Factors Contributing to the English Speaking Challenges Encountered by Saudi EFL Health Institution Security Guards

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Abstract:
The aim of this study was to investigate the perceived factors contributing to the English speaking challenges facing Saudi EFL security guards in health institutions. The data were gathered via questionnaires completed by 258 security guard students (132 males and 126 females) and interviews with 6 English teachers (3 males and 3 females). The findings indicated that course content and materials, as well as teaching methodologies, contribute to the speaking problems encountered by Saudi EFL security guards in health institutions. Concerns with course content and resources include insufficient content time, inadequate tasks for English language practice, and a lack of relevance to students' language learning needs. In terms of teaching methods, students are taught using the Grammar Translation Method (GTM), which emphasises memorising vocabulary in isolation rather than fostering communication in different meaningful situations. The study's implications and limitations were addressed.

1. Introduction

Speaking is a crucial skill necessary for acquiring proficiency in the English language. The vast majority, if not all, academic, professional, and business institutions require applicants to possess an adequate level of speaking English proficiency (Alshayban, 2022). In all Saudi universities, for instance, a student must have a score equivalent to a 5 on the IELTS; otherwise, he or she must complete a 32-hour English course. In business, companies expect applicants and students to be able to use the English language for particular purposes and in particular contexts. For instance, the oil company (Aramco) prefers applicants who communicate in English proficiently in business settings. Al-Seghayer (2023) asserts that local (Saudi) and international businesses are keen to recruit English-speaking workers because they frequently collaborate with international commercial organisations and maintain vital global connections. Therefore, these require specific language for particular purposes.

One of the primary goals of teaching English in Saudi Arabia is to improve the speaking skills of Saudis who work directly with non-Saudis and English speakers, particularly in high-level settings such as health institutions (Hoven and Algahtani, 2023). According to the Saudi 2022 Census, which was conducted by the General Authority for Statistics, it is estimated that there are currently 13 million (41.6% of the total population) expatriate workers living in Saudi Arabia. In health institutions, English is the most commonly used medium of instruction when communicating with foreign doctors, nurses, patients, and visitors. Safety is a priority for any health institution in terms of security guarding. Security guarding plays a critical role in saving people's lives. Security guards in hospitals should learn how to deal with emergencies, such as by understanding codes. They must learn how to give directions and provide information about their workplace, for example. They deal with people of various nationalities, the majority of whom speak English. As a result, security guards should learn how to speak functionally, as English is the most commonly used language in hospitals. This is why it is critical to investigate whether security guards in Saudi health institutions are able to speak English communicatively.

2. Research problem

Saudi students study English for about twelve years, from elementary to high school, and have two courses in English at the university. Despite the duration of time spent studying English, the students seem unable to use their English communicatively in different real-life situations (Al-Seghayer, 2023). Saudi students graduate from high school without being able to speak the target language functionally (Al-Hassaani & Al-Saalmi, 2022). Also, according to the IELTS data for the year 2022, Saudi Arabia ranks 35th out of 40 countries in terms of academic test takers, but it has the lowest position among all nations in terms of general test takers, based on their overall performance (IELTS, 2022).

Having said that, are the security guard students able to use their English communicatively in their fieldwork? Based on the present research's experience, ESP Saudi security guard students seem mostly unable to use their English communicatively. In terms of the ESP Saudi security guard course, students appear unable to use the necessary and appropriate communicative phrases in their field work, which is in health institutions. The researcher of this study examined the students orally in a preliminary investigation. Only a few students were able to express themselves and communicate their English effectively. Therefore, the researcher has been motivated to investigate the factors affecting Saudi security guard students when speaking in English. So, what are the perceived challenges students face in speaking their English communicatively? Despite the importance of ESP courses for students in Saudi Arabia, no research has been conducted on Saudi security guards. No study has specifically investigated students' and teachers' perceptions of the English speaking challenges encountered by ESP security guards in Saudi Arabia.

3. Institutional Background

The Saudi Health Academy, which operates under the umbrella of the Ministry of Health, has developed a curriculum aimed at instructing students some terms, expressions, and terminology that can help security guard students communicate effectively in their field work. The main goal of the course is to communicatively utilise the

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English common expressions in health institutions in Saudi Arabia. The students devote a total of 18 hours to their studies over a span of three weeks. The course consists of a total of nine chapters. The chapter in question is of a thematic nature. Every chapter starts with a textual passage and/or a conversational exchange, followed by a compilation of vocabulary that acts as the primary emphasis of the chapter. In accordance with the provided vocabulary list, students are expected to engage in a sequence of exercises and drills, mostly consisting of multiple-choice, matching, and fill-in-the blank questions. In order to achieve success in the course, students are required to successfully complete their final examination.

4. Research Objective

The aim of this research was to examine the perceived factors contributing to the English speaking challenges experienced by Saudi EFL security guards in health institutions.

5. Research Question

What are the perceptions of both students and teachers regarding the challenges facing security guard students when speaking English**?**

6. Literature Review

A number of studies have been conducted in ESP contexts to investigate the factors that influence EFL students' communication in English. In Saudi Arabia, several studies have examined the English skills and communicative use of English by Saudi students in ESP contexts. Notable contributions in this area include the works of Khalil & Semono-Eke (2020), Fadel & Elyas (2015), Almathkuri (2022), Muhammad & Abdul Raof (2019), Gaffas (2019), Hashmi, Rajab, and Sendi (2019), Alshayban (2022), Alsamadani (2017), and Al-Malki, Javid, Farooq, Algethami, and Al-Harthi (2022). These aforementioned studies used different tools and sample sizes concluding that EFL students face challenges in speaking English. What factors are contributing to the emergence of these challenges? The reviewed studies identified vocabulary deficiency, instructional methods, and course materials and content as contributing factors. This literature review will examine these studies as well as those conducted in other EFL settings.

The difficulty encountered by EFL students in speaking English is sometimes attributed to a deficiency of vocabulary (Gaffas, 2019; Alshayban, 2022; Aldohon, 2014). Within the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Saudi Arabia, Gaffas (2019) conducted a study on the perceptions of graduate students, while Alshayban (2022) investigated Saudi bankers. Both studies revealed that the participants faced significant difficulties in communication, primarily due to a lack of varied second language (L2) vocabulary and unfamiliarity with the meanings of certain terms. Similarly, Aldohon (2014) found deficiency of vocabulary as a major difficulty experienced by EFL Jordanian tourist police officers. Aldohon attributed these issues to insufficient opportunities to practice English outside the classroom. These results illustrate the importance of vocabulary, along with Nation's (2013) claim that vocabulary serves as the fundamental basis for learning any language. Hall (2018) and Newton & Nation (2021) argue that the less EFL students utilise the English vocabulary practically, the less likely they are to be able to communicate effectively in English. However, what if EFL students have enough vocabulary? Are they taught how to put the words they have learned into practice?

Given that teachers interact with students, it is not unexpected that teaching methods have a significant role in the learning process. Research findings suggest that ineffective teaching methods are a factor that could contribute to the problems experienced by EFL students when they speak English (Fadel & Elyas, 2015; Almathkuri, 2022; Hashmi, Rajab, and Sending, 2019; Alsamadani, 2017; Al-Hassani & Al-Saalmi, 2022; and Manulang & Susilowaty, 2022).

Examining Saudi undergraduate students in different ESP contexts, Almathkuri (2022), Alsamadani (2017), Alhassaani & Al-Saalami (2022), and Hashmi, Rajab, and Sending (2019) identified issues with teaching methods, with an emphasis on traditional approaches like the Grammar Translation Method (GTM), which encourages term translations and requires students to memorise their meanings rather than communicate functionally. The aforementioned studies found that Saudi students are being taught in a traditional way, with the instructor having more control over the classroom and the

learning process not being focused on the students. It was discovered that the emphasis was placed on teaching vocabulary and grammar as separate entities. According to Richards and Rodgers (2014), many EFL teachers prioritise instructing the structure and mechanics of the language (accuracy) above its practical use (fluency). This teaching method is teacher-centred and fails to foster the development of second language learners' ability to independently construct language and effectively articulate their thoughts and opinions in different meaningful settings (Nation, 2013; Thornbury, 2002). Learning should be learning-centred, in which the learner is the central part of the learning process and teachers facilitate the learning by providing students with tasks that promote communication (Cooze, 2017; Hall, 2018).

Other researchers, such as Almathkuri (2022) and Hashmi, Rajab, and Sending (2019), conducted studies using student questionnaires and interviews, respectively, and found that EFL Saudi students perceived their teachers as not involving them in group or peer work, workshops, or problem-solving tasks. Instead, the teachers relied on traditional lecturing methods. This illustrates the desire of the participating students to engage in interactive and communicative circumstances in order to improve their English language skills.

However, do teachers teach students how to communicate their English functionally? Referring to the studies carried out by Almathkuri (2022), Alsamadani (2017), and Alhassaani & Al-Saalami (2022) may help answer the question. These studies reveal that instructors tend to prioritise receptive skills over productive abilities. Almathkuri (2022) discovered that there was a lack of effective use of productive skills. Put simply, students have limited opportunities to actively develop their speaking abilities in a way that directly prepares them for their future responsibilities in the medical field, such as communicating with patients and other stakeholders. However, lack of practice could be a result of, as pointed out by Richards (2017) and Almathkuri (2022), having many lessons and a crowded course content.

Several studies have indicated that course content and materials have a role in the challenges confronting EFL students' when

speaking English. The aforementioned reviewed studies concluded that the course content fails to meet the students' needs, the courses are outdated, and they need to be updated to fit the needs of learners in their everyday lives as well as labour market demands. Specifically, listening is the input for the output (Newton and Nation, 2021), but Almathkuri (2022), Aldohon (2014), and Nguyen & Nguyen (2017) found the content fails to encourage students to engage in listening to authentic materials. Additionally, the topics covered are not tailored to the local context (Hashmi, Rajab, and Sendi, 2019), and irrelevant curriculum would expectedly discourage students from engaging them in learning the target language (Richards, 2017). Furthermore, the total number of course hours is insufficient for students to effectively practice their English skills (Almathkuri, 2022; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2017) and for teachers to provide students with feedback (Al-Hassaani & Al-Saalmi, 2022; Almathkuri, 2022).

Other research findings suggest communicative tasks and materials to improve the course content and materials, such as reading and listening to authentic materials (Hashmi, Rajab, and Sendi, 2019; Muhammad & Abdul Raof, 2019), practicing English through films and games (Fadel & Elyas, 2015; Manulang & Susilowaty, 2022), watching videos, delivering presentations, role-playing and class discussions. The results of these studies indicate that students seem to be aware of their needs. This is reflected in the suggested solutions perceived by both students and teachers that generally enhance communicative tasks. For example, Muhammad & Abdul Raof (2019) found that more than 70% of the participating students perceived that listening to lectures, taking notes while listening, watching videos, delivering presentations, and describing the content of tables and graphs were the most important tasks they wanted to have in their course. Cooze (2017) and Lennon (2021) point out that speaking tasks should be communicative and provide a valuable platform for learners to engage in simulated real-life conversations, where students can use their English in an interactive environment.

Al-Malki et al. (2022) found that the Saudi tourism profession places a high emphasis on speaking abilities due to the predominant nature of verbal communication with visitors. One of the most

essential speaking skills pertained to the capacity to respond to queries about attractions, provide detailed information about those attractions, identify oneself, and supply the necessary details pertaining to the attractions. These students' suggestions imply that they want to have active roles and practice their English speaking fictionally in different real-life situations.

To the best researcher's knowledge, no study has been carried out to investigate the perspectives of Saudi security guard students and their teachers about the problems the students encounter while communicating in English during their field job. The current research aims to address the existing information gap by using a mixed-methods approach (a combination of quantitative and qualitative methodologies) to comprehensively capture the whole of the narrative (Creswell, 2014).

7. Methodology
7.1 Sample of the Study

The study sample included 258 security guard students (132 males and 126 females). All of the students are graduates and have the same educational background. Also, the sample consisted of 6 teachers (3 males and 3 females). They have PhDs in teaching English and educational linguistics.

7.2 Instruments of the Study

Two instruments were employed in this study i.e. a student questionnaire and one-on-one teacher interviews. They were used to obtain the perspectives of students and teachers on the challenges experienced by the Saudi security guards while communicating in English. The questionnaire consists of 10 closed-item questions and one open-ended question. The researcher developed the questionnaire through exploration of the literature research and piloting. The researcher developed the 10-item questionnaire in Arabic (the L1 of the participants), incorporating a 5-likert scale ranging from 0 to 4, with 0 meaning "strongly disagree" and 4 meaning "strongly agree". Concerning the teacher interviews, six teachers were interviewed to elicit their perceptions of the challenges encountered by their students when communicating their English.

7.3 Procedure

After assuring the students of the confidentiality of their answers and that codes would be used instead of their names in the study, the questionnaire was sent to all the students to answer online via Google Forms. The items were presented in Arabic to avoid students' confusion. A total of 258 students completed the questionnaire. Their responses to the open-ended question were translated into English.

Regarding the teacher interviews, all six teachers were sent emails to ask for their approval on participation and what place and time suited them. All of them agreed to be interviewed over the phone. The interviews were presented in English.

7.4 Questionnaire Validity

To achieve the validity of the questionnaire, the researcher gave it to two bilingual TESOL professors to check the clarity of the content, the relevance of the content to the topic, and the translated (Arabic) copy of the questionnaire. Some items were modified as per their suggestions so as to establish the content validity. Also, piloting the questionnaire helped the present researcher obtain feedback from the students to draw conclusions about the validity of the questionnaire. A pilot test of the questionnaire was employed to make sure that there were no ambiguous, uncertain, or wordy items in the questionnaire (Creswell, 2014). Some elements were changed to be more explicit as a result of student feedback.

8. Results and Discussion

To answer the research question, *what are the perceptions of both students and teachers regarding the challenges facing security guard students when speaking English?* The questionnaire items have been categorised thematically. These include the course content and teaching methods.

8.1 Course content

As Table 1 (see appendix A) shows, about 60% of the student participants express a dissenting viewpoint on the adequacy of the content time, the effectiveness of the activities and tasks in facilitating English practice, and the relevance of the material to their specific course demands. These perspectives are supported by the participating

students' responses to the open question in the questionnaire. Only 42 students provided responses to the open-ended question pertaining to the difficulties they have while communicating in English. Two issues emerged from it, namely a scarcity of content time and insufficient practical use of English skills. One student mentioned, "we need extra hours to study English for three months rather than three weeks." Another student said, "we don't practice our English for communication. We just read the words and answered the multiple-choice questions.". The opinions expressed by the interviewed teachers support the perceptions of the students who took part in the study, as revealed through both closed-ended and open-ended questions. According to one teacher, "the course is insufficient for the trainees' language skills, especially their communication skills, which need more training hours to improve." Another teacher mentioned that "the content is not suitable because it is not relevant to students' future careers." Another teacher added, "students study the names of diseases, and those are irrelevant to their future because they are security guards rather than physical nurses." Another teacher mentioned that "the course is just to teach them some words in a list with their equivalent meanings in Arabic. It has nothing to do with improving their speaking skills."

The results indicated that both the participating students and their teachers concur that the content has some issues that need to be considered. Approximately 60% of the participant students and all of the interviewed teachers expressed agreement with regards to the insufficiency of content time, the inadequacy of activities and tasks in facilitating English language practice, and the lack of relevance of the course content to the language learning needs of the students. The findings of this present study are in line with Almathkuri (2022) and Al-Hassaani & Al-Saalmi (2022), who stated that teachers don't have enough time to give feedback and students have few chances to communicate their English in the class. The current research supports this perspective, since it is corroborated by a majority of the participating students and all the interviewed teachers, who concurred that there is insufficient time allocated for practice.

Regarding the activities and tasks of the content, the findings

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of the present study align with the findings of Hashmi, Rajab, and Sendi (2019), which indicate that the coursebook contents and material are outdated and unsuitable for ESP learners. Additionally, the findings of Almathkuri (2022) and Gaffas (2019) support this notion, as they discovered that the textbook is short and lacks linguistic and professional relevance for students. According to Richards (2017), students are less likely to actively participate in learning the target language if the curriculum is unrelated to their interests. Students' disengagement because of irrelevant vocabularies in this present study is stressed by all the interviewed teachers, who believed that the students were not active because they learned the names of some diseases that were not relevant to their interests and needs. Are the students able to recognise the meaning of these words and use them functionally in different contexts?

8.2 Teaching Methods

As far as vocabulary is concerned, Table 1 (see appendix A) illustrates that 160 (62%) of the students agreed that they can understand English texts easily. However, knowing the meaning of words and understanding the texts easily were not enough to help students use the target words functionally in different settings. This finding is reflected in Item 6, as it reveals that 168 (65%) of the students expressed disagreement with their ability to use the target words communicatively in different meaningful contexts. One possible reason for that may stem from the teaching methods. In other words, it seems that the students were not taught how to utilse the target words communicatively in meaningful situations. This explanation is corroborated by the findings in Items 7, where 214 (83%) of the students agreed that they learn the English words in isolated terms.

While 83% (see appendix A) of the students agreed that they learn the English words in isolated terms, 65% of the students concurred with the statement that they have challenges in effectively utilising these words across diverse and relevant situations. Consistently, all the interviewed teachers indicated that students learn vocabulary passively. For example, one teacher indicated that "most of the curriculum is objective exercises for the trainees to memorise

these vocabulary sets. There are gaps where content should be designated to provide the trainees with background information on the main themes of security in health institutions so that the trainees can correctly relate acquired vocabulary sets to work contexts". Another teacher said, "although the focus is on learning vocabulary, students can't use them functionally." This indicates that students learn English words passively. In other words, they are passively engaged in memorising the native language equivalents for the target words rather than actively involved in using their English words communicatively in different meaningful contexts. The findings of the current study are in harmony with those by Almathkuri (2022), Alsamadani (2017), Alhassaani & Al-Saalami (2022), and Hashmi, Rajab, and Sending (2019), who found that their participants were taught passively and were not given the chance to create their own sentences and use them in daily conversations. Nation (2013) points out that the acquisition of vocabulary necessitates language learners using the target words in a meaningful and functional manner across many communicative contexts, rather than just recognising and memorising their meanings. If students can't use vocabulary in contexts, how can they achieve their goal of learning the English language?

A total of 212 (82%) of the students agreed that their goal of learning English is to communicate with others. Consistently, 193 (75%) of the students disagreed that their goal of learning English is to pass the exams. The observed coherence between these two items shows that students have the desire to learn English for communicative purposes. Contrary to the participating students' perceived goals, all the teachers agreed that students only focus on passing the final exam. One teacher said, "most of the students just want to pass the exam to get the job. However, very few students come to me and say, we want to learn how to communicate our English." It seems that there is a gap between students' and teachers' perceptions regarding students' goal of learning English. While students indicated that their goal is to communicate their English, their teachers believed that their students just wanted to learn English to pass the exam. Hall (2018) indicates that a gap between goals of learning and teaching practices will hinder students from achieving their goals of learning the target language. In

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this current study, it implies that the students consider the importance of learning English for communicative purposes. However, it seems that due to the time constraints, they just want to pass the exam. This possible explanation is supported by all the interviewed teachers. One teacher said, "we want to improve their speaking skills, but we have only three weeks. We have to finish nine units that have lots of exercises. And students mostly focus on the exam." The statement suggests that teachers prioritise providing sufficient time for students to engage in English language practice. However, their instructional approach is mostly influenced by the educational system, resulting in a training course that is primarily focused on assessments and examinations. The way of teaching described seems to be teacher-centred, whereby the teacher assumes control over the whole learning process and emphasises the language aspects to enable students to successfully complete the examination, which serves as the ultimate outcome.

A majority of the students (80% or 207 out of 258) did not agree that their teachers play audio tracks focusing on the words they have learned. This finding demonstrates that listening was ignorant. Consistently, all of the interviewed teachers affirmed that the course content doesn't have audio tracks. Two teachers stated that they sometimes play some audio and video clips. One teacher said she uses You Tube to show her students how to pronounce some words. Another teacher indicated that he uses some cartoons on You Tube to show them how to give directions in English. The present study's findings are consistent with the research conducted by Alshayban (2022) and Almathkuri (2022), which similarly revealed that their participants did not have exposure to authentic listening experiences aimed at fostering communication. Listening serves as the input for the subsequent production (Newton & Nation, 2021). Therefore, students should be exposed to listening to the language so that they can speak the target language communicatively.

9. Implications of the Study

The findings of this study revealed that the course content and materials and the way they have been taught don't meet the students' expectations. Therefore, students should be engaged in tasks relevant

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to their needs and experiences so that they can be encouraged to communicate their English and maximise their practice. Also**,** there were limited chances for students to practice their speaking inside the classroom. Hence, it is advisable that curriculum designers and teachers give students enough time to practice speaking. Additionally**,** the present study's findings revealed that the students are taught using GTM, which emphasises rote memorization of vocabulary in isolation. Therefore, students should have active roles in their learning process and be provided with opportunities to actively engage in English communication, utilising the acquired words in various functional contexts. Furthermore**,** the findings of the present study also indicated that the perspectives of both students and teachers are disregarded. How can curriculum designers design courses without taking students and teachers' voices into consideration? In this study, the revised version of the course could incorporate a variety of communicative activities aimed at offering students supplementary opportunities to be involved in actual conversations on genuine subjects with real audiences (Cooze, 2017; Lennon, 2021). Ultimately, the comprehensive curriculum may prioritise practical application of English in real-life situations above the isolated study of linguistic components.

10. Limitations of the Study

This study has three main limitations. Firstly, the scope of this research is confined to a single city. The study's external generalizability is restricted by the location-based limitation, which also significantly reduces the sample size. Another limitation is that it is related to the study instruments. The data collection process included the administration of student questionnaires and teacher interviews. The inclusion of observational data in this study would have contributed valuable insights into the pedagogical methods and learning processes used within the classroom setting, surpassing the reliance only on the subjective perspectives of instructors and students.

Finally, although the students were asked an open-ended question in the questionnaire to talk about their challenges when speaking English, it would be better to interview them to elicit more

comprehensive perspectives or viewpoints pertaining to the data presented in the questionnaire (Creswell, 2014). These limitations should be kept in mind while interpreting all of the data presented in this study.

Appendix A

Table 1: Students' perspective of the factors that contribute to their challenges while communicating in English.

	Statement	Agree & Strongly Agree	Disagree & Strongly Disagree
1	The time allotted for the course content is enough	102 (40%)	156 (60%)
2	I have enough time to practice my English in the class	93 (36%)	165 (64%)
3	The tasks and activities help me to improve my peaking skills in English.	95 (37%)	163 (63%)
4	The texts in the course are relevant to my needs.	106 (41%)	152 (59%)
5	I can understand English texts easily	160 (62%)	98 (38%)
6	I can use the words, I have learned, in meaningful contexts	90 (35%)	168 (65%)

7	I learn the vocabulary in isolated terms	214 (83%)	44 (17%)
8	My goal of learning the English course is to communicate with others.	44 (17%)	214 (83%)
9	My goal of learning the English course is just to pass the exam	65 (25%)	193 (75%)
10	My teacher explains the lessons in Arabic	125 (48%)	133 (52%)
11	My teacher encourages me to speak English in the class.	75 (29%)	183 (71%)
12	My teacher plays audio tracks in the class	114 (44%)	144 (56%)

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