

Investigating University Students' Failure in English Requirement Courses

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© 2019 جامعة العلوم والتكنولوجيا، اليمن. يمكن إعادة استخدام المادة المنشورة حسب رخصة مؤسسة المشاع الإبداعي شريطة الاستشهاد بالمؤلف والمجلة.

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Abstract:

Some university students might fail at their first attempt to study English requirement courses, but later they perform well, ultimately recognizing that the courses were easy and their failure in such simple courses was a great loss. Others continue failing, get frustrated and finally may quit trying. The purpose of the current study, therefore, was to investigate the factors that contribute to university non-English major students' failure in English courses. A mixed model questionnaire was used to collect data from 56 male students who failed English at the University of Bisha, Saudi Arabia. All participants had previously failed English and were repeating the English requirement course during the period of data collection. Results of the study revealed that factors such as teachers, anxiety and inappropriate study methods were more responsible for students' failure than motivation, friends and family problems. Results also showed a significant difference between students who only failed the English course and those who failed two or more other courses. Those who failed two or more courses scored higher on anxiety than those who failed only English. Recommendations were that English teachers should be trained to follow collaborative learning and student-centered approaches and that the English curriculum for non-English major students should reflect their major.

Keywords: anxiety, motivation, students' failure, study methods, teachers.

استقصاء تعثر طلاب الجامعة عند دراستهم لمتطلب اللغة الإنجليزية

الملخص:

قد يتعثر طلاب الجامعة عند دراستهم لمقرر اللغة الإنجليزية للمرة الأولى كمتطلب جامعي، لكنهم يحققون أداءً جيداً بعد ذلك، مدركين حينها سهولة هذا المقرر، وأن تعثرهم فيه كان خسارة كبيرة، لكن عدداً منهم يستمرون في التعثر، وقد يصابون بالإحباط ومن ثم ينسحبون من الجامعة. لذلك هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى تقصي العوامل التي تؤدي إلى تعثر الطلاب الذين يدرسون مقرر اللغة الإنجليزية متطلباً جامعياً. وقد قام الباحث باستخدام استبيان مغلق ومفتوح وزع على 56 طالباً من الطلاب الذين يدرسون متطلب اللغة الإنجليزية للمرة الثانية أو الثالثة بسبب إخفاقهم في اجتياز اختبار المقرر في فصول سابقة. وقد أظهرت نتائج الدراسة بأن أستاذ المقرر والقلق والاستراتيجيات المتبعة في دراسة المقرر تأتي في مقدمة العوامل المسببة للتعثر الدراسي، أما عوامل الدافعية والأصدقاء والمشكلات الأسرية فتحتل المرتبة الثانية من الأسباب. كما أظهرت الدراسة فروقاً بين الطلاب الذين أخفقوا في مقرر اللغة الإنجليزية ومقررات أخرى وبين الذين أخفقوا في مقرر اللغة الإنجليزية فقط، حيث إن أولئك الذين أخفقوا في مقررات أخرى بالإضافة إلى اللغة الإنجليزية كانوا أكثر قلقاً من الذين أخفقوا في اللغة الإنجليزية فقط. واختتمت الدراسة ببعض التوصيات منها، ضرورة تدريب مدرسي اللغة الإنجليزية على استخدام طريقة التعلم التعاوني وطرائق التدريس التي تركز على الطالب بوصفه محوراً أساسياً في العملية التعليمية، كما أوصت الدراسة بضرورة أن يعكس منهج متطلب اللغة الإنجليزية رغبات الطلاب وتخصصاتهم.

الكلمات المفتاحية : القلق، الدافعية، تعثر الطلاب، أساليب المذاكرة، المدرسون.

Introduction:

EFL student failure is a common problem that raises concern among both teachers and policy makers. Students in many parts of the world where English is taught as a second or foreign language face problems in learning English (Al-Zoubi, & Younes, 2015; Souriyavongsa, Rany, Abidin, & Mei, 2013). For instance, a study among secondary school students in Nigeria found that such low performance was caused by many factors, including the prevalence of Arabic culture, negative attitudes towards English, traditional teaching styles and a lack of teaching facilities (Sa'ad, Adamu, & Sadiq, 2014). Most EFL students who complete secondary school are unable to speak or write a single proper English sentence (Al-Nasser, 2015; Al-Sohbani, 2015). Noom-Ura (2013) similarly found that Thai students who had studied English for 12 years were questionable. Alrabai (2016) studied low achievement among Saudi EFL learners, and indicated that the low level of EFL student competency was a "multidimensional and complex phenomenon" (p. 22). The factors contributing to these EFL student failures may involve a lack of motivation, negative attitudes towards English language, students' anxiety, inappropriate study methods, teachers and teaching strategies, negative influences of friends and family issues. Therefore, this study intends to identify some factors responsible for university students' failure in English requirement courses.

Review of Literature:

Generally speaking, attitude and motivation play a significant role in language acquisition (Gardner, 1968). Hamad (2016) conducted a survey study among students at King Khalid University, Muhayil, to determine the factors impeding communicative language teaching. Results indicated that communicative-language teaching was not practiced and that most teachers used a teacher-centered approach, which made students unable to develop communicative competence. This may also be an important factor contributing to student failure. Similarly, Chairunnisa, Apriliaswati, & Rosnija (2017) conducted a study on Indonesian school students who were learning English, and reported that negative attitude towards the language itself was the most influential factor for low achievement.

According to Alrabai (2016, p. 7) "despite the negative view that majority of Saudis have held about English in the past, there has been a noticeable recent shift in Saudi learners' attitudes towards English in the very recent years." This means the situation has been improving recently in Saudi Arabia. Additionally,

EFL student achievement is also badly affected by anxiety (Alrabai, 2014a; Alrabai, 2014b). As such, Heidari and Tahriri (2015) concluded that cultivating an appropriate student-teacher relationship is important for reducing student anxiety in the classroom setting. Specifically, they observed that students who freely participated in class were able to enhance their learning experience. Such participation also reduced exam anxiety because the students had remained on good terms with their teacher throughout the course. Alhammad (2017) concurred with this, stating that EFL students enjoyed learning English language when they were taught by friendly teachers. Further, Leong and Ahmadi (2017) found that Malaysian students showed low levels of English-learning achievement due to psychological obstacles. Together, these studies show that anxiety significantly influences student language learning. In Saudi Arabia, this is impacted by the predominance of a teacher-centered approach in the EFL setting. Thus, students do not usually have opportunities to engage in open classroom participation (Alrabai, 2016; Alrabai, 2014b). Moreover, Khan (2011) suggested that, in the case that teachers had no pre-service training, they should get in-service training. Shahzad, Qadeer & Ullah (2011) conducted a study on low achievement in secondary school English classes in Pakistan and determined that low achievement was a reflection of incompetent teachers and harsh classroom environments. Alhammad (2017) found that EFL students enjoyed learning English language if the teacher was friendly. Ahmad (2018) surmised that good study habits were a prerequisite for effective academic performance and vice versa; he found that low students' performance was due to a lack of focus in this area. Akbari (2016) observed that it is the teachers' responsibility to motivate students and help them succeed, as teachers are almost the only support for students' achievement and students have no exposure to English other than in the classroom. He also suggested that teachers should be trained to follow collaborative learning in their classrooms. Khan (2011) also cautioned that "it is the prime responsibility of the teacher/educator to explore the causes of existing barriers and find possible solutions so that the teaching/learning can smoothly take place for the ultimate growth and development" (p. 243). Alharbi (2019), in a similar vein, conducted a study concerning the challenges that students face in academic writing. He concluded that teachers were not able to simultaneously teach reading, writing and speaking. Further, he warned that teachers who complained about student backgrounds should not expect them to learn everything at once. This issue can partly be addressed by promoting strong study habits.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore factors that contribute to students' failure in English requirement courses at the University of Bisha, Saudi Arabia. The study intends to answer the following main research question:

- What are the factors that contribute to students' failure in English as a university requirement course?

Methods:

• Population and Sample:

The population of the present study consisted of students at the University of Bisha who failed the English requirement course in the previous semester(s) and were repeating the same course at the time of data collection, i.e. the first term between August and December 2018. The sample for the study consisted of 56 male students who failed the Intensive English Program. Demographic information was given in the first section of the questionnaire (see Table 1).

• Data Collection Instruments:

The study uses a questionnaire that consisted of both closed and open-ended items. It was divided into three parts. Part A was devoted for background information; part B included 18 closed-ended items concerning the factors thought to contribute to students' failure in English requirement courses. These were divided into six categories: lack of motivation, anxiety, teachers, students, family and friends. Part C was an open question about the reason(s) for students' failure. This question provided a chance for the respondents to give their own ideas that might not have been covered by the closed-ended items. This allowed respondents to describe the factors they felt contributing to their failure in English courses using their own words. Reja, Manfreda, Hlebec and Vehovar (2003) pointed out that open-ended questions enable the discovery of spontaneous viewpoints while avoiding bias that may be suggested by researchers. The open-ended section was an optional item. The researcher believes that making an open-ended section optional is important for respondents who would like to elaborate the reasons for their failure freely. Such an optional item makes students respond at their ease. The questionnaire in both English and Arabic was sent to a jury of experts from the English Department at the University of Bisha to determine the validity of the items and the quality of their translation into Arabic.

Using the questionnaire, the data were collected via Google Forms and the respondents were informed at the beginning of the questionnaire that it should be responded only by students who failed the Intensive English Program (requirement courses) and were taking it again.

• **Data Analysis:**

The quantitative data was analyzed via SPSS 22. The responses to closed-ended items were received and coded. Independent sample tests were used to calculate the descriptive statistics in terms of means and standard deviation (SD) and to find out if there was any significant difference between the participants' responses to the description of their failure in English requirement courses. The qualitative data obtained from the responses to the open-ended question were categorized and used in the discussion of results.

Results:

This section presents the data according to their order in the questionnaire, which included three parts. Part A: General information related to the English requirement courses; Part B: Factors contributing to students' failure in English courses; and Part C: Open-ended question to collect more details about the influencing factors.

• **Part A:**

Table 1 shows the frequencies and percentages of the sample responses to the questions in Part A: "General information".

Table 1: Frequencies and percentages for Part A: General information (N = 56)

Variables	N	%
Village	22	39.3
City	34	60.7
Students taught by Arabic speaking teachers	19	33.9
Students taught by Non-Arabic speaking teachers	37	66.1
Failed only English	34	60.7
Failed two or more subjects	22	39.3

• **Part B:**

This part provides the results of the statistical analysis of the study variables (i.e., factors affecting students' failure), which are summarized in Tables 2- 6 below.

As shown in the series of ANOVAs reported in Table 2, there were no significant differences between respondents from cities and villages on any of the factors.

Table 2: Differences between respondents from cities and villages on the main study factors (ANOVA, N = 56)

Factors	Home	n	Mean	Variance	F	P
Lack of Motivation	City	22	2.79	0.63	2.23	0.14
	Village	34	3.10	0.54		
Anxiety	City	22	3.08	1.35	0.64	0.43
	Village	34	3.31	1.05		
Teachers	City	22	3.78	1.72	0.03	0.87
	Village	34	3.43	1.18		
Family Problems	City	22	2.20	0.68	1.51	0.22
	Village	34	2.56	1.46		

Similarly, as shown in the series of ANOVAs reported in Table 3, there was no significant difference between respondents taught by Arabic and non-Arabic speaking teachers on any of the factors.

Table 3: Differences between respondents with Arabic versus non-Arabic speaking teachers on the factors (ANOVA, N = 56)

Factors	Home	n	Mean	Variance	F	P
Lack of Motivation	City	22	2.79	0.63	2.23	0.14
	Village	34	3.10	0.54		
Anxiety	City	22	3.08	1.35	0.64	0.43
	Village	34	3.31	1.05		
Teachers	City	22	3.78	1.72	0.03	0.87
	Village	34	3.43	1.18		
Family Problems	City	22	2.20	0.68	1.51	0.22
	Village	34	2.56	1.46		

However, the series of ANOVAs presented in Table 4 show that the only significant difference between respondents who failed only English and those who failed two or more other courses was on anxiety. Those who failed two or more other courses scored higher on anxiety than those who failed only English requirement courses.

Table 4: Differences between respondents who failed only English versus those who failed more than one course on the study factors (ANOVA, N = 56)

Factors	Courses Failed	N	Mean	Variance	F	P
Lack of Motivation	English only	34	2.52	1.46	0.77	0.38
	2 or more	22	2.79	0.90		
Anxiety	English only	34	2.96	1.16	5.40	0.02
	2 or more	22	3.62	0.95		
Teachers	English only	34	3.27	1.40	1.18	0.28
	2 or more	22	3.62	1.30		
Family Problems	English only	34	2.25	1.11	1.97	0.16
	2 or more	22	2.67	1.21		

• **Overall differences among the means of the study factors:**

As shown in the ANOVA reported in Table 5, the differences between the four study factors (i.e., lack of motivation, anxiety, teachers, & family problems) were significant at $p < .001$. While the overall ANOVA did not test specific ordering, the factors to which the respondents most attributed their failure to were factors relating to anxiety (Mean 3.22) and teachers (Mean 3.41); and those to which they least attributed their failure were lack of motivation (Mean 2.62) and family problems (Mean 2.42). This is encouraging in that anxiety and teachers were both more easily addressed than lack of motivation and family problems.

Table 5: Overall differences among the means of the factors (ANOVA, N = 56)

Factors	Mean	Variance	F	P
Lack of Motivation	2.62	1.24	10.14	<.001
Anxiety	3.22	1.16		
Teachers	3.41	1.37		
Family Problems	2.42	1.17		

• **Post-hoc Contrasts using the Tukey HSD Test:**

Because the one-way ANOVA shown above does not allow for specific comparisons, a post-hoc Tukey HSD Test was performed, which yielded the following significant results:

- Anxiety scores were greater than lack of motivation ($p < .05$) and family problems ($p < .01$) scores.

- Teacher scores were greater than lack of motivation ($p < .01$) and family problems ($p < .01$) scores.

All other pairwise comparisons failed to reach significance at ($p < .05$).

Table 6 below summarizes the statistical analysis of the factors affecting students' failure. A scale is considered acceptable if the Cronbach's alpha is 0.70 or higher. The Cronbach's alphas for four of the six scales were acceptable. The alphas for "Students" and "Friends" were low; therefore, the descriptive analysis reports all six scales, but only the four scales with acceptable Cronbach's alpha were used in the ANOVAs, and the means for the 18 individual items were tested.

Table 6: Descriptive statistics for factors (N = 56)

Factors	Cronbach's alpha	Item no.	Range	Mean	SD
Lack of Motivation	0.749	3	1.00-2.33	2.62	1.11
Anxiety	0.889	3	2.00-3.22	3.22	1.08
Students	0.238	3	1.33-4.00	2.98	0.77
Teachers	0.749	3	1.00-5.00	3.41	1.17
Friends	0.514	3	1.00-4.00	2.45	0.80
Family Problems	0.870	3	1.00-5.00	2.42	1/08

• Means on Individual Items:

Table 7 shows that there was a great deal of variability in the means for specific questions, even within a category. Lack of motivation did not seem to be a major factor, with all of the means below three, but participants particularly rejected the idea that English is not important (Mean 2.23). They reported high exam anxiety (Mean 3.84) and tended to blame instructors for not helping weak students (Mean 3.95); however, they did not see their instructors as unkind (Mean 2.96). They reported that their close friends failed (Mean 3.41), but did not attribute their failure to the negative influence of their friends (Mean 1.66). This seemed to be a common thread. They cited factors related to friends and family but took responsibility for those factors. They cited heavy family responsibilities (Mean 3.28), but rejected family problems as a cause (Mean 2.19) and also rejected a lack of encouragement from parents even more strongly as a reason for failure (Mean 1.77).

Table 7: Means and standard deviations for the individual items (N = 56)

Factors	Mean	SD
Lack of Motivation		
1. I was not motivated to study English.	2.80	0.17
2. I studied English only to pass the exam.	2.84	0.20
3. I think English is not important	2.23	0.17
Anxiety		
4. I had an exam anxiety	3.84	0.16
5. I feel nervous if I speak in the classroom.	3.20	0.19
6. I fear participating in an English class.	2.62	0.19
Students		
7. I only study before the exam.	2.92	0.17
8. I used to memorize without understanding.	2.86	0.16
9. I do not visit my instructor to explain the course to me.	3.14	0.14
Teachers		
10. Teachers do not focus on weak students.	3.95	0.17
11. Teachers did not give us a chance to participate in the classroom.	3.34	0.19
12. Teachers were not kind in dealing with students.	2.96	0.20
Friends		
13. I spend my time socializing with friends on issues other than studying.	2.28	0.14
14. My close friends failed English courses.	3.41	0.18
15. I failed because of negative influence of peers.	1.66	0.12
Family problems		
16. I have family problems (Orphan/ my parents are divorced etc.).	2.19	0.18
17. My parents do not encourage me to study at home.	1.77	0.16
18. I am responsible for my family issues.	3.28	0.20

• **Results of part C (Open-ended question) :**

Part C of the questionnaire provided respondents with an optional open question to talk about the reasons for their failure in detail. Of the 56 total respondents, 27 answered this question. Of these, seven respondents indicated that their teachers were not successful in delivering the information

in the class and did not care about students. Respondents added that their teachers had a mere aim to finish the curriculum and not to teach students. Another seven respondents indicated that teachers did not focus on weak students or encourage them to participate in class. Four participants stated that teachers used unclear teaching strategies or that students did not understand teachers' explanations. A total of three responses indicated that teachers talked for two continual hours without any student involvement. Finally, four responses mentioned that teachers were very strict and that students could not talk with them freely. Students' responses to the open-ended item generally indicated that teachers were the main factor contributing to their failure. This result is similar to Heidari and Tahriri's (2015) study – though their study was at secondary school level, but it is in the context of teaching English as a requirement course – in which low EFL achievement was primarily the result of teacher-centered methods.

The respondents also mentioned motivation, inappropriate study methods, the difficulty of the course, time of the lectures and the extra curriculum as factors for their failure in the intensive program. Responses also showed that many integrated factors were responsible for their failure in English requirement courses. Six respondents stated that there was no need to include the English course in their curriculum because their major was Arabic or Islamic studies and they would never use English in their lifetimes. They also stated that there was no connection or link between English and their majors. This shows that they were not motivated to study English at all. Further, six respondents stated that English was difficult and they did not know how to study it, thus indicating the importance of proper guidance by the teachers. Finally, five respondents noted that lengthy lectures and extra curriculum could be considered factors for their failure.

Discussion:

The present study aimed to explore factors which contributed to students' failure in English as a requirement course at the University of Bisha. This section discusses the findings of this research according to the participants' responses regarding factors affecting their failure in English requirement courses.

Motivation (Mean 2.62) was one of the three least important factors. However, anxiety (Mean 3.22) was one of the two most important factors for students' failure. Test anxiety (Mean 3.84) in particular, was one of the important factors

for their failure. Thus, findings revealed that students did not see lack of motivation as an important factor related to their failure (Mean 2.62). This is in line with previous studies which were done in the Saudi context (Alqurashi, 2014; Alshahrani, 2016; Javid, Al-Asmari, & Farooq, 2012; Nouraldeen & Elyas, 2014). They all asserted that Saudi EFL learners were motivated to learn English as a foreign language. However, anxiety scored (Mean 3.22) higher than motivation, indicating that it was an effective filter according to the monitor-theory (Krashen, 1982). The greater the level of student anxiety, the lesser their learning achievements are. These results are consistent with (Alrabia, 2014a; Alrabia, 2014b), who found that anxiety was one of the main factors associated with low student achievement. Elyas and Rehman (2018) suggested that teachers should be aware of the importance of helping students deal with such anxiety. They also recommended that examiners and invigilators should help students relax during exams by showing supportive attitudes and sympathy.

On the other hand, the teacher factor was the most influential factor contributing to student failure with a mean score of (3.41). The highest scoring item of the 18 items indicated that teachers did not focus on weak students (Mean 3.95). Another issue was that teachers did not give students opportunities to participate in the classroom (Mean 3.34). This made it further apparent that teachers did not pay attention to weak students. This issue was also suggested by the responses to the open-ended questions.

The results of the present study are supported by previous research. For instance, Khan (2011) stated that "It is the prime responsibility of the teacher/educator to explore the causes of existing barriers and find possible solutions so that the teaching/learning can smoothly take place for the ultimate growth and development" (p. 243). Cherif, Movahedzadeh, Adams, & Dunning (2013) also argued that it was the responsibility of the teacher to motivate students and teach them through successful learning strategies. Heidari and Tahriri (2015) found that low achievement among EFL students was primarily the result of traditional teaching approaches (i.e., the teacher-centered or grammar-translation approach).

Student failures to visit their instructors in search of explanations scored (Mean 3.41). Other factors related to student failure were "items that students memorize without comprehending" (Mean 2.86) and "students only study before the exam" (Mean 2.96). These results also indicated that it is a teaching-based responsibility to determine and find solutions to the factors leading to learning problems in the EFL classroom setting (Khan, 2011).

The factors of family (Mean 2.42) and friends (Mean 2.45) had relatively little effect on student failure. Respondents indicated that most of their friends had failed an exam (Mean 3.41), but they did not believe that they failed because of negative friend influences (Mean 1.66); this had the lowest score of all 18 items. They did cite heavy family responsibilities (Mean 3.28), but rejected family problems as a cause (Mean 2.19) for their failure. They rejected the lack of encouragement from parents even more strongly as a reason for their failure (Mean 1.77). This showed that students did not agree that their failure in English courses was because of negative influences of friends or family issues. Qualitative findings supported the quantitative results as no respondent mentioned friends and family as factors for their failure.

Conclusions:

This study investigated six factors believed to be responsible for university students' failure to pass English requirement courses (i.e., lack of motivation, anxiety, students, teachers and the roles of family and friends). Quantitative results showed that the factors of anxiety, teachers and inappropriate study methods were more responsible for student failures than motivation, friends and family problems. Qualitative results supported the quantitative results, as both showed that teachers were mostly responsible for students' failures. More specifically, failed students blamed their teachers for not attempting to reduce their anxiety, not paying attention to them and not guiding them in finding appropriate study methods. Rather, teachers tended to deal with students in an authoritative way and merely aimed to finish the curriculum. As indicated by the above quantitative and qualitative results, one of the most important ways to avoid student failure is to help them overcome exam anxiety. This can be accomplished by providing them with more practice and conducting mock tests with low consequences. These strategies would gradually increase students' confidence, thus preparing them for actual exams.

To sum up, students consider that teachers, exam anxiety and inappropriate study methods could be the reasons for their failures. However, they do not think that factors such as friends, lack of motivation and family issues are the reasons for their failure. Thus, the quantitative and the qualitative results indicated that it is the teachers' responsibility to help weak students with the appropriate study methods, reduce their anxiety and encourage them to develop lifelong study habits, rather than just study before exams. It is also the moral duty of teachers to help students overcome negative influences of friends and family problems if any. Obviously, teachers have no direct role

in these cases but should report unusual behavior to the Students Guidance Unit or Academic Guidance Unit.

Implications and Recommendations:

The study findings entail that teachers should address issues of anxiety by increasing their levels of encouragement and support to their students. They should guide students in finding appropriate study methods and pay more attention to weak students during class activities. It is also recommended that the English curriculum for students should reflect their interests or their major, and that teachers should be trained to use student-centered approach that focuses on involving all students in the learning process. Some teachers might resist such trend, claiming they have sufficient teaching experience, but these teachers should be motivated to attend training programs on modern teaching methods.

Finally, it is suggested that further research should be conducted to determine why weak students do not individually visit their teachers for further instruction. It is also recommended that future research should focus on university students who successfully pass their English requirement courses in order to investigate the factors that help these students achieve excellence so as to make use of those factors and reflect them in the learning process.

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