

The Role of Core Skills Development Through English Language Teaching (ELT) in Increasing Employability of Students in the Saudi Labor Market

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Received: November 22, 2019 Accepted: March 2, 2020 Online Published: March 17, 2020

doi:10.5539/ijel.v10n3p108 URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ijel.v10n3p108>

Abstract

The National Commission for Academic Accreditation & Assessment (NCAAA), Saudi Arabia, aims to determine 'standards and criteria for academic accreditation and assessment and for accrediting post-secondary institutions and the programs they offer' (2012). Along this line of teaching, learning standards, each department is required to submit the Course Report (CR) and the Course Specifications (CS) reflecting the quality of learning and the management of courses aiming to achieve the highest international standards. As mandatory procedure, English Language Centers (ELC) in the Saudi universities also prepare quality assessment reports. The reports include data about the assessment of English language skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing skills. In addition, the CR and CS both seek to establish whether students at the Preparatory Year have mastered core skills such as communication skills, problem solving skills, thinking skills, language skills, attention, executive skills, memorizing and other cognitive and interpersonal skills. This qualitative study highlights the major findings the teachers' perceptions about integrating core skills into English language teaching that would potentially increase employability of students in the labor market in Saudi Arabia and as well as contribute to the national vision 2030 that includes 'learning for working'. Our study focuses on the relationships between teachers' perceptions about core skills development during English language teaching and teachers' decisions about using teaching activities to enhance those skills. Data were collected through questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and class observations and coded into different categories and labelled and then the results were drawn analyzing the connection between those categories.

Keywords: core skills, language skills, communication skills, interpersonal skills, qualitative study

1. Background

Saudization in the private sector has been rising over the last five years with the entry of a large number of Saudi nationals into the job market. However, many studies have exhibited some challenges of availability of qualified and skilled workforce that can contribute to growth and standards of each sector. For example, a survey conducted in Saudi Arabia in 2016 revealed that 352 employers experienced shortage of workforce with the relevant soft skills. Among them, creative thinking and adaptability skills were identified as the most required but not available as compared to other technical skills (Saudi Gazette, 2016). It seems that many university graduates in Saudi Arabia lack certain soft skills such as reasoning and emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills needed in the workforce to succeed. This problem may hinder the realization of the Saudi Vision 2030 'learning for working' which aims to integrate Saudi students into competent workforce through education. Besides developing the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) the role of English as a foreign language teaching (EFL), a core subject at Preparatory Year in Saudi universities also aims to measure knowledge, cognitive skills, interpersonal skills and numerical and communication skills.

Likewise, the National Commission for Academic Accreditation & Assessment (NCAAA), Saudi Arabia, aims to determine 'standards and criteria for academic accreditation and assessment and for accrediting post-secondary institutions and the programs they offer' (2012). To fulfil this requirement of standards of teaching learning, each department is required to submit the Course Report (CR) and the Course Specifications (CS) reflecting the quality of learning and the management of courses aiming to achieve the highest international

standards. As mandatory procedure, English Language Centers (ELC) in Saudi universities also prepare quality assessment reports, including learning outcomes, teaching strategies, skills learnt during the course, exam results. These components are also reflected in the CR and the CS both seek to establish whether students at the Preparatory Year have mastered core skills such as communication skills, problem solving skills, thinking skills, language skills, attention, executive skills, memorizing. In the process of teaching core skills, teachers are major stakeholders who can a significant role to attribute to the success of student uptake of these skills. Therefore, considering the crucial role of teachers in implementing curriculum plans, the study aims to highlight and analyse teachers' opinions and perceptions about whether the English language curriculums, teaching activities and evaluation systems contributed to development of soft skills along with English language skills at the Preparatory Year as well as contribute to the Saudi national vision 2030 that includes 'learning for working'.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Core Skills

Griffin and Care (2015) assert that 'education needs to prepare students to deal with rapid changes in employment and learning styles. Teachers need to prepare students for jobs that have not yet been created' (p. vii). Renandya (2017) also believes that 'We are not just teaching students to develop proficiency in English but also preparing them for the real world out there where collaborative and critical thinking skills are of paramount importance' (p. 1). Core skills, soft skills, 21st century skills and life skills often used interchangeably to refer to communication skills, negotiation skills, problem solving skills, critical/creative thinking skills, language skills and other cognitive skills essential for learning and working (Kagan, 2003; O'Dwyer, 2013; Macmillan, 2014; Griffin & Care, 2015, Dhar et al., 2011; TESOL Arabia, 2012). These skills also develop students' thinking and creativity in the classroom and real-life atmosphere. Mclean et al. (2012) identifies learning, reading, writing, oral communication and numeracy as important core skills to 'to participate effectively in [their] society' in the Australian Core Skills Framework (p. 2). These skills are assumed to have connected to physical, social and economic growth benefits of individuals, society and workplaces. National surveys conducted in various countries suggest that 'the most important employability skills are ability to work well with others, communication skills, and teamwork skills' (Kagan, 2003). In a framework of teaching and assessment of 21st century skills, Griffin and Care (2015) define 21st century skills in four categories: 'Ways of thinking: Creativity, critical thinking, problem solving, decision-making, learning and innovation; Ways of working: Communication and collaboration; Tools for working: Information and communications technology (ICT) and information literacy; Living in the world: Citizenship, life and career, and personal and social responsibility' (p. 7).

2.2 Integrating Core Skills into Language Skills

First, the communicative language teaching (CLT) (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Richards & Rogers, 2001; Richards, 2006; Spada, 2007), a meaning focused interactive approach, depends much on certain core skills to accomplish language teaching learning tasks to foster language skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening. Bharathi (2016) argues effective communication refers to the ability to integrate reading, writing, speaking and listening skills in a real-life situation. Pair and group works, role playing, project works and similar social interactions and communicative activities will be integrated into lessons teaching. While they are often considered important activities for developing both language skills and core skills, what teachers think about them determines how teachers use these activities in classroom. Teachers play a significant role to implement teaching learning activities in language classes and to offer an insight into how teachers teach in a certain way, it is important to understand teachers' perceptions, opinions, beliefs or thinking (Hamilton, 1993; Borg, 2006; Kagan, 1992; Pajares, 1992; Richards & Pennington, 1998; Richardson, 1996; Richards & Lockhart, 1996). Bharathi (2016) investigated the teachers' opinions about their undergraduate students' writing performance in India and found that the syllabus fell short of developing writing skills and presentation skills. While 83% teachers reported that students' inadequate vocabulary attributed to their lower communication skills, students thought that their presentation skills and language proficiency could improve their communication skills. Indicating the importance of communication skills for personal and professional relationships, the researcher emphasizes 'demonstrative' teaching method to improve students' communicative skills (p. 6). Haley et al. (2013) investigated 25 pre- and in-service critical need language teachers' (12 Arabic and 13 Chinese) perceptions and knowledge about the ways of connecting 21st Century Skills to pedagogical practices and lesson planning in U.S. foreign language teaching settings. The majority of them reported that they were able to incorporate communication, collaboration and culture in foreign language teaching in addition to technology, media literacy, creativity and leadership.

Ashraf, Ahmadi and Hosseinnia (2017) studied the ways of integrating 21st century skills teaching into EFL and their effect on listening and reading comprehension skills. The posttest results showed that 21st century skills

positively influenced the learning of speaking and listening. The activities conducted with experimental group included tasks such as: 'Criticize your book, imagine your favorite book and speak about it. What makes you sad and angry at school? Design some questions to ask your manager, teachers, and institution managers. Give solutions to those problems. Compare your solutions with your friends. Give group solutions. Discuss about a social problem. How your classmates see it? Give solutions' (ibid, p. 38). Furthermore, Jacobson-Lundeberg's qualitative study (2016) brings attention to the need of integrating 21st century skills such as communication and collaboration into English language classes to enhance listening and speaking standards. The researcher's investigation of students' perceptions about the influence of personal development education found that 21st century skills had a positive impact on their ability to communicate and collaborate effectively with other people.

With regards to teaching materials used for soft skills development, a national survey of school teachers and college lectures conducted in Scotland showed that the online resources offered more flexibility in teaching approaches and addressed the needs of students who wished to learn online or blended rather than in a traditional way. However, teachers reported that they were not entirely sure about how to make decisions about choosing appropriate materials from the vast amount of resources available on the Internet. They also indicated that the contextualized materials would be more appropriate to engage students and enable students to relate the materials to their courses (Davidson & Elliot, 2007). Concerning the processes of using online resources, Kennedy, Lotham and Jacinto (2016) emphasize the improvement of the teachers' ability 'to incorporate [vast amount of] resources in their classrooms which usually impel a shift in the teaching process, moving away from teacher-centered approaches to student-centered learning strategies' (p. 30).

For the assessment of communication skills, Trinity College London (2010) conducts examination of presentation skills, speaking in public, problem solving and conflict resolution skills, summary and feedback skills and discussion. Presentation should be based on 'candidates' current social, educational, work or professional situation and background and reflect personal interests, experience and aspirations' (p. 18). Simulation or role play is generally an effective method of developing and testing soft skills such as negotiation and leadership which usually involve conversations and problem solving involve feeling, attitudes and desires (Core et al., 2006). On the other hand, some researchers also argue that the teacher should observe how students engage in task completion and the way they use 21st century skills in this process. Griffin and Care (2015) believe that 'Teachers' understanding of how students might vary in their twenty-first century skills can be informed by their observations of students when engaged in both online and classroom-based tasks, and by their analysis of their students' results.' (p.32).

3. Research Questions

- 1) What are the teachers' perceptions about the integration of core skills into language skills at the Preparatory Year English program?
- 2) What are the teachers' perceptions about using core skills to teach language skills and language skills to teach core skills?
- 3) What do Preparatory Year teachers think about assessment of core skills in teaching English as a foreign language?

4. Methodology

4.1 Design of Methodology

In this study, the researchers used the qualitative method (Nunan, 1992; Cohen et al., 2000; Dörnyei, 2007) to collect data from teachers via questionnaire, teachers' interviews and their class observation in an effort to study teachers' experiences about the integration of English language skills and core skills in the textbooks, teaching materials, teaching techniques and exams.

4.2 Procedure of Methodology

Interviews were effective to understand teachers' experiences of their using textbooks, teaching materials and teaching techniques that support or hinder language skills and core skills integration. Class observations further helped us to know what teachers thought about using language skills to teach core skills and using core skills to support language teaching. Data collected from questionnaire, interviews and class observations demonstrated whether teachers' teaching activities reflected their perception about teaching language skills and core skills.

A questionnaire was administered to collect data about what teachers thought about language skills and core skills integration in their language classes and analyzed similarities and differences between teachers' perceptions and students' perceptions.

4.3 Instruments of the Study

The researchers used three instruments, namely questionnaire, semi-structured interviews and class observations. As they analyzed teachers' responses qualitatively by interpreting all responses, then analyzed them manually.

4.4 Data Analysis

The researchers analyzed the teachers' responses qualitatively via analysis of the responses manually according to the study questions and objectives. Data were coded into different categories and labelled and then the results were obtained analyzing the connection between those categories.

5. Results and Discussion

The table below presents the teachers who participated in the study. It includes their teaching experience ranging from seven years to twenty-five years and at least five years teaching English in Saudi Arabia.

Table 1. The profile of the participants

S.N.	Name	Gender	Teaching experience	Age	Qualifications
1	George	Male	12 years	38	MA Applied Linguistics
2	Ziyad	Male	10 years	40	Ph.D. Linguistics
3	Daifallah	Male	18 years	55	MA, Applied Linguistics
4	Henry	Male	7 years	35	BA, Education, CELTA
5	Hussein	Male	25 years	58	MA, TESOL

Most participants of this study believed that core skills can be integrated directly or indirectly into English language skills teaching. Data also revealed that language learning may be accelerated if teachers could involve students actively in language activities, create situations allowing students to practice their language skills and connect those activities to real life. Most importantly, most of the participants believed that core skills and language skills are, in fact, conjoined and cannot be separated if teachers want to achieve success in English language teaching. The following are some of main common perceptions about language skills and core skills integration that surfaced from the questionnaire, interviews and classroom observations.

5.1 Language Skills and Core Skills Integration

One of the most important patterns that consistently emerged from the interviews and the questionnaire was that language skills and core skills could be integrated successfully. This integration could be built on the premises of organization of language learning activities, which often included problem-solving skills. For example, dealing with an angry customer as one of the participants recommended for core skills practice in a language teaching class. He asserted that students worked mostly in groups to learn making polite requests, explain, giving reasons, apologizing, thanking and creating conversation to deal with a customer. He further explained that the main purpose of this communicative activity was to resolve issues, which often involved decision making skills, collaboration and listening skills to arrive at a plan of action to deal with an angry customer. Data from questionnaire also revealed that most participants believed that core skills could be combined meaningfully with language skills through speaking, listening and interactions among students. This perception is aligned with Richards and Rogers (2001) who believe that teachers' role in the communicative language teaching is to create a situation where learners can be engaged in meaningful activity, which may provide an opportunity for learners to use their target language. The participants also underscored the relevance of such simulation of problem-solving activity as an experience, which might be transferred to their real-life situations both in their personal and professional life. Daifallah, another participant argued that teachers should adopt an integrated approach, which encompasses reading, writing, speaking and listening skills in combination with reading texts, which might challenge students sufficiently incorporating tasks such as thinking, and analysis skills. This finding concurs with Ashraf, Ahmadi and Hosseinnia (2017) who studied the integration of 21st century skills which positively influenced the teaching of listening and reading comprehension skills.

5.2 Language Skill Is a Core Skill Itself

Another major theme that emerged from this study was that some participants viewed language learning as a core skill learning in itself. For example, Ziyad, stated that, 'listening and speaking skills are the skills for communication'. He thought that speaking English fluently very often provide candidates an advantageous position for a job interview and is often regarded as an important quality, especially in big companies where employees will have to use English to work with migrant workers who cannot speak Arabic. In this regard,

proficient users of English are more likely to succeed in job interviews than non-proficient ones. Henry, another teacher argued that employers in such companies would like to consider English language proficiency as an important attribute for making decisions about hiring an employee. Furthermore, Hussein's thought English language skill as a core communication skill and meaning focused stating that, 'many Saudi people travel abroad for tourism, study and medical purposes and they will have to communicate in English'. This comment can be viewed in the light of language instruction with '(1) Learning through meaning-focused input; that is, learning through listening and reading where the learner's attention is on the ideas and messages conveyed by the language. (2) Learning through meaning-focused output; that is, learning through speaking and writing where the learner's attention is on conveying ideas and messages to another person' (Nation & Newton, 2009, p. 1). Interestingly, George thought English language skill as a core skill could help students for academic purposes such as studying other subjects such as science, computer and mathematics which are taught in English at the university.

5.3 Language Skills and Core Skills Integration Process

Data from questionnaire and interviews revealed that the most of participants emphasized the identification of core skills in each teaching unit and teaching approaches and strategies for teaching those skills during students' intensive language-learning period in the Preparatory Year. They recommended involving learners in group work and pair work or even project works where students could collaborate as a team and core skills could be indirectly taught while teaching language directly. This perception concurs with Ellis (2008) who asserts that, 'group work can provide interactional conditions which have been hypothesized to facilitate [second language] acquisition more readily than interaction involving teachers' (p. 815). During class observation, we also noticed some participant teachers dividing students in small groups for teaching the target language. Ziyad thought that working in groups might also improve students' core skills such as teamwork, creativity, negotiation skill, cooperation and decision-making skills. However, he emphasized that, 'teachers need to select the language learning activities carefully that may enhance students' core skills while teaching English'. However, George expressed that, 'without clear understanding and plan, the idea of core skills and language skills integration may not be successful'. He further explained that, 'there are some challenges, for instance, traditional examination system of testing merely language skills, lack of adequate use of group work and pair work in other subject classes, students going off tasks and problems of classroom management during pair and group work.' Similar results were found in a study in Libyan schools where the language teachers were encouraged to use pair work but it was not 'customary among their colleagues teaching other subjects' (Orafi & Borg 2009, p. 251).

5.4 Measuring Core Skill and Language Skills

Interview data showed that the most of the participants emphasized the need to measure core skills and language skills in a tangible way, so students may learn them seriously. Daifallah asserted that, 'test what you teach and teach what you test so that students understand its value'. He further suggested, 'we need to incorporate questions and tasks into regular exams with an aim of testing both core skills and language skills in all reading, writing, speaking and listening skills tests.' Likewise, Henry and George thought that questions should include vocabulary, grammar, reading, writing, speaking and listening skills to measure what students have learnt in their language classes. They argued that reading comprehension and analytical questions, for example may be useful to measure thinking skills and problem solving skills. Hussein and Henry believed that teachers could assess students by observing their participation in activities such as group work, question answer, project works, role play and similar other activities. Information about their learning could be obtained through, 'a set of questionnaire to acquire information of the practices of core competencies through the students' engagement and activities' (Syahrial et al., 2018, p. 23). Hussein and Henry further emphasized that, 'these activities must be practiced and practiced several times over a period, not just once or twice.' However, Ziyad contended that a language teaching class should not turn into a personal development class. Therefore, he suggested a more balanced approach to teaching both the target of language and core skills integration.

5.5 Vision 2030: 'Learning for Working' and 'Promoting Physical, Psychological and Social Well-Being'

One of the key questions in interviews with teachers included their perceptions about Vision 2030's 'learning for working' concept. We found that the two participants strongly believed that universities develop and teach the curriculum, which enhances students' employability in the labor market and entrepreneurship. They thought that this process should start as early as in secondary schools and perpetuate until they finish their university study. However, the other two teachers reflected that university education, including English language education, should broadly address the students' need to compete and succeed in the labor market and gain knowledge and ability necessary to understand the world and to build their successful personal life, society and nation. However,

both groups of teachers recognized that students need to learn language skills and core skills to compete in the labor market locally and globally. During class observation of teaching also, we found two participant teachers using teaching materials about Vision 2030. Ziyad, one of the participants even asserted that English language teaching must widen its scope of teaching grammar to transform into classes that are more productive where students engage in discussing things, which are more relevant to their life, and language teaching should be built around it. Henry argued that ITC skill, an important core skill, could open avenues for wider access to information about jobs, fresh materials about business and challenges and learning materials, which are often in English.

During interviews, another important theme emerged which addressed students' need to live a fulfilling life learning important virtues or qualities. This view is parallel with Vision 2030 which states,

The happiness and fulfillment of citizens and residents is important to us. This can only be achieved through promoting physical, psychological and social well-being. At the heart of our Vision is a society in which all enjoy a good quality of life, a healthy lifestyle and an attractive living environment.

Two participants, Ziyad and George felt that in English language teaching, teachers could include content, which may potentially promote physical, psychological and social well-being. They maintained that students could discuss the content about how to live a good quality life in groups and the same activity could be further expanded on writing skill. These perceptions are different from the view that, 'helping students to gain life skills isn't about developing a new curriculum, it's about teaching the same content but structuring and organizing life skills opportunities for our students as part of the organization of our class' (English Central, 2014, p. 3). Nevertheless, both direct teaching of life skills content and adopting instructional strategies that might allow students to use 21st century skills in their language class can be effective to teach life skill at the Preparatory Year program.

5.6 Support for Learning Core Skills and Language Skills

All participants underscored the importance of providing support to the students for their need to learn core skills. They thought that showing examples and modelling, using technology and appropriate materials and scaffolding could provide support for learning core skills and language skills effectively. Henry and Hussein, the participants of this study suggested that support was necessary especially when students were learning challenging and new things such core skills and language skills.

6. Conclusion

In this study, we investigated and analyzed Preparatory Year teachers' perceptions about integration of core skills and English language skills during teaching English. Upon the examination of their perceptions about the process of teaching language skills and core skills simultaneously, we discovered that interactive strategies, problem solving activities, and the activities that promote thinking and communication skills might be productive and stimulating for both language learning and core skills teaching. All participants thought that language skills and core skills are closely intertwined and the success of teaching the one largely depends on the other. This study also recommends teacher-training courses to facilitate teachers to teach core skills during English language teaching, some modifications in examination systems to measure both core skills and language skills and systematic teaching of core skills and language skills integration incorporated in intended learning outcomes (ILOs) of the CR and the CS prepared by the department.

Acknowledgment

The current study was sponsored under the project number of (160743) by the Deanship of Scientific Research, University of Hai'l.

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