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Factors of English Language Learning and Acquisition at Bisha College of Technology

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***Abstract*—**This paper participates in giving new vision and explains the learning and acquisition processes of English language by analyzing a certain context. Five important factors in English language acquisition and learning are discussed and suitable solutions are provided. The factors are compared with the learners' linguistic background at Bisha College of Technology BCT attempting to link the issues faced by students and the research done on similar situations. These factors are phonology, age of acquisition, motivation, psychology and courses of English. These factors are very important; because they interfere and affect specific learning processes at BCT context and general English learning situations.

***Keywords*—**Acquisition, age, factors, language, learning.

I. Introduction

ENGLISH language occupies large credits of the courses at the colleges of technology in Saudi Arabia. Students have to study up to five courses to acquire a diploma degree in different technical fields. The diploma concentrates on practical applications of scientific fields. Accordingly, most of the students are motivated and oriented to vocational fields rather than academic fields. This paper observes and studies the phonology, age, motivation, psychological barriers and English courses as factors of language acquisition in this context and connects it to related studies in the field. It attempts to diagnose and find the main barriers to developing L2 proficiency.

II. Phonological Factor

Pronunciation is critical in communicating ideas through intelligible utterances [20], [21], [23], [29], [40]. From a phonological perspective, English and Arabic are quite distinctive [4], [34], [42]; although they have some similarities [1], [13], [36], [37]. Consequently; Arabic learners of English are expected to encounter difficulties in some aspects of pronunciation [14], [45]. The following paragraphs discuss the factors which cause the most difficulty in English pronunciation for students of Bisha College of Technology BCT in Saudi Arabia.

Word stress is an important factor in English pronunciation. Controlling this feature helps second language L2 learners to build intelligible sentences [49]. Word stress refers to the emphasis on some syllables of the word more than others [9], [5], [49]. This causes slight increase of the speaker's volume on the stressed syllables. As [47] states: 'word stress is an abstract phonological property of a word that, under certain conditions, is phonetically realized so that the stressed syllable is more prominent or salient relative to the other syllables' (p. 135). The importance of word stress is not only limited to producing intelligible sentences but also to developing listening [49].

Word stress exists in English and Arabic. However, unlike English, Arabic stress is regular and predictable [5], [42]. For example, in English, the concept of changing stress may change the word class, as in 'Accent *noun* and Ac'cent *verb*. This feature does not exist in Arabic, but the students at BCT can imagine and comprehend word stress by explaining similar concepts in Arabic like the *Shadda*. However, it needs careful explanation to avoid mixing the two concepts. That is, teachers have to clearly explain the small differences between Arabic Shadda and word stress. The Shadda comes mainly in verbs, on letters not syllables, and never changes its place within the word. It duplicates letters while pronouncing the word such as Mecca /mʌkkə/.

The students of BCT, as all other Arabic students, have to be aware of the small differences between the pronunciations of the two languages. They also have to practice this concept to increase their competence. Zuraiq [50] states that Arabic learners tend to transfer the Arabic stress to English. However, he notes that, advanced learners overcome this barrier and put the stress in the right place.

A step forward takes us to rhythm. English and Arabic are both stress-timed languages [13], [36], [42]. This categorization explains the music of the language or what linguists prefer to call rhythm.

Rhythm also deals with the stress but on a wider level. It is formed by the distribution of words' stressed and unstressed syllables in connected speech. Its importance exposes at an early age. Psycholinguists claim that rhythm is an important tool that helps infants to discriminate languages [6]. Rhythm refers to the different ways of stresses, accompanied by other features such as pitch, tempo and loudness, distributed around word syllables [6], [8], [36]. These features explain the relationship between syllables that help linguists to give the distinct rhythmic classifications of languages. The following example shows the difference between word stress and rhythm:

Word stress ⟶ Important
Rhythm ⟶ As *good* as *gold*

Pike classifies languages into two rhythmic categories [6]: stress-timed and syllable-timed languages. Arabic and English

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are both stress-timed languages [6], [13], [33], [36]. This similarity, on the rhythmic level, advantages Arabic learners to acquire this feature of speech more readily than learners from syllable-timed language backgrounds. McKinney [33] conducted research on second language learners of English to measure the effect of rhythm on comprehension. The participants were Arabic speakers (stress-timed language) and Spanish speakers (syllable-timed language). She found that Arabic learners are significantly better than Spanish learners in a test based on comprehending sentences of the main stress. So, rhythm is specifically implied in connected speech which is different from the melody of the sentences which called intonation.

Intonation is the alternation of sounds in utterances [14], [22]. This alternation is integrated within the sentences and conveys variable meanings [22], [44]. Intonation does not comprise an obstacle for students at the college of Technology, because English and Arabic have the similar feature of falling intonation for statements. El-Imam [13], on his study on more than 200 modern standard Arabic dialects, including the dialects of southern region of Saudi Arabia where BCT is located, finds that these dialects tend to have falling intonation for statements. Levis and Pickering [30] state that English also has a falling intonation for that speech function. So, this similarity of falling intonation is another advantage to help Arabic learners in acquiring intonation.

However, the student experiences some problems in understanding the concept of intonation perfectly as the falling tone represents only one of five intonation patterns which are used in English each of which reveals different meaning [22], [44]. These tones do not always carry the same function in Arabic [26]. However, students tend to overcome this problem without difficulty as intonation is a global feature that can be comprehended by interlocutors [8]. Moreover phonological aspects are all acquired in different ways affected by different internal and external factors such as motivation, courses taught, psychological readiness, and age.

III. Age Factor

Scholars nominate children to be better than adults in learning English [28], [31], [39]. The Age of the children is considered a major factor in the process of language acquisition; that means, younger learners are better than adults [3]. However, Abello-Contesse [3] in his paper on the age and the critical period hypothesis, states that this is not an absolute fact. He points out that learners vary in their acquisition of language skills according to their age. Abello-Contesse [3] and Scovel [39] agree that different linguistic competences have different critical periods.

BCT students have to acquire a high school certificate to be admitted into a vocational major diploma. Therefore, they are at least 18 years old. According to critical period hypothesis CPH, this age is beyond the ideal age of language acquisition where the learner can be better acquirer of certain language skills such as speaking with native like proficiency [31], [41]. However, students at this age can acquire other linguistic skills, such as reading and writing, as well as a native speaker [31]. Teachers should be very dedicated, in BCT, to get the best outcomes in helping the student to acquire these language skills. They have to clearly distinguish the two language systems of English and Arabic to facilitate learning [28] and attempt overcome the age factor. But this distinction does not mean total separation. Arabic language rules, which implemented in the students' minds as a native language by formal teaching can be used to facilitate learning and acquire English rules.

Adults learn language consciously and actively. This can help the teacher and the learner in the process of language acquisition. BCT students connect the new rules and vocabulary to the knowledge they have about their first language. Consequently, acceleration in competence of the learning process is gained. This competence is an outcome of high analytical abilities possessed by adult learners [3].

Snow and Hoefnagel-Hole [43] studied three groups of language learners in Holland. These groups were young children, adolescents and adults. They tested these groups different times. The tests included different areas of the language including pronunciation, translation and grammar. Snow and Hoefnagel-Hole [43] study reveals that adolescents then adults' acquisition of language were far better and faster than children acquisition of language in most of the areas. Snow and Hoefnagel-Hole [43] affirm that this is because older learners are privileged by the language they already knew. However, [43] and [39] state that children are better than adults in acquiring pronunciation. In sum, the previous studies declare that even older learners have good chance to be highly competent in different substantial linguistic areas. Besides age, the success of adults is achieved by the quality of the formal instruction.

IV. Quality of Instruction: Course Design and Delivery

The major concern of the Technical and Vocational Training Corporation TVTC, which BCT is under its umbrella, is the vocational and technical training. Academic and scientific fields are considered supplementary fields that TVTC do not train. This orientation comes from the main goal and vision of TVTC [46]. So, the courses of English at BCT are selected and named to be ESP courses. Irrespective of the selection, they are based on the majors of BCT. Theses ESP courses, as [25] states, attempt to serve communicative needs of particular occupation.

It is easy to distinguish major variations of English competency between BCT students. This variation between the students' levels is challenging for English course designers or selectors in BCT. The students' competency of English varies from excellent to uneducated in English basics such as letters. This variation is clearer in the first and second levels of BCT. It is a predictable situation as most of the students need only to prepare themselves to join vocational employment.

The courses of English at BCT are, to some extent, old and need to be changed. The new courses have to be designed particularly for BCT students in order suit their situation and needs. Different criteria have to be considered when building

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these courses. Hayland [25] says that there are six important key aspects in ESP courses. The aspects are '(a) needs analysis, (b) ethnography, (c) critical perspectives, (d) contrastive rhetoric, (e) social constructionism, and (f) discourse analysis' [25], p. 392. Looking for ESP courses built for similar contexts, is also an important aspect in designing courses [27] for BCT students to meet the successful elements of language learning and acquisition. This part is going to discuss some of the aspects noted by Hyland and Jordan which serves the purpose of this paper. Our concerned aspects noted by [25] could be categorized into two. The first category (social constructionism, and discourse analysis) gives a wider view of the surrounding elements of ESP. The second category (including needs analysis, ethnography and critical perspectives) is closely attached to the students. The latter category is going to be discussed as it serves the aims of this paper by observing and presenting practical suggestions that could be employed in BCT or any similar situation.

Students' needs have to be carefully analyzed to extract the best outcomes of language learning. The analysis results in showing different needs of interdisciplinary elements [25]. Linguistic competence and its basic skills are the priority at this stage in BCT. It is important to try to close the gap between the linguistic competence of students and the course itself. Then, different variables have to be taken into consideration such as academic skills, professional and/ or occupational needs and related concepts. The student's culture that signifies their unique ethnographical features has also to be taken into consideration. Hyland [25] claims that the courses available have to look at these variable features and customs. These concepts are important to be included; and the ignorance of these feature results in disruption between the student and the course.

The students in Saudi Arabia recognize the increasing importance of English use in local and global domains. It is vital to understand their perspective about the use of English in ESP courses. Hyland [25] points out that the student's view of English learning has two perspectives which should be considered. On one hand, there is the general orientation and view of the community where the students study towards the language and its use. On the other hand, there is the students' view of the second language as a tool of opportunity or discrimination. Irrespective of the relatively low level of some students in English and their struggles in learning it, the general view of English learning and acquisition is positive in BCT. However, all of that does not always motivate them to make extra effort in learning English.

V. Motivation Factor

Motivation has been a research dominant of L2 in the last decade see [11], [17], [19]. It is considered the most important factor in L2 learning that sustains the continuity of the process in the long run [7], [11]. Linguistically, motivation is defined as the reason behind energizing human actions [35]. Dörnyei [11] states that motivation is the mental processes which stimulate and maintain actions. These definitions enhance the question of the roles and kinds of students' motivation in language learning.

Dörnyei [10] presents a general motivational framework based on integrative motivation, self-confidence and the appraisal of the teaching environment. The framework consists of: a) language level, b) learner's level and c) learning situation level. They deal with exploring the learner's L2 and the surrounding environment of the learning process from individual, educational and social perspectives.

Language level concerns the study of L2 aspects. It discusses different variables tied to L2, such as its culture, the benefits of learning it and the place of L2. Dörnyei [10] states that '[t]hese general motives [of language level] determine the basic learning goals and explain language choice' (p.279). Language level correlates with Gardner's view of integrative and instrumental motivations. It increases the learner's language level and develops it. Gardner [16], [18], and Dörnyei [10] show that learner's integration is a wide concept which motivates the individuals in learning socially and intrinsically. Integration focuses on the learner's motivation towards communicating with others in L2 either because of their attitude towards members of the L2 community or towards the language itself (L2). The other variable of motivation presented by Gardner which correlates with language level is the instrumental motivation. It is the practical part of language level. Learners are motivated when they recognize that future opportunities may be enhanced by English. For example, students of BCT are always asking about what opportunities English, as an L2, will open for them; and whether English will decrease the gap between them and the developed English speaking communities.

The second element of Dörnyei's framework is the learner level. Dörnyei [10] notes that the learner level has two variables which influence a learner's motivation. The variables are the need for achievement and self-confidence. The need for achievement is the goal that the learner wants to achieve in the future based on the elements of the learner's current situation. The need for achievement is affected by the L2 motivational self-system which covers the intrinsic and extrinsic factors 'of being engaged in the learning process' [12] (p. 3). For example the learner's achievement is affected by parents (extrinsic), and the learner's self-image (intrinsic) of the future which satisfies his/her current needs [12], [38]. Self-confidence is the second element that contributes at the learner level. It is the learner judgments of former experiences, which affect their positive or negative future expectations [10], [11], [16]. Self-confidence is enhanced by the active role of the learner in all language domains. This role participates in efficient language learning by recalling positive feelings and experiences of success. This feeling produces a better outcome of language learning and proficiency processes [16].

The learning situation is the third element of Dörnyei L2 motivational framework. Dörnyei [10] shows that it, also, includes intrinsic and extrinsic variables. However, these variables explore three different motivational elements. The elements are concerning the course and all variables bound to it such as teaching methods and the textbook; the second element is the teachers and every aspect and action affects

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their work whether because of external affects such as education policy or internal affects such as student's motivation enhanced the teacher's actions. The third element is the surrounding factors attached to the learners see [10].

Most students who aspire to technical colleges in Saudi Arabia do not have the desire for academic or scientific accomplishments as mentioned above. This orientation clearly affects their motivation which affects their progress in language learning. They join the college to attain the vocational skill and certificate and to fill vacancies in Saudi markets, rather than for academic goals. Brown [7] states that a student whose goal is to proceed beyond his/her current certificate will be more motivated than those who only needs to fulfill current requirements. Students' motivation is affected by other internal (psychological) factors which benefit or limit the learning and acquisition process.

VI. Psychological Factor

Anxiety is one of the psychological barriers which accompany language learning. It affects the learner's self-confidence and motivation which results in shaping the learner's attitude towards the language and its learning process. Anxiety is a combination of different feelings which makes it difficult to define [7], [48]. Although its complexity, scholars state that language anxiety is a collection of negative unpleasant feelings related to language learning process that cause worry and fear [7], [24], [32], [48]. The learner experiences these feelings in different situations. They may come as a result of past experience or future fears. Failing in learning language skills of L2 or communicating in L2 are the main causes of language anxiety.

Brown [7] states that lack of self-confidence in a learner may be due to fears of linguistic weaknesses which result in communication apprehension. He points out that this is an inner feeling or expectation of negative social evaluation. So this feeling affects the learner's motivation towards the learning process and also, self-esteem. Thus language anxiety can affect the learner's perspective of language learning and of the language itself [7], [24].

However, anxiety can also work as a facilitator. It can enhance the learning process by motivating learners to make more effort and achieve goals. It is one of the success factors that accompanies with motivation and competitiveness [7], [2]. Thus this kind of anxiety is called facilitative or helpful anxiety [7], [24]. BCT student experience different kinds of anxiety as most of L2 learners do. They also find themselves under the pressure of sometimes helpful and sometimes harmful anxiety. These factors show that most feelings of anxiety depend on different variables such as the learner's level of L2 and the appropriateness of the course to the learner's level and their past experience. All these factors shapes the student's attitude towards L2 [7], [15], [32].

VII. Conclusion

The BCT context is a sample of a common learning situation that is worthy to be taken into consideration when studying English learning processes. It is affected by different variables and factors. Internal and external factors are different variables that influence the progress of L2 learners. Correct speaking, age of acquisition, the courses taught, and the students' motivational and psychological readiness are all surrounding factors that interfere in language learning. Controlling these variables and employing them professionally would help in triggering the success of language acquisition and learning, in any context including BCT. However, more statistical studies needs to be undertaken because of the large amount of Colleges of Technology distributed around the country. Interestingly, similar inputs of students of BCT are enrolled in different branches of TVTC colleges which called 'Colleges of Excellence'. TVTC runs the Colleges of Excellence similarly with different methods of teaching implemented in these colleges. These methods are all based on Direct Method. It is important to do further comparative studies and distribute the results. The results test the present views and help the future plans of BCT developments.

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