
Effects of Culture Shock on Second Language Learners Studying Abroad and Their Willingness to Communicate

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Received: December 8, 2024 Accepted: January 17, 2025 Published: March 18, 2025

doi: 10.5296/jsss.v12i1.22720

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5296/jsss.v12i1.22720>

Abstract

The current study seeks to analyze the experiences and interactions of English second language learners in a foreign environment, particularly focusing on the culture shock phenomenon to enhance understanding of their perspectives and their eagerness to engage with native speakers of the language. The research utilized recorded interviews with seven English second language learners from Saudi Arabia, who participated in language courses in the United States to prepare for enrollment in their preferred fields of study. The information derived from the findings reveals several recurring themes throughout the interviews that confirm certain expectations prior to their arrival, highlight conflicts with American culture, and illustrate the differences between what they anticipated and the symptoms of culture shock, as well as showcasing the learners' efforts to adjust to the target culture.

Keywords: culture shock, communication, second language, education, language shock

1. Introduction

Education is a multifaceted field that researchers cannot stop asking questions about. To claim that the boundaries of the field are all explored and discussed, researchers need research to prove such a claim. Education is thought of as a social activity and as evidence of the civility of societies and thought of as a business or even a multibillion-dollar business (Barnett, 1997).

No matter how we think of education, we cannot mention the term without mentioning the students, who give the term "education" its depth and spread. Since the dawn of time, students have been moving around this world for different purposes. They have moved to

gain knowledge, to collect samples, to work and to get acquainted with different experiences. The moving of students for different purposes has not stopped and there is no sign that it will stop any time soon. The movement of students around the world has fueled many fields with content to conduct research and come out with theories, rules, and results. The students' travels and movement around the world were and have been discussed in the fields of social science, politics, psychology, business, and applied linguistics.

The reason all these fields have studied students and their education is because students are humans ruled by many laws of different kinds such as international official laws, psychological laws, religious laws, and spiritual laws. All these laws have made students creatures that affect and get affected by the environment around them.

With the above discussion in mind, this paper is going to discuss one of the aspects that students get affected by when they move or get hosted in a host culture and this aspect is the aspect of "culture shock." When we say culture shock, we mean the relation of the term to students and the world of education and the interaction of the students with moving for education. The term culture shock is used widely in the field of education, but interestingly, the term was originally coined in the field of anthropology by the renowned anthropologist Kalervo Oberg in the 1950s (Țaulean, 2020).

In the paper, it has been mentioned that a discussion of the term "culture shock" will be presented in relation to education and students. More discussion on the nature of students and their background will be presented in the review of literature and method of the research. This study will be limited to the discussion of the term "culture shock" in relation to education and language learning. However, some discussion will be presented in the review regarding the term "culture shock" and its different uses in different fields to make sure that the term is situated properly in this paper.

2. Literature Review

In this section, some topics related to culture shock and education will be discussed. Further, some definitions of terms and concepts will be provided so that the scope and limitations of the study are clarified and highlighted. The topics that are going to be discussed here include but are not limited to the term "culture shock," cultural adoption, acculturation, students' mobility, cultural immersion, language learning and culture, language learning and inclusion, culture shock in education, and first and target culture.

The first concept that is going to be discussed here is the concept of culture in relation to education. In general, culture is defined as all the ways of life including arts, beliefs, and institutions of a population that are passed down from generation to generation (Mironenko & Sorokin, 2018). There is a more extended definition that includes more aspects of human behavior, which suggests that culture is a concept that encompasses the social behavior, institutions, and norms found in human societies, as well as the knowledge, beliefs, arts, laws, customs, capabilities, attitude, and habits of the individuals in these groups. Culture is often originated from or attributed to a specific region or location (Barker, 2004).

It could be seen from the two definitions presented above that culture is acquired by humans

through learning. Scientists refer to that learning process as the process of enculturation and socialization (MARIŞ, 2019). That is why differences in culture can be found among different societies because these two processes of enculturation and socialization are carried out differently by different societies (Legare, 2017). Researchers define socialization in terms of society and, within the body of literature available, we can see that there is no disagreement among researchers on the perimeters of the term and its meaning. However, the term enculturation, especially recently, has attracted a lot of attention and heated a lot of discussions due to the modern lifestyle and changes in the demography of different societies as discussed by Yeganeh (2024). Enculturation is defined generally as the gradual acquisition of the characteristics and norms of a culture or group by a person of another culture (Shimahara, 1970). The reason why this term has attracted a lot of attention recently is because now societies deal with it as if it were acculturation, so due to the demographic changes in the different hosting cultures, individuals of different societies get exposed to exotic cultures and deal with them as if they were the native culture that they need to get exposed to and adopt (Gonzales, Fabrett, & Knight, 2009). All in all, people adopt, change, discard, and lean toward different extremes when it comes to culture in order to, in the end, reach and achieve a cultural norm that makes sure that different societies will flourish and survive. Culture creates for each person a context of cognitive and affective behavior, a blueprint for personal and social existence. Perception involves the filtering of information even before it is stored in memory, resulting in a selective form of consciousness. What appears to an individual to be an accurate and objective perception of a person, a custom, or an idea, is sometimes stilted in the view of another individual from another culture.

Another important topic that we need to touch on in the review is the relationship between culture and language. The exact nature of the relationship between language and culture has captivated and continues to captivate people of different and various backgrounds. That there should be some kind of relationship between the sounds, words, and syntax of a language and how users of that language deal with the world and behave in it seems so obvious, as, in fact, a given fact. This fact becomes evident as we humans socialize and come across each other and communicate. It is believed that language is an ancient heritage of humans (Harutyunyan, 2011). Language is a perfect medium for expression and communication among every human (Harutyunyan, 2011). Of all aspects of culture, language was the first to receive a highly developed form and its essential perfection is a precondition to the development of culture as a whole (Harutyunyan, 2011).

As just stated, language is the best medium used by humans to communicate and materialize thought. Each language provides names for the thoughts that we want to express. Understanding the meaning of the words requires partly social and partly individual cognition. Each person possesses his own stereotypes, tastes, superstitions, etc. The same is true for society where different people live. So, language is an “expresser” or the best medium for expressing the different faces of the culture and the best describer of the norms of the culture and how it is thought of and acquired in any society. Language links cognition, thought and actions to the essence of culture (Harutyunyan, 2011).

Before we move on, we need to touch on the topic of hosting culture and native culture. This

topic will be discussed in terms of what the two terms mean and their relation to language. Sometimes within literature “native culture” is referred to as “home culture” (Ward & Rana-Deuba, 2000). To begin with, each one of these terms has got its definition. Second, each term has a vast body of literature that has discussed each term in terms of sociology, culture, languages, and anthropology. A try will be made here to discuss each term and a brief discussion will be presented about each term. Simply, the host culture is the culture of the country where a person is currently living or has lived (Ward & Rana-Deuba, 2000). Moreover, the host culture or the term host culture refers to the dominant culture of the society in which an individual or a group lives. It includes the customs, traditions, language, values, and social norms of the predominant population within a certain geographic area (Ward & Rana-Deuba, 2000). For an individual to call a culture “host” he or she needs to move to this culture or finds it necessary to acculturate with it (Ward & Rana-Deuba, 2000). Whereas, the term home culture or native culture is defined as the culture of the place where the person was born and raised (Ward & Rana-Deuba, 2000). It could be seen from the two definitions presented for the two terms that a distinction could be made between the two concepts and that is true. The two concepts are distant and treated and dealt with within literature as two separate distant concepts. However, due to recent changes and globalization the uniqueness of each term and the boundaries between each term are becoming more and more fluid (Magnus, 2012). Now, we started to see within literature terms that promote such fluidity. Terms such as cultural globalization, moving cultures and international citizens are gaining momentum and getting more scientific attention and support such as in the work of Tomlinson (2007) and the work of Hermans and Kempen (1998). However, that does not suggest that there is a total eradication of the uniqueness of the two terms, but it suggest that there is a noticeable change in the way research looks at these two terms in different fields.

One of the questions of this paper is the effect of culture shock on the learning of a second language by Saudi students, so it is of importance to discuss the term cultural shock from a societal and educational perspective. The reason why this term is going to be discussed from two perspectives, the educational and cultural, is because these two perspectives cross paths and overlap, and both affect each other.

In general, “culture shock” is defined as feelings of uncertainty, confusion, or anxiety that people may experience when moving to a new country or experiencing a new culture or surroundings. This cultural adjustment is normal and is the result of being in an unfamiliar environment (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2020). From a psychological and anthropological view, most societies have had foreign visitors, either accepting them if they were perceived to have good intentions or opposing them if they were there to invade, pillage, or take advantage of them. Excellent descriptions of what we now refer to as intercultural contact can be found in the journals of Xenophon, Marco Polo, Columbus, Captain Cook, Burton, and Lafcadio Hearn. They also discuss some of the social and interpersonal challenges that these interactions frequently bring about. The main difference between then and now is how much more people are moving across national and ethnic borders. This is because of several of factors, such as the widespread availability of jet travel, the globalization of industry, the growth of educational exchanges, rising affluence that supports a booming tourism industry,

and the increasing movements of migrants, refugees, and foreign workers (Ward et al., 2020). So, the idea of culture shock was present and talked about long ago. However, it was not defined until recently by Oberg in the 1950s (T̄aulean, 2020). Oberg (1954) described himself as an immigrant in a foreign country and experienced tensions in his attempt to learn the language and adapt to the target culture. Oberg's view on culture shock led him to believe that it was much like an illness that affects people who are suddenly put in a situation where they must now reside abroad in an unfamiliar country, and that, much like a disease, this one might have its symptoms and a cure to follow. Furnham and Bochner (1986) had other views on culture shock, they further explained that it is focused on the stress that an outsider experiences while attempting to fit in a with new culture. Moreover, it is suggested that culture shock goes through phases and these phases were presented in the model of cultural adjustment proposed by Oberg (1954).

In the modal of cultural adjustment Oberg (1954) named four stages that an individual or a group go through when they get introduced to a new culture and these four stages are

- a) The honeymoon stage: The contrasts between the old and new cultures are romanticized during this time. For instance, a person may enjoy the new cuisine, the pace of life, and the customs of the locals after relocating to a different nation. Most people find the new culture fascinating during the first few weeks. They hang out with people who are courteous to foreigners and who speak their language. This phase, like most honeymoons, comes to an end.
- b) The negotiating stage: After a period (typically around three months, though this varies by individual), differences between the previous and new cultures start to emerge, potentially leading to feelings of anxiety. The initial excitement may gradually turn into negative emotions such as frustration and anger as one continues to encounter unfavorable situations that might seem strange or offensive according to their cultural perspective. Language difficulties, significant disparities in public hygiene, traffic safety, and the availability and quality of food can intensify the feeling of disconnect from the environment. Transitioning to a different setting places particular stress on communication skills, and there are practical challenges to navigate, including disruptions to one's circadian rhythm that can result in insomnia and daytime drowsiness; changes in gut bacteria due to different levels and types present in food and water; and challenges in finding appropriate treatment for health issues, as medications could have different names than those in the individual's home country, making the same active ingredients hard to identify. Yet, the primary change during this phase is communication: Those adapting to a new culture often experience loneliness and homesickness as they are not yet accustomed to their surroundings and encounter unfamiliar individuals daily. The language barrier can pose a significant challenge in establishing new connections: it is crucial to pay close attention to cultural-specific body language cues, conversational errors, tone of conversation, linguistic subtleties, and misleading translations. These cultural adaptations may also lead to confusion regarding personal identity as individuals attempt to reconcile their original cultural identity with the influences of integrating into a new environment. The challenge of maintaining one's identity while conforming to new cultural expectations can be

mentally taxing, which may lead to emotional fatigue or even feelings of hopelessness. For students studying abroad, some may develop heightened feelings of loneliness that ultimately impact their overall lifestyle. As they navigate life in a foreign country without the support of their parents, international students frequently experience anxiety and increased pressure while adapting to unfamiliar cultures—particularly when the cultural differences are substantial, as there are variations in logic and communication styles, with a pronounced focus on rhetorical devices.

- c) The stage of adjustment: After some time has passed (typically between 6 to 12 months), individuals start to feel comfortable with the new culture and establish routines. They become familiar with what to expect in various situations, making the host country feel less unfamiliar. Basic living concerns resurface, and life takes on a more "normal" quality. People begin to cultivate problem-solving abilities to navigate the culture and start to embrace its norms with a more positive mindset. The culture starts to become clearer, leading to a decrease in negative reactions and responses to it.
- d) The stage of adoption: In the mastery phase, individuals can engage completely and confidently in the host culture. Mastery does not imply complete transformation; individuals frequently retain various characteristics from their original culture, such as accents and languages. This stage is commonly referred to as the bicultural stage.

As could be seen from the proposal of Oberg (1954) each stage of these stages has got its own unique characteristics and features. However, are these characteristics and features have clear-cut boundaries and each person and/ or group needs to go through these stages as they are suggested here. The available literature suggests that individuals and groups adapt differently and in different ways depending on the circumstances as per Ellis, Jola, and Cameron (2024). People may not adapt at all no matter how long they get exposed to the host culture (Kim, 2017).

In parallel with the term culture shock another term came into existence because of sojourners moving back and forth between cultures and this term is the term "reverse culture shock". Reverse culture shock, often referred to as "re-entry shock" as per Wang (1997) or "own culture shock," can occur when someone returns to their home culture after adapting to a different one, leading to effects similar to those mentioned earlier (Gaw, 2000). This phenomenon arises from the psychological and psychosomatic impacts of the adjustment period back to one's original culture. Many people find this experience more unexpected and challenging to manage than the initial culture shock they encountered (Presbitero, 2016). Typically, reverse culture shock consists of two key components: idealization and expectations. After spending a significant amount of time abroad, individuals tend to concentrate on the positive aspects of their past, disregard the negative ones, and construct an idealized image of their previous life. Additionally, being away from their familiar environment can lead to the incorrect assumption that their former surroundings have remained unchanged. The realization that life at home has evolved, that the world has continued in their absence, and the challenge of adapting to these new realities while reconciling their fresh perspectives with their prior way of life leads to discomfort and emotional distress (Allison, Davis-Berman, & Berman, 2012).

Discussion on culture shock in, relation to society and psychology, and the different stages of culture shock have been just presented above and some references were made to that culture shock and may have some effects on education. However, what are the faces of that effect? How deep this effect is? And how can we define culture shock in relation to education and the learning of the second language in particular?

There have been numerous studies that can answer the questions raised in the above. However, most of these studies have not tackled the topic from the eyes of the participants of this study, which makes this study, as we will see in a later section of this study, unique and contributive to the body of research regarding culture shock.

In a study conducted by Fan (2010) it was made clear that language learning is a challenging task and the task of learning a language becomes more challenging the more the host culture is different and the more the target language is different from the mother tongue of the students or sojourners. It is suggested that in the course of learning a language and while undergoing the phenomenon of culture shock students experience another phenomenon in parallel with culture shock and that is the phenomenon of “language shock” (Fan, 2010). Further, it is suggested that not only do cultures influence languages, but languages also significantly affect the cultures in which they exist (Fan, 2010). Researchers refer to the theory that languages shape their users’ perspectives and cognitive processes as linguistic relativity (Gass, Behney, & Plonsky, 2020). Culture shock occurs when individuals move from one cultural setting to another; similarly, linguistic shock arises when an individual transitions into a different language environment. Given the close relationship between language and culture, cultural factors can greatly influence language shock, as evidenced by both linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects (Hinkel, 1999). From a linguistic viewpoint, language shock can manifest at various levels, such as phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics (Gass et al., 2020). For example, speakers of languages that lack affixes might find the concept of “infix” to be quite foreign. Conversely, since each culture has unique ways of articulating thoughts and feelings, the distinct manners in which speakers from different cultures and languages communicate about the human experience can lead to instances of language shock (Gass et al., 2020). So, culture is manifested in language and language is manifested in culture, and adopting a culture and acquiring a language can be challenging tasks due to the overlapping nature of both tasks.

However, what does research say regarding culture shock and the willingness of learners of the second language to communicate? While numerous theories listed have tackled the relationship between culture shock and language learning in general, as well as the interactions respectively, little research has been conducted to further explore the relationship between culture shock and the learner’s willingness to communicate specifically. First, we will talk about what is meant by a willingness to communicate (WTC) and then continue to the studies that tackled the term in relation to learning and culture shock. The concept of willingness to communicate (WTC) is gaining recognition as a significant factor influencing communication in both first-language (L1) and second- language (L2) contexts. Numerous studies focused on personal differences in L2 acquisition have shown how affective factors, such as attitudes, motivation, and language anxiety, impact language proficiency or

achievement. The construct of willingness to communicate (WTC) has recently been introduced as an important variable, offering insights into individual communication in both L1 and L2 settings (Yashima, 2002). The idea, initially explored in first-language communication, has also been extended to second- language communication (McCroskey, Richmond, & McCroskey, 2002). With the focus on second language instruction and learning moving towards communication, which is essential both as a process and as an aim of learning a second language, there is a need to address individual differences in this area (MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, & Donovan, 2003). This possibility was explored by integrating insights from the fields of second language acquisition and communication (MacIntyre et al., 2003).

3. Method

The guiding research question for this study is: What are the perceptions of second language learners experiencing culture shock regarding their English learning and the learning environment? This research study will employ a qualitative interpretive methodology. Given that the focus of the study is to examine students' perceptions of learning English, a qualitative interpretive approach is suitable for addressing the research question. A qualitative design is particularly effective in exploring lived experiences, which is essential for gaining deeper insights into the learners' perceptions. (Merriam & Grenier, 2019).

3.1 The Participants of the Research

The study's participants will include a selective group of graduate and undergraduate English language learners who are facing culture shock while studying at the Kent State Language Center. They will form a targeted sample for several reasons. The individuals chosen will be students enrolled in Kent State University's language program, specifically in beginner-level classes, determined by a designated language proficiency assessment, with the aim of entering their respective colleges after completing the language program. These participants will be experiencing some level of culture shock and are likely at the initial stages of this experience. Due to their proficiency level and recent arrival in the United States, the learners have had very limited exposure to the target culture.

3.2 The English Language Course

The introductory English language course is essential for learners to develop the fundamental language abilities needed to progress to higher levels and eventually enroll in their desired faculty. Daily activities in their language classes involve improving their skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The curriculum encourages students to engage with language tasks that they may face in everyday scenarios, such as purchasing groceries or composing a letter. The tasks primarily concentrate on themes related to the target culture, with little emphasis on other cultures.

3.3 Data Collection Procedures and Method

Data will be collected through a series of interviews. Edwards and Holland (2013) describe interviews as a form of dialogue utilized by qualitative researchers to investigate the experiences of participants in relation to a phenomenon, while also examining their interpretations that would enhance the study. Hatch (2023) asserts that researchers mainly

utilize interviews to uncover the meaning frameworks that participants employ to arrange their series of experiences, aiding in the understanding of their distinct realities. Therefore, the research will implement interviews to effectively explore the students' views on the English language teaching environment they encounter. Hatch (2023) also recommends using interviews as a structured approach to gather more information on specific subjects, as they allow for follow-up questions. As a result, participants often feel genuinely appreciated when someone demonstrates interest in their topic.

Furthermore, Rubin (2012) describes how qualitative interviews can assist researchers in reconstructing events they have not personally witnessed. Consequently, the language learners involved were posed a range of questions pertaining to their own culture, their perceptions of the conflicts between their culture and the target culture, their experiences while learning in the target culture, and how these factors relate to their views of the English language learning environment. Additional follow-up questions were also employed to provide greater insight into the perceptions and experiences shared. (Rubin, 2012) further recommends the use of semi-structured interviews, where initial questions focus on the theory being examined, followed by subsequent questions that allow the researcher to gather more detailed information on specific topics, and finally incorporating prompts through comments and gestures to enhance the interaction between the interviewer and the participant.

3.3.1 Sample Size, Power, and Precision

Along with the description of subjects, give the mended size of the sample and number of individuals meant to be in each condition if separate conditions were used. State whether the achieved sample differed in known ways from the target population. Conclusions and interpretations should not go beyond what the sample would warrant.

3.4 *Qualitative Data Analysis Procedure*

Hatch (2023) characterizes data analysis as a multifaceted procedure that is seldom thoroughly examined in the context of qualitative research. Researchers engaging in qualitative studies frequently face challenges in identifying connections and themes that help clarify the data. (Sanders, 2003), outlines a few steps recommended by Colaizzi (1978) to conduct a data analysis in a qualitative interpretive study. The current study will adhere to these outlined steps as presented below.:

- 1- The recordings from each interview will be replayed multiple times to gain a deeper understanding of the details and emotions conveyed in each session. The transcripts will be reviewed five or six times to enhance my reflection on the discussions that took place during the interview.
- 2- I will reach out to follow up on the analysis of the transcripts and include key phrases and insights derived from the spiritual experiences shared by the participants in their narratives.
- 3- Member checking will be utilized to review the data with the participants of the research. Hatch (2023) advocates for researchers to invite study participants to share

their interpretations and responses to the data and results. Consequently, a final individual meeting with each participant will be planned to collaborate and obtain their unique viewpoints.

- 4- General themes will be created to correspond with the responses given by the participants, facilitating the development of in-depth interpretations.
- 5- The ideas found within the transcription will be made use of by relating them to the phenomenon and the environment of learning.

The steps outlined earlier and the methodology described serve to address one primary inquiry: what are the perceptions of second language learners experiencing culture shock regarding their English learning in the host society? This question is likely to evoke a range of emotions, related inquiries, and discussions from the participants, which is why a thorough method was detailed, allowing us to gain comprehensive insights from the participants.

4. Discussion and Results

After gathering and examining the data, five key themes emerged. The themes are as follows:

1. Major obstacles or conflicts in acquiring and using the English language.
2. Major difficulties or conflicts arise from the emphasis placed on teaching speaking skills.
3. Major obstacles or conflicts arise due to insufficient guidance on how to approach writing skills.
4. Major difficulties or conflicts arise from the absence of culturally suitable teaching methods.
5. Major obstacles or conflicts arise from the insufficient emphasis on instructing academic vocabulary and writing conventions tailored to specific disciplines.

Throughout the data analysis process, five themes emerged as the most prevalent among the participants, effectively reflecting their experiences in learning English while navigating the culture shock associated with the new environment. Each theme will be examined individually, accompanied by examples from the collected data.

4.1 The First Theme: Major Obstacles or Conflicts in Acquiring and Using the English Language

In this theme, students faced a notable challenge in regularly practicing the English language. During individual and group interviews, as well as member checks, students pointed out specific barriers, both in and out of the classroom, that hampered their language practice.

An example from outside the classroom involved a significant challenge or tension; specifically, the interactions with Uber drivers, as one student preferred to avoid conversing with her driver. Alya mentioned that she felt uncomfortable engaging with her neighbors or Uber drivers when they initiated a conversation with her. In this scenario, Alya chose not to participate in discussions where the gender of the native speaker could create a cultural conflict for her, particularly when the speaker was male. She stated:

“I didn’t mingle with male neighbors.” Alya further stated:

“I think that is the worst thing about male Uber (drivers). I wish the drivers would not talk or stop talking altogether. The drivers talk a lot with the customers which makes me uncomfortable. I do not see this as a positive thing. I wish they would just keep quiet”.

Alya also conveyed significant unease when it comes to communicating and engaging with native speakers. Much of her unease stemmed from cultural factors; specifically, her cultural upbringing does not allow for regular interaction and conversation with individuals of the opposite gender. Consequently, her cultural background would ultimately limit her opportunity to practice the English language outside of class with a person of the opposite sex.

Ahmad shared a different challenge regarding practicing outside of the classroom. He recognized his outgoing nature and made efforts to engage with native English speakers frequently, except when it involved female native speakers of the target language, with whom he admitted he faced some challenges in initiating conversations. Ahmad remarked:

“I feel embarrassed and nervous to start a conversation with anyone”

Ahmad added “.....and especially with girls.”

Like Alya, Ahmad’s remarks suggest that he also faced a cultural conflict. His primary culture, Arabic culture, strongly emphasizes the segregation of genders in various everyday contexts, including educational settings within classrooms. In Saudi Arabia, his country of origin, positions such as restaurant hosts and supermarket cashiers were exclusively held by males. Females were not allowed to take on these roles. Classrooms in schools remain segregated, and throughout his education, all of his teachers were male. As a result, he may not be familiar with interacting with female individuals in his own culture, let alone in a different culture while trying to practice the English language.

Furthermore, both Alya and Ahmad encountered difficulties within the classroom. These difficulties were linked to practicing English with native speakers as well as adapting to the requirements of specific teaching methods. For instance, one student mentioned during a group interview that a significant challenge was the feedback provided by the instructor. This student felt that the instructor’s comments during class were often inadequate and unhelpful. In particular, she felt uncomfortable and hesitant to speak up in class because of the absence of constructive feedback. She believed that feedback would enhance her speaking abilities, but without it, she was unwilling to engage in practice. She expressed:

“Explaining rules in class only is not a good way. We would rather be given writing assignments to apply the rules and then, they correct and give us their feedback.”

Another obstacle pertains to the requirements of particular instructional methods. These methods posed significant challenges for all students, particularly for female students. This approach was linked to how students were grouped in the classroom. Clearly, the female students preferred to sit with each other during class activities rather than being paired with male peers. This preference stems from the influences of their first culture. Such grouping hinders students from practicing their English language skills when their partners speak the

same native language. Sireen illustrated this point with her remark:

“We have two Chinese students, two Japanese, and the rest of the students are all Saudis, except for one Jordanian who also speaks Arabic. When they divide the class into groups, they try to separate us so that we do not speak Arabic together. However, it is not working because we prefer to sit with the girls we know”

During the last member check held at the conclusion of the academic semester, the students noted that a few minor changes had taken place. Ahmad mentioned that he now feels more at ease interacting with native speakers, regardless of them being of the opposite gender. The female participants indicated that they have become more receptive to collaborating with male students, except for Lamya, who voiced her worries about potentially upsetting her husband.

4.2 The Second Theme: Major difficulties or conflicts arise from the emphasis placed on teaching speaking skills

All the participants of the study reported experiencing significant challenges or tensions. The emphasis on instruction was heavily centered on developing speaking skills. This focus on speaking often came at the detriment of teaching reading, writing, and listening skills, as indicated by the participants' experiences during their classes. This was particularly evident in the speaking tasks and their prevalence. Speaking tasks in the course predominantly targeted speaking skills, sometimes exclusively. Rayan, along with others, pointed out that he perceived these assignments as potentially the least beneficial for him. He felt that the instructor prioritized them over tasks that addressed other language skills. The predominance of speaking skill instruction has created feelings of tension and challenges among students, with some feeling they lacked opportunities to practice speaking in the speaking class.

One example of this was illustrated in an interview with Rayan, where he talked about the number of speaking assignments and his belief that they might have been the least helpful for him; he mentioned that opportunities to practice speaking skills were not integrated as much as he desired.

“I do not speak a lot. In the Listening and Speaking class, we just listen to the teacher, but we do not talk. We gave two presentations as an introduction, so far; but the major presentation is still to come next week. We did not benefit a lot from that class.”

Rayan enumerates the various assignments centered on speaking, underlining the activities and the priority the teacher assigns to this skill among the students.

Another instance of the focus on speaking skills surfaced during an interview with Lamya. Like Rayan, Lamya perceived the prevalence of speaking activities as a challenge or tension within the classroom, revealing that she noticed a high number of speaking exercises in her class.

Moreover, an instance of the focus on teaching speaking unexpectedly emerged when I inquired about the level of participation, to which Salwa responded by noting that even in listening and speaking tasks, concentration often leans toward enhancing speaking skills. She

commented:

“I do get to participate, we learn how to take notes and the quiz then depends on the notes we took, I felt it really helped me develop my understanding of different topics, but they sometimes focus too much on speaking exercises.”

The participants were posed the same question, yielding consistent answers, exemplified by Sireen, who detailed various activities carried out during the Reading class. One of these activities included reading, which would ultimately lead to discussions among the students and with the teacher the following day, in addition to competitive team-oriented games that emphasized speaking activities related to the reading material.

“One teacher assigned a reading of a book which we discussed the following day in groups. Another teacher used games, creating two teams in class.”

This indicates a prioritization of speaking activities for beginner learners to support their English learning journey. Nevertheless, the learners believe that the focus is not evenly allocated across all activities that encompass the various language skills, feeling that speaking skills receive disproportionate emphasis. The participants also mentioned extracurricular assignments and activities that concentrate solely on speaking skills. During the interview, Abdullah recounted his experience with these activities in the following manner:

“The teachers and the Center have assigned lots of events that help us speak the language. For example, we have a coffee hour that is held once a week. Teachers and students get together for an hour to speak about anything. This is optional of course. Some teachers, like Mr. Smith (speaking class,) have assigned 3 hours given throughout the week where we meet practicum students and speak about anything we want. The same idea as the coffee-hour. Also, there are other activities that are held on and off the campus in which we can participate and mingle with native speakers. For example, we attended the Valentine festival and a bowling Party, which lots of students from the Center attended.”

This suggests that students are encouraged to engage in additional activities aimed at enhancing their speaking abilities. Nevertheless, there were no activities provided that could assist in improving their other language skills. This detail reinforces the notion that the teaching methods employed prioritize speaking skills while neglecting reading, writing, and listening.

4.3 The Third Theme: Major Obstacles or Conflicts Arise Due to Insufficient Guidance on how to Approach Writing Skills

tensions due to insufficient instruction on writing skills. The participants highlighted the issue of inadequate teaching focused on writing abilities, and in some cases, a scarcity of writing skills relevant to their specific research areas. Concerning the particular writing skills, the participants also shared a desire for abilities that could assist them in achieving the required TOEFL score for admission into their desired fields of study.

This is illustrated by the participants' responses when questioned about the language skills they hoped to enhance. They unanimously stressed the importance of writing skills and

believed that improving these would enhance their chances of producing quality research papers once they enrolled in their chosen colleges. When asked about the overall language skills he aimed to improve, Ahmad emphasized the significance of writing instruction and its potential to support him throughout his academic journey:

“The only thing I needed help with is the methods or techniques of writing, as we did not focus too much on what I wanted to improve, like how to write papers for research and things like that. I think we need to learn more about these things that will help us.”

Ahmad discusses the academic writing skills that would enhance his capability to write research papers. He argues that the teaching approaches neglected the particular writing skills he wished to acquire in his course, which would ultimately support him and his peers when they transition to university and engage in research.

Abidan also expressed his wish to enhance his writing abilities and mentioned that his prior classes in his own culture did not sufficiently prepare him for writing academic papers:

“I already covered everything; they taught us a lot in Saudi Arabia. The only thing I needed help with was the methods or techniques for writing.”

Abdulaziz also mentions that his background in acquiring language skills encompassed a broad range, yet he still felt his writing skills needed more attention. The techniques surrounding writing seem to be of utmost importance to him, and concurrently, those are the very elements he found deficient in the teaching approach employed by his teacher during class.

While reflecting on the skills that remained undeveloped due to the teaching methods, the participants noted the limited frequency of practice sessions offered; they expressed a desire for more practice than what was available in class and requested an enhanced focus on reading and writing skills. Rayan remarked the following:

“The same thing with the other skill classes like writing. They didn’t help us much. We felt that it is our job to improve ourselves”.

The other participants shared comparable views about the tensions. The students believed it was their duty and responsibility to enhance these skills that were lacking in their teachers' instructional approaches. It can be assumed that Rayan would look for alternative ways to advance his writing abilities beyond the classroom.

4.4 The Fourth Theme: Major Difficulties or Conflicts Arise from the Absence of Culturally Suitable Teaching Methods

Another element of the teaching environment noted by the participants was the absence of culturally relevant instruction. Following their cultural customs, the learners assigned themselves gender-specific seating arrangements, allowing female learners to sit next to one another, which the teachers mostly supported throughout the class. There were occasions when learners were requested to rearrange their seating, resulting in female and male learners being positioned beside each other, which aimed to promote interaction with new partners; however, this made the learning environment uncomfortable for the students. Additionally,

some participants mentioned being directed to join an in-and-out-of-class activity known as “coffee hour,” where learners engaged in speaking activities with invited native speakers of mixed genders; however, it was noted that there were not enough native speakers present at these events, and most attendees tended to be from the same cultural background, causing them to revert to their first language. This is illustrated by Ahmad’s statement:

“We, also, have the “coffee hour”, but it is not regular, probably every 3-4 weeks. Yesterday I attended it, but again most of the attendees were Arabs who speak Arabic. This is a problem. We don’t talk about other cultures or practice English. Don’t misunderstand me. I am an Arab myself, but I would like to meet people from other cultures”

Sireen also discusses the challenges that the teaching methods imposed on her while she was learning a language, along with the various pressures of striving to meet the rigorous grade requirements:

“I feel we are constantly under pressure. They want us to get A+, but they don’t give us time to study. We attend classes and take final exams at the same time. They are not making it easy for us. We are given lots of exams and assignments at the same time of the final.”

Sireen represents a new cultural concept that may be unfamiliar to either her or her instructors. She embodies the pressures of adapting to a new culture while consistently needing to achieve top grades to progress in her language studies. Sireen also notes that the multitude of assignments makes it challenging for her to balance her language learning effectively.

In a similar vein, during the conversation with Salwa, she indicated that the teaching approach did not consider her experience of culture shock:

“I would say the feeling of being homesick, after just a short while I felt like I couldn’t bear being here, and that I had to go home during the next holiday, there was also some internal pressure, that was the thing that most impacted me, as in trying to live up to everyone’s expectations, so like the demanding tests are a lot and very hard for anyone to deal with, so I have to deal with the pressure of time, and the internal pressure, and constantly thinking about going home. I would say these are the things that most stand in the way of my studies.”

Another cultural concept raised by Salwa, which her teachers may not fully grasp, is the students’ lack of familiarity with her surrounding culture. This unfamiliarity can lead to feelings of anxiety and difficulty, which can certainly affect the language-learning experience.

An example of this issue came from Abidan, who highlighted the challenge of addressing culturally sensitive subjects in education. He noted that he felt unable to engage in class when a delicate topic was discussed, expressing concern that his response could conflict with the teacher’s perspective. This is illustrated in the following statement:

“There is this teacher who gives us passages about political or social issues and asks for our opinions. Since I don’t have any bad intention, I gave my opinion, just once; but it seems my honest opinion might have upset him.”

4.5 The Fifth Theme: Major Obstacles or Conflicts Arise from the Insufficient Emphasis on Instructing Academic Vocabulary and Writing Conventions Tailored to Specific Disciplines

Students faced considerable challenges or tension due to insufficient instruction on academic vocabulary and writing styles relevant to their fields. Much of this challenge and tension centered on the vocabulary that instructors chose to teach versus the vocabulary that students felt they needed to learn. Students reported that instructors typically focused on what could be termed "single situation specific" vocabulary, which describes relatively common circumstances in everyday life. Instructors often relied on this type of vocabulary when utilizing lessons from commercially produced language learning materials. For instance, a typical scenario in a vocabulary lesson would involve a person shopping for groceries and interacting with a cashier. The lesson would cover phrases and words like "How much does this cost?" "Can I return this?" and "Is there a discount on this today?" This lesson emphasizes particular vocabulary terms from that context, which form the foundation of the words taught by the instructor.

Students encountered significant challenges and tensions with this method of vocabulary instruction. One issue was that this approach to teaching vocabulary was neither expected nor appreciated by the students. Instead, students anticipated acquiring specific vocabulary that would aid in enhancing their writing skills; for instance, they hoped instructors would focus on vocabulary relevant to writing both formal and informal letters, as well as research papers. Another issue was that students felt this vocabulary instruction did not support their preparation for the TOEFL exam. They expected instructors to introduce more sophisticated vocabulary, particularly terms that usually appear on the TOEFL test. This was seen as a major concern because passing this exam was crucial for them to gain admission into their desired university and program. Finally, another issue raised by students was that their vocabulary lessons often seemed aimed at simply memorizing a list of words.

Salwa expressed her struggle or frustration with instructors who emphasized the memorization of vocabulary. She felt that this teaching method was driven by a desire to maintain certain grade standards. Salwa shared an example of her experience with vocabulary instruction in her class. She mentioned:

"We are forced to memorize the vocabulary for that lesson that we are tested on, otherwise your GPA will suffer, even if we don't always get the meaning."

5. Conclusion

The first theme revealed various obstacles faced by the participants, who articulated their struggles to consistently engage in English language practice. These obstacles were evident in scenarios both within and outside the classroom, largely arising from cultural differences that made it challenging for participants to adapt, which in turn hindered their regular practice of language skills as they tried to adjust to new circumstances. Similar findings were reported by researchers investigating language learners' capacity to acclimate to a foreign culture during their language studies. The second theme emerged from participants feeling overwhelmed by the emphasis placed on speaking instruction in their English language

classes. In other words, most of the instructional methods and practice activities predominantly targeted speaking skills, while the participants expressed a wish for a more balanced focus on other language skills such as reading, listening, and writing. In the third theme, participants noted a significant lack of emphasis on writing skills within their classrooms. They conveyed that enhancing their writing abilities would be highly advantageous for their academic success, particularly for passing the TOEFL exam and writing research papers in their chosen fields. However, Fields, Hatala, and Nauert (2014) explored a somewhat different perspective, analyzing the role of writing skills among learners. While this study concluded that further investigation is necessary, it also found that language learners often regard writing as a secondary skill compared to speaking. In the fourth theme, participants expressed that much of the instructional material was culturally unsuitable, as it centered on concepts and norms that were alien to them; they suggested that incorporating more culturally relevant content would facilitate their language learning. Finally, the last theme highlighted the students' frustrations and challenges stemming from their perception that there was insufficient instruction on vocabulary and writing styles pertinent to their specific fields.

Acknowledgments

Not applicable

Authors' contributions

Not applicable

Funding

Not applicable

Competing interests

Not applicable

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Macrothink Institute.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical

restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

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