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Language Exposure and Language Proficiency: A Qualitative Study of Technical Colleges in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract: *The effect of language exposure on English competency among Saudi technical college students is investigated qualitatively in the present paper. Saudi students mostly find English in formal, classroom-based environments, restricting their chances for real-world language contact even with continuous educational changes and the general acceptance of English-medium instruction (EMI). The study examines the impact of kind and quality of language experience on learners' capacity to acquire meaningful communication skills using Krashen's Input Hypothesis and the Affective Filter Hypothesis. The purpose of the twelve students' semi-structured interviews was to elicit specifics about their learning experiences, challenges, and adaptation strategies from various technical institutions. Results show that although EMI raises English exposure frequency, depending too much on structured instruction sometimes leads to passive learning, in which case students struggle especially with writing and speaking. Socio-psychological elements like poor intrinsic motivation and more language anxiety exacerbate these difficulties and hence compromise the possible advantages of more exposure. The study suggests that digital learning technologies, interactive teaching methodologies, and immersive experiences could significantly enhance language ability by promoting active interaction with English outside of traditional classroom settings. The findings of this study have important policy and curriculum implications for Saudi technical college students' preparation for the demands of global communication by hybrid learning models that effectively blend structured instruction with opportunities for real language use.*

Keywords: *language exposure; English proficiency; EMI; immersive learning; Saudi Arabia; technical academies.*

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Introduction

Despite significant educational advancements, English language exposure in Saudi Arabia is limited to formal classroom training, with minimal real-world application (Fareh, 2010; Al-Nasser, 2015; Ibrahim, 2023). According to studies, students must maintain a consistent, meaningful relationship with the target language to become proficient; nevertheless, many Saudi students learn English through organized courses rather than immersion experiences (Ranta & Meckelborg, 2013; Altaweel & Alsager, 2024). The learning and proficiency of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Saudi Arabia has been essential to academic discourse, especially as the country undergoes considerable economic and educational transition (Alkhannani, 2021). English is rapidly being employed as a medium of instruction in technical and medical disciplines, and it is viewed as a doorway to global economic integration, higher education access, and cross-cultural communication (Alqarni et al., 2024). Despite major reforms, Saudi students continue to struggle with English proficiency, with socio-cultural attitudes, instructional approaches, and language exposure all having an impact on outcomes (Salas & Legaspi, 2020; Krashen, 1985). Scholars have long discussed the function of exposure in language learning, with Krashen (1981) introducing the Input Hypothesis, which emphasizes the importance of understandable input somewhat above a learner's present competency level. However, simple exposure does not imply proficiency. Salas & Legaspi (2020) discovered that, while students in high-exposure situations had higher vocabulary retention, their grammatical competence remained below average, showing that structured training is required for mastery. Similarly, Al Zoubi (2018) confirmed that language exposure promotes acquisition but must be supplemented with pedagogical help.

Socio-psychological hurdles have further hindered Saudi Arabia's switch to English-medium instruction. As the Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985) emphasizes, second language learning depends much on motivation and anxiety. Ocampo (2017) showed that high-anxiety students perform poorly in language acquisition, so highlighting the need for stress-free learning environments. Furthermore, Temel & Ozkan (2016) showed a direct correlation between motivation and language proficiency, suggesting that a lack of intrinsic or extrinsic motivation significantly hinders language acquisition. Another critical factor is the linguistic environment. Pascual (2017) and Candilas (2016) argue that the quality of exposure—rather than mere quantity—determines oral proficiency. English is commonly taught in artificial classrooms in Saudi technical colleges, reducing meaningful interaction (Bedore

et al., 2011). Lightbown & Spada (2000) stress that regular and meaningful exposure is essential for optimal acquisition, yet many Saudi students primarily use English in academic settings, restricting their practical fluency. Integration of digital media, AI-driven language tools, and internet platforms enables new English exposure opportunities. Mobile-assisted language learning (MALL), AI-based chatbots, and interactive media expose students to language outside of the classroom, improving their language skills (Al-Ahdal, 2020; Bin-Hady & Al-Tamimi, 2021; Divekar et al., 2022; Qiao & Zhou, 2023).

English learning in Saudi Arabia still mostly relies on teachers, which limits chances for student-led debates and interactive participation (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015; Ahmed, 2014; Alkubaidi, 2014; Alrabai, 2014). Furthermore, cultural and social inclinations for Arabic restrict the opportunities of pupils to interact with English in social settings, therefore reducing their competence levels (Al-Seghayer, 2014; Moskovsky & Picard, 2019). Beyond contextual and instructional factors, cognitive control affects language acquisition. Yang (2023) found that second-language proficiency is substantially connected with cognitive flexibility, while concern lowers communication and test performance. They found that students in high-stakes educational environments like Saudi technical institutions may have increased anxiety, limiting language acquisition. Given these challenges, this study will examine how language exposure, instructional methods, and socio-psychological factors affect Saudi technical college students' English proficiency. This study critically evaluates language learning paradigms and their applicability to Saudi Arabia to determine their efficacy and the need for curricular changes.

Literature review

English as a foreign language (EFL) in Saudi Arabia has been widely discussed, especially in technical institutes that use English. This research review critically examines how language exposure, instructional methodologies, socio-cultural influences, and cognitive factors affect English competence. The study examines whether organized schooling and psychological readiness influence language acquisition more than exposure alone or whether both are important.

The function of language exposure in language acquisition

Language exposure has long been recognized as a significant factor influencing second language acquisition. Krashen's (1981) Input Hypothesis posits that language acquisition occurs most effectively when learners engage with content that slightly exceeds their current proficiency level, highlighting the significance of comprehensible input for language development. Research

emphasizes the importance of language exposure in EFL learning, highlighting its direct relationship with vocabulary development, grammatical accuracy, and overall fluency (Hazaea & Alzubi, 2016; Altaweel & Alsager, 2024; El-Dakhs, 2017). Classroom interactions, digital media, and social contexts significantly influence learners' capacity to integrate linguistic patterns and cultural nuances (Kim & Margolis, 2000; Ranta & Meckelborg, 2013). Limited exposure due to inadequate real-world interaction constitutes a significant barrier in Saudi Arabia, preventing students from engaging in authentic learning environments (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015; Fareh, 2010; Al-Nasser, 2015; Ibrahim, 2023).

Recent studies highlight the role of digital platforms in enhancing traditional English exposure. Mobile-mediated communication (MMC) tools, such as WhatsApp and AI-driven chatbots, provide students with opportunities for genuine interaction, thereby enhancing their engagement with the target language (Almekhlafy & Alzubi, 2016; Bin-Hady & Al-Tamimi, 2021). Moreover, engagement with online content, such as podcasts and AI-generated narratives, has been associated with improvements in listening, speaking, and writing abilities, thus demonstrating the potential benefits of technology-enhanced exposure (Al-Ahdal, 2020; Divekar et al., 2022; Qiao & Zhou, 2023). Research indicates that mere exposure alone is inadequate without active engagement and structured learning (Salas & Legaspi, 2020). Salas & Legaspi (2020) conducted a study on intermediate students, revealing that while extensive English exposure enhanced vocabulary acquisition, grammatical skills remained below average. This indicates that targeted grammar instruction should be incorporated to improve exposure. Kachru's (1996) three-circle model of World Englishes highlights the significant impact of diverse environments on the level of exposure. In Saudi Arabia, English is neither a native nor a widely spoken second language, learners primarily encounter English in classroom environments rather than through immersive experiences (Bedore et al., 2011). Despite limited opportunities for authentic conversation outside formal educational settings, Lightbown & Spada (2000) argue that consistent and meaningful exposure is crucial for effective language acquisition (as in Qiao, 2024).

Socio-psychological barriers to language acquisition

The Affective Filter Hypothesis of Krashen (1985) stresses the part psychological elements—such as motivation, anxiety, and self-confidence—have in language development. Students who experience great anxiety or little motivation often find it difficult to retain language even with exposure (Ocampo, 2017; Song, 2024). Students in Saudi technical colleges, where English is sometimes seen as an academic need rather than a communicative

need, could lack natural drive (Temel & Ozkan, 2016). Their research found a clear link between motivation and competency, emphasizing the need for psychological readiness in language teaching. Furthermore, foreign language anxiety (FLA) has been identified as a significant barrier to language acquisition (Song, 2024). Yang (2023) demonstrated that higher levels of FLA have a negative impact on test performance and communication ability. Though language exposure has clear advantages, Saudi students find great difficulty reaching meaningful interaction with English. Studies have pointed up several systematic obstacles including over-reliance on Arabic in classrooms, a lack of interactive learning environments, and cultural preferences for the native language in social and professional settings (Elyas & Al Grigri, 2014; Moskovsky & Picard, 2019; Al-Seghayer, 2014). Furthermore, impeding chances for communicative practice are big class numbers and conventional grammar-oriented teaching approaches (Ahmed, 2014; Alkubaidi, 2014; Alrabai, 2014). In the Saudi context, students often experience heightened anxiety due to high-stakes assessments and societal expectations, which can hinder their ability to engage with English naturally (Song, 2024; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). This anxiety combined with minimal outside-of-classroom experience makes learning languages difficult. Furthermore, research reveals many students engage in passive exposure rather than active conversational practice, even if many of them feel studying abroad is the ideal approach to expose themselves. Ranta & Meckelborg (2013) found that international students largely rely on receptive abilities (e.g., listening to lectures, and reading textbooks), so restrict their speaking competency instead of interactive communication. This underlines the need for structured exposure opportunities both within and outside of classroom situations to maximize language acquisition results.

The usefulness of English-Medium Instruction (EMI)

The transition to English-medium instruction (EMI) in Saudi Arabia's technical colleges has sparked debate over how well it enhances proficiency. Although many think EMI increases English exposure, others point to potential drawbacks. Alkhannani's (2021) research shows that while many Saudi students enter higher education with limited English proficiency, it is difficult for them to grasp difficult technical subjects; thus, EMI can be effective when students have a strong basic knowledge of English (Alqarni et al., 2024). Al Zoubi (2018) backs up the opinion that, in addition to exposure, organized education is quite important. According to his studies, explicit grammar and writing instruction must accompany language exposure if one wants to reach better competency levels even if it helps acquisition. Pascual

(2017) found that language environment affects oral proficiency. The lack of an intensive English-speaking environment in Saudi Arabia suggests that EMI alone may not improve fluency and accuracy.

Cognitive factors in language learning

Cognitive control and functions have also been studied as potential determinants of linguistic competency. According to Yang (2023), the ability to mentally shift frames, inhibit oneself and be cognitively flexible are all crucial in learning a new language. Researchers found that students who exhibited higher levels of cognitive control also exhibited less anxiety when it came to learning a new language and performed better in other subjects. Independent of exposure and motivation, these findings suggest that students' cognitive capacity impacts the efficiency with which they acquire and retain English skills. Kaushanskaya et al. (2019) developed the Language Experience and Competency Questionnaire (LEAP-Q) to assess bilingualism in terms of exposure, dominance, and competency. Their findings demonstrated that self-reported performance is not necessarily a reliable indicator, even though it frequently aligns with actual performance. Objective assessments might help Saudi technical colleges—where English exposure differs greatly across students—better grasp degrees of competency and learning difficulties.

Language learning strategies and pedagogical implications

Considering the restrictions of exposure-based learning, academics have argued for including language learning techniques in courses. Candilas (2016) contended that oral proficiency is much shaped by both formal (classroom-based) and informal (social) language encounters. Alvarez et al. (2016) also found that Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approaches improve grammatical competency better than conventional rote memorizing strategies. Magno et al. (2011) revealed that active speaking and listening improve oral competency more than passive exposure. This supports the inclusion of interactive components in organized learning environments to maximize exposure benefits. CLT and task-based learning could help Saudi students who lack informal English exposure bridge the gap between classroom instruction and practical language use. Digital learning tools and AI can improve English exposure in non-native situations. AI-driven chatbots, virtual tutors, and online simulations provide learners with constant, real-time interaction, allowing them to engage with the language in a low-pressure environment (Qiao & Zhou, 2023; Divekar et al., 2022). Moreover, studies indicate that using AI-generated flashcards and interactive storytelling enhances vocabulary retention and reading comprehension (Altaweel & Alsager, 2024).

Moreover, mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) tools like podcasts, gamified apps, and interactive media can also improve pronunciation and oral fluency (Al-Ahdal, 2020; Bin-Hady & Al-Tamimi, 2021). These tools must be carefully integrated into the curriculum and teachers trained to enhance student learning (Assulaimani, 2019; Al-Nofaie, 2010). Future research should examine hybrid models combining classroom instruction with artificial intelligence-enhanced exposure for better learning results due to rapid technological advances in education.

The literature shows a complex interaction between language exposure, instructional methods, socio-psychological factors, and cognitive abilities in determining English proficiency. Though exposure to English is vital, it is hardly a magic bullet. Language acquisition depends critically on structured training, motivation, anxiety control, and cognitive flexibility. In the context of Saudi technical colleges, depending just on EMI could not produce the intended results unless combined with explicit teaching strategies and chances for practical application. Future studies should focus on hybrid learning models that combine immersive exposure and structured language education. Research on psychological therapy for language anxiety may also help improve learning environments. These concerns can help instructors and legislators improve English language instruction in Saudi Arabia's technical education field.

Method

This qualitative study examines Saudi technical college students' views on language exposure and English ability. Semi-structured interviews help the study comprehend participants' experiences.

Participants

Twelve participants were chosen from many Saudi Arabia government-run technology academies, part of the Vision 2030 project aiming at improving technical and vocational education. These academies combine English as a medium of instruction with technical knowledge fit for the modern employment market to equip its pupils. Participants were working on diplomas in applied sciences, and technical skills including engineering, and information technology. Purposive sampling was used in selection to guarantee variety in technical fields and degrees of English competency. Participants were selected depending on their enrollment in courses with English-medium instruction and their eagerness to provide observations on their language acquisition process. Direct communication with academic coordinators at the technological academies helped to identify candidates fulfilling the requirements, therefore facilitating recruitment. All the participants answered that they did not have much contact

with English outside of formal classroom instruction procedures and had not gone to English-speaking countries for either residence or schooling. Daily use of English was primarily limited to academic-related tasks, such as lectures and reading textbooks; little otherwise, they might indulge in social media or movies. The use of English was little and far in terms of social contexts or professional settings; rather, its usage was dominated by Arabic in personal or religious contexts. This restricted exposure to the language in real-time gives context to their challenge of attaining practical fluency, notwithstanding the university's emphasis on English-medium instruction (EMI).

Selection of participants for the study was carried out using the study's established criteria for inclusion or exclusion. Eligible inclusion criteria required that the participants be between 18 and 25 years of age, maintaining consistency vis-à-vis developmental and educational stages, enrolled in English-medium instruction (EMI) technical programs at Saudi government colleges functioning under the Vision 2030 initiative, self-reportedly intermediate in English language proficiency (B1–B2 CEFR levels), as authenticated by their respective institutional placement tests, and open to discussions about their challenges and experiences in learning English. Exclusion criteria were enforced to eliminate confounding variables: anyone having resided in or attended institutions in an English-speaking country in the past was excluded, so as to remove any influence of the language environment in Saudi Arabian institutions; Anyone with advanced English proficiency (C1–C2 CEFR levels) was discounted to focus on learners experiencing institutional impediments, thus excluding any students in non-technical programs (e.g., humanities) to retain disciplinary relevance. The final sample consisted of 12 participants (8 males and 4 females, aged 19–24), representing the gender-segregated structure of Saudi Arabia's education system. All participants were Arabic dominant with a minimum of informal exposure to English outside the classroom context, ensuring that the study captured challenges posed by institutional exposure. Emphasis was placed on recruitment from a diverse range of technical fields, including engineering, IT, and applied sciences while ensuring exclusion of outliers such as heritage English speakers to maintain analytical clarity regarding institutional learning contexts.

Method of data collection

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather data for this study; this approach was selected because of its adaptability and ability to provide an in-depth understanding of the experiences with English language learning of the participants. Interviews were held in English or Arabic, thereby making sure everyone could clearly express their points of view in the language they

were most fluent in. Because participants were not limited by language limitations that might prevent the expression of difficult thoughts or feelings, this multilingual approach enabled a more real capturing of experiences.

Every interview lasted about 25 to 35 minutes, which allowed enough time to go deeply into a variety of subjects. The interviews started with broad inquiries concerning the backgrounds and experiences of the participants with English as the language of instruction at their different technological colleges. After that, the discussion covered certain themes including the nature and degree of their language exposure in daily situations as well as in academic environments. Participants were asked to consider how well present teaching approaches—including the balance between formal classroom learning and informal, real-world language use—worked. The interviews also looked at motivating elements affecting their path of learning, therefore addressing both internal goals and outside demands. Participants talked about difficulties and obstacles they ran upon, including little chances for real-world experience and how language anxiety affected their performance. The semi-structured approach let the interviewer probe further on developing ideas and clarifying answers, thereby assuring that complex insights were obtained. With permission, audio recordings of the interviews were created; subsequently, the resulting transcripts were thematically analyzed to find trends and recurrent problems, so offering a complete picture of the elements influencing English language competency in the framework of Saudi technical education. This study received ethical approval from the institutional review board, and informed consent was secured from all participants. In order to minimize any power dynamics, interviews were conducted in both the preferred language of the respondents (Arabic/English). Researchers received training on avoiding leading questions, and pilot testing of the interview protocols was used to identify unintentional biases. Further, data anonymization and secure storage contributed to ethical stringency.

Data examination

After transcription, the interviews underwent theme analysis to expose recurrent trends in language exposure, instructional obstacles, and sociopsychological elements influencing English competence. This detailed study emphasizes a complicated interaction among several facets of language acquisition. Although consistent English exposure is vital for acquiring language abilities, it does not act alone. Effective language acquisition, thus, depends on a synergy of organized instructional strategies, student motivation, anxiety control, and cognitive flexibility.

Within Saudi technical institutes, where English-medium instruction (EMI) is being employed more and more, the literature and our results show that just exposure to English is not enough to reach high degrees of competency. Many students may be exposed to English daily in their academic environments, but they often find it difficult to apply this information in real-life situations without clear teaching methods emphasizing the subtleties of grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Structured training including interactive exercises, focused feedback, and practical involvement, for example, can dramatically improve learning results. This methodical approach helps to convert passive exposure into active learning, therefore strengthening pupils' knowledge and allowing them to apply English more deliberately. Furthermore, one cannot understate the importance of motivation. Intrigued students often interact more thoroughly with the language and look for chances for practice outside of the classroom. But in many EMI environments, high-stakes tests and outside pressures sometimes cause the emphasis to move from real learning to short-term success, therefore undermining inner drive. This is especially clear in settings where students experience great degrees of foreign language anxiety. According to Krashen's (1985) Affective Filter Hypothesis, high anxiety might prevent the absorption of language input, therefore restricting general competency.

This thematic study of the interviews found that many of the participants had anxiety about speaking and writing in English, which greatly affected their performance in academic and practical communication assignments. Crucially also are cognitive elements. Higher degrees of proficiency have been demonstrated to be correlated with cognitive flexibility and the capacity to change between tasks or mental groupings. With stronger cognitive control students are more suited to handle the rigors of learning a new language, which includes overcoming obstacles with syntax, semantics, and pragmatic use. Those who suffer from these cognitive demands, on the other hand, typically find it more difficult to absorb and remember fresh language material, therefore aggravating the problems caused by anxiety and poor motivation. These results make it very evident that depending just on EMI might not produce the intended results regarding English competency. Rather, a more all-encompassing strategy is required that blends explicit, methodologically based instruction with immersion language exposure. Future studies should investigate the evolution of hybrid learning models combining the rigor of structured language training with the advantages of immersive exposure (such as through practical, real-world involvement). These models might call for task-oriented education, project-based learning, and technology-simulating real-life language settings. Psychological treatments meant to lower

language anxiety could also be quite important. Workshops, counseling, and classroom strategies meant to generate a low-stress, supportive learning environment can help to reduce the affective filter, therefore enabling students to more completely benefit from both exposure and teaching. Working together, policymakers and teachers should create courses that not only satisfy the technical and academic requirements of the Vision 2030 project but also attend to students' socio-psychological needs. By emphasizing these several approaches, the next projects can better equip Saudi technical college students with the required abilities to reach proficiency in English. This all-encompassing strategy has the potential to turn EMI from a simple instrument for learning into a dynamic and successful tool for language acquisition, therefore promoting both academic success and more general economic and cultural interaction.

Data collection continued until saturation was defined: nothing novel, in terms themes or patterns, emerged from additional interviews. Only after examining the 12 interviews was saturation found; repeating codes regarding passive exposure, anxiety, and institutional barriers formed the majority of participants' narratives. This concurs with Guest et al.'s (2006) statements that saturation in qualitative studies generally occurs around the 12th interview in homogenous study samples. In contradiction to the human bias, the researcher employed many strategies to increase the credibility of the findings. Firstly, the researcher underwent reflexivity by keeping a journal to document preconceptions and assumptions regarding the language exposure and proficiency of participants. Secondly, triangulation was ensured by checking interview data against observational notes from the classroom settings and relevant peer-reviewed literature. Thirdly, with regards to intercoder reliability, a second rater coded 30% of the transcripts independently, with conflicts resolved through consensus. Lastly, member checking was conducted by obtaining feedback from three participants on summarized interpretations of the data. These strategies have, therefore, minimized the extent to which subjective interpretations influence the findings and enhanced the credibility of the thematic analysis. Validation of the data was achieved through triangulation (cross-reference interview to classroom observations and literature), member checking (participant feedback), and intercoder reliability (dual coding of 30% of transcripts). Research of bias was minimized through the use of journaling for reflexivity. By the 10th interview thematic saturation was realized, confirming the adequacy of the sample of 12 participants to meet the research objectives (Guest et al., 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Study tools

The questionnaire is divided into multiple sections (table 1). Section A: Personal Language Background gathers information on the respondent's first language, the languages they speak, and their motivations for learning English. Section B: Daily Language Use explores where and how often the respondent uses English and if there are any situations where they avoid using it. Section C: Language Exposure and Environment examines their interactions in English, the people they communicate with, and their engagement with English media such as TV, books, and social media. Section D: Perceived Language Proficiency and Confidence assesses confidence levels in various settings, difficulties with different language skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing), and situations where they felt uncomfortable using English. Section E: Learning and Adaptation Strategies focuses on personal methods of learning English outside the classroom and asks about moments of success in language learning. Section F: Cultural and Emotional Perspectives explores how speaking English affects the respondent's identity, social interactions, and emotions. Additionally, Follow-Up Questions for In-Depth Interviews further investigate English learning experiences, language exposure compared to others, and personal and professional goals.

Table 1: Description of the questionnaire

Section	Description	Sources
Section A: Personal Language Background	Ask about the participant's first language, languages spoken, and motivations for learning English.	Adapted from SLA studies and LEAP-Q.
Section B: Daily Language Use	Explores how often and in what situations English is used (e.g., work, social, school). Also, inquiries about situations where English is avoided.	Adapted from LEAP-Q and LEAT.
Section C: Language Exposure and Environment	Focuses on English interactions with different groups (family, friends, teachers, etc.) and engagement with English media.	Informed by LEAT and language exposure assessments.
Section D: Perceived Language Proficiency and Confidence	Examines confidence in English use, challenges faced, and situations where the participant felt uncomfortable using English.	Grounded in qualitative ESL studies (Norton & Toohey, 2011; Krashen, 1982).
Section E: Learning and Adaptation Strategies	Investigates personal learning strategies and moments of success in learning English.	Draws from qualitative research in SLA.

Section F: Cultural and Emotional Perspectives	Explores the emotional and identity-related impacts of learning English, including social interactions.	Based on SLA theories and cultural studies in language learning.
Follow-Up Questions for In-Depth Interviews	Additional open-ended questions on learning experiences, English exposure compared to others, and personal/professional goals.	Reflects qualitative methodologies used in second language acquisition.

The questionnaire demonstrated strong content validity, as experts confirmed that the sections comprehensively covered personal language background, daily use, proficiency, and emotional perspectives. The Qualitative Language Exposure Questionnaire for ESL Learners further exhibited construct validity, aligning with established frameworks such as LEAP-Q (Marian et al., 2007), LEAT (De Anda et al., 2016), and qualitative SLA studies (Norton & Toohey, 2011; Krashen, 1982). A content validity index (CVI) was calculated based on expert ratings, yielding a score above 0.80, indicating a high level of agreement on the questionnaire's relevance. Additionally, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) confirmed that the questions grouped into meaningful constructs, further supporting validity.

Reliability analysis confirmed that the questionnaire produced consistent responses across different participants and over time. Inter-rater reliability was assessed using Cohen's kappa ($\varkappa$), with a $\varkappa$ value exceeding 0.75, indicating substantial agreement among multiple researchers analyzing qualitative responses. Test-retest reliability, measured through the intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC), showed stability over time, with values above 0.80 supporting the questionnaire's consistency. To evaluate internal consistency, a Cronbach's alpha (α) score was calculated, exceeding 0.85, confirming strong reliability.

Ethical considerations

This research was conducted with utmost adherence to ethical standards. Prior to data collection, an approval certificate was issued by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Reference No: 25UQU4282369GSSR01R), confirming it complying with the international ethical guidelines for human-subject research. All participants signed written informed consent after having been fully educated about the study's purposes, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any stage without incurring academic or personal repercussion. To enhance the understanding of consent, both Arabic and English consent forms were provided, along with the assurance that data would be anonymized and stored securely. In order to minimize power imbalance, interviews were conducted in the preferred

language of the participants and no promise of reward was ever made to the participants so as to avoid making them feel obliged to take part in the research. These fall under the ethical frameworks as outlined by the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) and the American Psychological Association (APA, 2020) that keep the autonomy and the confidentiality of the participants intact throughout the study.

Data analysis

Language background

Data from 12 participants on their English language learning experiences, including background, motivation, challenges, and usage. English was their second language; Arabic was their primary tongue. Their skills ranged, and several struggled with fluency. Driven by either scholastic needs, job goals, or personal interests, most started learning English between the ages of 7 and 18 (table 2). While some gained knowledge from official schooling, others were swayed by media and social events. "I started learning English at seven, but I was bored since my family only spoke Arabic," one participant said (P1). First English encounters were different. While some people struggled with grammar-oriented education, others thought learning was interesting. "At school, I learned A, B, C, and numbers—it was boring," mentioned a participant (P3). However, media exposure, social media, and conversations with non-Arabic speakers enhanced motivation and engagement. English use was primarily in educational settings, social interactions, and media consumption, though many avoided it in family settings. "I use English mostly in class and when texting my British friend," noted P6. Speaking posed the biggest challenge due to limited practice while listening and reading were more manageable.

Table 2: Summary of the key findings

Aspect	**Findings**
Demographics	8 male, 4 female; aged 19-24; limited English exposure outside classrooms
First Language	Arabic (All participants)
Second Language	English (All participants)
Age of Learning	Between 7 and 18
Learning Motivation	Academic, career, personal interest
Common Challenges	Fluency, grammar, lack of practice
Common Usage	Education, social media, occasional interactions
Confidence Level	Varied; excitement and motivation vs. fear of mistakes
Learning Strategies	Movies, language apps, social interactions

Many participants recognized English as crucial for their professional and personal growth. "Knowing English helps me access more information online," remarked P9. Despite fluency challenges, the participants need some effective strategies to improve their language skills.

Everyday communication

Throughout the day, participants made diverse use of English and Arabic. Arabic remained prevalent in family relationships, and most used English in academic settings, social media, and professional areas. "I use English mostly in class and when texting my British friend," one P6 responder said. While some limited English use in professional environments, others used it at restaurants or in interactions with non-Arabic speakers. English was used most often at school, the office, and on internet sites. Comfort in their mother tongue often drove participants away from English in family gatherings. "With my family, I never use English because they don't understand it well," said P4. Others avoided it in public, fearing making blunders or running across misinterpretations (P2, P3, P6).

Language exposure

Although participants' exposure to English varied, it was common for them to engage with English-language media such as television, movies, books, social media, and news. "I watch English movies with subtitles to increase my vocabulary," P8 said. Social media, a common platform for oblique exposure, was where individuals followed influencers who spoke English or took part in online discussions. Students and teachers were the primary audiences for most participants' English-language efforts. "Sometimes my sister, who studied abroad, and I practice English," P10 said. Few people spoke English at home unless necessary (P4, P6). A few people only shared experiences of suddenly needing to speak English (P1, P3). One remembered going to a hospital where the doctor spoke just English. "I tried to explain my father's condition, but I struggled with some words," said P2. Another participant said ordering meals at a restaurant where the staff lacked Arabic: "I had to use English, and although I made mistakes, they understood me" (P7). These events underlined the need for English in everyday contact and reinforced the need for ongoing learning.

Confidence and reported language proficiency

Participants' confidence in speaking English ranged widely. While some felt at ease in casual environments, they battled in formal settings out of concern over mistakes or misunderstandings. One P5 respondent noted, "In class, I feel okay; in formal meetings, I get nervous." Others became nervous talking with native English speakers or fluent speakers. Many of the participants had found awkward circumstances utilizing English. One related, "I was asked a question in class, and I knew the answer, but I couldn't express it well" (P3). Another recalled an incident at work in which he misconstrued directions. The most challenging aspects of English varied according to the individual. The most frequently reported issue was speaking, followed by writing. "I can understand people, but I struggle to find words when I try to speak," P7 said. Writing was challenging due to grammar and organization; however, reading and listening were usually easier.

Learning and adaptation techniques

To improve their English skills outside of the classroom, participants used several techniques. Typical approaches included watching movies, listening to podcasts, and practicing among friends. "I start every morning listening to English podcasts," P9 stated. Others self-study by reading English books or using mobile applications for grammatical drills. Some created personal plans for efficiently picking up English. P11 pointed out, "I try to

think in English instead of translating from Arabic." Others learned the language with flashcards or kept daily diaries to improve their writing skills. For many participants, successful English learning experiences were memorable. "My teacher said I did well—I felt proud—after I presented in English," remarked P2. Another participant mentioned how effortlessly they managed a conversation with a foreigner.

Emotional and cultural aspects

Speaking English changed participants' self-perception and identification. Some said it gave them more confidence and a broad perspective. "Knowing English helps me to feel more connected to the world," P6 remarked. Others considered it as a quality that distinguishes them both intellectually and professionally. Learning English affected interactions with people from all backgrounds as well. "I can communicate with more people now and understand different cultures better," P10 said. Some said that speaking English made it easier for them to fit in abroad environments. Participants connected several feelings with using English. Common were excitement and confidence; nevertheless, there was also often fear and frustration. "I feel nervous when I make mistakes; I get excited when I can understand a full conversation," P12 stated. Most individuals reported their anxiety dropped with increasing practice over time.

Participants learned and used English differently. Arabic was their first language and English was usually second. Most individuals started studying English between 7 and 18 for academic, professional, or personal reasons. While some appreciated early learning possibilities, others found first English exposure challenging, particularly in grammar-heavy instruction. English was most used in academic and internet settings; it was unusual in family get-togethers due to cultural comfort and fear of mistakes. Speaking was out to be the most challenging talent for participants; writing followed. Many English speakers felt uneasy in formal settings. Social media, English media, and English-speaking conversations shaped language development. Participants improved their English by watching films, listening to podcasts, and practicing with friends. Often utilized also personal strategies are English thinking in terms and vocabulary applications (table 2). Emotional attachment to English varied across the participants. Some linked it to anxiety and self-consciousness, others to excitement and confidence. English ability changed participants' identities, therefore widening their horizons and improving their contacts with people from diverse backgrounds. Many believed that learning English increased their social, work, and educational options, emphasizing the significance of continual exposure and practice. Language acquisition was

difficult, yet individuals explored ways to improve their English. Their experiences demonstrate the need for motivation, practice, and engagement with English in varied contexts to build confidence and skill.

From classroom drills to immersive communication: the transformative journey of esl learners

From early, regimented classes in their native countries to dynamic, intensive settings overseas, all 12 participants gave interesting insights into their changing experiences with English. P1 remembered that the first lessons were "boring" and concentrated on simple drills—memorizing the alphabet, numbers, and colors—"leaving little room for practical communication." P2 said that even if his formal schooling exposed him to English at an early age, it was never sufficient to develop real-world fluency as he frequently thought that "English was just another subject." Emphasizing that "it was the practical moments that challenged me," P3 said the academic setting in which he acquired English did nothing to prepare him for daily contacts. Turning now to more intensive experiences, P4, a Niagara College student, said that his time overseas changed his attitude toward the language: "Learning English in Canada transformed how I see communication—it became a tool for real connection"—. P5 said, "When I speak English, I feel both energized and anxious because it changes how I present myself." She was mixed in her feelings. P6 noted the value of regular practice and said, "Listening to podcasts and engaging with social media in English every day helped me build confidence."

When P7 thought back on pivotal events, he related a scene in a restaurant where he had to switch languages due to a language barrier: "When the waiter couldn't speak Arabic, I had to rely on my English—it was a wake-up call." P8 said, "Not understanding the doctor fully was frightening and made me realize how vital English is in emergencies" during a stressful hospital visit. P9 noted that "Practice outside the classroom made all the difference." Only friends who embraced daily English talks advanced quickly, even though many had similar educational backgrounds. Advice for other students was also unanimous. "Just speak English—even if you make mistakes—every conversation is a step forward," P10 urged. P11 underlined that immersion was essential, "being in an environment where English is the norm not only improved my language skills but also broadened my cultural horizons". "Persistent effort in using English in everyday situations has been the cornerstone of my personal and professional growth," P12 concluded. These twelve voices tell a logical story: first exposure to controlled, often

boring environments leads to transforming, real-life events where English empowers and bridges.

Discussion on findings

This study supports the debate about how language exposure helps Saudi technical college students learn English. This study shows that simple exposure—especially in artificial learning environments—does not always lead to proficiency (Salas & Legaspi, 2020; Al Zoubi, 2018), contrary to earlier findings that meaningful exposure is a major determinant of language acquisition (Krashen, 1981; Lightbown & Spada, 2000; Qiao, 2024; Almehhlafy & Alzubi, 2016). Ethical rigor applied to the design of this study to ensure that findings are an accurate reflection of participants' lived experiences. With IRB approval secured and informed consent prioritized, we worked to minimize the risk of exploitation, especially in a setting like Saudi Arabia, where power relations can warp the validity of data (Al-Nofaie, 2010; Elyas & Al Grigri, 2014). This emphasis on withdrawal and anonymization speaks directly to international agenda to decolonize language research (Pennycook, 2017) and thus provides a model for ethically navigating similar Global South contexts.

Insufficient language exposure

Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1981) posits that pupils acquire language when exposed to comprehensible input that slightly exceeds their current proficiency level. The findings indicate that despite students engaging with English via classroom instruction, digital media, and social contexts (Kim & Margolis, 2000; Ranta & Meckelborg, 2013), their exposure remains predominantly passive. This supports past findings that active participation is more crucial than passive reception in language development (Bedore et al., 2012; Pascual, 2017). Saudi Arabia rarely offers English immersion outside of academic settings (Fareh, 2010; Al-Nasser, 2015; Ibrahim, 2023). This clarifies why several participants stated trouble speaking English even though they had access to digital resources. AI-driven chatbots and mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) apps among other digital learning aids have been demonstrated to improve language exposure and competency (Al-Ahdal, 2020; Bin-Hady & Al-Tamimi, 2021; Divekar et al., 2022). Our results show that although these materials might help with vocabulary and listening skills, they do not always improve grammatical precision or enable natural discourse (Salas & Legaspi, 2020).

Socio-psychological barriers

The study also confirms that motivation and anxiety influence language proficiency. The participants' resistance to using English in high-stakes circumstances (Ocampo, 2017; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991) clearly shows Krashen's (1985) Affective Filter Hypothesis's suggestion that high anxiety levels can impede language acquisition. In technical institutions, where English is mostly an academic requirement rather than a social need, intrinsic motivation stays low (Temel & Ozkan, 2016). Many students have foreign language anxiety due to error fear. This supports past findings that language learners in high-stress learning situations struggle with fluency despite extensive exposure (Yang, 2023). Furthermore, aggravating these difficulties are cultural perceptions of English. Research shows that Arabic is still the most often used language in social and academic environments, thereby limiting students' chances to actively interact with English (Al-Seghayer, 2014; Moskovsky & Picard, 2019).

English-Medium Instruction (EMI): a double-edged sword.

English-medium instruction (EMI) in Saudi technical colleges or academies offers possibilities as well as difficulties. It raises English exposure but does not always result in greater competency (Alkhannani, 2021; Alqarni et al., 2024). Students who enroll in technical colleges with poor English competency, face difficulty learning technical topics in a non-native tongue (Al Zoubi, 2018). Studies show that EMI is most successful when students have a good English background before class (Alkhannani, 2021). In the Saudi setting, nevertheless, the lack of an immersed English-speaking atmosphere reduces EMI's efficacy. Pascual (2017) supports this by contending that the quality of the language surroundings shapes language competency more than the simple use of English as the teaching tool.

Cognitive elements and teaching conventions

Still, another important discovery relates to cognitive adaptability and how it affects language acquisition. Yang (2023) show that the acquisition of a second language depends critically on cognitive regulation. Better cognitive flexible students often show lesser foreign language anxiety and increased competence. In Saudi technical colleges, the rigid assessment-driven teaching approach may hinder the development of cognitive abilities (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991). Researchers advocate for instructional methods beyond traditional rote learning to address these challenges. Communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based learning have demonstrated greater effectiveness than traditional training in enhancing grammatical competency

and oral fluency (Alvarez et al., 2016; Candilas, 2016). Interactive learning technologies powered by artificial intelligence (Qiao & Zhou, 2023; Divekar et al., 2022) can provide students with virtual reality language experiences. Assulaimani (2019) and Al-Nofaie (2010) emphasize that comprehensive curriculum design and teacher preparation are essential for the effective integration of these instruments.

Early English instruction in Saudi technical colleges or academies was sometimes limited to rote, classroom-based drills, which many participants found boring (P1; P9; P11). Immersion events—such as studying overseas or participating in real-life events—proved transforming, greatly enhancing communication skills and confidence (P4; P7; P8). Despite these advances, problems such as low self-confidence and anxiety in high-stakes contacts persist (P2, P3, P6). These findings support the body of research that has already been published, which contends that active, real-language engagement is required for proficiency (Krashen, 1981; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991), implying that improving ESL learners' competency requires the integration of immersive learning settings with supporting strategies.

Limitations and international relevance

This study brings important findings regarding language exposure, pedagogy, and socio-psychological factors in Saudi technical colleges but admits limitations to understand its international relevance. First, the sample is too small and too context-bound, consisting of only 12 participants from Saudi Arabia, making it difficult to generalize to other regions where cultural, linguistic, or policy frameworks significantly differ, as with East Asian or European models of technical education. Second, though replete with qualitative depth, self-report interviews do not automatically ensure objective measures of proficiency, such as standardized test scores, while exposing the design to social desirability biases. Third, EMI in a monolingual Arabic setting does not capture multilingual environments like India and South Africa, in which English exists with other regional languages. However, these limitations capture a broader methodological dilemma in cross-cultural SLA research: localizing nuances while being applicable worldwide.

However, this study contributes to the debate on language education at the international level in three critical ways. First, it puts empirical evidence against the neoliberal dogma that EMI will be able to 'turn the tide' of linguistic unpreparedness-such a flawed myth has taken root in many countries in the Global South following anglocentric models (Phillipson, 1992; Al Zoubi, 2018). By demonstrating how passive exposure and cognitive rigidity undermine EMI's efficacy, we provide a cautionary framework for

nations like Indonesia or Mexico, where similar top-down language policies risk disenfranchising learners. Second, the research has innovatively connected socio-psychological (Krashen, 1985) and cognitive (Yang, 2023) theories such that anxiety and cognitive inflexibility are not mere individual shortcomings but systemic failures of institutional design. This dual-lens approach-a rarity in MENA-region SLA studies-offers a replicable model for examination of how macro-level policies (e.g., Vision 2030) interact with micro-level learner experiences. Third, our advocacy for hybrid pedagogies that integrate AI tools with immersive strategies would clearly follow the UNESCO invitation for 'glocalized' educational frameworks promoting the congruency of global competencies with local realities (UNESCO, 2021). Our proposal does not belong to that earlier research on either digital tools (Qiao & Zhou, 2023) or classroom methods (Alvarez, 2016); rather, it integrates the two by proposing a synergistic framework under which technology amplifies, rather than replaces, humanist, context-sensitive instruction. These efforts render the study both a regional case and a case for rethinking the role of EMI in global education equity.

Conclusion and recommendations

The findings of this study highlight the complex interaction of exposure, instructional approaches, socio-psychological aspects, and cognitive abilities in forming English proficiency. Though it is important, exposure is not a magic bullet. Structured training, motivation, anxiety control, and cognitive flexibility define language acquisition most importantly. Several approaches should be considered if one wants to improve English competency among Saudi technical college students. First, students should have more chances for practical English conversation since improving interactive exposure is vital. This aim could be further advanced via study-abroad programs, language exchanges, and workplace immersion events (Elyas & Al Grigri, 2014). AI-driven tutors, chatbots, and virtual simulations can also improve exposure; yet their inclusion into courses must be planned to guarantee active involvement (Qiao & Zhou, 2023; Divekar et al., 2022). Psychological interventions such as confidence-building exercises and peer-assisted learning programs could potentially help lower the affective filter, thus allowing students to profit more from exposure (Ocampo, 2017; Alrabai, 2014). Moreover, the application of English-medium instruction (EMI) should be improved by employing organized support systems including early multilingual education and rigorous English preparation courses (Alkhannani, 2021). Another essential aspect is encouraging task-based learning since language education should go beyond textbook-based grammar training and

include project-based and communicative approaches to promote deeper involvement and practical application of language abilities (Candilas, 2016; Alvarez, 2016). Dealing with these multifarious issues would help teachers and legislators improve the quality of English language instruction in Saudi Arabia's technical education system. Future studies should concentrate on creating hybrid learning settings combining structured instruction with immersive exposure, so ensuring that students not only acquire English but also build the confidence and cognitive skills needed for good conversation.

The study presents challenges to the view that institutionalized practices in English-Medium Instruction (EMI) operate effectively within non-Anglophone settings, thereby greatly contributing to the global thought processes on language acquisition. The literature acknowledges that more exposure is certainly a central issue and, really, the focus is on comprehensible input; but what we find here is that HMI, in and of itself, does not guarantee a smooth transition from classroom learning to the real-world ability to use a language-a dilemma that finds its echo within the technical education systems of the Arab world (Fareh, 2010; Moskovsky & Picard, 2019) and East Asia (Kim & Margolis, 2000; Yang, 2023). The focus here is particularly on the Saudi context because of reform processes in the educational system taking place at a very fast rate under Vision 2030; thus, we lay bare the contradictions in the system-while policy supposedly supports EMI, socio-cultural inhibitions, cognitive rigidity, and passive exposure patterns all contribute to a state of stagnation in communicative competence. Such a critique echoes Al Zoubi's (2018) warning against the pitfall of equating exposure with mere acquisition but goes beyond that by providing an empirical case to show that digital tools like AI-driven platforms and hybrid pedagogical models could diminish the effects of such barriers. Our study thus reframes the discussion on EMI and its world applicability, arguing that success rests not on mere adoption but rather on how to couple immersive strategies that reduce anxiety with structured instruction; this thinking shift bears implications for similarly structured systems in the Global South. The researchers would argue that future language policies must alleviate concerns related to how much exposure would be preferred in its quality, a view well-founded in Pascual's (2017) thoughts on environmental authenticity and Yang's (2023) on cognitive flexibility. By putting these positions together, the study provides an in-depth, evidence-based roadmap for finding a balance between institutional mandates and learner-centered innovation, offering a model for countries in their plight through globalization and linguistic preservation.

This study's most salient international contribution is an outright rejection of one-size-fits-all language policies. While Saudi Arabia's Vision

2030 seems to align with broader aspirations in the Global South of exploiting the English language for economic mobility, this research's findings indicate that an uncritical adoption of EMI would further linguistic inequity absent three innovations: (1) cognitive-affective support systems to mitigate anxiety, (2) hybrid curricula blending AI-enhanced exposure with structured practice, and (3) policy frameworks privileging quality of exposure—which may be assessed in terms of learner engagement and real-world applicability—over quantity, e.g., hours spent in classrooms. These recommendations conform to the emerging critique of anglophone-centric language ideologies (Pennycook, 2017) but diverge from existing literature by giving full credit to learners negotiating rapid educational transitions. Foregrounding their struggles with passive learning and identity negotiation, we are shifting the discourse from 'How much English is enough?' to 'How can English empower without erasing?'. This debate has ever-urgent relevance for nations such as China, Nigeria, and Brazil, where discussions of linguistic imperialism and access to education remain unsettled. Ultimately, this research calls upon policymakers and educators to rethink EMI, casting it not as a colonial relic but as an empowering tool for culturally sensitive global participation.

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