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TEACHING ENGLISH AT UNDER GRADUATE LEVEL IN AN EFL CONTEXT: A STUDY OF SAUDI ARABIAN STUDENTS IN PRINCE SATTAM BIN ABDULAZIZ UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to discuss the language problems of students who are in the EFL contexts. Saudi Arabian students are considered for the present study as they are EFL students. The paper throws light on the differences between ESL and EFL contexts, how the language is treated differently in these contexts, and the environment and the levels of motivation of the students. The paper also provides some key solutions and recommendations by the researcher.

KEYWORDS:*EFL (English as Foreign Language), ESL (English as Second Language), motivation, context.*

INTRODUCTION

After learning and teaching English for thirty five years in India which has an ESL context, the researcher got an opportunity to teach English in Saudi Arabia. Being a lecturer of English in Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University, Al Kharj, he has conducted a small scale research through questionnaires and face to face interviews. The subject of the study is the English language issues of the students, their personal opinions and motivation levels to learn the language. The researcher has also included his personal observations from the classroom teachings in this paper. In order to obtain accurate information, he has prepared a questionnaire which includes 12 'yes or no' questions and an open question to seek the suggestions of the students to learn and use English in a better way.

The Difference between ESL and EFL Contexts:

English as Second Language (ESL) differs from English as Foreign Language (EFL) in many ways. The students in ESL context study and use English from an early age. Even the society encourages the students to communicate in English in many situations. For example, India has ESL context where students study in English medium schools and speak Englishdaily. The Indiancontext is such that the society respects people who can communicate in English. The business language is undoubtedly English. Even interviews are conducted in English and the results are reported in it. But EFL context is different. The students in EFL context are not introduced to English in their school. These students use only their mother tongue to study and to communicate. The society plays no role in making a student learn English. Even the business language would be their mother tongue. For example, the Saudi Arabian students study in the Arabic medium and use Arabic in their work places. A few schools do have English, but it is taught in Arabic by the Arab teachers who are not proficient in English. The student finds it easy to fulfil all his needs in the society by using Arabic.

In the ESL context, students know spelling system and use English regularly for their academic and personal needs. Here, almost all students can understand the teacher who is speaking in English and a good many students can respond to the teacher in English. Some

unfortunate students who studied in their mother tongue may find it hard to understand and respond in English. But because of the continuous exposure, within no time they start understanding English, and in a year or two start using it effectively.

But in an EFL context, students donot know the language at all. So the teacher has to start from the scratch. Even if some students pick up some language, they end with alphabet and minimum vocabulary. This is not sufficient to understand or speak the language.

In the ESL contexts, students would have high levels of motivation to learn English. English is both a need and a luxury for them. They get good jobs and are respected depending upon their communicative competence in English.But in EFL, students would have low levels of motivation as they do not see the use value of English and most of them may feel that it is a needless burden for them.

LANGUAGE TEACHING IN EFL AND ESL CONTEXTS

Teaching English for ten years in India offered the researcher many challenges like preparing students for competitive examinations and making them career ready. But when he started teaching English in Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University it posed a new set of challenges which he rarely faced previously in his career.

The researcher used more words and less body language in ESL. Lecture was sufficient in most of the classes. But in EFL context, more body language was used as they are beginners and more student participation was required than the teacher's involvement.

In the ESL context, the teacher can comfortably assume that the students have attained at least intermediate level in the language. But in the EFL context, most of the students would be at the beginning level. So teaching English to them would require new strategies like introducing spelling systems, pronunciation system, etc, before making sentences.In this context what Intakhab says is quite enlightening. "In Saudi Arabia, since Saudis speak their native language at home and during their interaction with their friends, peers, and classmates, there is a bleak chance to learn English through day-to-day interaction." (Intakhab, 71). So, the teacher needs to provide motivation, language inputs and encourage the students to use the language.

As the students are already motivated in ESL, the teacher need not spend much time in motivating the students to learn the language. But in the EFL context, a good amount of time has to be allocated to motivate the students to learn English as they have low levels of motivation. Sometimes,the teacher even faces resistance from the students to learn the language. At that point of time, the researcher used to go beyond the lesson and make the students understand the role of English as a global language. Still, some students who are not planning to leave Saudi for any purpose would only pretend to be interested just to pass exams and be done with them.

Results of the Survey Conducted

Prof. Intakhab says, "In spite of a good planning, curriculum, textbooks, qualified teachers and effective administration, the teaching-learning process sometimes seems to be futile when the actual skill development is not up to the mark. However, there could have been greater change had a systematic analysis been made in the past by exploring the factors responsible for such a low level performance. In this connection, an investigation may be proved to be quite helpful towards the finding out the actual causes, and evolution of some fruitful and compatible strategies of teaching English as a Foreign Language in a second language environment." (Intakhab, 69)

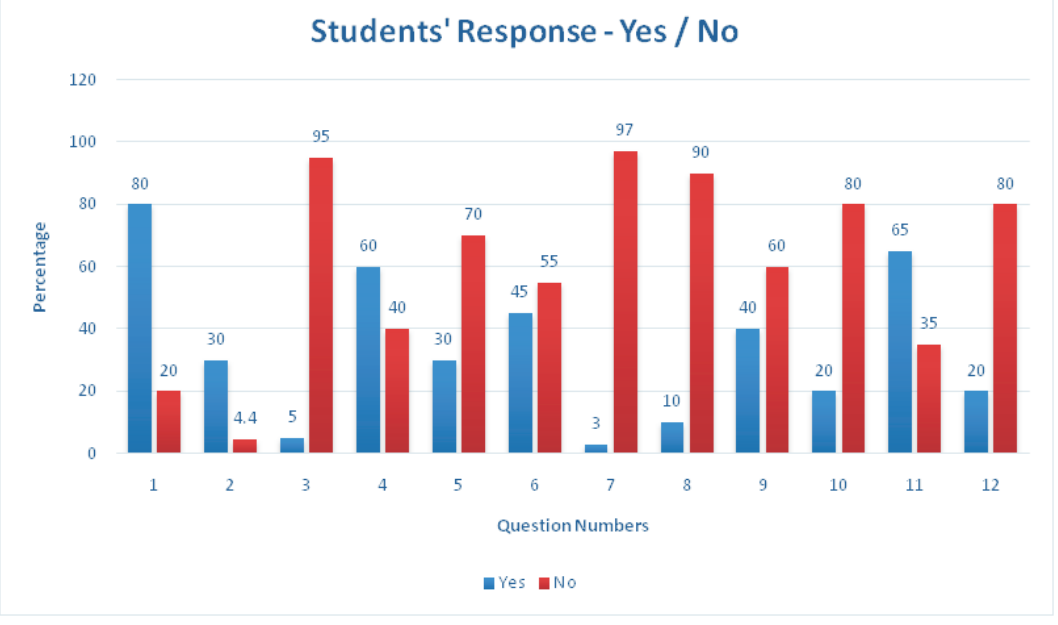
Following Intakhab's recommendation, the researcher conducted a small scale survey. Along with oral interviews, a questionnaire was administered to the students in the university to understand their perspective on English language learning and teaching. The questionnaire was given to 300 students and responses were obtained. The following are the questions and their responses:

PERSONAL OPINIONS OF STUDENTS:

1.Do you think you should learn English? (Yes / No)
Students' Response:Yes- 80% No 20%
2.Do you benefit in any way if you know good English? (Yes / No)
Students' Response: Yes- 30% No 70%

3.Do you have chance to learn English and use it in your daily life? (Yes / No)
Students' Response:Yes- 5% No 95%
4.Did you study English in your school? (Yes / No)
Students' Response:Yes- 60% No 40%
5.Do you support the idea of introducing English medium schools in Saudi Arabia? (Yes / No)
Students' Response:Yes- 30% No 70%
Motivation Levels of Students:
6.Does the government motivate you to learn English? (Yes / No)
Students' Response:Yes- 45% No 55%
7.Does your society support you to use English in your daily life? (Yes / No)
Students' Response:Yes- 03% No 97%
8.Do you have self-motivation to learn and use English? (Yes / No)
Students' Response:Yes- 10% No 90%
9.Do you think you should use English at the work place? (Yes / No)
Students' Response:Yes- 40% No 60%
10.Do you encourage others to learn and use English in Saudi Arabia? (Yes / No)
Students' Response:Yes- 20% No 80%
Language Problems of Students:
11. Do you find English difficult to write as you have to write it from left to right? (Yes / No)
Studets' Response:Yes- 65% No 35%
12.Do you think you can differentiate the following sounds of English?
/t/ – /d/ /d/- /dh/ /p/-/b/
Students' Response:Yes- 20% No 80%
In your opinion, what can be done to make the Saudi students learn and use English?

Students' Response:1. Better environment can be created for using English in the campus. 2. Learning resources should be increased. 3. Books should be given freely to study.



Graph 1: Students'Response to the Questions

Even though many reforms were introduced in the field of education, English learning has been slow. In

the university, after passing level 1 courses such as Grammar, reading and writing, the students can barely converse in English. According to Alshumaimeri (2003) "Teachers have pointed out that students leave the secondary stage without the ability to carry out a short conversation." So, even in the schools the same story continues.

SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above responses, the following solutions and recommendations are made:

1.The format of the English question papers should be changed completely. In the existing system, students only tick the correct answer from multiple choice questions. In many papers, there are no theoretical questions at all. So students can only read English but they cannot write. So, many subjective questions have to be introduced in the question paper so that students can both read and write in English.

2.Greater awareness has to be created among students regarding the importance of learning English. English language must be shown to the students in the international context.

3.Seminars and talks should be organized in English instead of Arabic. As the students listen to more talks and attend more seminars organized in English, they learn and use English faster.

4.Awards like gold medals can be given to the students who score the highest marks in English subjects.

5.Co-curricular activities, like public speakingand essay writing, can be conducted in English.

6.Communication from the university such as circulars, time tables, calendars and schedules can be sent in English along with Arabic.

CONCLUSION

As there are many challenges for the teachers and learners, the management can support them for a better performance. If the above solutions and recommendations are followed seriously, there can be a change in the attitude of students towards English. As there is a huge difference between EFL and ESL contexts, the teachers should be as patient as possible in teaching English. The difference between various sounds of English should be made known properly for the better pronunciation of students. Concrete steps should be taken to improve the motivation levels of students.

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