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## **MOTIVATION, ANXIETY AND GENDER: HOW THEY INFLUENCE THE ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE FOR SAUDI STUDENTS STUDYING IN IRELAND**

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### **Abstract**

*Many students from Saudi Arabia go abroad to advance their studies for varied reasons. Ireland is a new experience for most of them. The aim of this study is to investigate how factors such as motivation and anxiety interact with gender issues to affect the acquisition of English as a second language for Saudi students choosing to study in Ireland. The research will investigate the role of motivation, anxiety and gender in the learning process for Saudi students studying English language schools in Ireland. A mixed methods approach will be used for the purposes of this research. In the case of this study, the sequential mixed design where the qualitative approach follows the quantitative will be applied. The data will be collected using questionnaires and follow up interviews. The questionnaire includes 30 multiple choice questions. The questionnaire will be made available online and participants will be given the option to volunteer for an interview by clicking an option and entering their contact details. The research subjects will be Saudi students at university language centers in Ireland.*

## **Keywords**

Second Language Acquisition, Motivation, Anxiety, Gender.

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## **1. Introduction**

Many students from Saudi Arabia go abroad to advance their studies for varied reasons. Ireland is a new experience to most of them. The chapter reviews literature on the issues of acquisition English as a second language for Saudi students choosing to study in Ireland. The students take English because it is not their first language in Saudi Arabia. The paper further reviews literature on the Saudi education system, its history and development.

In addition, it will shed the light on the history of female education. The critical period in first and second language will be discussed briefly since it would help having better understating of the learners. Area of interest in this literature review is the strategies used to teach and learn English language, including the reasons Saudi Arabian students feel they need to study English as second language. It will also discuss motivation and de-motivation in details, as well as anxiety and gender. As a conclusion, the review of literature will recommend future research needs on the topic.

## **2. History of Education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia**

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was established in 1932. As a poor country, there was a small educational system with only 12 schools including 700 students (Alamri, 2011). The dramatic change was 1938 when the oil was discovered. The educational system moved to another stage and people started learning. At first, the education was only for males until 1960 when the first girls' school was established. This was a new era in the history of Saudi educational system. Boys and girls are still separated in all levels of education until now.

### **2.1 Female education in the kingdom of Saudi Arabia**

The government of Saudi Arabia has invested a large amount of money to improve the female educational system in the last few years. In 2011, Princess Nora bin Abdulrahman University was opened. It is considered the largest university for women in the world, with more than 60.000 students in different majors.

— It has been a major priority for the Saudi government to guarantee the right of education to all citizens(AlMunajjed, 2009). In 2005 the late king Abdullah launched the scholarship program. The dream of Saudi students became true. Students of both genders were allowed to

study in different fields in different countries and they were funded. The number of Saudi students studying abroad has been increasing in the last few years reaching to more than 200.000 students.

## **2.2 Saudi Arabia's Education System**

Elyas and Picard (2010) made a study to investigate the education system's history in Saudi Arabia. The study included a discussion of the effects that modern teaching have in teaching English as a second language in the country. The authors examined the education system in Saudi Arabia critically. They discovered a close connection between the modern methods of teaching English language and the traditional practices used in Saudi Arabia. The authors observed that the concept of hybridity could help English teachers and students in Saudi Arabia to identify and solve their challenges in teaching and learning English as a second language. Notably, the study discussed some of the teaching practices that the students and teachers prefer in Saudi Arabia, as well as highlighting how to manage and deal with some of the challenges that they face. This is actually very beneficial because it could help the teachers in Ireland to understand the language learning needs and the best method that suits the Saudi students.

It is important for the tutors to know their students' educational experiences and backgrounds. For instance, not all students learned English in their earlier courses, and therefore, the tutors should know how to deal with such cases. Students who did not learn English before have different learning needs as compared to those that did it before. The students also have different social and emotional needs that may affect their learning. It helps them understand how to deal with the students.

In some cases, students may be the breadwinners in their families, meaning that they have to work after class. Such a student could have learning difficulties due to the responsibilities that they have. Every tutor needs to understand the best acquisition methods for second languages so that they can easily reach all the needs of their students. Motivating the students should be a daily practice so that they can deal with the feelings of anxiety and learn English in a better way.

## **3. Saudi Students in Ireland**

The number of Saudis seeking to study in Ireland has been increasing in the last few years, joining courses like medicine, engineering, linguistics...etc. Most of them are in Dublin,

Cork and Limerick cities. Irish is the first official language, but English is the dominant language. This is one of the reasons that makes Saudis decide to study there. In order to join under or postgraduate study, a certain level must be achieved in the IELTS exam.

The IELTS is an international English language testing system which test English proficiency in speaking, listening, reading and writing skills. Therefore, students have to work hard in order to reach to the level that allows them to do their degree. As the number of Saudis seeking to learn English has notably increased, it would be interesting to investigate the factors that help in the acquisition process and this is what this study is going to cover.

### **3.1 Why Saudi Students?**

Learners of English as a second language are not the same. In other words, it has been shown that the first language or the mother tongue of a learner has its influence on learning English as a second language. For instance, Ebtesam and Baseed have shown that Arabian students have difficulties with the function and usage of the verbs be, do, and have. They believe that this difficulty occurs because of interference since there are no equivalent for these verbs in Arabic ( Ebtesam and Basaeed, 2013).

Moreover, Arabic is spoken as the official language in 22 countries and each country has its own differences. So, it would be interesting to investigate wither Saudis have unique features among other Arabian speakers of different origins when it comes to acquire English as a second language. This is the reason why this study will focus on Saudi students.

## **4. Factors Affecting Acquisition of English as a Second Language**

English is one of the most widely spoken languages in the world. As a result of this, it is very important to understand the factors that affect the acquisition of English as a second language. Given the importance of the English language, there has been a lot of interest in the manner in which second language learners learn it.

According to Carreira (2006), the acquisition of English as a second language depends on various factors which are interdependent. One of the main factors is motivation. The level of motivation a student has is vitally important. Motivation is one of the main factor that leads to a successful learning environment (Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams, 2013).

In other words, how motivated a student is towards wanting to acquire the English language largely affects the progress that student is likely to make. If the student generally has

interest in learning new languages in general and especially English as second language, then that student stands a higher chance of making significant progress in learning English as a second language. Such a student will learn the second language much faster and more easily compared to students who are not motivated (Carreira, 2006). Motivated students tend to have more opportunities of being successful learners. Learners who want to achieve goals such as graduation or any other purpose are more likely to succeed (Yule, 2014).

Moreover, anxiety has a large effect on the learning process. Students who are anxious will feel uncomfortable and afraid to participate in the class (Ni, 2010). Ebtesam and Basaeed have mentioned that relaxation has a great influence on the learner. Also, they highlight that motivation enables students to work harder without complaining (Ebtesam and Basaeed, 2013).

Generally, motivation can be intrinsic or extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation is driven by personal desire to achieve certain goals in life while extrinsic motivation is driven by outward factors such as rewards for engaging in certain behavior or achieving certain set goals. It has been determined that both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation helps enhance the process of learning a second language. For the learner who is intrinsically motivated, their desire to not just to achieve personal goals but also to successfully learn a new language in order to enhance his/her chances of learning the language successfully.

For the extrinsically motivated learner, the desire to improve one's language skills and subsequently be in a better position to communicate with peers or find a job also contributes to that learner's successful learning of the second language (Carreira, 2006). The intrinsic motivators are the desire to achieve personal goals and learn a new language successfully. On the other hand, the extrinsic motivators are finding a job and communicating with peers. As has been noted earlier, it is indeed true that both these motivators will work to enhance the learning of the second language and are therefore highly recommended. It is also true that lack of such motivations, on the contrary, lower the chances of learners successfully learning a second language.

## **5. Gender and Language Learning**

Öztürk and Gürbüz (2013) carried out a study to ascertain how gender connects to motivation and anxiety. The study aimed to investigate how gender affects the acquisition of foreign language, both in speaking and learning. The authors observed that the female students

under study had a higher rate of motivation in learning English as a foreign language as compared to the male students. The study showed that the female students were more anxious while learning as compared to the male students in the English class. Their study concluded that the female students had a higher rate of anxiety, but a lower one in motivation as compared to the male students.

Some of the gender-based differences in English learning affect the academic outcomes and achievements of students according to a study conducted in Saudi Arabia. The rates at which female students enroll into the universities keep increasing rapidly. One observation was that the medical students find learning difficult because English is the only way of learning in the entire college. The difficulty occurs among the male and in the female students. The study's aim was to test whether gender affected the general academic performance of the medical students in pre-clinic. Female students had a higher grade in English as a second language.

In addition, the female students had better results in English than in the medical sciences. However, the female students had higher academic performance in the pre-clinical studies. In conclusion, Al-Mously, Salem and Al-Hamdan (2013) suggest that it is important for all Saudi students to go through English proficiency tests to improve the English proficiency among female and male students. The tutors need a modern method of teaching English as a second language to increase students' general academic performance.

For many decades, researchers reported common problems in language learning manifested differently among the men and women. Second language learning can be difficult for some foreign learners. English students who come from countries where English is not the mother tongue face learning difficulties. Park and French (2013) argue that most colleges and universities dictate that English as a compulsory subject in the curriculum. The students who start learning English at their early age find it easier to cope in college. However, it becomes difficult for advanced students who did not start it early enough. Learning involves reading, listening, writing and speaking. Since these countries do not emphasize the importance of English, both male and female students find it tough when they progress in college and English speaking becomes a problem.

Gender is one major factor that influences how students perform in class, especially with the effect of motivation and anxiety. It clearly important that there is a need for further research on gender, anxiety and motivation in foreign language learning.

## **6. Pilot Study**

In order to test out result and gain possible insights about the main study, a pilot study was conducted with two Saudi students, one being a male, and the other female. The female participant also volunteered to take part in an interview. Conducting a pilot study is perceived to increase the chances of having a successful study, since it serves as a miniature version of the main study which will be conducted (Hundley & Van Teijlingen, 2001, p. 1).

For this research, the pilot study utilized questionnaires followed by an interview. Both participants were asked if they would volunteer in the interview, with the female respondent agreeing. The same order will be also applied for the main study.

The questionnaires covered selected details related to the study. These included the length of time the student had been in Ireland, their expectation of Ireland, their reaction to studying in a mixed gender class, how the classroom environment in Ireland makes them feel, as well as the main factors for their motivation and anxiety in the classroom. As for the data, Microsoft Excel was chosen to analyze the data due to the ease of use and its capability to produce the necessary output such as graphs. For ease of interpretation, bar charts would be used for displaying the data of the study. Six questions were asked to the volunteer during the interview, with her answers being transcribed after.

### **6.1 Results of the pilot study**

#### **A. The questionnaire:**

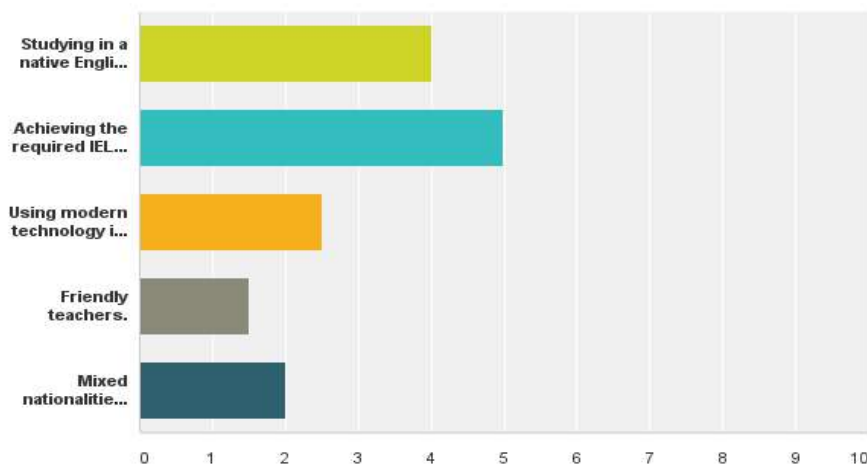
As mentioned in the earlier section, the pilot study included one participant from each gender. Both are studying the English language in language schools in Ireland. The male participant was 25 years old while the female was 21. Both of them have never studied in a mixed gender classroom before. As for their preferences, the male student preferred to study in a mix gender classroom, while the female does preferred a single gender classroom. She mentioned that she feels uncomfortable when working with a Saudi male, which was not the case for the male participant.

Interestingly, both respondents felt comfortable when working with non-Saudi students of a different gender. There was a disagreement on the negative affection of the mixed gender classrooms. The male student disagreed with the fact that a mixed gender classroom negatively affected his acquisition of English language skills. On the other hand, the female student said

that it has negatively affected her learning. In terms of positive affection, the female disagreed while the male had no opinion.

The female participant preferred a teacher of the same gender, with the male stating that he has no opinion on the matter. Interestingly, they both agreed that they feel happier sitting beside a non-Saudi student of a different gender. Moreover, they strongly agreed that the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) served a great role in motivating them. Also, they both indicated that preferred studying in a mixed nationalities classroom, because they perceived that this is one of the factors that would help in motivating them. They both refused the idea of studying in a Saudi only classroom. Lastly, they both thought that modern technology plays an important role in motivating them towards learning English.

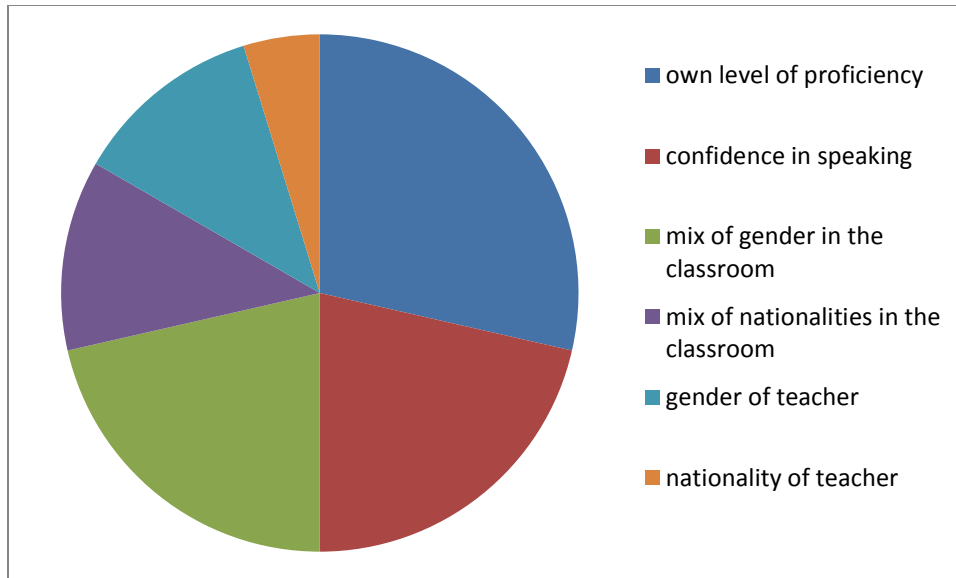
When ranking the factors that motivates Saudi students who would be currently studying in English in Ireland, with 1 being the most motivating and 5 being the least, the results were as follows: 1) Achieving the required IELTS result; 2) Studying in a native English speaking country; 3) Use of modern technology; 4) Mixed nationalities classrooms; and 5) Friendly teacher.



**Figure 1:** Motivational factors for Saudi student in classroom

In terms of ranking the factors contributing to anxiety with 1 being the main source and 6 being the minimal source of anxiety in the classroom, the following results were obtained: 1) Own level of proficiency; 2) Confidence needed when speaking; 3) Mixture of gender in the classroom; 4) Mixed nationalities in the classroom; 5) Gender of the teacher; and 6) Nationality of the teacher.





**Figure 2:** Anxiety factors for Saudi student in classroom

## 6.2 Discussion

The pilot study indicates that the students are not comfortable learning beside others in the same class if they are from Saudi and they are of different genders. Female students even preferred to be in a single gender class. However, the students showed a sense of ease and comfort when learning beside a non-Saudi student of a different gender. This extends to the preference for teachers, although the female student preferred to have a teacher of the same gender.

As for the sources of motivation, the participants ranked the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) as playing a great role in motivating them.

In terms of the factor of “studying in a native English speaking country”, the learners gave 4 out of 5 as their rating for the importance of this factor. This shows that they have chosen to study abroad because they believe that it can contribute towards their learning of the English language.

The use of modern technology is also an important factor for motivating students. Modern equipment like computers for example, would motivate learners because they have programs which assist students to pronounce words correctly. The modern computer keyboard also has a word predictor that can help learners correct their spelling mistakes.

The two students are in strong agreement that being in a mixed nationality classroom increases their motivation and lowers their anxiety in the classroom. From the data collected in the questionnaires, they are not comfortable in a Saudi only classroom.

The factor of “level of friendliness of teachers” was rated as the lowest of the 5 factors. However, this factor is also important as it helps the learners feel at ease in the classroom. Unfriendly teachers put the students under pressure and this may have a negative influence on their acquisition of the language.

### **6.3 Sources of anxiety in the English language classroom**

The factors were rated in a scale of 6, with 1 being the main source of anxiety in the classroom and 6 being the least. “Own level of proficiency” was the highest source of anxiety as shown from the data. The learners had felt anxious about their ability to communicate in English. This was followed by “confidence in speaking” with the two students stating that they were anxious when participating in class, giving presentations or when making performances in front of the whole class. This level of anxiety appeared to increase with the increasing difficulty of questions. The next factor of “mix of gender in the classroom” came in third, since both students felt that mixed gender classrooms raised their level of anxiety because there were topics that would be difficult to discuss in a mixed gender classroom. “Mix of nationalities in the classroom” came in fourth, but the students mentioned that they were less anxious in a mixed nationality classroom compared to a Saudi only classroom. In fact, they thought of mixed nationalities classrooms as factor which helped to motivate them. The factor “gender of the teacher” came in fifth, with students saying that they felt more comfortable with a teacher of the same gender. Lastly, the factor “nationality of the teacher” was the least source of anxiety according to the two students.

### **6.4 Interview analysis**

The female student said that she feels very anxious when told to work along a male student especially from her native Saudi. This corroborates the results from the questionnaire discussed in the previous section. Gender appeared to affect the level of motivation of students, with mixing male and female individuals increasing their anxiety as well as negatively impacting their learning.

Another result from the interview was that the student mentioned how she enjoys learning the English language because her teachers are friendly. This is one of the factors that had not

been ranked as a major contributing factor from earlier, but it appears that friendly teachers also increase the motivation for their students.

The use of modern technology was also cited as one of the factors that increased the motivation to learn for the student.

Living in a friendly community also emerged as a positive factor that helped to improve the participant's ability to learn the English language. The participant believed that the Irish people were very friendly, and that they were able to accommodate her for conversations when she would need to practice. So, it can be said that friendly communities would also positively influence one's ability towards learning a language. So, in order to gain better understanding of this matter, a question about the positive influence of friendly communities will be added to the interviews questions.

## **7. Conclusion**

It can be concluded that there has been research on the issue of the factors that affect the learning of English as a second languages by students. However, most of the researches focus on other students and not necessarily those from Saudi Arabia. In fact, the study is approaching the subject of acquisition of English as a second language from the point of view of the Arabian students drawn specifically from Saudi Arabia and the role of motivation, anxiety and gender in the learning process.

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