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## **My experience as a Teacher of English as a Foreign Language**

**Dr. Gassim H. Dohal**

*English Teacher, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia*

### **Abstract**

*I taught English as a foreign language for four years at a Saudi Arabian intermediate and secondary school. I taught both levels. My experience was disappointing for I found that teaching English was unproductive. At the secondary level, students were not able to identify some of the English alphabets.*

*Later, I joined the Imam University where I spent two years teaching English for non-specialized students. At a college level, English was chosen as an optional, elective, grade-gained, and pass-guaranteed subject.*

*College students told me in more than one department and on many occasions that they chose English because they did not want to do much work and they wanted to pass the exam.*

**Key Words:** *English, Saudi, teaching, foreign, students*

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**Introduction:** In my opinion, there are many factors that lead to the failure of teaching a foreign language like English such as the curricula, the environment English is taught at, the traditionally required method of teaching in classes, and the lack of support from both the colleagues and the society. I will address those factors, relying on my teaching experience.

Receiving my BA degree in English from the Imam University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, I decided to work as a teacher of English. I applied for a job and was assigned at a school ten miles away from my family's home. This was not bliss; in my community, it was a torment to me because parents thought their children would grant "pass" in English as long as they knew the teacher.

**English as a Requirement:** English is taught at both intermediate and secondary schools in Saudi Arabia as a compulsory subject. A student has to take between two and five classes a week; it depends on the type of school whether public or religious. Each class is forty-five minutes.

**Teaching Method:** Teaching English in most, if not all, classes is carried out in the form of a dull one-way monologue. The teacher comes to the classroom, calls attendance, opens the assigned book, and explains the difficult words. Every line is read aloud by the teacher followed by its translation into the mother tongue. The whole classroom time is consumed in explaining the content of an assigned English text in the native language. The students do nothing except listen to the teacher and at the end of the semester learn by heart few things to pass the exam. They usually do not bother themselves about the actual text; they prepare for the exam from the help hints and review teachers provide them with as a short cut to passing at the end of the course in question.

**My Situation:** I started teaching English to different levels: first and second intermediate levels, and second secondary level. Each level consists of four classrooms arranged according to the alphabetical order of the names, not according to their proficiency. Each classroom has between thirty and thirty-five students. That means three levels times four classes times min. thirty students.

I ended up having three hundred and sixty students. Now imagine how difficult to handle this big number.

The early grades: First and second intermediate ones were easier for me to handle for many reasons: First, they were young; they tended to listen to those who were teaching them. Second, they were at the early stages of learning a language they heard of, but never experienced.

Third, no one taught them English before; I mean the first intermediate level; the second intermediate students were not so influenced by their English teacher of the earlier year.

On the other hand, the secondary level was very hard to manage for the following:

First, they were at and beyond the age of adulthood; they were experiencing a complete change in ways of thinking and behaving.

Second, they were at a point of fossilization; they got used to a particular way of banking education; a way that would grant them a “pass” in the exam. They had been taught by other teachers for years and under the impression that English is a difficult subject and there is no need to learn it. Therefore, their focus was just to pass exams. One feels sorry to see students who spent some time on learning English but in vain.

**Factors to be Observed:** In the light of what I mentioned above, there were factors that may contribute and lead to the failure of learning English as a foreign language in a developing country like Saudi Arabia.

First, the curricula are designed in advance and are not subject to criticism. As a teacher one has to work on a provided book and is to abide by that text. The schoolmaster and inspector will come to the class few times each year to check the progress made as far as the text in question is concerned. The whole text should be addressed according to the designated time and plan a teacher is to provide at the beginning of the year. Hence, the teacher’s objective is changed according to the surrounding circumstances from teaching process as a focus into meeting the timetable and covering the text in question—a text with many things to be reconsidered. In brief, quantity of the lessons becomes more important than their quality for those who are in charge.

Once I talked with a school inspector of English about issues in the text I was teaching—issues that may be reviewed and changed or deleted, he asked me to write my notes and comments and submit them. I did, but he never got back to me.

Second, method of teaching is another factor. Due to the fact that the teacher has to cover the whole provided text and that other subjects are taught according to the teacher-centered method and due to students’ lack of readiness to change easily, a teacher has no option but to teach in a teacher-centered method; every student expects the teacher to do everything. In other words, it is hard to use group activities, outside class, or expect reader-response interaction, etc. Because of students’ ignorance of such methods and administrators’ refusal of any invention or new change with regard to methods, any new activity, if possible and applicable, takes a lot of time in order to get students ready for the method in question.

For example, if students are asked to group themselves. First, they will take a great deal of time to do so. And second, they will disturb other neighboring classes by the noise they will make while moving chairs and tables. Whenever a teacher starts an activity other than the old-listening-class method, students and school officials think of the teacher as a frivolous person who wants to waste time. For those administrative officials, such a teacher is not a qualified one.

Third, the environment where English is taught is not good for teaching a foreign language. As I mentioned above the dull one-way method, the class size which exceeds thirty students all of them are beginners, the teacher’s load which is beyond control, and the short time a teacher has to teach,

the lack of support one receives; all these components make it difficult, if not impossible, to succeed appropriately in doing such a job.

In addition, classroom conditions are destructive; you have noisy, chaotic classrooms. You have a large class size; over thirty students. You have kids playing in the back of the classroom. You have got kids talking and others listening to them. Others may finish their homework for other subjects. Those students are not doing these things for the first time; they used to do so in other subjects. Those who sit at the back of the classroom feel they can do whatever they want back there. And it looks like as though the teachers are just teaching those in the front. Even those who want to learn at the back cannot learn—they could not even hear in that noisy, disruptive atmosphere.

Fourth, lack of support from both the colleagues and the society is another reason that leads to the uselessness of any effort. If the colleagues are suspicious of all you do, if they consider you and your subject as a challenge to what they are teaching or doing in their classes, and if they regard what you are doing as a waste-of-time subject which has no benefit in students' future—if all this and more takes place at your school, then it is a real challenge that requires great efforts and that is not easily solved. In other words, an individual's efforts are not enough to solve such an issue.

With regard to the society, it is another polar power—the majority of people think of English as an impediment to their children's success; it is difficult to learn, strange to write, and useless to use in a community who communicate in another language. Some people like to see their children speak and use English when necessary—particularly in hospitals, but due to their inability to help their children in their homework and their children's complaints about difficulties they are facing while learning English, their objective focus becomes their children's passing.

The issue of “passing” the exam becomes the main concern of officials. Once my school principal refused to xerox my test because he believed that questions were difficult—however, he knew no English, but he judged questions through looking at them. Usually after each exam, he called me to his office, and used to tell me that the percentage of students who flunked my subject was the highest he ever saw. He used to tell me that there was no reason to have five-to-ten percent failing the English exam.

By the way, there is nothing in my case called “READING ASSISTANT, WRITING ASSISTANT, or TEACHING ASSISTANT”—everything should be addressed and done by the teacher alone. However, I met students who should see a psychological assistant whose parents were not ready to think of a psychologist; it is a shame to have an appointment with a psychologist.

Of course, there are other elements that affect the learning process of English—they include: native-foreign language relationship, supporting materials, and teachers' qualifications.

—As you know Arabic is written from right to left while English goes the opposite way. This may cause confusion for some students whether in writing or the way of looking at words, phrases and sentences.

—Materials that help in teaching English like posters, cards and tapes are important. Usually they are not available. Once I asked for posters and cards that would help teach English to young students—the answer was that the school never received such materials.

—Qualifications are important; those who are in charge should hire qualified teachers. Also most teachers do not have formal training in the teaching methodology. So they tend to teach the way their own teachers taught them decades ago. At least in some cases, you will get shocked when you discover that English is being taught by the teachers whose area of expertise is not English. Even teaching the basics requires a qualified person who can transfer knowledge in a right way.

What I faced at the college level while teaching non-specialists at the Imam University is almost similar to what I experienced at the secondary level. When it comes to the assigned text, it is about

stories that have nothing to do with students' life, written in literary 18<sup>th</sup> century English. Sometimes a student develops a dislike for a certain text because of its difficult language and style. The English department is not ready to address this issue; I have many troubles with them, those in charge used to say, "try your utmost and avoid the parts that cause some troubles." Why not assign a good text and save your time? Also I met students who cannot identify some letters at the college level, wow!

I was disappointed to have this experience—yet this is what I saw while teaching English for years. Yet this experience took me to pursue my struggle, receive my doctorate degree, and get involved in the process of educational change in my country.

**My suggestions:**

—Curricula should be subject to criticism and frequent evaluation by specialists and those who are working in the field.

—Modern language, clear style, and acceptable content should be the focus of those who design textbooks.

—Class size and devoted time should be seriously considered.

—Workshops are to be held for parents to let them know of the importance of what their children are learning. And Colleagues are to be notified of the importance of their cooperation. Also principals may be informed of the needs the teaching of a foreign language requires.

—Helpful materials should be provided. And assistants are to be available whenever needed.

—Officials are to hire qualified teachers whose qualifications will enable them to carry out the mission of teaching a foreign language.

—Training in teaching methodology may be provided when necessary.

—Frequent evaluation and assessment are important.

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