The study raises more questions about other vital factors such as course instructors' views of the materials, faculty members of the target department, family belief in the usefulness of the program, potential employers. These views and beliefs shape the student's preparation process and therefore, should be explored further.

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**Appendix**

Dear student:

*Please read carefully all the statements and kindly, for each statement, choose the option that suits your opinion most using the following scale:*

(Strongly Disagree – Disagree – Uncertain – Agree – Strongly disagree)

Statement
1. My ability to learn English is high.
2. I express myself freely in English.
3. I have a problem with some grammatical rules when writing in English. (reversed item).
4. I participate effectively in English discussions.
5. I can speak English very well.
6. My understanding of what others say in English is limited.
7. I speak English with accents
8. I have some English reading habits.
9. I can write very well in English.
10. I feel good about myself when speaking in English
11. I feel happy when I am with my English classmates
12. I can read very well in English.
13. I don't feel at ease when I talk to my English instructors
14. I find difficulty talking in English in front of my classmates
15. My classmates are better English learners than me
16. My English instructors have high expectations of me.
17. My English classmates do not like me.
18. I can understand English very well.
19. I am always attentive to my English instructors.
20. I attend English class sessions on time.
21. I volunteer myself for any English classroom activities
22. I miss many English class sessions.
23. I avoid any discussions in English.
24. I read for pleasure in English.
25. I reluctantly participate in English classroom activities.