



## WHY DO KUWAITI STUDENTS IN THE COLLEGE OF ARTS THINK THAT LEARNING ENGLISH IS BOTH DIFFICULT AND UNNECESSARY?

**Mona S. Rashed<sup>i</sup>**

College of Arts, English Language Unit,  
Kuwait University, Kuwait

### **Abstract:**

The study sheds lights on the basic reasons and/or obstacles that hamper Kuwaiti students in the College of Arts/Kuwait University from advancing in English learning process in ESL classes. It, on the same level, tries to answer the question: “*Why Do Kuwaiti Students in the College of Arts Think that Learning English is Both Difficult and Unnecessary?*” The study moves onto a parallel direction which focuses on the various factors that affect the full and smooth L2 acquisition. The survey was answered by about 500 students from the Arts College studying English modules (090, 141, and 142). Students answered the questions in either language; English or Arabic. They, in return, disclosed their views, suggestions, ideas and reflections about the curriculum. On the other hand, the survey results demonstrated the fact that students were discontent with the traditional methods of teaching grammar; they explained that they would want a more communicative method of integrating grammar within other L2 skills.

**Keywords:** Arts College students, survey, English language learning, obstacles, eliminating skills, factors

### **1. Introduction**

Around the world, ESL students encounter diverse obstacles that impede or slow the language learning process. There are, normally, substantial problems from which L2 learners suffer whether cultural, social, ideological, political and/or factors. Those

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<sup>i</sup> Correspondence: email [zainah12200@gmail.com](mailto:zainah12200@gmail.com)

background differences can work as barriers to hinder students from L2 acquisition. (Jin and Cortazzi, 1998:118).

This paper tries to answer a major question; *“Why do Kuwaiti students think that learning English is both difficult and unnecessary”*? On the other hand, it proposes solutions to the problem. As more students in the Arts College fail to attain higher levels in English, the survey approaches various possibilities behind the problem; is it anxiety, fear to speak in the classroom, which is a common factor shared by ESL learners (MacIntyre, P.D.; Gardner, R.C.) 1994, or there might be other reasons that create such a dilemma to the Arts students?

Throughout the survey feedback, Arts students gave diverse reasons as obstacles to attain English. Multiple comments were part of the characteristics to the ideology and system in this region.

## **2. Literature Review**

Bearing in mind the facts about L2 acquisition regarding the difficulty in learning and the different levels students around the world fall in, this study uncovers a fact that students in Arts have their strategies to improve their levels. Many students revealed that they extract certain rules from their mother tongue (L1) and utilize them in the target language (L2), (Vygotsky, L.) 1978. Among the difficulties they face is the ability to memorize grammar structures, or recall vocabulary words due to the dissimilar nature of English and Arabic. The un-correspondent relation between the two languages appears in phonology, lexicon, and structures.

This paper will discuss the following factors:

- Mother tongue (L1) influence
- Socio-cultural influence
- Academic stress
- Grammar: important or not?

### **2.1 Mother tongue (L1) influence**

A language has its cultural medium where social, ideological and political effects are present. It shines over the students' learning/developing stages of the target language. Participants of this survey in the Arts College mentioned that some words in English were not only difficult to read or pronounce, but some sounds were also unfamiliar, i.e. the first language (Arabic) doesn't have them. They explained that some sounds in the target language were novel to them such as (V) in vital and (P) in plan and (G) in goat as well as the sound (SU) as in usual. Some ESL students in Arts College are making

efforts to pronounce the sounds correctly, yet little has been achieved. For example, vital becomes fital, plan becomes blan, usual with the original sound becomes ujwal. Consequently, to some students, attempting to borrow rules or similar sounds from L1 into L2 was of a minimal advantage. (MacIntyre, Clement, Dornyei & Noels) 1998. Unfortunately, learners, in their endeavor to apply familiar linguistic features from L1 to L2 create sharp difference and perplexity. (Jarvis & Paclenko, Scott & Aneta) 2008, (Weinreich, Uriel) 1953. On the same level, a few students revealed confusion with silent letters in words like; 'often, walk, talk, debt, muscle, descend, fascinating and so on' because such letters don't exist in modern Arabic. Therefore, students read the entire word exactly as the case in their mother tongue.

## **2.2 Socio-cultural influence**

Students experiencing an anxiety-producing condition attempted less interpretive messages than those experiencing a relaxed condition; (Steinberg and Horwitz) 1986. This study exhibits a few socio-cultural factors that contrive the environment for students to sense such an anxiety in class such as:

- The conventional direct method of learning in class where students take the lesson, concepts of the today-lesson, and the language skills immediately from the teacher without a great effort to research the information is the common method used in government schools in this region; Kuwait. In college, however, students encounter a new method of learning during which they have to research, study the material independently, and submit the results individually. Such a communicative, interactive, independent work in college confuses the students and reduces their ability to acquire language skills or accomplish well in class, or in this educational system in general.
- Since language is a type of aptitude where learners must produce verbal and written work, and since most Kuwaiti students who participated in the survey come from a traditional, dictating-style schools, the college system works as a challenger for them in the sense of participating in class, expressing their opinions freely, and creating/producing in the target language. This, consequently, constrains them from advancing in L2 as well as acquiring the language because they are frustrated, embarrassed and/or confused.
- Some students use L1 in class to assure themselves that they understood well, or to ask for the meaning of some difficult words, or to inquire about the complex instructions announced by the teacher. Correspondingly, such attitude in ESL classes is unacceptable; it contradicts the fundamental ESL classroom rules. On

the other hand, it affects the amount of L2 acquisition and the level of comprehension.

- Many participants in the survey expressed a feeling of discomfort in class when they feel they are under constant correction of the teacher. It is connected to their image in front of peers, while some of the participants thought correcting mistakes did little help for them to gain more vocabulary or understand a grammar item. According to Holley and King (1969: 81-88) overt correction is not only unnecessary, but definitely inadvisable and even harmful to the L2 learners. On the other hand, researchers like Blair (1982) and Brumfit (1984) have investigated in this area and concluded that error correction has minimal if no role in improving L2 acquisition. On the same level, Semke (1984) found out that error correction in writing, for instance, would have an unfavorable effect on the quality of the students' writing as well as their attitude towards writing in L2.
- Another phenomenon appears in this part of the world is the timidity of speaking freely to in class. As segregation between genders in classes is a law in schools in Kuwait, genders feel embarrassed to speak freely in class when they reach college level. They feel a sense of pressure to participate in class least they make a mistake and their image/conceit is distorted. Conforming to point, Covington (1992) says that students engage in some behaviors considered detrimental to learning, such as avoiding seeking help, in order to protect self-worth. Students usually avoid participating in situations where they think they would be criticized or judged by peers or the teacher. They fear that their "ignorance" about the subject discussed appears and their image is distorted among mates. Correspondingly, students in the College of Arts/Kuwait University experience the same circumstances in addition to experiencing that in front of female peers whom they encounter as classmates for the first time in life. Such an act could impede further learning, and normally, speaking confidently in class.

### **2.3 Academic Stress**

Students around the world experience similar stress causes such as courses pressure, academic commitment, confusion, anxiety, lack of time management and so on. Hirsch & Ellis (1996) point out that the pressure to earn good grades and to earn a degree is very high. Other potential sources of stress include excessive homework, unclear assignment and uncomfortable classrooms. Kohn & Frazer (1986). On the same level, participants of the survey noted that academic stress play a role in decelerating language skills comprehension and acquisition. Therefore, many students changed their

strategies, tried new personal methods to improve in L2 and consequently earn higher grades what conforms to Alloga & Ongori (2009). In the feedback, many students revealed that they had to change/evolve their studying techniques and ways to endure the amount of assignment and material decided to them. The amount differs from what they are used to receive in schools, and that leads to a type of stress they bear.

Confusion is another cause of stress which the participants mentioned. The overload of the language skills presented in every ESL module is overwhelming to the learners. They think that the amount of class work and homework exceeds their capacity (in apprehension and time allocated to the course) especially that they have other courses to study; a feeling of frustration and depression blocked their desire to work hard for some time as they argued. This group has also mentioned that the unclear, inadequate guidance by the teachers regarding the assignment instructions created a feeling of anxiety of making mistakes, discouragement out of confusion and the lack of intention to participate in class later and review the answers.

Parental pressure is a stress source that college students suffer from. In their comments, Arts College participants disclosed that the 'parents 'expectations' is another burden laid on their shoulders during college years. Parents usually expect and anticipate highly from their children, waiting to see excellent grades and perfect performance in college unaware of the uneasy life their children experience in college. Concerning this point, many students revealed that the family demand has a noticeable impact on them emotionally and intellectually, which led to tension, partial loss of memory during exams, and school repugnance in general what normally causes confusion in accomplishing tasks and organizing thoughts and work.

Other groups engaged in this study mentioned that lack of time management effect their school life. They admitted that they are confused about deciding the duties that should have the higher priority to do. They said that there were aware of the tasks they had to accomplish, yet were lost in organizing their time. They acknowledged the stress generated from the lack of time management as they were unable to detect the cause behind it and treat it. On the other hand, they complained that such a syndrome created a sense of depression, dissatisfaction, pessimism about the future and helplessness. Consequently, this problem reflects on material acquiring, language acquisition and their performance in college courses in general. The ability to organize their schedule according to subject importance, leisure time, set of goals and other related issues is unsettled.

## **2.4 Grammar: Important or Not?**

Johanna Nichols (1984) "*Theories of grammar may be divided into three types: structural, formal, and functional.*" Structural and formal are related as they both describe phonemes, morphemes, syntactic relations, semantics, constituents, sentences and other grammatical structures. Functional grammar, on the other hand, analyzes grammatical structures such as the communicative situation, the speech event purpose and participants, and the discourse content.

In short, grammar skills are essential in learning the language and useful in speaking, comprehending and other aspects of life. It also has a substantial role in understanding and advancing in English as well as it is effective in job interviews and various situations. Then why did a lot of the survey participants propose eliminating grammar?

In fact, a question regarding this point appears; is grammar taught as an independent skill important or not?

Students who suggested eliminating grammar explained that it should be integrated with another skill and taught. Correspondingly, Hillocks and Smith (1991) think that most students do not benefit from grammar study in isolation from writing, if the purpose in teaching grammar is to help students improve their writing. In fact, some scholars say that there is nothing standard in language teaching about teaching grammar as an isolated subject. The language arts/skills are perceived as a unit. The major purpose of teaching a language is to employ grammatical skills/options into the writing work. Students disclosed that it would be more effective and useful to learn grammar within the frame of writing and reading passages. They showed more desire to improve their writing and speaking rather than allocating time and effort to learning grammar individually. Accordingly, in ESL/EFL learning, speaking, listening and language comprehension should mount the priorities to teachers and educators in teaching a language (English here) because these are the primer tools to acquiring a language. Many students mentioned this fact and proposed it should be acknowledged in ESL teaching.

## **3. Survey Analysis**

Around 500 students from the Arts College had participated in a survey of 7 questions. They answered the questions and presented their feedback. It is noticeable that numerous students had chosen to eliminate grammar as a skill taught independently in the ESL courses in the Arts College/Kuwait University. Those students either urged educators to teach this skill implicitly in other skills like writing or reading, or they

proposed to open a new course of listening and speaking where grammar is taught through practicing formal conversation sessions and corrected (by the teacher or peers) while speaking in the class and listening to others. They explained that the persistence of teachers to practice grammar constantly left the students with little energy, little motivation to participate in class, and created a sense of depression that the language is a difficult, complicated skill to attain.

The most important point in teaching grammar, in general, is to enhance their ability to communicate, comprehend reading passages, understand conversations and speak well and correctly. On the other hand, if a learner focuses on learning the language structures in details order to master it, this would lead to minor successes in acquiring a language. It would, relatively, slows down the advancing in attaining a language.

25% of the participants demanded more practice on writing; whereas, 29% of them asked for the writing courses updating. Following the socio-cultural influence of the environment, Kuwaiti students tend to be active in writing classes. In their feedback, they showed a common assumption that writing allows them express their feelings and reflections exactly as the local environment that has poets, writers, authors of all backgrounds. Still, the need to enhance their writing skill embodies another purpose that serves their academic life in college. The Arts College students revealed that obtaining ability to a highly academic writing skill helps them to do well in English and other courses. When they have a sense of control over writing, expressing, explaining, they can achieve well in studying. Some assured that writing well can serve them in their higher studies and later professions. Other views explained that excellent writing helps them to affect others; an image that is impressive can originate from professional, academic writing work when others read it or listen to it. Also, logical, sensible writing allows a correct, organized way of thinking and gives the brain the chance to function properly and orderly.

On the other hand, 49% of the feedback was on listening and speaking where participants thought that it was the most useful skill they would benefit from. As people interested in social media channels and participating in this field extensively, students demanded more speaking and listening classes so that their ability to communicate enhances. It is interesting to know that they suggested intense connection through the media programs with the teachers and with each other during the semester. They wanted to exchange information, as questions, express feelings and reflections about the courses. Also, they proposed to have more class activity concerning conversation and listening to peers and the teacher. They explained that the world nowadays requires communication through technology and a good ability to contact

others, and influence them. Because some of them some studying media, they gave a remarkable weight for the skills of connection with others, informing, persuading, being influential speakers and negotiators with and in front of audience(s). They also assured that speaking well and affecting others have a noticeable influence on future opportunities for work, and leading others.

Remarkably, 10% of female students showed a different attitude towards many aspects than males. In the opinion section of the survey, some female students suggested creating a new course in the curriculum. They proposed to have an art class where students could perform (act), sing, and give a one-day-class to peers; a class which is composed by students. They requested a more open, free and active environment where studying English would be both amusing and educational. They thought that studying should not be rigid and devoid of “soul” and the “rhythm” of everyday life. This group explained that they wanted to be part of the curriculum, adding to it, and changing instead of being passive recipients.

Most students, in the opinion section, mentioned the exam setting. Male students expressed anxiety and tension during the test due to the “unfriendly environment” as they revealed. They complained that such an atmosphere affects the examinees negatively. Female students, however, showed “patience” towards the severe surroundings during the exam. They understood and accepted the strict instructions of the proctors during the exam and thought that was normal.

26% of the participants from the freshmen and first-year-students showed ‘optimism’ towards learning a new language. They noted that learning English has multi benefits on their future studies and career; whereas 18% of the old students were not hopeful about studying English excessively because they thought that they would eventually work in local business places where English is not the main language or necessary to use.

#### **4. Pedagogical Implications and Solutions**

In the learning process, the curriculum should be relevant and attainable by students of different levels. Regarding improving Kuwaiti students in the Arts College; non-English-speakers, there are a few solutions teachers could conduct:

##### **A. Working on the curriculum**

- The syllabus should reflect the local environment and at the same time open the students to the real world whether in the reading passages, the writing topics and the speaking and listening lessons. They need to be introduced to the



international issues while they are still deeply rooted to the Kuwaiti surroundings of culture and traditions.

- In the writing lessons, students should know the difference in the writing patterns between the two languages and cultures. In Arabic, natives tend to elaborate in writing, expressing, giving examples and over describing whereas the English style of writing in general is direct, straightforward and condense. The use of the right words and correct style is the way to lead them gradually to write correctly in L2.
- For students who have difficulty in pronouncing some phonemes, simple phonetic structures should be introduced to them through oral practices. The teacher can read the sound and a student to repeat and practice daily on the target. Words including such sounds can be put in sentences so that students can read them and learn the correct pronunciation and meaning. It is a fact that Arabic has a unique system on sounds and letters where no other language shares such phonemes. Therefore, some students might face such confusion.
- It is important to expand the students' vocabulary competence starting from the mutual words in L1 and L2. Many English words have entered Arabic and became part of the daily local dialect expressions. Teachers should emphasize the chance and introduce similar words in meaning to the students. It is a method to enhance the words they already know and add new parallel words to the list, and prepare the students to gain more vocabulary. Another method to follow is to direct the students' attention to the common/international words that appear in the social media, where students are indulged and creative, and use those words in contexts such as; 'mention, share, cut and copy, snap and so on.
- Familiarizing the students with the curriculum is an effective step in learning L2. The learners need to feel comfortable through the acquisition process because they know they will be tested in the material. Therefore, a correct exposure to the syllabus content whether grammar structure learning, writing, listening and speaking, reading and so on is vital to forward the process. Teachers can ask students to use the internet to see videos of short films, clips etc., in order to live an authentic setting of an L2. They can use and develop 3 skills; listening, speaking and analyzing while watching. It is a method in which students will grasp at least few words from the conversation and learning the right context to them. Segments of language can be easily learned when the exposure is visual and audio.

## **B. Writing**

- Communication is important in writing as well. Teachers can explain the writing material assigned for the day and ask students to write pieces of their own then see if they have understood the lesson and applied the rules. Both parties could discuss the rules/instructions in class to know the importance to follow them. Students should be able to generate correct, reasonable, minimally acceptable paragraphs. Thus, a one-to-group communication is essential to overcome difficulties and possible mistakes.
- Peers correction helps in achieving good, readable writing pieces. Teachers can ask students to evaluate a student's essay. A student can read his/her essay aloud while classmates are listening and taking notes if necessary. Then, they can give their feedback in a class discussion where the teacher does not participate and the students lead the class. Students can take turns in reading their paragraphs and get comments from peers, and the teacher might take notes to amend others' points and guide the performance. A strategy like that allows students to know their mistakes without being embarrassed, share ideas with mates, reach logical points, correct their won writings, build self-confidence, and build good relations with peers.
- Dictionary frequent checking is another strategy to enhance the students' vocabulary. They can look into a few pages in the dictionary and/or look into pages in the encyclopedia to learn new words, know their meaning and see them in examples or in context. Out-of-material searching is important and helpful for those who want to excel in writing, reading and speaking. They can employ the words in their writing paragraphs, in dialogues and understand the reading passages if the reading comprehension contains such words or similar.
- Posters, graphics and pictures are methods teachers can use to illustrate the writing instructions and topics for students. They can hang a poster on the board and show the students vocabulary words that are useful to use in the paragraph, and distribute papers on which there are graphics/pictures to show students the main idea of the lesson, the instructions and the steps to do a perfect writing piece. Visual aid, accompanied with illustration and teacher's explanation, is a practical method to help learners accomplish a good work in their writing work because they will remember it.
- Integrating grammar structures into writing classes would allow students to improve their writing ability and advance their skills in writing, thinking and generating ideas and correcting their work. Grammar employed in writing also helps them to build coherent and logical writing pieces.

### **C. Reading**

- Reading at home to prepare the assigned text and know the subject is a substantial step towards understanding the reading comprehension and practice reading without mistakes. Students need to know the subject earlier and correct their pronunciation ahead so that they are familiar with the topic to study and the sounds and words to read correctly. Teachers must assign reading passages at home to give the students the opportunity to participate in class with confidence, know the subject taken in class, and read with minor pronunciation mistakes. Those who cannot read alone at home must be aided by the teacher in class to read aloud and explain the points (ideas of the passage) and correct the sounds. Such strategy will help both weak and strong/confident students to participate in class and be able to give their piece of mind over the information given, the difficult words in meaning and pronunciation as well as building a good relation with the teacher and the reading comprehension.
- Free discussion in class allows an atmosphere of comfort and confidence among students to participate freely. Also, teachers need to tell the students that such a discussion about the assigned topic will not involve grades so that students can speak confidently. More points and views would be shared and expressed in a friendly environment where everyone can engage in talking about something useful. At the end, they can understand the lesson well, ask questions for clarifications and interact openly with peers.
- Skimming and scanning are two reading skills that are fundamental for students to learn. It is vital that teachers stress on the benefits of those skills so that students can do well in the reading comprehension tests as that allow them to go over that passage quickly and thoroughly. Teachers must also tell students that those skills can help in outer reading pieces such as looking for a piece of news in the newspapers and magazines, and can focus on the main idea(s) in a pamphlet, a brochure and so on in a shorter time.

### **D. Motivation**

- Teachers can allow students involve into in-class and outside-class activities so that they release from the daily routine, and enjoy a new way of learning. Knowledge can be acquired better and correctly through changing learning methods, using blended learning and even practicing computer-mediated activities, (Strauss) 2012.
- Students can participate in designing language courses they think are ideal for non-native speakers. They can add material and textbooks of their choice to create the best syllabus they want. They can also choose the topics, activities,

group work, in-class games and so on to get enthusiastic about learning and acquiring.

- A direct, friendly relation between the teacher and the students, and the students among themselves can create a good atmosphere for learning. Students need to feel comfortable in learning so that they can express themselves better, openly and achieve goals.
- Visual and audio learning is another method to fast and exciting learning. Such type of learning simplifies the comprehension process to students and aids the teacher to explain the lesson effectively.
- Assigning a random free day is a good way to relief the students from the daily studying pressures. The teacher- with the students- can select a day to make as a friendly, work-free day where they can discuss any issue both parties decide about. Students can be allowed to talk about their needs, likes/dislikes, suggestions and views about the course and the material, and even about each other if they want. A healthy atmosphere can lead to development in acquisition and comprehension.
- Rewards must be present in the motivation procedure. A teacher can reward the good students and the ones who are steadily improving by praising them publicly, giving them bonus marks, allowing them a day off, allowing them to speak in front of the class and/or other classes, asking them to choose their reward and so on. Such psychological encouraging has a huge effect on the students whether the good ones or the ones that are trying.
- Outer-curriculum-activities are highly regarded by students. An invitation to watch a drama performance, a wonderful movie, a gathering at a café or in the park makes a huge move forward to students. They will appreciate the teacher, the course and be eager to learn more and accept extra work.
- Briefing the students with their performance; weaknesses and strength points is vital to allow the learners produce more and/or correct their mistakes. Constant updating is as important as teaching them new material because the students need to be enlightened of their status.

## 5. Conclusion

By analyzing the results, it is concluded that:

- Most participants disclosed that they faced little or some difficulty in pronouncing some sounds. Due to the absence of some sounds in the mother tongue L1, the learners were confused to pronounce some sounds and the silent

letters because they couldn't find an identical sound to it in Arabic, and because modern Arabic does not have silent letters in general what hindered the phonetic learning and comprehension to some extent.

- Many students are struggling in college system; they find it hard to move from the traditional passive, recipient learner in school into the active, action maker student according to the college system. This resulted in a cloud of regression in L2 acquisition, lack of self-confidence and lack of enthusiasm to participate in class.
- A high number of students mentioned a social, cultural anxiety where both genders are shy to interact with each other in class. Arabian/Moslem ideology encourages gender segregation; thus, Moslem states comply to the law and apply it in governmental schools. As a result, students, who have lived in this system for years, find it challenging to communicate with the other gender in class.
- Male participants revealed that parents' expectations put a daily pressure on them which adds to the studying mental stress they suffer from. Being males in the family, they are obliged to follow fathers' rules/ideas including studying a certain special field regardless of their desire and the amount of effort they need to put in the alien study major.
- Some students thought that grammar was unnecessary to be taught as an independent skill. They thought that integrating grammar with other language skills would help develop the learning process and allow the learners to approach learning L2 without the fear of failing the basic structures and/or speaking improperly.
- Female students showed passion to learning L2. They proposed creating new courses in the curriculum such as drama acting, singing, free readings and open conversation classes. They found no problem in complying to the class rules and were more patient in accepting the strict common exam settings than male students.

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