

TEACHING ENGLISH IN THE HEALTHCARE SECTOR IN THE GULF REGION: CAN THE EFL/ESP PROGRAMS MEET THE EXPECTATIONS?

Dr. Abdellah Benahnia*

*Casablanca: Morocco
English Language Center Director
King Fahad Medical City, Riyadh,
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
Email: abdul14v2@yahoo.com

Abstract

Regardless of how much money the Gulf countries governments are pouring into the field of education, the teaching of English as a foreign language is still facing too many hurdles. Outsourcing the EFL/ESP business seems to be a temporary solution for many universities and educational institutions, yet the whole process and the concept of relying on others to carry this mission brings more challenges than long term benefits. Therefore, the outcome is still weak compared to the expenditure, and the learners' proficiency in English remains insufficient and below expectations for both male and female individuals in the Gulf region. This study is an attempt to answer the following main questions: (1) what are the challenges that the Gulf countries face in teaching EFL & ESP? (2). How can the Gulf countries governments overcome these challenges? The study will also look into the planning of outsourcing the EFL/ESP business, the preparation of teachers, motivation on the part of the learners, and the assessment techniques and to find out if those factors are among the major problems that render EFL/ESP programs unable to meet the expectations and deliver as expected.

Keywords: EFL Challenges, Teaching English policies, English in the Arab world, English in hospitals

INTRODUCTION

Although tremendous efforts have been exerted to improve the teaching-learning process of English, EFL/ESP programs still fail to deliver as expected, and the EFL/ESP learners' proficiency in English remains inadequate and below expectation. This paper investigates the challenges encountered in teaching English in the Gulf area.

If you pay a short visit to the old market in the heart of Riyadh called '*Assawiqa*' (in Arabic, meaning the small market), or the Bazar area called '*Dirah*' (in Arabic, meaning one's neighborhood), or the *Matrah old Souq* (old market) in Mascat in Oman, you will most likely run into many expatriates that you can easily recognize through their western way of clothing (most citizens in the Gulf area wear a '*Thawb*' a long white garment covering all the body, while women wear a '*abaya*' which is a long black garment and a '*niqab*' which is a black veil that covers both hair and face). If you happen to ask any of those expats about his or her profession, don't be surprised to get to know that the majority of them are English language teachers. This is simply because some of the most lucrative EFL/ESP teaching positions in the world can be found in the Middle East and Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE) represent the most common customer. However, due to cultural differences, state schools do not hire native-English speakers and you can rarely find a native teacher in those schools. Moreover, surprisingly English as a second language is a required

subject in the Gulf countries national curriculum, fluency in that language is still far attainable. However, competency in English seems essential for young male and female in those countries to secure almost any decent job, which means that there is a constant demand for native-English teachers in colleges, higher institutions, universities and private language schools. Besides attractive salaries, most teachers are either provided with decent apartments, or they get a housing allowance enabling them to find a suitable apartment or a villa. In some cases, water and electricity are covered by the sponsor. In addition to that, the teaching schedule is much lighter than what a language teacher finds in other European or Asian countries such as in Germany, Korea, or Japan. Also, the number of students per class is very reasonable in comparison to those countries. Further more, do not get surprised if you meet someone who taught for twenty years or more in those country, because though the weather is one of the hardest in the world, culture, cheap oil, cheap cost of living, as well as geographic and religious locations remain a source of curiosity and attraction.

SOCIO-CULTURAL BACKGROUND

The domain of EFL/ESP teaching is to an extent bound to the socio-cultural aspect of the Gulf countries society. Until recent years, learning English was viewed as something that should be avoided amongst religious people (such as in Saudi Arabia). It was considered (for some people) as '*lughatu al khawajat*' (the language of westerners). According to Fawwaz AbdelHaq and Oqlah Smadi (2007), "there is a sense of fear among the Saudis that the use of English entails Westernization, detachment to the country, and a source of corruption to their religious commitment" (p.1). However, the results of his study reveal that the use of English does not make the participants Westernized, neither their national identity gets weakened, nor their religious commitment becomes corrupted. For that trend, focus should be only on the learning of Arabic and religious studies. As the society was moving fast into the era of the imported advanced technology, as well as the great demand on skillful people who must be equipped with considerable knowledge of English, most job seekers started to realize that possessing the minimum working English proficiency is a must. Since the Ministry of Education in each of the Gulf countries is still unable to fulfill that requirement, this itself opened the door for the private schools and institutions and foreign language providers to fill this vacuum and supply the market with all sorts of imported English courses and programs. Those who already have a job and started to notice that knowing some English is vital to their survival and promotion, started to seek refuge in these private institutions for evening courses. Moreover, unlike before, many jobs became available for Saudi women as well. Therefore, learning English became a must among women not only because of the labor market requirement, but it started to become a prestige and a symbol of being educated (see Benahnia, 2012). Many private institutions were specifically designed for women seeking EFL/ESP learning. However, just like men in the Gulf area, women in those countries face difficulties as well in acquiring the English language. Some of those difficulties might be linked to the linguistic nature of the mother tongue language (MTL) of these learners.

Linguistic Background and Challenges

Unlike the Anglo-Saxon scripts and others, Arabic language seems unique in its form, shape, and intonation. Since reading Arabic requires right-left eye movement, this habit puts The Arab learners of English in constant difficulties using left-right eye movement. Similarly, the aspect of writing in English requires not only left-right movement, but probably in thinking as well. As far as pronunciation is concerned, Gulf learners find difficulty in releasing sounds that do not have an equivalent in Arabic such as the sound "P" (substituted by "b"), "v" (substituted by "f"). For example "personal" is pronounced as "*bersonal*", and "very" is pronounced as "*fery*". Also the "affricate tch" and the "fricative sh". Gulf learners often substitute "tch" with the "sh" sound because it is much easier for them. In addition to that, Gulf learners also find difficulty in differentiating between "dark l" like in the word "*bell*", and "clear l" such in the word "*bill*". They tend to over use the "dark l" or what is known as "emphatic l". Socio-linguists such as my previous professor of phonology Prof. Kaddouri, advocates that this has something to do with the climate around the speaker. In other words, people living in extremely hot areas tend to use the "emphatic l" instead of the "clear l". Therefore, they tend to keep the muscles of their larynx relaxed instead of tense. A very strong evidence for that is the paste and the flow of the language in the Mediterranean area, Europe, or Latin America, such as Spanish (which is *muy rapida*: very quick), and Arabic used in Morocco, in contrast to the Arabic used in the Middle-East. In fact, Moroccan Arabic borrowed many words from French and Spanish, and the flow of the language somehow is affected by those languages as well (see Benahnia, 1992). Let us not forget that Arabic is quite different from English in its phonological, morphological mechanism, syntactic, and grammatical rules. To sum up this issue, we can say that in addition to the above linguistic and para-linguistic difficulties, speaking, and spelling remain some of the most apparent and common challenges for EFL learners in almost all Gulf countries.

MAIN CHALLENGES FACING EFL AND ESP

1.1- EFL Challenges

Given the above socio-cultural and socio-linguistic factors, as well as the general socio-economic situation in the whole region, we can say that regardless of all the mentioned difficulties and challenges, EFL teaching/learning is quantitatively a booming and flourishing business field in the Gulf area. However, as quality is concerned, statistics and research findings show that the learning outcomes of EFL still seem below expectations. The university graduates do not seem to have mastered the language though some majors were provided solely via English as medium of instruction. Nowadays you can easily notice that most universities across the Gulf countries are operating a foundation program called 'Preparatory Year' program (PY). This program is mainly geared towards preparing students willing to embark on a science major such as medicine or nursing. Since the number of enrollees each year is huge, universities are unable to run the business of EFL or ESP on their own. They rather get the whole business outsourced to one company or more such as the case of the main universities in Saudi Arabia such as King Saud University, Imam University, and Princess Noura University in Riyadh only. The number of teachers needed in each of these universities goes beyond 200 teachers in order to cover the need of EFL or ESP teaching. In order to maintain business with universities, EFL/ESP companies try to get help from various recruiters in order to keep up with the demand and supply requirement. However, the outsourcing bidding process, and the formation committees dealing with the tender may involve members who are not specialized in the EFL/ESP field, or unable to even speak the language! The reality being such, and bearing in mind that managers at these institutions insist on having native speakers preferably (if not only), do not be surprised to find novice (sometimes unqualified) teachers on board. To teach these programs a teacher is normally required to have:

- a Bachelor degree in any subject.
- an English Teaching certificate (normally a 'CELTA' or equivalent); and
- about two years of experience or more.

These requirements are looked at very closely when it comes to a near-native teacher, but for native teachers, a teaching certificate is often welcome. Having said that, the outcome is often weak because teachers who did not actually sit for a BA degree in English, and did not go for a Masters degree in TESOL or applied linguistics where they are exposed to classroom management courses; teaching methods; language acquisition; real syntax and phonology courses, might definitely meet serious problems when it comes to class control, deep grammatical explanations and so on. Summing up the efforts and knowledge of nearly six years studies of a BA and an MA in one month studies in order to get a teaching certificate (probably on-line only) has, with no doubt, negative consequences on both teachers and learners as well. A very embarrassing incident took place where a teacher has no clue about his or her own language grammar or syntax. A teacher once said that: "...it was the first time in my life to discover that there is such a thing in the English grammar called 'the perfect tense'." Then, what would you expect?!!!

Besides universities and colleges, there are also private local small English Institutes as well as some international language schools which provide EFL and ESP courses. Some of these schools provide language courses in the form of training that is given as a package to local companies and banks to either boost the language proficiency of their staff, or train them on a specific skill. Due to the smaller teaching staff at these schools, teachers will often have more responsibility. Private institutes tend to be more flexible with regards to tailoring courses for their clients. Most local customers run to these schools or renown institutions in order to get the TOEFL or IELTS international examinations for various reasons.

1.2- ESP Challenges in Hospitals and Healthcare Facilities

Since some of the teachers coming to the Gulf area do not hold more than a CELTA (certificate of teaching). In some cases, the native teachers' major is not in the field of teaching English, or not even in a related field. In this case, it is hard to believe that the majority of those teachers can successfully teach ESP courses which require not only talents, but also subject matter mastery and knowledge. If many of those teachers ironically face difficulties teaching grammar or syntax, obviously, it wouldn't be fruitful to assign to them a course of Medical Terminology, or Effective Business Writing, let alone other scientific related courses. Filling the gap for such ESP courses with general English (EFL) teachers is the real dilemma which ultimately affects the learner's outcome in most healthcare facilities.

The above points are generalizations based on the author's encounters and past experience in the Middle East. They can vary (greatly) with different employers and their academic approach and set objectives in carrying the EFL/ESP mission. As far as teachers' hiring is concerned, there are three different types of English teaching jobs available in the Gulf region: Direct contracts are available for Men and Women; and contracts through recruiters or agencies. For most contracts, teachers do not need to be native speakers. All

of the contracts can be expected to provide flights tickets and an accommodation provision (either an allowance or a provided apartment). Qualifications and experience are negotiable (in some cases); however, the most commonly recognized English teaching qualification in this region is the CELTA (Certificate for English Teaching to Adults). If someone is interested in teaching in the Gulf area and has not taught before, a CELTA is one place to start. To do a CELTA you do not need to be a native speaker. contracts require some type of experience. This experience could be gained in the home country of the teacher home such as teaching in programs for immigrants or local English teaching initiatives. In other words, novice teachers often look for logical solutions to overcome the challenges:

1.3- Insufficient Preparation Of Teachers

It is very surprising to see hundreds of male and female university graduates with a Bachelors degree in English in some of the countries in the Gulf region, yet they are still facing challenges to be hired as EFL or ESP teachers! Bearing in mind that there is a great need for those teachers not only in large cities and towns and remote rural areas and villages as well. They are also needed to work as English trainers in main hospitals. One of the obvious reasons is simply that universities and colleges usually prefer to hire someone with at least one or two years of experience. With lack of experience, and no idea about classroom management, fresh graduates face difficulties in getting a job in their field. On top of that, various recruiting companies and agents are furnishing their clients with teachers from all over the world and mainly with native teachers or near native teachers of English at all levels. The major question here is: Where and how can these fresh graduates get some experience or a chance to practice teaching? For this reason, the healthcare sector is always in need of trained professional teachers capable of delivering ESP courses related to medical care or nursing. However, let us be frank here, one of the main issues in most work places in the Gulf area is that the majority of young graduates would prefer to get a managerial position instead of doing the actual teaching. Also, theoretically speaking, teacher training centers are supposed to supply the need of teachers in every subject not only English. However, it does not seem to be the case in almost every country in the Gulf area.

1.4- Lack Of Motivation On The Part Of The Learners

Since the community of learners in the healthcare facilities is in general from the hospital staff or employees, motivation seems to be a problem among those learners. One of the common impressions among EFL and ESP teachers is that those learners do not seem to be motivated and not willing to do homework. Some teachers believe that employees feel secured about their job position, and therefore they do not feel obliged to make any extra efforts to learn. Some researchers such as Abdelaziz Mohammed (2011) believe that this has something to do with their sense of "fear" of this foreign language: "Through my long experience in learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), I found that so many students in Saudi Arabia feared to learn English. They were very anxious and demotivated." (ibid: 2011) In other words, bad habits and lack of learning skills and strategies seem to be carried with them even in higher level of their schooling be it college, university, or even after getting a job (such as the case in hospitals). The thirst for knowledge and the eagerness for library search seem very rare. In some scholarship programs such as in KFMC in Saudi Arabia, the candidates who are eligible to go abroad and complete their studies, are highly motivated, while the others who know that for any particular reason may not be allowed to travel, they seem to be less motivated and even become disruptive to their peers. In other words, education is not viewed as a vehicle towards life and career betterment. The question that poses itself then is: Shouldn't the teachers encourage and help their students to love their subject matter and overcome their learning weaknesses and barriers?

1.5- Need For Assessment Techniques

According to many researchers in language teaching/learning, testing remains one of the most important factors in the process of language acquisition and learning. In other words, it is not only an effective tool for continuous assessment and measuring achievement, but it is a vital tool for screening learners and checking their level of proficiency and progress. Many studies have also shown that lack of validity, reliability of tests and assessment tools can easily impede the progress of learners. In other words, inflating scores, and giving non-challenging tests or quizzes does not help the learners nor does it help the teacher in his or her task either. Students in the Gulf countries tend to depend on memorization as a learning style (bound to their mother tongue linguistic learning style), and therefore, they must be trained and exposed to more universal learning styles and strategies. They also need to be challenged.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Findings of this study reveal that inadequate planning of outsourcing the EFL/ESP business, the formation of the committees dealing with the bidding or tender process for outsourcing this business, insufficient

preparation of teachers in order to appropriately and professionally train employees in main hospitals, lack of motivation on the part of the learners, and weak or old-dated assessment techniques are among the major problems that render EFL/ESP programs unable to meet the expectations and deliver as expected. Therefore, it is highly recommended that close attention must be given to local novice English teachers and fresh local university graduates. They must be given a chance to practice teaching with appropriate training and continuous education opportunities. Moreover, the business of EFL/ESP should be assigned to specialized people in the field, and unnecessary interference from other departments who have no clue about the nature of language teaching/learning should be avoided. Furthermore, students must realize the benefits of continuous education and gaining knowledge, and they must also perceive the value of training as a vehicle to life, and career betterment.

FURTHER SUGGESTIONS FOR RESEARCH

Assessing the real outcome of EFL and ESP programs carried out via outsourced service providers can be an area of interest for further research. A research can also be done to see the impact of low level of English proficiency on patients and co-workers in healthcare facilities in this region.

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