Adjusting to Learning in the US: Saudi Students Speak Out

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Unprecedented numbers of students from Saudi Arabia are currently studying at universities in the US. These students must make major adjustments when encountering academic expectations in their host country. In this qualitative study, 10 Saudi students spoke in depth regarding their experiences with differences in methods of instruction and learning between Saudi Arabia and the US. They spoke of adapting in their interactions with teachers, in learning to understand versus memorization, in taking responsibility for their own learning, and in developing opportunities to speak English among so many other Arabic-speaking students. Implications for universities and ESL institutes are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

International students, including students from Saudi Arabia, are an important presence in US higher education. The number of international students studying at US colleges and universities has burgeoned by 72% from 2000 to 2014, according to a press release by the Institute of International Education (Institute of International Education, 2014). Saudi Arabia ranks fourth in the countries sending the largest numbers of international students to the United States (following China, India, and South Korea). In the 2013-2014 academic year, there were 53,919 Saudi students studying in the United States. The King Abdullah Foreign Scholarship Program fully or largely funds Saudi students studying in post-secondary institutions in the US, a key factor in the choice of many Saudis to pursue higher education in this country. The funding includes tuition, a stipend for health insurance and living expenses, as well as airfare back to Saudi Arabia (Leggett, 2013).

Because of cultural differences between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the US, Saudi students have significant adjustments to make at US universities. All international students have challenges in coming to the US to study; it certainly benefits the US in important ways when students successfully make those adjustments. Evan M. Ryan, Assistant US Secretary of State for Educational and Cultural Affairs, says:

> International education is crucial to building relationships between people and communities in the United States and around the world. It is through these relationships that together we can solve global challenges like climate change, the spread of pandemic disease, and combating violent extremism. (Institute of International Education, 2014)

In addition to relationship building, the US benefits financially by having international students in its institutions of higher education. Their spending pumped more than $27 billion into the US economy in 2013, according to the Department of Commerce (Institute of International Education, 2014). Obviously, post-secondary institutions have much at stake in helping international students succeed academically.

Some of the dramatic adjustments that students from Saudi Arabia must make when confronted with the culture of the US have been studied with regard to their impact on the academic success of Saudi students in the US (Razek & Coyner, 2013). Domestic students and their professors in the US have been raised in a society that values individualism, coeducation, and the separation of church and state, including the prohibition of religious instruction in public schools. Saudis are Muslims from the Middle East, raised in a collectivistic culture with separation of males and females in education (Prokop, 2005), and "the study of Islam remains at (education's) core" (Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia, 2015). Adjustment difficulties for international students are related to the cultural novelty that they experience in their host country (Hechanova-Alampay, Beehr, Christiansen, & Van Horn, 2002).

Whereas the influence of culture on engagement and persistence in higher education has been well-documented, there is less information regarding the impact of differing methods of instruction and study habits in Saudi Arabia on academic adjustment to studying in the US. The expectations for instruction, relationships with teachers, and habits of participation in class and study outside of class are formed in elementary, middle, and high school over a period of 12 to 13 years. Through in depth interviews of several Saudi students, this study investigates their perspectives on the specific differences in learning and studying that they encounter when they matriculate to a university in the Midwest of the United States.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Education in Saudi Arabia starts with kindergarten; grades one through six are the elementary level; intermediate education lasts for three years (grades seven through nine); and secondary education goes for another three years (Al Salloom, 1995; AngloInfo, 2015). One foundation of the educational system is to teach at least one foreign language so that students "…acquire sciences, knowledge, arts and useful inventions, and convey our sciences and knowledge to other societies and [thus] make them contribute to the propagation of Islam and to the service of humanity" (Saudi Arabia Ministry of Education, 1995, p 7). Children also study Arabic, art, geography, history, mathematics, religious studies, national education, and science. In addition, girls study home economics and boys engage in physical education (Al Salloom, 1995). There has traditionally been an emphasis on memorization and teacher-dependent learning in grades K through 12 (Hamdan, 2014).

In recent years, the Saudi government and other leaders have acknowledged that changing economic and demographic conditions necessitate a corresponding adaptation of the educational system, including changes in the curriculum and ways in instruction (Prokop, 2005). Analysts of the Saudi pedagogy have said that the education system relies upon professors passing uncontested knowledge on to students—which students must memorize—without imparting analytical thinking skills (Prokop, 2005). This, in turn, brings about a "passivity of learners" (Hamdan, 2014, p. 204). In higher education, there has been criticism that Saudi education pedagogy is faculty-centered rather than student-centered and that there is a need to employ different teaching strategies in order to motivate students (Alamri, 2011). In the US, by contrast, teacher education programs maintain a de-emphasis on rote learning (remembering) and an emphasis on teaching students to comprehend, apply, analyze, synthesize, and evaluate what they learn (Forehand, 2015).

According to Alwehaibi (2012), there have been 'radical' changes in Saudi Arabian education in recent years. In 2002, in an effort to achieve more relevancy in education, the Saudi Minister of Education announced an ongoing effort to encourage creative thinking and self-learning (Prokop, 2005). This effort has been advanced, in part, when Saudi students are exposed to teachers of English who are imported from other countries (Hamdan, 2014). The courting of foreigners to teach English in KSA, however, has not been without problems. An influx of non-Saudis is seen by some as a threat to the country's conservative traditionalist values (Lindsey, 2011). There is a longstanding tradition of preferential

treatment for native Saudi faculty, including the opportunity for tenure and advancement (Onsman, 2011), thus limiting and sometimes alienating the expatriates. Gender-based segregation in higher education also limits the attraction of qualified academics to Saudi higher education (Onsman, 2011).

Even with attempts to change pedagogical practices at the university level in Saudi Arabia, students coming from there to the US have a difficult adjustment to make if they have grown up with pedagogy that emphasizes knowledge as an absolute that is imparted through rote learning methods by teachers from kindergarten through twelfth grade. To learn more about that adjustment, this study posed the following questions: How do Saudi university students perceive the differences in methods of instruction and learning between Saudi Arabia and the US? What are their reactions when they transition from methods of instruction and learning that have been ingrained throughout their educational careers in their home country to methods commonly used in the US? How do they perceive the expectations and behaviors of their teachers in the US?

METHOD

Context

The midsize public university in this study is situated in the Midwest of the United States and enrolls approximately 15,000 students. Of the entire student population, slightly over 10% are international students. About a fourth of the international students are from Saudi Arabia. On this campus, international students who are learning English typically spend a year or more in an intensive English language institute to improve their English skills in order to meet proficiency requirements before acceptance into undergraduate or graduate programs in the university. The makeup of the institute at the time of the study was approximately 70% Saudi students.

The Qualitative Interview

The phenomenon of interest was Saudi students' perspectives on differences between study and instructional methods in their home country compared to their experiences at this university. The study employed a qualitative approach in order to permit an open-ended exploration of the topic and to encourage the expression of thoughts and ideas from the students that may not appear in the extant literature. Qualitative research allows the potential for interviewees to express their ideas and opinions in an open and genuine manner that may not occur in a more impersonal survey or questionnaire (Patton, 2002).

A semi-structured interview was developed by the principal investigators. Following the open-ended questions, additional follow-up questions were asked depending upon the responses. The standardized open-ended interview format was employed in order to make the best use of the interviewees' time, reduce variation between interviews, and help make the responses easier to compare in analyses (Patton, 2002). The interviews were made as much like 'conversations' as possible to encourage the interviewees to feel comfortable in sharing their perspectives and to allow for natural digressions along the way.

The principal investigators were a faculty member in the school psychology program whose specialty is bilingual education and a doctoral student in educational leadership whose first language is Arabic. The doctoral student, originally from Jordan, had spent several years teaching English as a second language in Saudi Arabia.

The recorded interviews were conducted by the doctoral student in Arabic. He first transcribed the interviews in Arabic and then translated them into English. The Arabic transcriptions were de-identified and then translated into English by a second Arabic speaker (a doctoral candidate who holds a Masters degree in Linguistics) so that the transcriptions could be compared for agreement. Where there were instances of disagreement, the two Arabic speakers and the bilingual education specialist met to discuss the differences and come to an agreement as to the most appropriate translation.

Participants

Ten interviewees were recruited by the Arabic-speaking primary investigator using the network sampling method (Merriam, 2009). Prospective interviewees were asked if they would be willing to answer a series of questions about their academic experiences in Saudi Arabia and in the US. The interviews took place in private at mutually agreed upon settings on campus.

The sample consisted of five male Saudi Arabian students enrolled in the university's intensive English language institute and five engineering students enrolled in the university. Of those latter five, two were undergraduates—one in mechanical engineering and one in biomedical engineering. Of the three graduate students, one was in the computer engineering program and two were in the industrial engineering program. There was not a decision to interview only engineering students at the university level; however, this university is known for its engineering programs and international students from certain countries, including Saudi Arabia, tend to prefer the engineering occupation.

It was determined at the outset that only male interviewees would be included. The reason for only including males was out of respect for standards governing interactions between males and females in Saudi Arabia. The male interviewees were assured of confidentiality in meeting privately one-on-one with the male interviewer. The custom in Saudi Arabia would be for a female to be accompanied by a male relative in the presence of another male. For this study, it was determined that having a male relative present during the interview would change the dynamics and introduce a confounding variable into the data.

RESULTS

For the purposes of reporting this study, pseudonyms are being used to identify the interviewees. The students at the institute who are learning English are identified as Ahmed, Ali, Adam, Awad, and Atif. The students at the university are identified as Karim, Kamal, Khaled, Khalil, and Khamis.

Several topics were explored in the interviews regarding differences between academic experiences in Saudi Arabia and in the US. They include behavioral expectations within the classroom, relationships and interactions between teachers and students, methods of studying, the study environment, and what advice the interviewees would offer their teachers and the institution. These topics were a subset within the interview that also dealt with methods of teaching and learning English as a foreign language. Both investigators immersed themselves in the data, and then used the analytic device of clustering in order to discern and organize themes (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Following are themes that emerged from the data.

Behavioral Expectations within the Classroom

Saudi students were surprised at the freedom they had within their classes in the US. They found they were allowed to speak to other students, go to the restroom, take phone calls, eat, and drink. They were also allowed to ask *simple* as opposed to *advanced* questions; that is, questions that were not designed to show their grasp of the content but to show their need to understand the content.

However, the freedom in the classroom was not without its price. Khamis had problems with a teacher's classroom management. In his interview he related that, three days prior, one of his teachers had solicited advice from her students about the class. He said,

> One of her problems is her way of controlling the class which is a wrong one. If the student speaks in a low tone, she will look at him in an unsuitable way. So, she should deal with the student as a student and she can control the class just by looking at the students without making them silent or telling them not to speak, especially in a graduate class to make us feel relaxed in the class. The way they deal with the students is very important. Being firm is important in some classes; we were attending some classes which look like a marriage hall where everyone is speaking. It is hard to learn in such conditions.   (A marriage hall is a building used for wedding receptions.)

Relationships and Interactions Between Teachers and Students
Teachers' Investment in Helping Students Learn

The Saudi students in this study perceived that their teachers were making active efforts to help students learn. They mentioned these teacher behaviors:

- Teachers here give students more feedback on assignments and tests. They keep office hours to help students. Khalil noted,

    There (in KSA), the teachers were explaining the lesson and leaving the class (directly). They were completing the curriculum and then leaving. They did not show much care about office hours because the students were not coming to see them in these hours, so they didn't like to attend them (office hours) because the students don't use these hours to ask about study affairs.

    He explained that students in KSA often visit their instructors not to get help with content or class performance but to explain their reasons for missing classes. Khalil continued,

    But when I came here things changed; the culture has changed and the teachers have office hours and they are available during these hours. My behavior has changed as a student because I noticed the teachers care more.

    But he adds, "…even (here), some of them don't care."

- Some of these students perceived that, in Saudi Arabia, teachers have the attitude, "This is how I was taught so it's good enough for my students." Talking about teachers in KSA, Khalil said, "The teachers weren't clear and they were saying 'this is our experience and let our students live our experience.'"
- Teachers here seem clearly invested in helping their students. Khaled said, "In Saudi Arabia, the student is doing 60 to70% of the work, but here there are many teachers who are doing their best to help the students" although he adds, "…not all of them."

Asking Questions of Instructors in Class

It can be daunting for students with limited English proficiency to ask questions in front of the entire class. Institute students are in a different situation, in this regard, because everyone in their classes is learning English. At the university, it is likely that the majority of students are native English speakers. In the institute, Ahmed and Ali said they were comfortable asking questions in class. For the others, it depended on the teacher. Atif acknowledged,

    I feel embarrassed because, first, my language doesn't help me. Second, some teachers at the institute embarrass you when you ask because he responds to my question with another question. So, the majority of the students in the class ask their colleagues at the end of the class.

One reason this might happen is that the student's question is unclear to the instructor; the instructor asks for clarification but the student doesn't know how to respond. Among the university students, Karim and Khaled felt comfortable asking questions in class. For the others, it depended. Kamal said, "I don't feel hesitant; this is my personality. But I am afraid that my teacher couldn't understand what I am saying due to grammatical issues and things related to the language." Khalil was also concerned about whether he was using correct English when asking questions in class and felt that some teachers were not receptive to answering questions, "…when you ask some of them a question, he says you have to go and read by yourself, go and find the answer. If I could find the answer, I wouldn't ask him the question." Interestingly, Khamis said, "It depends on the class; when I feel that I am versed or skilled with the

material or the course, I ask him, but if I don't understand the material, I don't ask him." This may be related to experiences in KSA, where students were encouraged to ask advanced rather than simple questions.

Asking Questions of Instructors after Class

Most of the institute students were comfortable asking questions of teachers after class. Ahmed found his teachers to be helpful in this regard. He explained,

> He responds thoroughly. I go to the teacher and I'm quite confident that he will answer the question, even if he is outside the classroom, and even if it is after the school time, he answers my question, and it is possible to send him an email or by any other way, and I get the result directly and quickly.

Atif found it more helpful to talk to his instructors after, rather than during, class. He said,

> I ask most of my questions after class and alone because I have a better chance to ask more and to deliver (clarify) my idea. When I ask a question in the class, I might ask about a part of a question, so the teacher will start clarifying something I don't mean to ask about. This way I can stop him to ask him about what exactly I mean.

The university students all felt comfortable communicating with the teachers after class. Karim said, "I ask. The more I ask, the more comfortable I feel."

Methods of Studying and Academic Skills
Emphasis on Memorization

Several interviewees mentioned the emphasis in KSA on memorization (as opposed to learning to understand) and cramming before exams. According to Khaled, "We were relying on tutoring and studying for the exam only to pass." It is not unusual for Saudi families to hire tutors for their children. Khamis said, "In Saudi Arabia, we used to rely on memorization and studying one or two days before the exam time." In speaking of the importance of memorization, Atif said that when writing was tested in KSA, students would memorize five paragraphs and then would come to the exam and write one of the paragraphs from memory. Khalil spoke about the difference between storing knowledge and repeating it rather than applying it.

Interviewees were asked whether they currently use memorization in studying for exams. Here, again, they made a distinction between memorization and understanding. Awad agreed with Ahmed, who explained, "I use the study method of memorization to memorize vocabulary and definitions, but in grammar we try to understand….. Memorization is only for vocabulary." Ali said that he always memorized before exams, adding, "Memorization is easier than understanding. My way of studying at the high school depended on memorization." Adam and Atif pointed out that it is easier to memorize something you understand. Kamal said that he memorizes in biology "…but for the rest of courses I prefer to understand them." Khalil agreed that sometimes courses required memorization. He said, "I depend on memorization around 75% and 25% for understanding." Khaled admitted, "I am the worst person in term of memorization. I understand first." Khamis relied on memorization at times, saying, "If the brain was unable to understand, I would use memorization."

Reading the Text and Using Handouts

Most interviewees read and re-read assigned readings, although Ali confessed, "Honestly, I study before the exam time." Nine of the ten students said they often or always take notes in class. Khamis said,

> It depends on the lecture and the teacher. I go to some classes just for attendance records and I go to other classes to gain knowledge. So, I write notes in these classes. In some

classes, I have some expectations in advance that I will not benefit from the course. So, I
don't exhaust myself in writing notes.

Most interviewees took notes and highlighted or underlined while they read assignments. All students
looked up Arabic definitions of English words, as needed. This can be onerous because, as Khamis noted,
"Yes, out of ten words, I look up two to three."

Most interviewees liked using teachers' handouts, sometimes to supplement readings and other times
to replace readings. Atif said, "I may use it to reinforce understanding if I felt it would simplify
understanding, but I don't use the handouts that minimize the material's volume." Khaled said that he
makes up his own 'handouts,'

I make them before the class. I remember once that I made a three page handout about the
if clause because it was important for the exam. When the teacher started explaining the
lesson, my handouts included 80% of the content. It helps me a lot.

But Khalil said, "It depends on the course. I would study the book if we have to, but if the notes are a
good alternative for the book, I would study them only." And Khamis admitted, "It depends on the
teachers; some of them force you to read the handouts. To be honest, we study the old exam papers for the
test."

Studying with a Group

Preferences varied for studying individually or with a group. It was more typical for the institute
students to study with a group. Ahmed said, "On the weekdays, I study on my own and on the weekends,
I study with a group mostly. It is very useful to exchange ideas, information, and experiences, and I
encourage it." Adam said he typically studies alone but is willing to help his friends, "Sometimes my
friends come because they want me to teach them, especially at the exam time." Most university students
preferred to study alone but would work with a group, depending on such factors as whether or not they
knew the other students or needed help themselves in understanding course content.

Using a Tutor

At least initially, most institute students worked with a tutor. As they progressed, they found they no
longer needed that extra help. Atif said, "I don't study with a tutor. When I face difficulty, I ask one of
my colleagues for help, whose proficiency is higher than mine, or I might go back to ask my teacher."
None of the university students worked with a tutor.

Where Students Study

Students typically studied at home and/or at the library. Ahmed said, "I study at home and with
groups around an hour after covering important things alone." Khalil noted the temptation to visit rather
than studying when in a group. He said, "The library is a place for social communication and wasting
your time greeting your friends and those people whom you know."

Writing

Interviewees largely agreed that, before coming to the US, they did not learn to write in a systematic
way. They were taught 'stream of consciousness' writing rather than a systematic method involving
organization of ideas and content. Adam recalled, "No, I didn't learn (organized writing) in Arabic. I had
one course at college in Saudi Arabia about how to search and use references." Kamal said, "I write in
English better than I do in Arabic." Khamis tried to transfer skills he learned in writing English to Arabic,
saying, "I didn't learn it in the Arabic language, but I learned it here in writing courses in English
language; then I change it to the Arabic language and I don't know if the structure is correct (or not)."

Most interviewees used spell and grammar check when writing their assignments on the computer.
Several asked a friend with more proficiency in writing or an American to proofread their papers before

they handed them in. 'Buddy-checking' is commonly encouraged during classes at the institute. At the university level, all of the students used their instructors, an American friend, or the university's writing center to check their papers before handing them in. Karim said he was obliged to use the writing center with one instructor, saying, "I used it once because the instructor was tough and he was checking every single word."

Advice for the Institute and University
What Would Be Helpful to Saudi Students?

Interviewees were asked whether there was anything that could be done to help international students be more successful. Several of the institute students mentioned the need for more non-Saudi students in their classes. The interviewees believed that they would be forced to speak more English if fewer of their classmates spoke Arabic. For example, Ali said,

> Each class has 20 to 22 students and the majority are Saudis which makes it difficult to learn quickly. Some teachers ask us to complete our homework with a partner in the class and mostly he will be a Saudi. If he were a Chinese or any other student from a different nationality, I would use English to communicate with him.

Adam felt that the institute should provide tutors, similar to tutors who are provided at the university for students who are struggling in classes. Awad expressed the opinion that students should go outside the institute to find opportunities to speak and read English, saying, "There are many things the student can gain outside the institute like speaking and making friendships with native English speakers because it enhances his language, in addition to much reading." Atif agreed with the need for more experiences speaking with native speakers but thought that the institute should provide those experiences. (As it is, there are volunteers from the community who are conversation partners with institute students once a week.) Ahmed, whose wife is also a student at the institute, spoke about the difficulties faced by Saudi females when so many other students are Saudis. He said,

> I think that the institute is full of Saudi students and some students, especially the females, find it embarrassing to speak or to ask questions in front of the male students because they came from a conservative community where there was no coeducation. If the female Saudi students were with a teacher or students from another nationality, it would be much better.

When asked what could be helpful to international students, Kamal wanted more accountability. He felt that some teachers were better than others and he would like some 'quality assurance.' He went on to say, "The Saudi student feels afraid to talk about this because he belongs to a culture where the teacher has the authority to cause failure for those students who might complain about teacher's performance. Some teachers might take it personally."

But Khalil, Khamis, and Kamal shifted the responsibility for success squarely onto the students. Kamal said, "It depends on the person himself. If you don't want to do something, you won't do it. Regarding the courses, it depends on the person himself….how much time you give for preparation and studying and preparing for the class." Khalil agreed that students must focus on a clear goal, saying, "The goal mustn't be only the certificate (degree), but the knowledge you gain with the certificate. There are courses that require a long time for studying and the youngsters don't have time to study." Khamis reiterated concerns about the maturity level of students who have had little experience with the world and become easily distracted by freedoms and experiences they don't have at home. He explained,

> (They need to) come at an older age somehow. If he comes here at an early age, 18 to 22 or 23, he would have many things in mind he hasn't done yet. So, he starts growing up at

the age of 24. One year abroad equals five in our country. This way, he grows a lot in one year.

What Advice Would Saudi Students Offer?

The interviewees were asked what advice they would give to teachers in the institute and the university. Ahmed and Adam wanted courses at the institute to be better aligned. Ahmed said,

> I think that teachers are highly qualified in teaching English as a second language. The advice I would give to them is that every teacher should start where the other teacher stopped because we had classes where the new teacher sometimes ignores what his colleague taught. So, we will remain in the same place without moving further.

Adam agreed that among teachers there should be "…cooperation and discussing ideas at one table to achieve a specific result."

University students were mixed in the advice they would offer teachers. For example, Kamal said, "There is nothing … teachers are great and cooperative. They deal with students as students." For the other interviewees, a theme emerged regarding the sensitivities of these students to the manner in which teachers related to them, perhaps reflecting cultural expectations. Karim said, "I met many teachers and it would be better if they were more lenient because some of them feel irritated when they deal with students." Khalil agreed,

> Students are coming from different backgrounds and the teachers make generalizations about the class. So, he supposes that all understand (the content), or all don't understand without taking into consideration the individual differences. Sometimes, when you ask him a question, he alienates you from studying. The student has fear of the teacher. It happened to me twice during my study, but with the passage of time, I get used to it.

DISCUSSION

This study sought to answer the following questions: (a) How do Saudi students perceive the differences in methods of instruction and learning between Saudi Arabia and the US? (b) What are their reactions when they transition from methods of instruction and learning that have been ingrained throughout their educational careers in their home country to methods commonly used in the US? (c) How do they perceive the expectations and behaviors of their teachers in the US? While it is legitimate to analyze these interviews to discern themes regarding these questions, it is important to keep in mind that in this study there were just 10 interviewees at one university. There are rich data to mine from these interviews but the qualitative nature of the study introduces some ambiguity into the generalizability of the results.

That said, there are themes that emerged that help in understanding the experiences of Saudi students—what is going well and what needs improvement:

These students, by and large, agreed that their instructors in the US are invested in helping students master the learning objectives of the courses. Teachers are accessible during class and outside of class to answer questions and give feedback. They keep office hours and respond to their students' phone calls and emails. Many of them show an attitude of caring to the students.

Classes are less formal in the US. Students do not have to ask permission to leave the class to go to the restroom. They can eat, drink, take phone calls, talk to fellow students, and ask simple, as opposed to advanced, questions. (It should be noted that there are doubtless many university faculty who would prefer that their students *not* take phone calls during class.) The downside to this informality is that, as one interviewee remarked, a classroom may at times seem like a "marriage hall," making it less conducive to learning.

In Saudi Arabia, for these students, there was a focus on memorizing the course material in order to give it back to the teacher on exams. They had been taught to rely on teachers to be in charge of their education, to not question the teachers' knowledge and authority (Hamdan, 2014). In the US, they found more of an emphasis on understanding course content in order to be able to apply it.

Writing essays and paragraphs in an organized, systematic manner was a new skill for these students. They had not learned a systematic way of organizing their writing in Arabic so those skills were not transferrable to writing in English when they arrived here.

In terms of curriculum, these interviewees recognized that it was not enough to spend six to seven hours a day studying English in the classroom and lab, especially when many of the other students were Arabic speakers. According to Denman and Hilal (2011), Saudi students place value on going to countries where their study is in English and the country is English-speaking. They see the significance of having opportunities to interact with others who can speak English with them. It would be disappointing, then, to be surrounded by other Arabic speakers and miss out on some aspects of the immersion experience.

These students appeared to have moved from using tutors and communal studying to relying more on their teachers and studying independently, although they were open to studying with others in order to help them or when they themselves needed help. This may be tied to the increased accessibility of teachers in the US.

The interviewees, especially when they were learning English, sometimes had difficulty articulating their questions in class. They preferred asking their fellow students or asking the teacher individually rather than being embarrassed by their lack of proficiency in front of others.

As they progressed from the institute to the university, the students seemed to move toward taking ownership of their learning. University students accepted that, although their teachers and the institution were not perfect, it was their own efforts and motivation that determined their academic success, rather than attributing responsibility for learning to outside forces.

Implications

As mentioned in the Introduction to this paper, international students are a tremendous resource for higher education in the US and throughout the world. Saudi Arabia ranks fourth in the number of international students attending US post-secondary institutions. Administrators in higher education have much at stake in retaining Saudis and making sure that their experiences in the US are positive and that they successfully achieve their goals of earning undergraduate and graduate degrees. Considering some of the profound differences between academic experiences in KSA and those in the US, Saudi students must make major adjustments in learning to overcome the obstacles and earn diplomas in undergraduate and graduate programs.

Following are some implications of the study that should be of interest to administrators and faculty who work with Saudi students: (a) English as a second language (ESL) teachers and administrators should realize that their Saudi students may not have a foundation in organized writing, which is typically taught at the elementary and secondary levels in the US. (b) Teachers should understand that Saudis are learning a new way to learn, one which emphasizes understanding and application rather than memorization. It may be helpful to acknowledge this at the outset and explicitly teach metacognitive and comprehension skills. Saudi students are also accustomed to taking a more passive role in their education and may need encouragement, at first, to actively shape their own academic experiences. (c) It is important for ESL and university teachers to be sensitive to the discomfort and embarrassment that their international students may suffer just to ask a question in class. (d) Finally, it is probable that ESL administrators and teachers alike would agree with the interviewees that it would be better not to have a preponderance of any language (other than English) spoken by their students so the students are forced to speak more English. If the King Abdullah Scholarship program continues to be offered, the problem of providing more of an English-immersion experience may continue to exist. It may be helpful for teachers and administrators to know that students also see this as a concern and would like to have more opportunities to practice English outside of classes.

Limitations and Future Directions

As mentioned earlier, one limitation of this study is that it was done with 10 students at one institution, thus potentially limiting the generalizability of the results. It would be interesting and helpful to interview Saudi students at other institutions to see if similar themes emerge. Another limitation is that, for cultural reasons, the study was restricted to male interviewees; in the future, a similar study with an Arabic-speaking female interviewer and female interviewees would doubtless yield rich data. It would be helpful to investigate what intensive English language institutes are doing to 'force' students to speak English when they have a preponderance of students who speak Arabic, Chinese, Hindi, or other languages. Finally, elementary and secondary education is doubtless evolving in KSA and may be different for today's students than for these adult students. It would be interesting to repeat this study in the future with a newer generation of Saudi students.

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