

*The Role of Motivation in Language Achievement: A Self-Reporting Study of
University Students*

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Abstract

The current study investigates Saudi university students' motivation and attitudes towards learning English as a foreign language. It employs an online questionnaire to collect data and uses a descriptive analysis approach to reports the results. Fifty-six students responded and submitted their answers online. Their answers were processed and quantified using SPSS. The analysis used crosstabulation and One-Way ANOVA in addition to frequencies, means and standard deviations. The findings suggest that students' age plays a role in their preference of different types of motivation. GPA and parents education played a less important role. They also fail to establish a link between what is being taught in the classroom and real life situations which results in low levels of motivation. A more task-based approach and more room for decision making should be promoted by language teachers in order to address this problem.

Keywords: Motivation, Task-Based Language Teaching TBLT, L2 Writing

Introduction

Motivation plays a significant role in developing students' learning a new language. Although the majority of EFL students acknowledge the status of English as a medium of communication and academia, some still lack proper levels of motivation for various reasons including - but not limited to - teaching practices, the inability to relate English to real life situations, disinterest in English culture and values, and the disillusioned perspective of what learning a foreign language for.

Whether students like it or not, the fact of the matter is that more pressure is placed on educational institutes to teach more language classes from earlier years. This is compounded by peer and family pressure to progress in both social and academic life which inevitably requires proficient English.

Despite all of the pressures, Arab students in general and Saudis in particular are among the lowest achievers in standardized English language tests such as IELTS and TOEFL. What is even more worrying is the fact that average test takers are scoring even less year on year, definitely not something that pleases the educational authorities.

Lack of motivation affects every aspect of language but we believe it particularly does writing. Interestingly enough, it was writing that Arab and Saudi students scored the least. However, students consistently report a need to develop speaking despite scoring the most in IELTS (Grami & Alkazemi 2011, and Ghobain & Grami 2012). This is an unusual situation and one which calls for more investigation. We assume that students are disinterested in academic prose and are more interested in communicative skills. In other words, their purpose for learning English, even if specialized in it, is less academic and more sociable.

With all this in mind, the organization of the article is as follows, the literature review looks at definition of term motivation, similar studies on motivation and attitudes to establish the research gap as we see it, the methodology details the approach we adopted for collecting data required to answer the research question, the results and discussion section provides our interpretation of the study findings and relates them to the literature and finally we account for the study's shortcomings and suggest ideas for future work in the conclusion.

Literature Review

This section looks at previous studies carried out on motivation and teaching English to Arab and Saudi students. It serves as a platform for inspiration and comparison alike.

Motivation and Language Learning

Many researchers suggest that motivation is very important in the success of language learning. Dornyei (1994) for example believes that it is one of the most significant indicators of success. Oxford (1994) also mentions that motivated individuals show favorable attitudes toward learning a language. In fact, logic dictates that unless

students are willing to carry on learning the new language, chances of success will be very limited. This assumption however is supported by the previous studies and many more.

Motivation has been defined as the learner's orientation with regard to the goal of learning a second language (Crookes and Schmidt 1991). It is thought that students who are most successful in learning a target language (TL) are those who like the people that speak the language, admire their culture, or have a desire to become familiar with or even integrate into the society in which the language is used (Falk 1978). Motivation could be integrative, as is the case in Falk's, or instrumental, generally characterized by the desire to obtain something practical or concrete from the study of a second language (Hudson 2000). Instrumental motivation is based on utilitarian approach towards learning a foreign/second language which could be to pass a school/university examination, to find a better job, to immigrate to a native country, to read technical information, to translate various kinds of information or academic documents into a foreign language or merely as a social trend, especially among youth in a society where opportunities to use a second language (L2) in daily verbal exchanges are quite uncommon.

Lightbown and Spada (2006) and Brown (2000) point out that both integrative and instrumental motivation are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Learners rarely select one kind of motivation in preference to another, rather a combination of both orientations is usually at play. Brown (2000) for instance gives example of international students residing in the United States, who are learning English for academic purposes as well as wishing to become integrated into the people and culture of the country, at the same time.

It is important to identify the type of motivation that assists or desists in successful language acquisition. Simultaneously, it is necessary to consider motivation as one of the variables in an intricate model of correlated individual and situational factors which affect each learner variably. In his socio-educational model, Gardner (1982 and 1985) identifies a number of correlating factors in learning a second language. Gardner's model looks specifically at second language acquisition in a structured classroom setting rather than a natural environment. His work focuses on the foreign language classroom. The model attempts to correlate four features of L2 acquisition; the social and cultural milieu, individual learner differences, the setting or context and linguistic outcome. In this project, we interchangeably use Gardner's model to refer to integrative/ intrinsic motivation, by which we mean learning English for purposes other than professional or academic.

There are many ways in which teachers can help their students maintain a high level of motivation. For example, Murcia et al. (2008) believe that creative environments - where students are allowed to make their own decisions - should increase their motivation. Teachers are therefore recommended to introduce tasks that require critical thinking and creative application of the learned material. Similarly, Chen & Brown (2012), and Nicholls (1983) mention that task-based learning should increase levels of motivation . Task-based language teaching (TBLT) makes learning meaningful and students gain a sense of competence. Chen & Brown (ibid) believe that the emergence of the web can be translated into more chances for language students to write for an authentic audience. Pae (2008) adds other recommendations to

make the classroom motivating, including providing meaningful feedback, a supportive classroom environment, and interactive tasks. Maherzi (2011) reporting on her study in a similar context also believes that a more autonomous learning environment helps improve motivation levels.

Teaching English to Arab Students

Teaching English to Arab students seems particularly challenging. In fact, a variety of factors, ranging from social to institutional and academic, may explain the extremely low scores in standardized tests such as IELTS as Al-Saghyer (2005), Grami (2010), McKay, (1992), Gray, (2000) Whitefield & Pollard, (1998) believe. In teaching English to speakers of Arabic language, learner performance was considerably below IELTS average and it dwindles even more in writing tasks in comparison to other language skills as table (1) shows.

	Listening	Reading	Writing	Speaking	Overall
Amharic	4.78	5.64	5.62	6.11	5.60
Arabic	5.14	4.96	4.89	5.65	5.23
Bengali	5.85	5.44	5.54	5.87	5.74
Chinese	5.72	5.85	5.19	5.28	5.57
Dutch	7.95	7.79	6.79	7.60	7.60

Table (1): Mean IELTS score of some first languages

Little exposure to authentic English could be a significant factor affecting learners' motivation. Learners enter the University after completing their secondary school (12 years of studies). The learners may have started learning English from grade 6 or 7 at school, which is at the age of 11 – 13 where the medium of teaching English could not be necessarily English; reliance on Arabic is common in explaining difficult points to ease learner comprehension.

Most of the EFL learners in the Arab world are from families where either both parents have no education in English i.e. no English to communicate with their children. (Al-Shumaimeri, 1999; and Habbash, 2008) Many students may not have had English a medium of their instruction throughout school years and may not have yet anything to do with English as a medium of communication in future; they only enroll because it is a university requirement to graduate. So integrative motivation is not at work to ignite such students' interest to learn and perform well in L2. In such a situation, the students' instrumental motivation is also affected; he or she might pay more attention to other subjects and linger on in English for years.

Rationale of the Study

The issue of motivation is complex and needs to be explored carefully calculating the factors affecting learners' progress in general. One cannot simply measure language learning in terms of the hours spent doing activities/exercises in the language lab/classroom and the instant linguistic outcome/performance of the student.

We observed learners' unwillingness to use English in basic tasks including surfing the Internet, or sending text messages or emails. They do not read English newspaper nor do they watch any English broadcasting channel such as the BBC or CNN even when they are available for free. This attitude shows lack of genuine desire from learners' point of view to absorb L2. It also means there is something wrong somewhere; a barrier preventing the development of a bond between the learner and his/her target language and making the whole episode of learning a pastime and not real learning because successful learners are researchers and lifelong learners. As a result, the learning is restricted to certain phrases and expressions and not language. Students may find it extremely difficult to engage in real conversations because of that. It is a situation which invites one's interest to probe the matter further to identify the factors responsible for this lack of motivation among the learners. "What could be the factors affecting the learners' attitude towards the English language" is the question that motivates us to write this piece of research.

Based on Gardner's model (ibid), our analysis looks into learners' attitudes toward language learning with reference to their social background, parents' education, presentation of the instructional material in TL, as well as its relevance to the students' culture and their (specific) needs, teachers' contribution or failure in motivating learners, classroom atmosphere, learners' personal opinion/belief about learning English, self-confidence, learner autonomy, learner satisfaction, practical utility of the TL, and its possible contribution towards shaping their career.

Methodology

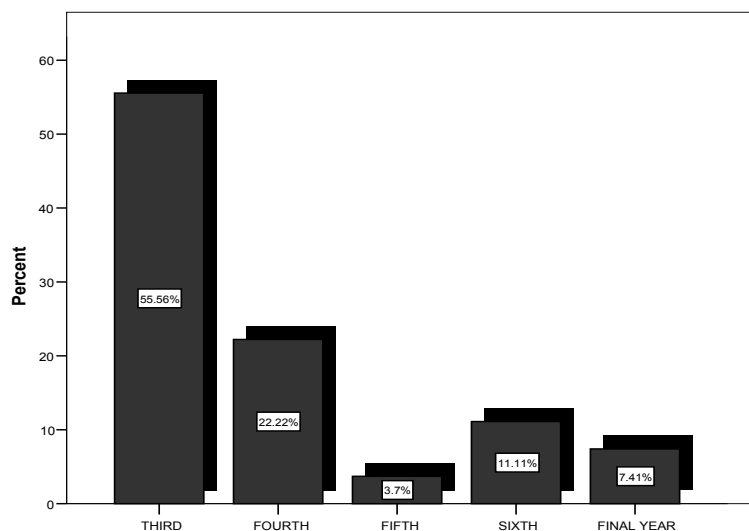
This section describes first the participants of the study and second how we set about collecting the data for our research. It describes the methods of both collecting and analyzing the data.

Participants:

The study targeted university students whose major was English. Most of the students approached were studying English major at King Abdulaziz University in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. They were mostly in their third and fourth levels in the university (77%) with the remaining in their fifth or final year. Most of the students are male students with an average age of 23. The range is between 20 and 29 with an SD of only 2.5 making the group harmonious as far as age is concerned. Their GPA which is the only official indicator of their performance ranged between 2.00 and 4.88 (out of 5.00) with an average GPA of 3.56.

		STUDENTS' AGES	GPA OUT OF 5.00
N	Valid	46	48
	Missing	10	8
Mean		22.91	3.5663
Std. Deviation		2.511	.79200
Minimum		20	2.00
Maximum		29	4.88

Table (2) Participating Students' Basic Information



Graph (1) Students' Level in the University

Upon their admission to the university, candidates are given a placement test and those who qualify enter a one year Preparatory Year Program (PYP) where they are exposed to English based instruction and an extensive practice in four language skills. It is a 3 hours a day and 5 days a week practice. After successful completion (minimum 60% marks) of PYP, learners are enrolled in different faculties according to their interest in specialties.

In the faculty of Arts and Humanities, they are obliged to take advanced level of English language skills for two academic semesters, completing which paves their way to take English Linguistics and Literature, but the learners' getting through these English courses doesn't necessarily mean that the goal has been met; many of them still might not be able to use English as a medium of communication and expression, both orally as well as in writing which speaks volumes about the level of motivation and achievement among learners of English.

Data Collection Methods:

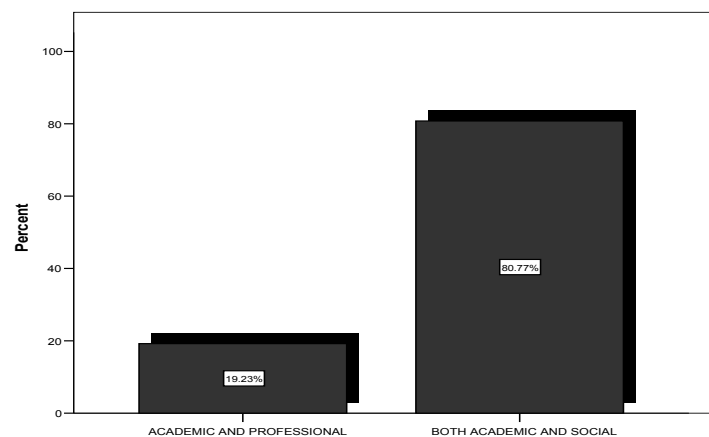
In order to get enough data to test our theories, a semi-structure questionnaire was developed into an online version in both Arabic and English. The questions were divided into two main categories; general questions - to establish students' social and academic background - and more focused questions to understand how students evaluate their learning experience, their level in English, what interests them in their major and eventually how motivated they are to engage in their studies successfully. Most of the questions were closed-items but there were also open questions for students to elaborate their responses, should they wish to do so. Following guidelines by Cohen et al., (2003 and 2007), the questionnaire has been through various stages of development including the pre-piloting and piloting. In the former, the questionnaire was evaluated by fellow researchers to check for its content and fitness of purpose. In the latter however, the questionnaire was administered on a small representative

sample of the target research population to highlight any practical issues including ambiguity and bias. The final version was ready and was distributed directly to students via emails and indirectly via forums frequently visited by them. The return rate is acceptable as far as emails are concerned. Out of about 180 students approached, around 80 replied. No data that identified the participants was collected. This was in keeping with research ethics and also to encourage students to give more honest and unbiased responses.

Results

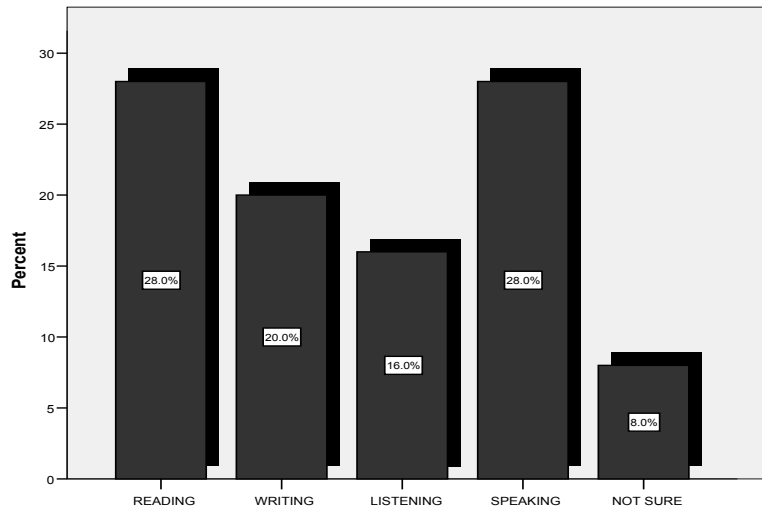
Quantitative Data:

The overall majority of the students wanted to learn English for both social and academic reasons. This roughly translates as integrative and instrumental motivation. However, about one in five wanted to learn English for academic purposes only, with none stating merely social reason for learning English.

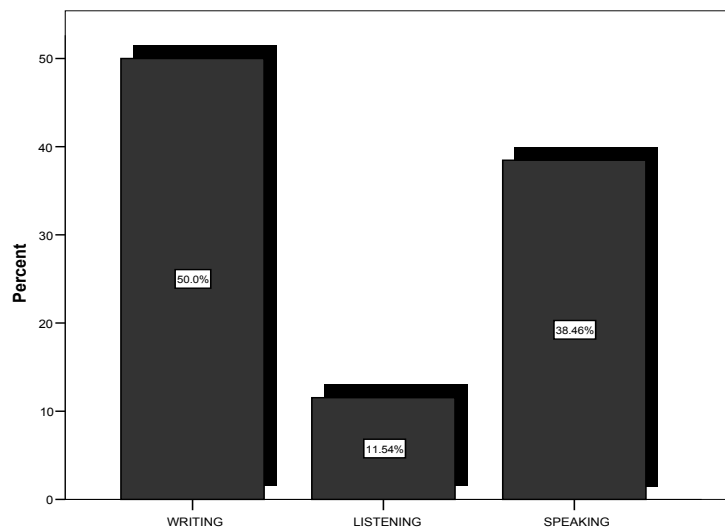


Graph (2) Skills Students' Reasons for Learning English.

An identical percentage of students believed they were best at reading and speaking while a smaller fraction thought they were good at writing and even less at listening.



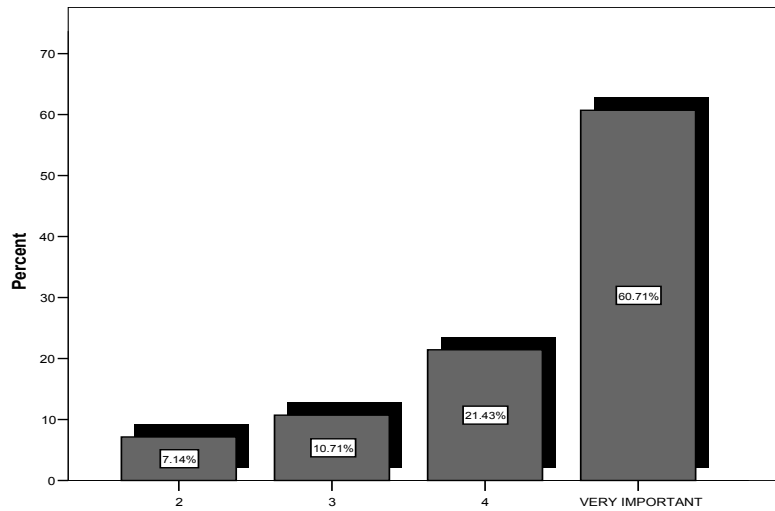
Graph (3) Skills Students Believed they Are Best at.



Graph (4) Skills Students Wanted to Improve the Most.

Students' own assessment of their different language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) all resulted in normal curves. The majority rated themselves as average with smaller percentages toward the far ends of the spectrum.

However, the majority of students acknowledged the value of language in communication as the graph below shows.



Graph (5) Students' Perception of Language and Communication.

There are a number of possible factors which could affect students' responses including their age, GPA, gender and parents' education. We dismissed the gender factor due to the disproportionate numbers of male and female students.

The cross tabulation test shows that the younger the respondents the more favorable views they held towards both types of motivation. As for integrative motivation, students aged 26 or more all believed it to be very important. Younger respondents on the other hand had more varied views. The interesting result here is that only students aged 21 and 20 thought integrative motivation to be not important. However, when students were asked about their opinion regarding instrumental motivation, all of them believed it to be either important or very important regardless of age.

		IMPORTANT	VERY IMPORTANT	TOTAL
AGES	20	2	2	4
	21	4	12	16
	22	0	4	4
	23	4	2	6
	24	0	8	8
	26	2	0	2
	27	0	2	2
	28	0	2	2
	29	0	2	2
Total		12	34	46

Table (3) Students' Age against Perception of Instrumental Motivation

The One Way ANOVA tests show that the relation between age and their beliefs towards different types of motivation is very significant as the table below shows.

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
INTEGRATIVE	Between Groups	22.239	8	2.780	3.265	.006
	Within Groups	31.500	37	.851		
	Total	53.739	45			
INSTRUMENTAL	Between Groups	3.536	8	.442	3.067	.009
	Within Groups	5.333	37	.144		
	Total	8.870	45			

Table (4) One-Way ANOVA Results

Students' GPA does not seem to play a role in their perception of instrumental motivation. They all share the idea that it is important. They however showed a slight difference when they responded to integrative motivation. The higher the GPA the lower importance they assign to integrative motivation. Students whose GPA was above 4.30 had a relatively neutral opinion. In fact, the four students with the highest GPA thought it was unimportant. The result is very significant as the One-Way ANOVA test shows (sig. = 0.000). Finally, as far as parents who speak English are concerned, the results showed no real difference between the opinions of those who have no parents spoke English and those whose fathers did.

Qualitative Data:

The qualitative questions toward the end of the questionnaire were designed to allow students elaborate on their responses. A number of themes emerged from the analysis of students' responses. When asked what can be done to improve the level of English, many students believed in autonomous learning and findings opportunities to speak with others in English either by travelling to English speaking countries or with help from the department. The theme recurred so frequently that it is almost unanimous. Students also indicated the importance of integrative motivation and learning for the sake of language itself.

As what has to be changed in the classroom, many students wanted to see a move away from the typical and into the creative. They also wanted more participation in the classroom whether in discussion or decision-making. Some students want less pressure in the classroom. For instance, assignments should be an opportunity for improvement not merely an assessment method. New words have to be explained because many students cannot follow the teachers and eventually lose interest when they do not understand these words.

Finally, when the students were asked with whom they spoke English regularly, the majority indicated those who did not speak Arabic: teachers, as the most common group followed by hospital staff. When asked about which areas of their daily lives involve the use of English, the majority indicated watching films and foreign/English channels as the most common (listening only) opportunity. Others also included composing and reading emails, sending texts, and to a lesser extent reading magazines and papers. Almost none reported writing in English as a habit.

Discussion

The results show some interesting findings. Contrary to what the literature suggests, the majority of the students acknowledged the need for an academic aspect of English. We assume that due to the fact that participants were all English major university students, their motivation was more academic oriented.

We also expected students to want to improve their productive skills i.e. speaking and writing and the results proved us right. However, students who wanted to improve their writing outnumbered those who wanted to speak better, again contrary to what the literature suggests. In a similar fashion, students were also able to connect language to its core function of communication.

The current status of English in the Saudi society most definitely affects students' opinion of L2. Also the social milieu is not, at least English friendly; one doesn't come across many who would communicate in English in this almost a mono cultural religious society where Arabic is the dominant culture, language and opinion. But the situation has already started to change; English is now introduced in grade 4 in public schools which was introduced in grade 6 (at 11 to 12 years of age) previously.

In order to make language learning a motivating and pleasant experience, language teachers, based on keen observation, require to put in great deal of effort and plan their lessons in a way that arouses the students' interest and motivation and the set goals/short term objectives are achieved. This study aims to find out the students' opinion about language learning experience, whether they (the students) enjoy the language material presented to them, and if cultural barriers interfere with the learning process; cultural differences between the students and the teacher as well as between the students and the culture of the target language.

In a language classroom, equipment and facilities such as the Internet, visual screens/OHP, CD/DVD player, classroom size, number of students in a class, seating arrangement, teacher's (technical as well as professional) knowledge and readiness to use available infrastructure is of paramount importance. Modern techno-electronic gadgets, if used effectively, can make learning experience enjoyable and may contribute to motivate students. The teacher should peep into students' goal-orientedness and plan lessons and select language content that fulfills learner expectations, and is at par with their interests, level of thinking and language understanding. It is also note-worthy that teaching language is not as teaching mathematical formulae; it's a complex process involving human psychology and everyday interactions with other humans.

Role of teachers as models and motivators is vital to whether learning or no learning takes place in the classroom. As Dornyei (2000: 116) notes, "teacher skills in motivating learners should be seen as central to teaching effectiveness" and teacher behavior is a powerful "motivational tool" (Dornyei 2001: 120). Teacher as a classroom manager is the one who creates an environment which could contribute to successful language acquisition or otherwise. Students need ample opportunities and steady encouragement in language acquisition. For learning to take place in a language classroom, the students should speak more than the teacher, express their opinion and feel that they don't run the risk of being ridiculed because a tense

classroom climate can undermine learning and de-motivate learners (see MacIntyre, 1999 and Young, 1999). The teacher should be a motivator, moderator and able to involve students to the point where they shun their consciousness to routine mistakes, their shyness to use L2 (a common factor among second language learners), and express themselves spontaneously in the target language, and deduct rules for their own learning because "the only kind of learning which significantly affects behavior is self-discovered, self-appropriated learning" (Rogers, 1961: 276). Successful communication using the target language would create a sense of achievement among learners. Research in the area suggests L2 achievement strongly affects learner motivation (Strong 1983, cited in Ellis 1997).

Learning a foreign language for utilitarian purposes is also common among students. As is mentioned earlier, a student who performs well in a language classroom may not (necessarily) be curious to make the TL his lingua franca. He tries his best to perform well inside the classroom to score high marks to pass the examination, but using TL outside the classroom has no attraction/reward, he may believe. In other words, greed for grades shifts students' focus to performance outcomes, rather than the process of learning. Consequently, many students become grade driven, not "grade grubbing". It might not be wrong if we translate it in terms of the TL being a means to an end, and not an end in itself for such learners. Such instrumental learners might not be successful lifelong learners and the superficially learnt content may vanish gradually after the end (passing the examination) is met.

Presence of both integrative and instrumental motivation is an essential ingredient of success; the former has been found to sustain long term success when learning a second language (Taylor, Meynard & Rheault 1977; Ellis 1997; Crookes & Schmidt 1991). Early research conducted by Gardner and Lambert showed integrative motivation played more important role in a formal learning environment than instrumental motivation (Ellis 1997). It is important to note that instrumental motivation is acknowledged as a significant factor in some research, whereas integrative motivation is continually linked to successful second language acquisition. It has been found that students learn a foreign language for more reasons instrumental than integrative. But those inspired by integrative approach are usually found more motivated and so more successful in language acquisition.

Another very important lesson we learned from this study is what students believed with regard to teaching practices, the role of the language and consequently their motivation in the classroom. Students in fact showed a good level of maturity when they suggested ways in which a learner can improve his or her language. They acknowledged the communicative aspect of language which according to them should be reflected in more integrative motivation. The academic aspect nevertheless was prevalent as the majority of students recognized the need for more vocabulary teaching and opportunities to visit the library and conduct research in English. However, their actual practices sometimes fall short of their ambitions. The majority indicated using English for recreational rather than professional purposes. Almost not a single participating student indicated writing in English as regular practice.

Students' beliefs have to be considered genuinely which in this case goes in line with what we proposed in the beginning of the study, i.e. more communicative, task-based classes and more authentic opportunities for them to use their target language. The

benefit of such an approach is two-fold. First, students will be able to relate their acquired knowledge to real-life situations, and second, their knowledge should be reflected in their overall performance. We cannot however ignore the fact that students' writing is especially poor according to IELTS results as well as other indicators. A balance has to be struck between students' communicative aspirations and their deficiencies in writing.

Teachers equipped with this knowledge should be able to make more informed decisions. The current teaching environment does have good points but we anticipate it can be further improved by regularly listening to students and making adjustments accordingly.

Conclusion

We established the status of English in Saudi Arabia and discussed its impact on students' level of language in general and their motivation in particular. We theorized that students' age, gender, parents' education and academic performance could affect their opinions toward different types of motivation. As it happened, only age was of any significance. The impact of gender could not be fully investigated due to the small number of female participants but it would be interesting to carry out a more comprehensive study to find out if gender does affect preferences.

We also touched on what teachers can do in the classroom to maintain high levels of motivation. In our opinion, any type of motivation is a good thing and should encourage students do better.

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