

## Bridging the gaps: EFL teacher preparation programs A study in Saudi Arabian Context

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**Abstract:** Although English, as a core school subject in Saudi Arabia, has been around for almost a century now, the EFL teachers' preparation programs in Saudi Arabia still fail to deliver, help or even set a plan for change as the English proficiency for Saudi students in schools and colleges has for long been low. The current study aimed to investigate some, and might be hidden, causes for the low English achievements for students in Saudi Arabia. Qualitative meta-analysis was used in which four faculty members were semi-structurally interviewed. The findings show that, 1) the average score of Saudi students in TOEFL, as an English standardized test, were low and below expectations especially in reading and writing, 2) there is a huge gap between what students in EFL programs learn and the demands of modern teaching, 3) many EFL programs lack adequate teaching courses and practices, 4) lack of interaction and exposure to native speakers is also problematic and caused shortcomings. The study recommends that more serious redemptions needed despite the recent efforts.

**Keywords:** EFL programs, teacher preparations, English proficiency, and Saudi Arabian context.

## لسد الفجوات: برامج إعداد معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية دراسة في السياق السعودي

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الملخص: على الرغم من أن اللغة الإنجليزية، باعتبارها مادة أساسية في مدارس المملكة العربية السعودية، موجودة منذ ما يقرب من قرن من الزمان حتى الآن، فإن برامج إعداد معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في المملكة العربية السعودية ما زالت تفشل في تحقيق الأهداف أو المساعدة أو حتى وضع خطة للتغيير حيث إن إلمام وكفاءة الطلاب السعوديين في اللغة الإنجليزية تعد منخفضة ولفترة طويلة. تهدف الدراسة الحالية إلى استكشاف بعض الأسباب، ربما الخفية منها، لانخفاض تحصيل اللغة الإنجليزية للطلاب في المملكة العربية السعودية. وقد تم استخدام التحليل النوعي حيث تم إجراء مقابلات شبه مقننة مع أربعة من أعضاء هيئة التدريس. وتشير نتائج الدراسة إلى أنه: (1) كان متوسط درجة الطلاب السعوديين في اختبار TOEFL، كاختبار موحد للغة الإنجليزية، منخفضًا وأقل من التوقعات خاصة في القراءة والكتابة، (2) هناك فجوة كبيرة بين ما يتعلمه الطلاب في برامج اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية ومتطلبات التدريس في الوقت المعاصر، (3) تفتقر العديد من برامج اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية بالسعودية إلى مقررات تربوية وممارسات تعليمية كافية، (4) كما أن انعدام أو قلة التفاعل والتعرض للمتحدثين الأصليين يمثل أيضًا مشكلة ويؤدي إلى أوجه قصور كبيرة، (5) تحتاج تلك البرامج إلى عمليات إعادة بناء وإصلاح كثيرة وملحة على الرغم من الجهود القليلة المبذولة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: برامج تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، إعداد المعلم، إتقان اللغة الإنجليزية، والسياق السعودي.

## 1. Introduction:

There is a current worldwide consensus that teacher preparation programs and education are in desperate need for changes and improvements if a country wants to meet the demands and challenges of 21st century (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Korthagen, 2010; Futrell, 2008). Although those programs differ in various levels around the globe in terms of depths of knowledge content, instruction and assessment, current studies agreed that teacher quality is one of the most significant determinant factors for students' progresses and achievements (Banks, 2014).

Moreover, Saudi students' results in multiple standardized testing matrixes such as TIMMS, PIRLS, and TOEFL have consistently been low. Their results have shown the lowest performance or at most one of the five bottom participating countries. Recent studies have clearly revealed the fact that some current English teachers in Saudi Arabia feel that they have not been adequately prepared in colleges to teach in terms of content knowledge and teaching skills as well (Al-Seghayer, 2014; Fareh, 2010). They, moreover, believe that they need to learn more effective practices and specific skills to do so (Banks, 2014; Ryan et al., 2005). What makes it even more complicated is that teachers' appointments in Saudi Arabia is usually till now are based on as needed basis and not necessarily on the basis of quality.

### 1.1 Research Problem:

Despite the fact that there are now more than 33 EFL teacher preparation programs in Saudi Arabia as of 2017, the nature and quantity of EFL courses in those programs are still problematic. Fareh (2010), for instance, described the graduates of these EFL programs as especially 'improperly prepared' especially. Those programs have been under scrutiny recently with the low English achievements of Saudi students in multiple English standardized tests. The current study shed lights on some problematic sides and aspect of those EFL programs.

### 1.2 Research Questions:

The study's main purpose is to contribute to the recent urgent discussion on the current situation of EFL teacher education programs in Saudi Arabia and investigate some real, and might be hidden, causes for the low English achievements for Saudi students. The overarching questions of the current study are as follows:

Q1/ How the EFL preparation programs have progressed and changed throughout the time in Saudi Arabia?

Q2/ What are the Saudi students' current levels of English proficiency as measured by TOEFL, as a standardized test?

Q3/ What are the major problems of the current EFL teacher preparation programs in Saudi Arabia and what are the recent attempts for reform?

### **1.3 Research Hypothesis:**

The study hypothesis is that there is a relationship between Saudi students' poor performance in multiple English standardized tests and the current situations of EFL programs in Saudi Arabia. Students' results are a product of performance and effort spent in the classrooms, and thus there are some shortcomings in the current EFL teacher preparation programs in Saudi Arabia.

### **1.4 Research Objectives:**

With many concerns raised now about Saudi students' poor scores in multiple ESL/EFL standardized tests, the current study aimed at getting a more deep understanding of the current EFL teacher preparation programs in Saudi Arabia. EFL teacher preparation programs are considered by many as significant and hidden causes for such results. The study's objective is to shed lights on the current along with historical overview of the situation of EFL programs in Saudi Arabia and investigate some problematic issued in those EFL programs in Saudi Arabia.

### **1.5 Research Importance:**

With consistent poor performance of Saudi students in multiple English proficiency tests, English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher preparation programs in Saudi Arabia are now under security for the failure to adequately prepare teachers for the demand of the modern school and global competition. The preparation of EFL teachers in particular is increasingly becoming a focus for many educational institutions as it is an essential procedure for reform. Menken and Antunez (2001) stated that "teacher preparation has become a target for reform efforts as a means to ensure the ability of all teachers to teach" (p.3).

### **EFL Teacher Preparation in Saudi Arabia:**

Educators in Saudi Arabia have recently realized that it takes more than a beautiful logo or TV channel to prepare teachers. EFL teachers preparation programs in Saudi Arabia have been described as 'inadequate and nonsystematic' (Al Hazmi, 2003). Until 2017, departments of English where students study English for roughly four years within College of Science and Arts, College of Foreign Languages, or other colleges have widely been the place where EFL teachers got prepared and granted a teaching position by the time of graduation.

### **Historical Overview:**

Although the exact date in which English language teaching (ELT) was first introduced in Saudi Arabia education is still precisely unknown (Alshahrani, 2016), many authors believed that it was middle or late 1920s when the Directorate of Education was first established (Al-Seghayer, 2014; Faruk, 2013 & Niblock, 2006). During that time, however, in which Saudi Arabia as a country was not yet completely

established, little attention and hesitant welcoming were given to ELT as a school new subject due to the fears and views that English was just a threat to the country's culture, mother tongue and religious beliefs (Elyas and Picard, 2010).

After the completion of the country stabilization, the Saudi government passed many important legislations on ELT. In 1943, an important legislation was made to introduce English as an essential core school subject starting from the 1st grade of the intermediate stage (grades 7-9) all the way to college (Al-Ghamdi and Al-Saddat, 2002). EFL was then taught as a core subject for Saudi students for six years starting from grade 7 till the last year of high school.

As the time progressed, English became more important and was given more attention as a school core subject in schools' daily schedules. Mahboob & Elyas (2014) argued that this attention is due to the economic values of English as the language of contracts, negotiations and agreements since Saudi Arabia began relying heavily on foreign companies especially oil companies and infrastructures. Moreover, according to Cordesman (2003), the Saudi military power, training and development was also a major factor in the increasing significance of ELT as there were many 'trainers and technicians, working within KSA from as early as 1948' (Mahboob & Elyas, 2014, p3.).

As for ELT at college and university levels, English was first taught for university students in the late 1940s. According to Faruk (2013), English was first taught for Saudi university students in 1949 precisely in the newly established Islamic Law College in Makkah for 2 hours a week for 4 years.

Historically, however, King Saud University in Riyadh was the first university to establish English department in 1957 for males (Al-Abed and Smadi, 1996). Then, the other Saudi universities followed opening English departments for males while Umm Al Qura University in Makkah was the last to open English department in 1980. As for Saudi females, the Girls' College of Education in Makkah was the first to establish the English department in 1972 which then 12 teacher colleges followed in different regions of Saudi Arabia. The number of English departments continues to grow to reach a total of 33 EFL preparation programs as of 2015 (Moskovsky & Picard, 2018).

#### **Current Situation:**

Till recently, university graduates with Bachelor degrees in English or English and Translation in Saudi Arabia were usually offered a teaching position with no teaching preparations whatsoever. In fact, just by graduation, teaching positions are offered with no intensive training related to teaching issues, methodologies, and assessments. This kind of preparation is obviously considered weak or a lack in the preparation which would more likely result some undesired outcomes (Al Hazmi, 2003; Bailey & Damerow, 2014). Moreover, Fareh (2010) argued that most of those graduates are not qualified for English teaching as they do not have teaching certificates or even study some courses in teaching English as a foreign language.

One of the major critiques to the current EFL preparation programs in Saudi Arabia is the courses and study plans themselves which EFL prospect teachers undertake. An overview of the syllabus for EFL programs reveals that most, if not all, courses have nothing to do with modern teaching methods, assessments, or students' physical and psychological developments. Al-Seghayer (2014), for instance, clearly criticized the study plans themselves in those EFL preparation programs and explained that EFL pre service teachers attending one on those programs are generally required to undertake the following courses: 1) few on basic but general education which are mostly university or college requirements; (2) department requirements English courses including general linguistics courses, applied linguistics courses, and English literature; and (3) some elective courses of students' choices (p.144).

Another noteworthy critique for the current EFL teacher programs in Saudi Arabia is the lack of exposure to the real English speaking instructors. Most, and in some cases all, instructors are from neighboring Arabic countries especially Egypt, Sudan, and Jordan. As a result, Arabic is predominately the language of instruction used. According to Moskovsky & Picard (2018), teaching English as the target language (TL) in Saudi Arabia by the Arab non-native speakers would definitely result some shortcomings as it 'commonly involves non-native phonological features' (p.15).

Moreover, it is widely known with strong evidence that English as a foreign language cannot be properly learned without a complete immersion in the target language environment and life situations where English is the only or at least the predominate language used. Lasagabaster & Sierra (2010), for instance, pointed out clearly that intensive English teaching programs are the solution or even as effective as immersion. They argued that immersion is 'a far way more productive' to improve English learning and teaching.

As a consequence of the shortage in native and English instructors and instruction, the EFL graduates from such programs are by large not capable of carrying research-based solutions or innovative instructions which would help them in their daily teaching (Hökkä and Eteläpelto, 2014). Many of the EFL graduates are not able to conduct and coherent action research to deal with or even solve some issues happening in the classrooms.

To help improving English proficiency, Saudi government introduced a number of reforms related to teaching and learning English in the country. Saudi students are now exposed to English instructions more in their daily school schedules and their English textbooks have been updated and produced in cooperation with several specialized publishers in the United States and England (Moskovsky & Picard, 2018).

#### **EFL in Saudi Arabian context:**

Saudi Arabia, due to its religious place and wealthy of oil and trade, has many strong connections economically, religiously, and socially with different parts of the world. Saudi Arabian teacher education is

a bit unique; it started a century ago as soon as the country was established as a kingdom in 1920s. Established officially half a century ago, English preparation programs started in the 1970s and continued till now (Al-Seghayer, 2014). However, despite the fact that English, as a foreign language, teaching and learning started early in Saudi Arabia, the achievement level remains declining.

Moreover, teaching as a lifelong career is very popular in Saudi Arabia among English major graduates, especially females. A large number of English graduates are applying for teaching, and the majority is accepted with no competitions or teaching certificates. This obviously decreases the likelihood that those graduates are neither suitable for teaching nor they possess superior teaching skills (Kansanen, 2007; Niemi & Jakku-Sihvonen, 2006).

Along with the above uniqueness, English teaching in Saudi Arabia is still wondering around looking for the proper and fast ways to achieve its objectives and putting them into effects. Despite the money, time, and efforts spent on English teaching and learning in Saudi Arabia, the results and outcomes in multiple English proficiency tests are still way below expectations. Efforts are made, yet minimal achievements are gained in return. Green (2014) clearly shows that English proficiency tests are just ways to measure if English language is adequate to carry on a daily job or some tasks.

English teaching methods in Saudi Arabia are still largely traditional (Fareh, 2010& Al-Hazmi, 2003); it is teacher-centered in its essence rather than learner-centered. In addition, many undesired teaching practices are repeatedly taking place in a normal EFL classroom setting; instruction is generally in Arabic focusing largely on memorization. Some students, on the other hands, rarely speak, interact or even participate in productive discussions in English (Fareh, 2010). As a result, many pedagogical erroneous practices are continuously occurring and students are becoming less motivated as their needs often remain uncovered.

### **New Attempts for Reform:**

Major and rapid reforms regarding English teaching and learning in Saudi Arabia are still taking place due to the consistence low achievements in English and the increased recognition of the importance of English teaching and learning. Moreover, English has widely become an essential requirement for most jobs and professional establishments in Saudi Arabia (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015).

In 2016, a new more aggressive reform was implemented in which EFL pre service teachers were required to take a yearlong intensive educational preparation program leading to General Educational Diploma (GED) prior to their appointment as school English teachers. In the GED, pre service EFL teachers take many courses related to curriculum and instruction such as teaching methods and skills, curriculum designs, teaching with technologies, micro-teaching, and measurement and evaluation. In addition, a twelve-week practical training in public or private schools is required for each EFL prospect teacher before graduation.

Another significant attempt for reform was the launch of national project regarding the development of English textbooks in 2009 in which all English textbooks were renovated and replaced with new series of textbooks in cooperation with specialized publishers from the United Kingdom and the United States such as MM publisher, Macmillan, and Pearson Edu. Each publisher produced a series of English textbooks to be taught in Saudi Arabia public schools in specific region such as Fly High, Get Ready, and Traveller.

In addition, one of the most effective attempts of reforms was the launch of the huge Saudi government scholarships started in 2005 to send Saudi students to learn English and then study for undergraduate or graduate degrees in one of the modern English speaking countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and United Kingdom. Moreover, the total number of students studying in those countries is just huge. For instance, the total number of students studying in the US only in 2016 is around one-hundred twenty thousand students (Saudi Cultural Mission, 2016).

Similarly, a very recent quality development program, called 'Khebrat', was launched in the middle of 2016 by the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia to select some teachers, including EFL teachers, to spend a six months to one-year intensive training program in teaching and learning. According to the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Education website (2016), The program is in cooperation an global partnership with some universities around the globe that have good ranking in education and high ranks in several achievements tests such as Finland, United States, United Kingdom, Australia and Canada. The main goal of the program is to have a deep understanding of the process of teaching and learning, and the social contexts of education and how they affect students, teachers, and schools.

Moskovsky and Picard (2018) argued that the launch of this program have some major impacts on EFL teaching, learning and research. Moskovsky and Picard also believed that the prosperous outcomes of such program would soon be tangible. For instance, the research about EFL teaching and learning in Saudi Arabia prior to the launch of the program was very minimal and 'small' in both volume and breath, but then steadily increased continuously with 'a sharp rise after 2010'. However, this needs a careful study since the rise number of research and publication might be due to the online library repositories and emerging of various scholar research engines that have helped in the increase of the breath of volume not only in Saudi Arabia, but also in many other parts of the world.

## 2. Methodology:

To achieve the study's aim of getting a more deep understanding of the current EFL teacher preparation programs in Saudi Arabia, qualitative meta-analysis was applied and used (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2006; Timulak, 2009) in which some faculty members at one of the EFL programs in Saudi Arabia were interviewed to get rigorous qualitative data.

Moreover, four faculty members who had been teaching in those programs were interviewed in individual semi-structures interviews to gain deeper understanding. However, although a list of questions were written down as directed in conducting this type of interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), the participants were open to talk and elaborate to have their full perceptions.

The data obtained from the semi-structured interviews were transcribed, categorized, and analyzed using the open coding. The qualitative data were originally intended not only to generate grounded theory, but also to underline some integrated themes and aspects to reach a better understanding of the studied phenomenon precisely 1) the nature and shortcomings of EFL teacher preparation programs with the context of Saudi Arabia, and 2) the underlining causes of low English achievement among Saudi students despite the efforts, time, and money spent.

Moreover, TOEFL, as a standardized test for English proficiency for speakers of languages other than English, is popular and widely used as a measure for English proficiency not only in Saudi Arabia but also in many other countries such as U.S, Canada, and Australia. TOEFL has been for long one of the requirements for admission to pursue graduate and even undergraduate studies in those countries. As a result, many EFL graduates in Saudi Arabia are encouraged to take the test as an objective measure of their English proficiency. For the purpose of this study, TOEFL data and score reports were chosen to get a fair and objective measure not only for the Saudi test takers which are the ultimate product of English teaching and learning in Saudi Arabia but also in comparison with their counterparts in other Middle Eastern countries.

The entire corpus of data were analyzed to generate some themes and detect some recurring patterns, views and ideas. To enhance the credibility of data, coherent and integrated themes were categorized and regrouped in a cross-case bases in which the answers of interviewees were grouped together to share a common perspective rather than individual ones (Patton, 2002).

### **3. Literature Review:**

Studying the challenges of teaching English in China, Cheng (2004) found that English language teachers there were lacking some important aspects in their preparation in terms of subject matters, assessment and they were also less qualified in methodologies used in teaching English.

Current studies show that the lack of preparation has to a great extent failed not only to deliver competent EFL teachers, but also impacted the EFL teachers in multiple aspects in their English proficiency, teaching competence, assessment and instruction methodologies (Fareh, 2010). In fact, the inadequacy of EFL teachers' preparation is indeed a significant reason for the results of EFL learners in Saudi Arabia which were consistently low and fallen way behind expectations. Moreover, Al-Seghayer (2014) clearly expressed the effects of such inadequate preparation:



A subnational number of Saudi EFL teachers are professionally and linguistically incompetent and do not have a firm grasps of methods of teaching language elements [...] It is publicly acknowledged the proficiency level of the majority of Saudi Arabia's English teachers is insufficient to the degree that they barely understand the materials that they are attempting to teach to students (p.143).

Those studies revealed the fact that EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia are in need of some training and professional developments in modern and effective teaching methods, classroom managements, and types of effective assessments.

Al Shabbi (1989) study examined the training programs targeting the Saudi EFLs working as EFL teachers or in supervision using a mixed methods approach between quantitative and qualitative and found that there is a huge gap between the two. The study, more importantly, revealed the participant's notion that current Saudi programs preparing EFL teachers and instructors were relatively of low standards. In addition, Al Hazmi (2003) echoed Al Shabi findings and concluded that current EFL teacher programs in Saudi were basically 'inadequate' and more suited translators not EFL teachers.

Mohammed (2007) argued that EFL teacher preparation programs across Saudi Arabia are for long facing several challenges and problems. One of the biggest problems is a lack, mismanaged or misuse of students' practicum as it has failed to prepare and push students to their fullest potentials. Practicum as an important requirement for EFL teachers' preparation has been traditionally administered and failed to cope teachers with modern methods of teaching, connecting theories with practices, and rapid changes in modern schools and millenniums.

Exploring some of the key components of the EFL teacher preparation programs in Saudi Arabia, Alshuaifan (2009) stated that the 96 participants who were English language instructors from both college and grade school levels clearly expressed their dissatisfaction regarding the current Saudi EFL preparation program. They emphasized some lacks and shortages in such programs such as the lack of sufficient courses in teaching methods, EFL syllabus, and cultural tolerance and awareness.

#### **4. Results and Discussion:**

In the present subsection, the findings for the second and third questions are mainly presented since the answer of the first question regarding the past and present situations of the EFL programs was addressed earlier. Saudi test takers' results in TOEFL, a popular English proficiency test, were first discussed to have a better view and measurement of current level of English proficiency Saudi schools' and colleges' students who took the exam which in some ways reflect the outcomes and the extent of current EFL programs in Saudi Arabia success. Then, major problems and reforms are then presented through semi-interviews of four faculty members working and teaching at EFL programs ranging between 8-13 years.

### Saudi Results in TOEFL Exam:

Examining Saudi students' results in an English standardized testing is a way to measure their English proficiency. Despite the fact that English has for long been a core subject in public and private schools in Saudi Arabia, the average scores of Saudi students in many English standardized tests have been very low in comparison with their counterparts from other Arabic speaking countries who share a number of common backgrounds in terms of history, first language and education system. The following table shows a detailed summary of TOEFL iBT results in 2017, the last reported exam, for students from the Middle East (TOEFL Test and Score Data Summary, 2017).

**Table (1) TOEFL iBT test results for the Middle Eastern students in the year of 2017**

Geographic Region	TOEFL Skills				
	Reading	Listening	Speaking	Writing	Total
	30	30	30	30	120
Algeria	18	20	21	19	78
Bahrain	19	22	24	22	86
Egypt	20	22	22	22	86
Iraq	16	18	20	18	72
Jordan	19	21	21	20	80
Kuwait	16	19	21	19	76
Lebanon	21	22	23	23	89
Libya	18	20	21	19	78
Morocco	19	21	21	20	81
Oman	19	21	22	21	82
Palestine	17	19	21	20	77
Qatar	18	21	22	21	82
Saudi Arabia	15	18	20	17	69
Sudan	18	20	22	19	79
Syria	19	21	22	20	81
United Arab Emirates	19	21	23	21	84
Yemen	16	18	20	18	73

As the above table illustrates, the average scores of Saudi students in TOEFL iBT test in 2017 were indeed disappointing. The total scores of Saudi test takers were the lowest in comparison with their counterparts. More precisely, Saudi test takers scored consistently the lowest, especially in reading and writing, and among the lowest in listening and speaking along with students from Yemen and Iraq.

In fact, for the last five consecutive years, Saudi students' scores in TOEFL were the worst among the entire Middle Eastern countries especially in reading and writing. Their results were described as 'painful truth' (Saudi TOEFL, 2011). The following table illustrates the results of Saudi students in TOEFL in five consecutive years from 2012-2016.

**Table (2) Saudi average scores in TOEFL iBT for the last five consecutive years**

Years of the Test	Listening	Structure & Written Expression	Reading	Rank	Total Arab Countries
2012	48	41	41	19	20
2013	47	41	41	20	20
2014	48	40	41	19	19
2015	47	40	41	18	19
2016	49	41	42	17	19

As the above table shows, the section mean scores of Saudi Arabian students in TOEFL were low. In fact, their scores were almost the worst and their rank was almost always the least among the entire Arabic countries. This results were described as 'painful results' which did not reflect the time, the money and the effort spent in English as a core school subject which have been taught in schools for a long time.

#### **Problems and reforms of EFL in Saudi Arabia:**

The above data clearly show some problems and shortcomings that need to be addressed. To get a deeper understanding of the current EFL preparation programs problems and reforms in Saudi Arabia, four faculty members working and teaching at various EFL programs with long teaching were semi-structured interviewed with teaching experiences ranging from 8-13 years. The following table summarized the profiles of each interviewee.

**Table (3) Profiles of interviewees**

Teacher	Gender	Years of teaching	Grade level of teaching
T1	F	11	College & Graduate
T2	M	8	College
T3	F	10.5	College
T4	M	13	College & Graduate

#### **Current EFL programs situation:**

Participants were asked about the current situation of EFL programs in Saudi Arabia where they work and teach. The lack of some preparation aspects of real life and work situations and future

profession for those EFL teachers was one of recurring themes among the participants. As the T1 clearly described it when she said

In most, if not all, [current] EFL programs, there is a huge gap between what they learn and the reality of what they will do upon graduation. Some prospect EFL pre services have expressed this concern to me.

T4 also reflected on this in more detailed. Having taught and worked in EFL programs for almost 13 years, he clearly emphasized the fact that most of the current EFL programs don't focus enough on real job and what those EFLs are expected to do after graduation. Teaching, as a profession, has greatly changed over the time, and what EFL expected to do in the past is no long the same. He emphasized this fact saying

The role of EFL teachers is rapidly changing and expanding. What an EFL teacher was expected to do a decade ago is no longer working. Now, there are so many things EFL teachers need to masters besides teaching such as understanding national policies, working with parents to help them understand their child and being an effective teacher.

Indeed, the gap between what EFLs receive and learn the reality of their profession as EFL prospect teachers is one of the shortcomings of current EFL programs in Saudi Arabia. As the T4 explains, EFL prospect teachers get chocked and feel the gap between what they have leaned and what they face in real teaching situations.

### **Problems of EFL programs:**

As in some other preparation programs, EFL programs in Saudi Arabia are still having some problematic issues. One of the problems in EFL preparation programs is the lack of focus or even existence of teaching methods and learning styles courses as a substantial part of EFL preparation. This lack results in some misconceptions about the reality of teaching and requirements of learning. As a result, multiple and might be contradict notions and attitudes about teaching and learning would definitely occur. One of the common misconceptions about teaching that the participants repeatedly mentioned is the notion that knowledge is the only requirement for successful and effective teaching; the more information you memorize, the better teacher you become. As T2 clearly put it

Teaching is a complicated process and some EFLs prospects believe that teaching is only about information; the more knowledge you remember the better teaching careers you will have. So, when they [EFL pre service teachers] go to schools for real teaching, they got chocked! And some get lost and need a long time to overcome.

Separation between what is being taught and the real life situation is indeed problematic. T3 add to this as well saying

In my view, there is existence distance between what is being taught and learned in EFL and real teaching situation; this makes EFL prospect teachers think that students in general learn the same way so continuing using the same teaching method over and over again would be legitimate.

Another big problem of EFL current programs is the lack of interaction with native speakers and exposure to native. It is widely known and experienced that a complete immersions in natural setting and communities of English where English the only way to communicate is the best way to learn a foreign language. T1, a female faculty member at an EFL program, stressed this fact saying

Although exposure to native English speakers and real life situations in English started to decrease, it is still there especially in females EFL preparation programs.

Exploring the causes and solutions of the lack, or may be the absence, of native speakers working and teaching in EFL programs is an urgent topic which needs further investigation. However, this shortage of exposure to native English speakers with native accents, especially in female EFL preparation programs, would certainly lead to some unsatisfactory results such as mistakes in phonology, grammar, writing skills and limited opportunities to practice the new learned materials and content in English.

### **New attempts for reforms**

As for the attempts to address the shortcomings, the participants clearly expressed their notions that although there have been some serious attempts, but they still insufficient efforts to include all the aspects and parties involved in EFL teaching and learning. It is indeed a good effort to fix the curriculum, but it would be better if you sufficiently train the teachers on them. As the T4 described it

Too many things are involved in EFL teaching and learning such as

Curriculum, instructors, classrooms along with learning and teaching context, labs, and support materials just to name few. Fixing one aspect would be a good thing but obviously not enough.

On the other hand, T2 believed that scholarships and studying abroad has been the best remedial way where students have the opportunity to learn English from native speakers and exposed to various methods of teaching.

Studying abroad where English is the only way of communicating

is in my view the most significant attempt to improve EFL prospect teachers where they exposed to real life situations.

However, the number of EFL preparation teachers benefiting from the huge funded scholarships that Saudi Arabian government lunched ten years ago is very limited since the focus program is on the scientific study fields such as engineering, medicine, and law. Moreover, the number of EFL preparation teachers is decreasing over time and the focus of the scholarship programs has greatly shifted to merely science and medicine.

It is indeed something unjustifiable to have continuously low scores in English achievement for Saudi students despite the effort, money and time spent for and in English teaching and learning. The current study tried to spot out the gaps in the EFL preparation programs in Saudi Arabia due to the ever long low achievements of Saudi students and the rapid transforming period in English curriculum and teachers training.

There was a shared view among interviewees about EFL preparation programs in Saudi Arabia. They all agreed that there were some shortcomings and aspects that need urgent improvements such as current EFL plans of study and curricula, teaching methods, and instructors. This finding is aligned with the findings of Fareh 2010 and Al Shegayer 2014.

The finding also reflects the imbalance between what the EFL prospect receive and learn, on one hand, and teaching as a preferred profession for many EFLs after graduation. This might be due to the insufficient classes and focus of courses in teaching methodologies, assessment, and learning styles and developments. Cheng (2004) study about English teachers in China also found the same thing which made EFL prospect teachers less qualified in teaching English.

## 5. Conclusions:

It seems that there are some causes for continuing the EFL programs not to deliver and achieve its objectives. First, content knowledge and teaching English itself as a foreign language have been the main focus of the current EFL programs in Saudi Arabia rather than teaching it for students in public or private schools. As a result, obvious gaps and shortcomings are existed in those programs between what EFL graduates have learned and practiced in those programs on one hand and actual teaching on the other, as it is more likely the profession for many EFL graduates upon graduation. Second, although some EFL graduates have originally no plan to become a teacher, but many will choose teaching as a career. Third, due to the lack of exposure to native speakers and training in real life situations, some EFL teachers got chocked and discouraged by students' English level which were either weak or less motivating.

Indeed, teaching and learning are complicated processes. In fact, it might be difficult or time consuming for just describing the range of tasks a teacher now needs to perform and be aware of inside and outside classrooms. As a result, the study reveals that the current EFL programs in Saudi Arabia need more serious reforms, improvements and addressing the problems clearly. The efforts, money and time spent before are not sufficient as they might be addressing the symptoms rather than the problems. However, further investigations need to be intake to improve the current EFL programs situations.

## 6. Recommendations:

It would be for sure useful to see and follow the steps of some successful EFL programs either in the Middle East or abroad to overcome the shortcomings and improve the weak results. Looking at what

others are doing is crucial for any efforts of educational reform which allows to spot out the weakness and maintain the strength sides.

Moreover, new and more practical standards for up-coming EFL teachers might be needed. At the meantime, professional development plans are also needed to in service EFL teachers. Cross-cultural and multi-national studies are recommended to reveal some solutions and find ways to improve the current EFL programs in Saudi Arabia.

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