

## The Effect of Exposure Density on EFL Learners' Fluency in Saudi Arabia

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### Abstract

The Internet proliferation, information technology, and globalization as well as the importance of English as a global language cannot be overstated. It is widely recognized that Saudi university students, learning English as a foreign language, encounter numerous learning challenges stemming from various factors. This paper delves into the critical issue of English language exposure and postulates that inadequate exposure to English is a central contributor to students' learning difficulties. To investigate this, a questionnaire was administered to a cohort of 50 students, comprising both male and female participants enrolled in the Department of English and Translation at the University of Qassim. The findings from the survey revealed that, on average, the students reported moderate exposure to the English language. Additionally, the data indicated a noteworthy disparity, with male students exhibiting greater exposure to English compared to their female counterparts. These results serve as a preliminary exploration of the issue of English language exposure among Saudi university students. They underscore the need for further in-depth research in this area to comprehensively understand the dynamics of language exposure and its impact on the learning experiences of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners. This concludes by suggesting the imperative for future research endeavours and outlining initial recommendations for augmenting language exposure among EFL learners. These recommendations aim to inform pedagogical practices and strategies that can enhance English language learning in the context of Saudi Arabian universities.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary era marked by internet proliferation, information technology advancements, and globalization, the role of the English language has attained unprecedented significance (Steger, 2023). English has long held its status as the international language, and its importance has surged in the wake of globalization, driven by the availability of media from around the world through diverse sources such as the Internet, television, and radio (Montgomery, 2013). Particularly, media output from English-speaking countries, notably the United States, has permeated societies worldwide. An essential facet of this linguistic globalization is the policy of not dubbing films and television programs but rather providing translations through subtitles, a practice that has significantly contributed to the acquisition of English as a second or third language (Salomone & Salomone, 2022). However, the prevalence of English-language media does not always equate to proficiency, as many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instructors and learners continue to face challenges in mastering the language (Alharbi, 2015). This predicament appears to be prevalent among Arab EFL learners, including

those in Saudi Arabia. Despite years of studying English as a foreign language, many EFL learners encounter difficulties in various language skills, encompassing reading, writing, listening, speaking, and their sub-skills (Al-Ahdal & Abduh, 2021). A prevailing hypothesis suggests that these challenges may stem from insufficient exposure to the English language. This research article aims to investigate the effect of "insufficient language exposure" as a potential factor contributing to the learning difficulties experienced by EFL learners.

### **1.1.Statement of the problem**

In the age of the internet, information technology, and globalization, the importance of the English language has grown significantly. However, Saudi university students learning English as a foreign language (EFL) face numerous learning difficulties, and it is widely acknowledged that insufficient exposure to English may be one of the primary reasons behind these challenges. This study aims to investigate the extent of exposure to the English language among EFL students at the University of Qassim, Department of English and Translation. Specifically, it examines whether insufficient exposure to English is a major contributing factor to the learning difficulties experienced by these students. While English has become a global lingua franca, students often encounter difficulties in various language skills, including speaking, writing, reading, and listening. This study seeks to shed light on the role of language exposure in addressing these challenges and provides valuable insights into strategies for increasing language exposure and enhancing English language education for EFL learners in Saudi Arabia. The main research question is:

Does exposure to English in the Saudi context differ among male and female learners?

### **1.2.Research objectives**

1. **To Assess English Exposure:** The primary objective of this study is to evaluate the level of exposure to the English language among Saudi university students studying English as a foreign language. The study aims to determine whether insufficient exposure to English is a significant factor contributing to students' learning difficulties.
1. **Gender-Based Exposure Analysis:** Another objective is to analyze and compare the exposure to English between male and female students. The study seeks to identify any gender-based differences in language exposure and assess how these differences might relate to learning difficulties.
2. **Identification of Learning Difficulties:** The study aims to identify specific language learning difficulties faced by EFL students, including challenges in speaking, writing, reading, and listening. It also intends to investigate instances where students revert to their first language (Arabic) due to language-related issues.
3. **Exploration of Language Exposure in the Classroom:** This research endeavors to explore the extent to which English is used within EFL classrooms, considering both teacher and student language preferences. It aims to determine whether the use of Arabic in the classroom reduces students' exposure to English.
4. **Examination of Motivation and Language Exposure:** The study seeks to investigate the relationship between exposure to English and students' motivation to learn the language. It aims to understand how increased exposure influences students' motivation and, in turn, impacts their language learning outcomes.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

This study relies on key theoretical pillars the Natural Approach, developed by Krashen and Terrell (1983), stands as a cornerstone. This theory underscores the pivotal significance of

exposing learners to comprehensible language input, as elucidated by Krashen's influential hypotheses, including the Input Hypothesis and the Monitor Hypothesis. These concepts emphasize the efficacy of language exposure slightly above learners' current competence levels, highlighting the critical role of English language exposure in fostering proficiency and overcoming learning difficulties (Al-Ahdal, & Al-Ma'amari, 2015; Cantone, 2022). This research incorporates the notion of media's impact on language learning. Various media forms, such as television and the internet, provide EFL learners with authentic language exposure opportunities (Al-Ahdal, 2020b). Sonia Livingstone's work on media's influence on the lives of children and youth underscores the role of English-centric media genres in language exposure (Al-Ahdal, 2020a). Additionally, the utility of mobile-mediated communication, exemplified by WhatsApp, is a tool for language exposure and learning (Ali & Bin-Hady, 2019). The study also recognizes the paramount importance of informal learning settings, particularly in the context of media exposure. Informal environments, including online interactions and media consumption, significantly contribute to language exposure and the acquisition of language skills, extending beyond traditional classroom boundaries (Bin-Hady & Al-Tamimi, 2021; Roy et al., 2022). The research underscores the ever-expanding role of technology in language learning, encompassing the utilization of the internet, computer games, and social media platforms. Technology not only facilitates language exposure but also offers learners genuine opportunities for English communication (Kankaew, et al., 2021). This study embraces a sociocultural perspective, acknowledging the influence of culture and societal factors on language learning. It emphasizes that learners' use of their first language (L1), such as Arabic, within EFL classrooms can impact language exposure and learning dynamics (Al-Ahdal, 2020a). In sum, these interconnected theoretical frameworks provide a robust foundation for comprehending the intricate relationship between language exposure and the learning challenges faced by EFL learners. (Rosselli et al., 2022).

### **3. METHODS**

#### **3.1. Research design**

The research design of this study is primarily descriptive and cross-sectional in nature. It aims to assess the exposure to the English language among Saudi university students studying English as a foreign language (EFL). The study took place in Saudi Arabia, Department of English and Translation, at Qassim University, second semester for the academic year 2022/2023.

#### **3.2. Participants**

The study utilized a random sampling technique to select a sample of 50 students from the University of Qassim English department. The sample consists of 25 male and 25 female students enrolled in level two and three. The study employed a random sampling technique to gather data from a sample of 50 students enrolled in the English department at the University of Qassim. This sample was evenly split between genders, with 25 male and 25 female students. The participants selected for the study were primarily from academic levels two and three. This balanced sample size and gender distribution aimed to provide a representative group of students to investigate the research question effectively, ensuring a diverse perspective from both male and female students across different academic levels within the department. The participants were furnished with precise instructions before they embarked on completing the questionnaire. These instructions emphasized the importance of carefully reading each statement within the questionnaire before offering their responses. This approach was pivotal in guaranteeing that participants comprehended the questions fully, promoting thoughtful and considered responses while mitigating the risk of misinterpretation or hurried answers.

#### **3.3. Instruments**

The English language exposure questionnaire was utilized in this study, initially adapted from Mango et al. (2009) and further refined by the current researcher in collaboration with two

colleagues from the University of Qassim's English and Translation department, can be considered a robust and effective research instrument. This questionnaire comprises 24 items that comprehensively explore various scenarios in which students come into contact with the English language, including settings like home, interactions with friends, university-related activities, and media exposure. The collaborative review process with fellow professors at the university helped ensure that the questionnaire was well-tailored to the study's objectives and context. The questionnaire itself featured a five-point scale that permitted participants to indicate the frequency with which various situations applied to their English language exposure. This scale enabled a nuanced evaluation of exposure levels, facilitating a more in-depth and insightful analysis of the collected data. To uphold the integrity of the data, the researchers implemented measures to ensure that all questionnaire sheets were returned with all items checked. This meticulous attention to detail prevented the occurrence of missing responses, thereby eliminating potential data gaps and enhancing the overall completeness of the dataset.

Furthermore, the questionnaire's internal consistency, as demonstrated by Mango et al. (2009), exhibited high reliability, as indicated by a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.91. This coefficient suggests that at least 91% of the variance in scores can be attributed to true differences in language exposure rather than inconsistencies in item content or poor question quality. Given its successful utilization in a similar context with university students in a prior study, the questionnaire proves to be a valuable and valid tool for assessing individuals' levels of English language exposure. Its adaptability and strong internal consistency make it well-suited for achieving the intended research objectives in the present study, ensuring the collection of reliable and meaningful data on English language exposure among the selected student sample.

**3.4.Data analysis**

The data collected the data analysis unveiled that, on average, both male and female students had exposure to English beyond "sometimes." However, noteworthy gender disparities were observed, with male students reporting higher levels of exposure. These findings provide valuable insights into the English language exposure patterns among Saudi university students and the underlying factors influencing these variations.

**4. RESULTS**

The data analysis process was conducted with proficiency, facilitated by the clarity and straightforwardness of the questionnaire items. The researcher efficiently inputted the gathered data and subsequently performed statistical analyses using the SPSS program available at the University of Qassim. This comprehensive statistical analysis yielded valuable results and insights into the study's objectives.

**Table 1.** *Descriptive statistics for English language exposure*

Minimum	Maximum	mean	Standard deviations
50	2.00	3.07	0.48

Based on Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test, P value = 0.90 and accordingly, Descriptive analysis is used to examine whether the average scores exceed the middle point "sometimes".

**Table 1** presents the descriptive statistics for English language exposure among the 50 students in the study. The table includes the minimum and maximum scores, the mean (average) score, and the standard deviation, which measures the variability in the data. The minimum score of 2.00 suggests that even the lowest level of English language exposure reported by any student

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in the sample was above the middle point "sometimes." This indicates that, on the whole, students in the sample had some degree of exposure to the English language in various contexts. The maximum score of 3.07 suggests that the highest level of English language exposure reported by any student in the sample was considerably above the middle point "sometimes." This indicates that some students in the sample had a high level of exposure to English. The mean score of 3.07 reflects the average level of English language exposure among the students. With a mean score above the middle point "sometimes," it is evident that, on average, the students had exposure to English more frequently than occasionally. This finding contradicts the initial hypothesis that students' exposure to English might be limited. The standard deviation of 0.48 is relatively small, indicating that the students' exposure scores clustered closely around the mean. This suggests that there was not a significant amount of variability in the responses, and most students fell within a similar range of English language exposure.

**Table 2.** *One-Sample T-Test*

Mean	Standard Deviation	Degrees of Freedom (df)	p-Value (2-tailed)
1.06	0.30	49	0.00

Table 2 shows that the mean score is 1.06 with a standard deviation of 0.30. In this test, the degrees of freedom (df) are 49, and the significance level (Sig 2-tailed) is 0.00, which is typically considered highly significant. The key finding here is that the mean score of 1.06 significantly differs from the reference point of "sometimes." This suggests that, on average, the students in the study reported a level of English language exposure that exceeds "sometimes." The low p-value of 0.00 reinforces the statistical significance of this result.

This outcome indicates that the students in the sample have regular exposure to the English language in various contexts, such as at home, with friends, at the university, and through media. This finding contradicts the initial hypothesis, which likely assumed that English exposure might be less frequent. It implies that the students are actively engaged with English in their daily lives, which could have implications for their language proficiency and skills.

It's important to note that this result provides a snapshot of the students' language exposure at a particular point in time. Further research may be needed to understand the long-term trends and potential factors influencing their exposure levels.

**Table 3.** shows that males minimum (252.4), maximum (4.21) means(3.26) , standard deviations(0.41) and females minimum(252.0), maximum(4.21) means(2.88) , standard deviations(0.48)

**Table 3.** *Differences between males and females*

<b>Minimum</b>	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
Males	2.52	4.21	3.26	0.41
Females	2.52	4.21	2.88	0.48

Descriptive statistics for males and females based on Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test, P-value = 0.93 and 0.61 for males and females, respectively, and accordingly, independent samples T-test is used to examine the difference between the mean scores for males and females. The independent samples t-test conducted in this study revealed a statistically significant difference between the mean English language exposure scores of male and female students. The t-test resulted in a t-value of 2.99 with a p-value of 0.004, indicating that the difference in means is statistically significant at the 0.05 level. In practical terms, this means that Saudi male students

exhibited significantly higher levels of contact with or exposure to the English language compared to their female counterparts.

## **5. DISCUSSION**

The study's findings indicate that Saudi male students have significantly higher exposure to the English language than their female counterparts across various contexts. This gender difference in English language exposure prompts an exploration of potential reasons. Research by Varol and Yilmaz (2010) on language learning activities among male and female learners suggested that, in some contexts, gender may not play a significant role in language exposure. However, the findings of this study align with Maubach and Morgan's (2000) observation that male students often exhibit a greater willingness to take risks, engage in spontaneous language use, ask questions, and assert themselves in classroom interactions. These characteristics may contribute to increased exposure to English among male students. It is essential to consider the sociocultural context in which these students live. Saudi society is known for its conservatism and a more traditional, male-dominated structure. This context may afford male students greater freedom in their language use, particularly within their homes and when engaging with English-language media. For example, male students might spend more time watching English-language movies, TV programs, news broadcasts, and browsing English websites. They may also have more opportunities to make decisions that involve using English.

Conversely, female students might face constraints related to societal norms, moral values, and the protection of their honor, which could limit their exposure to English. This constraint might extend to their interactions at home and within the broader community, as well as in academic settings. This finding is in line with Bin-Hady and Al-Tamimi (2021) in which Yemeni female learners use technology less than males. These differences may be attributed to gender-related communication patterns, sociocultural norms, and societal roles. This study underscores the importance of considering these factors when examining language exposure and proficiency among students in specific cultural contexts.

The issue of insufficient language exposure among Saudi university students learning English as a foreign language (EFL). While it outlines the problem and its significance, as well as touches upon the impact of media exposure and technology in language learning. The study mentions that students are "moderately exposed" to English, but it lacks a quantitative measure of exposure. Future research could benefit from a more detailed analysis of the extent of exposure through various sources, such as hours spent watching English-language media or time spent using language learning apps (Rustamov, 2022). The study briefly mentions that male students are more exposed to English than female students, but it doesn't delve into the reasons or implications of this difference. Further research could explore the underlying factors contributing to these gender-based differences in exposure and how they impact language proficiency (Molnar, 2022). While the study acknowledges that students face difficulties in various language skills, it does not provide a detailed analysis of how exposure (or the lack thereof) affects specific skills like speaking, writing, reading, and listening. Future research could investigate the relationship between exposure sources and the development of these skills (AlTameemy, et al.,2020; Isaqjon, 2022). Pedagogical Implications: The study briefly mentions the policy of not dubbing films and television as a factor in language exposure, but it doesn't explore the pedagogical implications of incorporating media into language classrooms. Further research could investigate effective strategies for integrating media exposure into EFL classrooms (Isaqjon, 2022). Longitudinal Studies: The study focuses on the current exposure levels of students but does not consider changes over time. Conducting longitudinal studies to track changes in language exposure patterns and their effects on learning difficulties could provide valuable insights (Isaqjon 2022). The study mentions the role of WhatsApp in providing exposure to English but lacks an in-depth analysis of how modern technology and mobile-mediated communication can enhance language exposure and learning. Further

research could delve into the effectiveness of such tools (Almekhlafy & Alzubi, 2020). The study focuses on Saudi EFL learners, but it could benefit from comparative research with learners in other EFL contexts to identify similarities and differences in language exposure and its effects. Influence of Media Genres: While the study briefly mentions that various media genres are predominantly in English, it doesn't explore how different genres (e.g., movies, music, news) might influence exposure and language proficiency differently (Livingstone, 2001). The study mentions that exposure can enhance learners' motivation but doesn't delve into the mechanisms behind this relationship. Future research could explore how exposure influences motivation and, in turn, impacts language learning outcomes (Kim & Margolis, 2000). The study discusses the issue of insufficient exposure but doesn't provide specific recommendations for increasing language exposure among learners. Future research could focus on identifying and evaluating strategies to enhance language exposure effectively (Badali et al., 2022). Incorporating these research gaps into future studies would help provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role of language exposure in EFL learning and contribute to the development of effective language teaching strategies.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

This study delved into the challenges faced by EFL learners in Saudi Arabia, particularly at the University of Qassim's English department. Although the initial assumption pointed towards insufficient language exposure as a primary cause of these challenges, the research findings shed light on a nuanced reality. It became evident that while students at the University of Qassim's English department did exhibit some degree of contact with and exposure to the English language, there existed a significant gender disparity in these exposure levels, with male students surpassing their female counterparts. This discovery underscores the need for further, more comprehensive research. Future investigations should involve larger and more diverse samples drawn from various academic institutions to gain a more holistic understanding of the factors influencing students' English language proficiency. These factors may extend beyond exposure and include the examination of teaching methodologies employed across Saudi universities, the content and structure of English department curricula, and the sequencing of courses within departmental plans. In essence, while this study has provided valuable insights into the English language exposure of Saudi EFL learners, it has also opened the door to a broader and more intricate exploration of the multifaceted challenges they face. Addressing these challenges effectively requires a comprehensive approach that considers exposure alongside other pedagogical and contextual factors. Such research endeavors are pivotal in facilitating the enhancement of English language learning and teaching in Saudi Arabia.

### **Recommendations**

The findings of this study emphasize the crucial role of increased language exposure and practice in addressing the learning difficulties faced by EFL students. Building upon these positive results, the researchers offer a set of recommendations to enhance English language learning among EFL learners, especially in the Saudi context:

1. Engage in Language Exchange: Students should seek language exchange opportunities, such as finding a pen pal or language partner who matches their language needs, age, and interests. Modern communication tools like email, text chat, voice chat, text messaging, and video conferencing can facilitate such exchanges.
2. Watch Foreign Films: Watching foreign films in their original language is an enjoyable and effective way to enhance language exposure. These films can be easily accessed on the internet or through cultural institutions. It's important to select films that align with one's cultural values and are in the original language.

3. Read Foreign News: Accessing international news sources through the internet or television can help students stay updated on global events while improving language skills. Reputable channels like Al Jazeera English can be a valuable resource for English learners.
4. Cultivate Native Speaker Contacts: Actively seek out opportunities to interact with native speakers in your community. Joining or starting conversation groups, attending language-focused events, and engaging in conversations with native speakers can significantly enhance language skills.
5. Utilize Online Resources: Take advantage of online resources like foreign language search engines, discussion boards, chat rooms, and foreign language magazines to explore personal interests while practicing English.
6. Visit Libraries: Local libraries may offer books and magazines in foreign languages. Reading materials in the target language can improve vocabulary and comprehension skills.
7. Embrace Multimodal Learning: Language exposure and practice should involve various skills, including speaking, comprehension, reading, and writing. Learners should strive to develop a well-rounded set of language skills.
8. Effective Teaching Methods: Instructors should employ effective teaching methods that cater to individual learners' needs. Providing additional coaching and counseling, especially for slower learners, can help address their specific challenges.
9. Create a Supportive Classroom Environment: Instructors should encourage and motivate students to participate in class using English exclusively. Establishing this practice from the first session helps students adapt to the language-learning environment. Shy learners should be gently encouraged to engage through group activities and open-ended questions.
10. Holistic Language Learning: Language acquisition involves interconnected skills and knowledge. Improvement in one area can positively impact others. Therefore, learners should focus on improving various aspects of language skills and understanding the cultural contexts in which language is used.

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