

Teaching of English Communication Skills to Arab University Students: Challenges and Antidotes

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Abstract

Students studying English communication skills in Arab universities constitute a significant proportion of the university population. This population is rapidly growing and making teaching of English in Arab universities significant, rewarding yet challenging. Challenging in a way that teachers of English communication skills to Arab students continue to experience unique challenges. This study investigated these challenges and the possible solutions. Quantitative data was collected from 30 English teachers teaching Arab students in Arab countries within the Levantine and the Gulf using survey questionnaire and analyzed descriptively using Microsoft Excel Data Analysis tool. Results revealed that common challenges experienced by English teachers teaching Arab students in Arab countries include; large classes, which makes it difficult for teachers to implement communication skills in the university; inadequate resources needed to teach communication skills; communicative incompetence of students; learning being teacher-centered rather than learner-centered; the rare use of English by students in their conversations. Others included rote learning and unauthentic exam system; difficulty in motivating and encouraging students to orally participate in class discussions; difficulty in assessing students' ability to communicate in English; and low communicative abilities. Results also revealed challenges unique to specific universities included insufficient knowledge of English among students; the tendency of students to switch to Arabic; vocabulary insufficiency; lack of seriousness by students; students not finding English to be useful; lack of motivation for students; insufficient student interaction; poor oral skills; and shyness. Participants identified the following as possible solutions: offering more English classes and extracurricular activities; making passing exam more difficult; giving more vocabulary; demonstrating the value and importance of English; motivating students; teaching real-life situation while they communicate using proper English orally and in written form; and exposing them to different situations by sending them on trips to English speaking countries.

Keywords: oral communication, motivation, oral language acquisition, English foreign language classroom, English foreign language teaching, assessment, self-esteem

Introduction

Students studying English as a foreign or second language in Arab universities constitute a significant proportion of the university population. This population is rapidly growing and making teaching of English in Arab universities significant, rewarding yet challenging. Indeed, researchers have acknowledged the complexity of teaching English as an International Language (EIL) in countries where English is the second language, as well as the challenges experienced by Arab students in learning English. However, the emphasis has been placed on challenges experienced by learners of English in Arab schools and colleges. These challenges have been identified and broadly categorized as: cognitive load; language load; learning load; cultural load; lack of authentic text; positive and negative transfers; mother tongue influence/effect; and language match (Al-Khresheh, 2010; Abdo & Breen, 2010; Ahmad, 2011; Egbert et al., 2007; Brisk, 2010; Wingfield, 2006; Aburumuh, Smith & Ratcliffe, 2009). A few studies have examined challenges experienced by teachers of English communication skills in Arab universities (Lakshmi, 2013). Informed by this gap in research, the present study examines the challenges and antidotes of teaching English communication skills to Arab university students.

Literature Review

As indicated herein, Studies have overwhelmingly focused on the challenges experienced by teachers of English in general within the Arab context and other contexts. In other contexts (i.e., China, Japan and others) challenges experienced by teachers of English have been identified as class size; inadequate preparation of teachers; low qualifications among teachers; students lacking motivation to learn English; inadequate teaching methodology (Cheng, 2004; Gross, 1999; Gandara, 2003; Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002). On the other hand, within the Arab contexts, challenges experienced by teachers of English have been identified as class size; inadequate preparation of teachers; low qualifications among teachers; students lacking motivation to learn English; inadequate teaching methodology; lack of motivation among students/learners of English; students not receiving enough exposure to English; poorly designed curriculum; accent and pronunciation, and English syntax notably long sentence/chunk (Rahman & Alhaisoni, 2013; Lakshmi, 2013; Ansari, 2012).

For example, Lakshmi (2013) examined challenges experienced by teachers teaching English as a second language to Arab students in Arab universities and noted that in most of these universities, the non-Arabic teachers are outnumbered by the faculty with Arabic as their first language. According to Lakshmi (2013), this impacts the teaching-learning process in EFL classes in Arab universities as these teachers, especially the non-native English teachers tend to use Arabic as their medium of instructions. Lakshmi (2013) further argued that this is an impediment to Arab students learning of English. According to Lakshmi (2013), this explains why most students in learning English as second language in Arab universities graduate with good grades but with considerable limitation when it comes to communicating in English either in written or spoken form. Lakshmi (2013) also held the view that the English course syllabus used by teachers at undergraduate level deviated from the Western standards and that this mismatch results in the mismatch between students' standards and syllabus standard and that this reinforces the challenges experienced by teachers of English in Arab universities, demanding greater perseverance and patience. Lakshmi (2013) further noted that challenges are related to the students' educational, personal, political, cultural, and linguistic background. Congruous to these observations, Lakshmi (2013) further held that Arabic students encounter challenges in pronouncing certain English sounds. For example, they pronounce "pray" as "bray" and "park" as "bark". This is blamed on the impact of Arabic on their acquisition of English language as Arabic lacks the sound /p/. These pronunciation problems have been identified as a problem facing teachers of English in Arab universities. Similarly, Akasha (2013) explored challenges experienced by Arabic-speaking teachers and ESL students. Participants included 8 teachers and 2 Arabic-speaking ESL students. The study focused on factors influencing the learning of Arabic-speaking ESL students; their need and challenges experienced by teachers teaching these students. Data was collected using classroom observations; student interviews and parental survey. Teachers identified the following challenges: lack of professional development that focuses on Arab students' linguistic and cultural differences; and lack of effective communication between teachers and parents that support ESL learners academically; culturally and social.

In another similar study, Ansari (2012) noted that problems faced by teachers of English in Arab universities are stemmed from the reasons that students lack information regarding the college or university they enroll in; poor teaching methodology; deficiency in the English language curricula; lack of personal impetus from the students; and unsupportive environment for language learning.

Evidently, these studies only made an attempt to link the challenges experienced by teachers of English in Arab colleges to specific issues. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, none examined specific challenges of these studies experienced by teachers of English communication skills within Arab universities.

Methodology

In the present descriptive study, quantitative data was collected using a survey questionnaire. These questionnaires were mailed to English teachers in various Arab universities notably universities in UAE, Palestine, Oman, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and others. The questionnaire consisted of three parts: an informed consent sheet; a short demographic survey section; and the section containing questions on participant's reaction towards challenges and solutions. The questionnaire consisted of both closed-ended and open-ended questions, which were derived based on the literature review. It contained questions requiring participants to respond to statements allowing them to choose responses ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree or strongly disagree).

The open-ended questions were aimed at clarification on the statements responded to in the closed-ended part and to probe participants to provide what they considered were challenges unique to their specific universities and the specific responses. The rationale for choosing the survey questionnaire was that it was deemed the most appropriate method for collecting data aimed at giving in-depth interpretation and description of challenges experienced by teachers of English communication skills. The survey questionnaire also allowed the researcher to design statements identified in the literature and seek approval or disapproval from participants. Participants were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality

Sample Size

A total of 40 questionnaires were distributed via email. Out of this, 30 participants filled the questionnaires and emailed back to the researcher. This sample size is large enough to justify the conclusion reached and to allow for the generalization of findings of this study.

Sampling technique

Participants were selected using a convenient sampling technique from a population of teachers teaching in various universities in Arab countries. The rationale for choosing teachers from these universities was to fit into the study context considering the focus of the study was on teachers teaching English communication skills to Arab university students.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data collected using survey questionnaire was analyzed using Microsoft Excel software data analysis. Participants' responses were converted into percentage and data represented pictorially in form of bar graphs as demonstrated in the result section.

Results

Results revealed that teachers often experience several challenges while teaching English communication skills to Arab university students in Arab universities. Common challenges identified and approved by participants include: large size classes; inadequate resources; infrequent use of English by students; communication incompetence among students; learning style being teacher-centered rather than learner-centered; passive participation by students in conversations; learning focusing on rote learning; an authentic exam system; low-esteem issues affecting students towards English; difficulty in motivating and encouraging students to orally participate in class discussions; and difficulty in assessing students' ability to communicate.

Majority of participants either strongly agreed (42.90%) or agreed (57.10%) that large classes was a challenge as it makes it difficult for teachers to implement communication skills in the university. Moreover, more than 50% of participants identified inadequate resources needed to teach communication skills as one of the key problems facing teachers teaching communication skills in Arab universities with majority either strongly agreeing (42.90%) or agreeing (28.10%) to the statement that "There are inadequate resources needed in my university to teach communication skill". Participants also overwhelmingly (i.e., strongly agreed-71.10%) supported the view that communicative incompetence of students was one of the greatest challenge. Perhaps, this is explained by two reasons: learning being teacher-centered rather than learner-centered and the rare use of English by students in their conversations. This was confirmed by participants given that more than 50 percent of participants (strongly agreed-42.90%) and agreed (28.10%) that students in their universities rarely used English and over 50 percent of participants (strongly agreeing-42.90%) and agreeing-28.10%) that learning in their universities is teacher-centered rather than learner-centered (Figure 1).

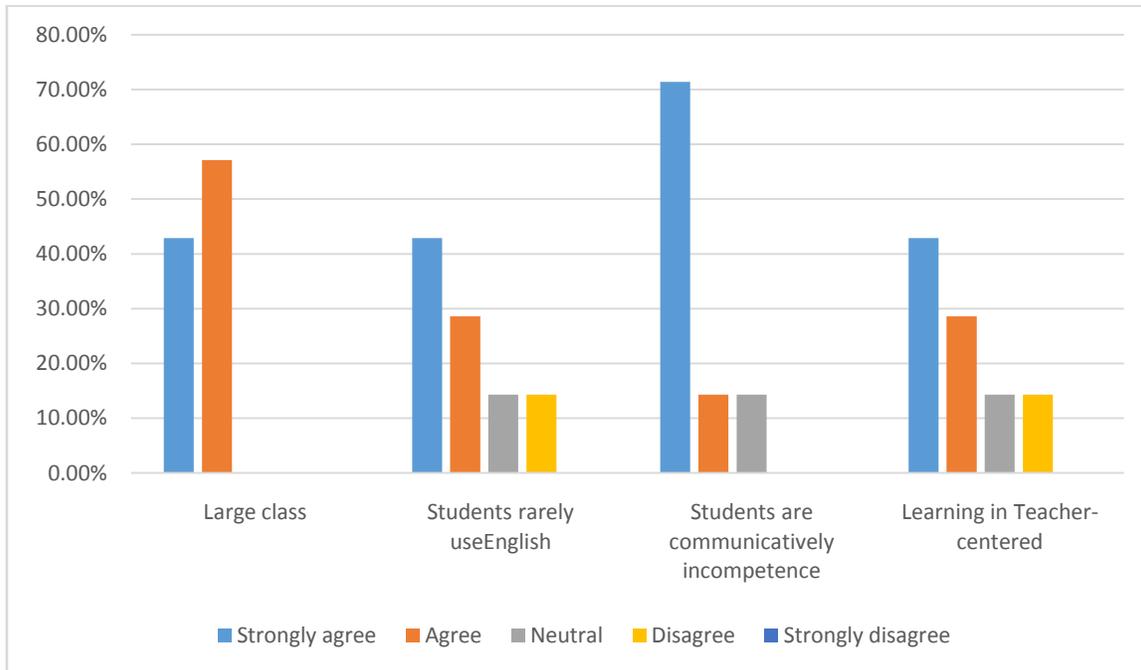


Figure 1: Challenges experienced by teachers of English communication skills

Participants overwhelmingly identified rote-learning and unauthentic exam system as two key problems facing teachers teaching communication skills to Arab students in Arab universities. Surprisingly, all participants (87.60% strongly agreed and 12.40% agreed) that Arab universities expose students to rote-learning with 42.90% strongly agreeing and 42.90% agreeing that exam system was not authentic to test effectively communication skills among students (figure 2).

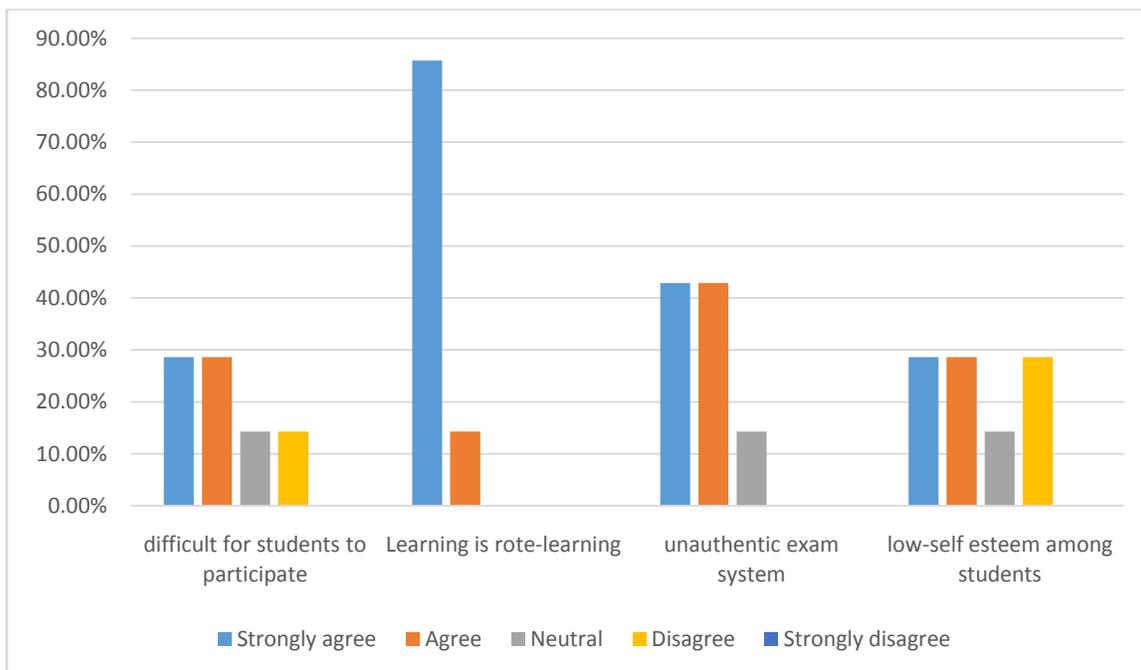


Figure 2: Challenges experienced by teachers of English communication skills

Lastly, participants identified difficulty in motivating and encouraging students to orally participate in class discussions; difficulty in assessing students’ ability to communicate in English; and low communicative abilities as other challenges they experience while teaching communication skills Arab students.

Majority of the participants strongly agreed (71.40%) and agreed (28.10%) that students in English classrooms in their university had low communicative abilities. Majority of participants also strongly agreed (28.10%) and agreed (71.40%) that it is a great challenge for an English teacher in my university to motivate and encourage all students to orally participate actively in the English communication skills classroom. Similarly, majority of students strongly agreed (28.10%) and agreed (57.10%) that it was hard for the English teacher in their university to assess the students' ability to communicate orally in English because the students' oral activity was linked to their emotions (Figure 3). Other challenges of teaching communication skills to Arab students in Arab universities are unique to specific universities were revealed in participants' responses to an interview question that sought to provoke them to reveal challenges they faced while teaching communication skills to their students in class. Responses varied and included insufficiency knowledge of English among students; the tendency of students to switch to Arabic; vocabulary insufficient; lack of seriousness by students; students not finding English to be useful; lack of motivation for students; insufficient student interaction; poor oral skills; and shyness. Worth noting is that lack of understanding vocabulary featured in majority of participants' responses as a challenge to teaching vocabulary to Arab students.

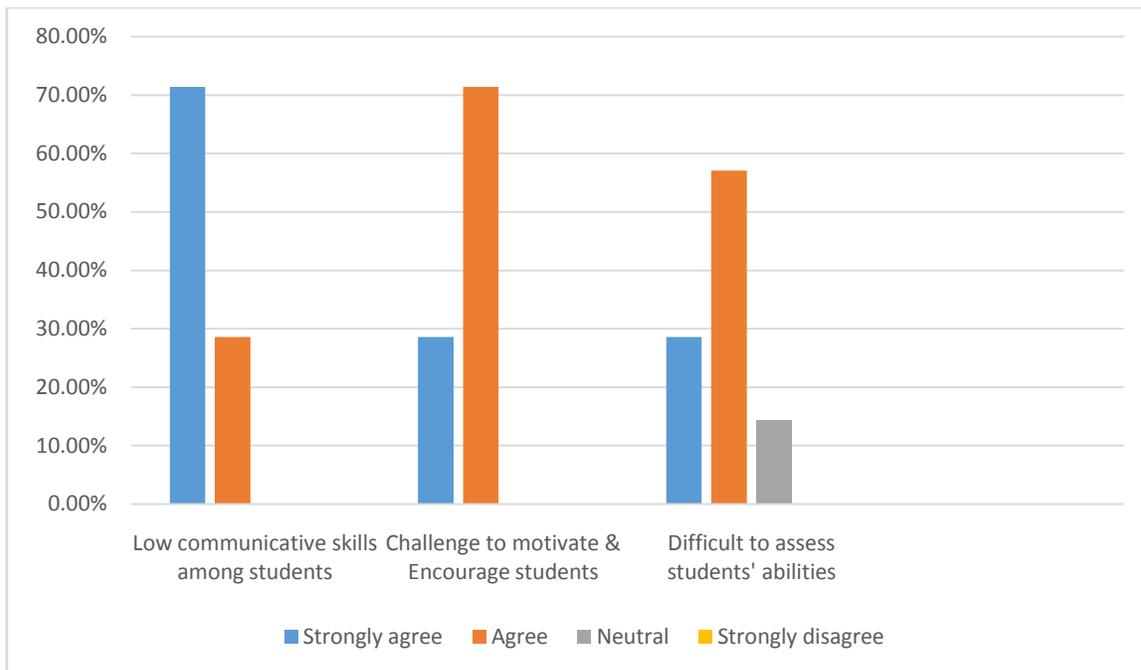


Figure 3: Challenges experienced by teachers of English communication skills

The researcher further probed participants regarding the specific area(s) of English language that made English communication skills difficult for Arab students. Majority of participants identified the following: pronunciation and accent; unknown vocabulary, keeping pace while listening to speakers, audio, or recording in English; English syntax such as long chunk/sentence; and contracted form of spoken English.

Participants were presented with a list of what had been identified in the literature review as possible solutions to challenges being experienced by teachers of communication skills in Arab universities. Possible solutions included: extensive reading and listening might improve speaking quickly; ; reading whatever is at hand, watching BBC, CNN and other English TV channels; using a good monolingual dictionary and consultation with someone who knows better English, may be useful; teaching small group (25-30 students) based on needs based syllabus, will be effective for learning; occasionally, they should be made aware of common mistakes, unusual collocation; translated version of Arabic phrases, idioms and inappropriate questions; students should be frequently engaged in debate, set and extempore speech making, presenting seminar, story-telling situations so that they can individually expose themselves to speaking as well as reduce their shyness and nervousness; more listening practice with different accents can improve students' exposure to varieties of English; graded English courses with integrated skills development should be offered rather than separate spoken English classes; occasional discussions on notional difference between Arabic and English culture and language is important for raising cross-cultural understanding; there should be a special emphasis on increasing useful vocabulary;

Frequent practice in spoken English with good friends will be very useful; offering at least six months intensive English language training at the beginning of undergraduate program; they should be encouraged to speak more in variety of situations uninterruptedly; they have to be familiar with different syntactic forms of English sentences; and student should be taught different stress patterns and intonation of English speech. Unsurprisingly, despite the uniqueness of their universities, participants approved almost all the options given.

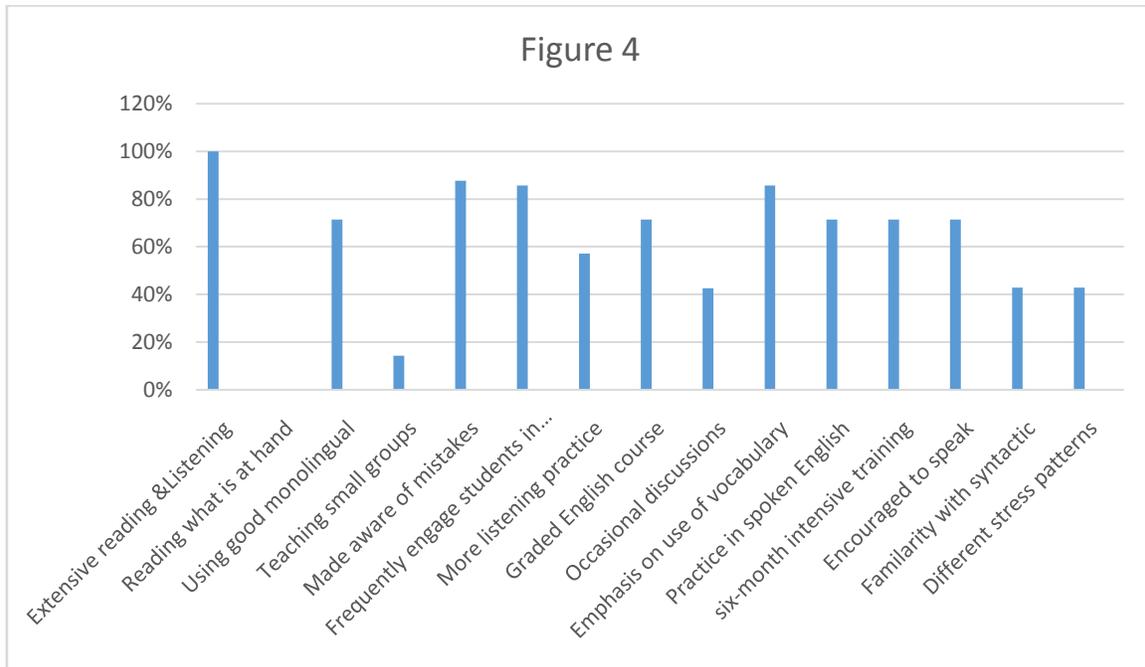


Figure 4: possible solutions to challenges experienced by teachers of English communication

All participants (100%) identified extensive reading and listening as an amicable solution to the challenges identified herein (figure 4). An overwhelming majority (87.70%) of participants believe that the solution lies in the students reading whatever is at hand, watching BBC, CNN and other English TV channels; occasionally making students aware of common mistakes, unusual collocation, translated version of Arabic phrases, idioms and inappropriate questions; friendly engaging students in debate, setting and exploring speech making, presenting seminar, story-telling situations to allow students to individually expose themselves to speaking as well as reduce their shyness and nervousness; and putting emphasis on increasing useful vocabulary. Moreover, (71.40%) of participants held the view that the solution lies in using a good monolingual dictionary and consulting someone who knows better English, may be useful; offering graded English courses with integrated skill rather than separate spoken English classes; offering students frequent practice in spoken English with good friends; offering at least six months intensive English language training at the beginning of undergraduate program; encouraging students to speak more in variety of situations uninterruptedly; and offering students more listening practice with different accents to help improve their exposure to varieties of English (57.10%). Solutions such as teaching small group (25-30 students) based on needs based syllabus (14.30%); occasional discussions on notional difference between Arabic and English culture and language to raise cross-cultural (42.60%); ensuring students are familiar with different syntactic forms of English sentences; and teaching students different intonation of English and stress patterns (42.90%) were not well supported by participants (see figure 4). On the other hand, unique solutions to challenges raised by participants through the interview varied depending on the specific challenge identified by participants. They included: offering more English classes and extracurricular activities; making passing exam more difficult; giving more vocabulary; demonstrating the value and importance of English; motivating students; teaching real-life situation while they communicate using proper English orally and in the written form; and exposing them to different situations by sending them on trips to English speaking countries.

Discussion

The present study examined the challenges and antinodes of teaching communication skills to Arab university students. Several common challenges were identified by teachers teaching communication skills in Arab universities. They include: large classes, which makes it difficult for teachers to implement communication skills in the university; inadequate resource resources needed to teach communication skills; communicative incompetence of students; learning being teacher-centered rather than learner-centered; the rare use of English by students in their conversations. Others included rote-learning and unauthentic exam system; difficulty in motivating and encouraging students to orally participate in class discussions; difficulty in assessing students' ability to communicate in English; and low communicative abilities.

Challenges unique to specific universities included insufficient knowledge of English among students; the tendency of students to switch to Arabic; vocabulary insufficiency; lack of seriousness by students; students not finding English to be useful; lack of motivation for students; insufficient student interaction; poor oral skills; and shyness.

Results by Abdelgadir and Ramana (2016) were in conformity with this study finding that students lack interest and motivation in learning English and that students do not practice English communication skills. Abdelgadir and Ramana (2016) also revealed that emphasis is often placed on role learning rather than on skill development. Other challenges identified by Abdelgadir and Ramana (2016) but not captured in the present study were absenteeism among students; appointment of inexperienced and unqualified teachers to teach English; and students not embracing the use of dictionary. The finding of this study also corroborated those found by Fareh (2010). Fareh (2010) identified challenges experienced by teachers teaching EFL in Arab institutions as learners lacking motivation to learn; and the use of teacher-centered methods rather than learner-centered methods. Other challenges identified by Fareh (2010) but not confirmed in the present study included: inadequate assessment techniques; inadequate preparation of teachers; inadequate teaching methodology; improperly trained teachers; inadequate pedagogical preparation by teachers; compartmentalization vs. whole language approach; teaching materials and textbooks; low student exposure to English.

Regarding students' lacking motivation towards foreign language; other studies (e.g., Ericsson, 1993; Ur, 2005) confirmed the value and importance of motivation in learning foreign language and lack of it can make it challenging for teachers to impact on students. Ericsson (1993) acknowledged that the learning process must be active and that when acquiring new language, motivation influences the outcome. Ericsson (1993) further opined that one of the most challenging tasks for teachers of foreign language is to ensure learners are motivated to actively engage freely in conversations. In view of Ericsson (1993), what makes this difficult is that student's lack the reason to converse with each other and that many times, they find language classroom to be artificial. Ericsson (1993) further claimed that language should never be treated as an isolated phenomenon rather be practiced and taught in a context. Ur (2005) believes that to get students to communicate and express themselves freely in the foreign language, teachers should use interesting topics, and ensure the discourse have a meaningful aim/purpose. Distinguishing meaningful learning and rote learning, Brown (2000) argued that learners should not learn different items of the target language separately and that learners should acquire language in a meaningful way. Similarly, Brown (2000) further suggested that educators should not make foreign language classrooms the local of rote activity; rote drills; rote recitation; pattern practice without context; and other activities that do not promote meaningful communication. Granath and Estling (2008) proposed that language teachers should ensure meaningful communication occurs in foreign language classrooms by using the internet. According to Granath and Estling (2008) by using the internet, language teachers can allow students to authentically practice communication. They can use the internet and the computer during teaching of language mostly for information search and word-processing and authentic communication. They should allow students in language classrooms to communicate with others across the globe via chats, e-mail and communicate orally through Skype or Windows Live Messenger. Students can also be allowed to participate in authentic discussions such as BBC or Le Monde via the internet. These discussions are useful because they can help students to develop and exercise their communication skills. Emphasizing the importance of students practicing language, Tornberg (1997) hinted that it is important for students to understand that what is learned and practiced in foreign language classrooms should be used in reality outside the classroom. In view of Tornberg (1997), students tend to limit and associate foreign language with what is learned and acquired while in the classrooms.

Ur (2005) also emphasized the importance of letting students to practice oral communication via role-play. According to Ur (2005) role-play is a genuine discourse, which allows learners to practice their skills outside the classroom. Other researchers (e.g., Shehdeh 2010) support the view that students should actively participate and practice oral communication while in foreign language classrooms. According to Shehdeh (2010) through practicing oral communication, students get used to foreign language and this enables them to improve their communication skills and express themselves orally and freely in a foreign language.

Results by Rahman and Alhaisoni (2013) are also congruent to what was revealed in this study. Rahman and Alhaisoni (2013) identified difficulty in implementing an authentic curriculum; and the exam system failing to effectively test communication skills. From the students' perspective, challenges were identified as shyness, vocabulary problems; and the challenge in capturing the pronunciation of native speakers. Students also reported that the experienced difficulties with contracted forms of spoken English; accent and pronunciation, and English syntax notably long sentence/chunk.

Similarly, findings by Rahman and Alhaisoni (2013) corroborate those found in the present study. Challenges identified by Rahman and Alhaisoni (2013) are lack of motivation among students learners of English; and students not receiving enough exposure to English. Others included poorly designed curriculum (i.e., one developed without a Needs Analysis and without clear-cut objectives and aims); teaching materials and textbooks not meeting the needs of learners; poorly trained and unqualified teachers; and teachers uninformed of new methodologies of teaching English language.

On the overall, all participants recognized the importance of communication skills. Indeed, in the increasingly globalized world where international exchanges take place, the value and importance of written and oral communication skills cannot be underestimated. As observed by Al-Shumaimeri (2003) communication makes critical ideas and thoughts available and enables individuals to reflect and think critically when making decisions. Al-Shumaimeri (2003) further recognized that critical thought is an important part of any form of expression, whether oral, visual, or written communication. Al-Shumaimeri (2003) added that written communication enables students to express, extend and organize their thoughts. Agreeing with Al-Shumaimeri (2003). Ellis (2008) believes that educated individuals with excellent communication skills can help organizations communicate more effectively, responsibly and ethically. Similarly, all language methods, including Grammar-Translation Method, Direct Method, Communicative Language Teaching Method, Audio-lingualism, and Cognitive Method recognize the importance of communication skills in Second Language Classrooms. For example, Direct Method identified oral and written communication skills as a primary skill in the study and acquisition of a new language. Similarly, Audio-lingualism recognized the importance of oral and written communication in learning new language. Cognitive Method also attaches great importance on communication skills. Considering the importance of communication skills to Arab students and the gap in research as demonstrated above, this study examined challenges faced by teachers in teaching of English communication skills to Arab university students and the possible solutions.

Conclusion

As demonstrated in this study, teachers of English communication skills teaching Arab students experience common problems that affect them all. However, there are challenges unique to their specific universities. As revealed in this study, teachers of English communication skills in various Arab universities can overcome these challenges by implementing the following recommendations:

- Offering more English classes and extracurricular activities to their students
- Making passing exam more difficult
- Providing more vocabulary and demonstrating the value and importance of English
- Motivating students to practice English communication outside the classroom situation
- Teaching real-life situation to students using proper English orally and in written form
- Exposing students to different situations by sending them on trips to English speaking countries
- Exposing students to extensive reading and listening practice
- Encouraging students to read whatever is at hand, watch BBC, CNN and other English TV channels
- Using a good monolingual dictionary and consultation with someone who knows better English.
- Teaching small group (25-30 students) based on needs-based syllabus
- Occasionally making students aware of common mistakes

- Frequently engaging students in debates and setting and extempore speech making
- Presenting seminar; story-telling situations to individually expose themselves to speaking as well as reduce their shyness and nervousness.
- Exposing students to more listening practice with different accents to help them improve students' exposure to varieties of English
- Offering students graded English courses with integrated.
- Providing occasional discussions on notional difference between Arabic and English culture and language to help raise cross-cultural understanding
- Emphasizing on increasing useful vocabulary
- Encouraging frequent practice in spoken English with good friends
- Offering at least six months intensive English language training at the beginning of undergraduate program
- Encouraging students to speak more in variety of situations uninterruptedly
- Ensuring students become familiar with different syntactic forms of English sentences
- Teaching students different stress patterns and intonation of English language.

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