

The Effect of an Intensive Language Course on Students' Linguistic Performance at Majmaah University, Saudi Arabia

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the effect of an intensive language course at Majmaah University on improving students' linguistic repertoires. It also explores the perceptions of instructors at Majmaah University on students' performance after the intensive language course. The study also addressed the following questions: 1-To what extent did the intensive language course at Majmaah University improve students' linguistic repertoires? 2-How do instructors at Majmaah University react towards students' linguistic repertoires after the intensive language course? To achieve the set objectives: the study used a mixed-of qualitative and quantitative method. A total of 283 students participated in the study experiments, and eight instructors responded to the interview questions. A paired samples t-test was used to evaluate the students' scores before and after the three-month program. The findings revealed that the students scored significantly higher on the post-test. Qualitative data also showed that improvement was not limited to their linguistic repertoires but also applied to their personal skills.

Key words: Intensive language course, linguistic performance, Saudi context

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1. Introduction

Several studies have attempted to analyze the recent deterioration of students' English skills at Saudi universities. Some of these studies addressed students' competencies in language skills (e.g. Abahussain, 2016; Aljarf, 2009; Alseghayer, 2014; Alsubahi, 2001; Liton & Ali 2011; Mahib ur Rahman 2011; National Center for Assessment in Higher Education(NCAH) 2014), while others attempted to evaluate the programs and teaching methods used in English departments (e.g. Abahussain, 2016; Alhajailan, 2003; Alzaidi, 2011; Almohanna, 2010; Mahib ur Rahman, 2011;). Coincidentally, all of these studies acknowledged that Saudi students' have poor language proficiency. For instance, Alsubahi (2001) indicates that 60% of students sample from five universities passed their final English examination with very low achievement standard. Abahussain, (2016) and Aljarf, (2009) shows that several Saudi students who study at the tertiary level struggled with listening comprehension and in responding to very straightforward questions or instructions in English. They also had unpretentious written English and their performances in the English tertiary examinations were lower than in other subjects. From my own experience as a language lecturer, I have noticed that the intake from secondary schools not meet university standards, and the students' English competency is problematic. This observation is echoed by Abahussain's (2016) study, which pointed out that some of the reasons for students' poor language proficiency levels, particularly at English departments, is the leniency in student admissions and ignorance of the prerequisites of English departments. Hence, many students with little motivation to study English and poor language proficiency, are accepted into English departments. Abahussain (2016) also argues Saudi universities do not provide students with sufficient preparation courses. To bridge the gap between secondary intake and university demands, some universities have adopted intensive language courses to solve this problem. Among these is Majmaah University. Thus, this study aims to investigate whether the intensive language course at Majmaah University helps to reduce this dilemma or not.

2. Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

- 1-To what extent did the intensive language course at Majmaah University improve students' linguistic repertoires?
- 2-How do instructors at Majmaah University react towards students' linguistic repertoires after the intensive language course?

3. Research Objectives

- 1-To investigate the effect of the intensive language course at Majmaah University in improving students' linguistic repertoires.
- 2-To explore instructors' perceptions at Majmaah University on students' performance after the intensive language course.

4. Previous Studies:

Nagano (1995) points out that: "a one-week intensive English course could affect not only the learners' achievement but also their attitude toward learning English positively". (p.13)

Austin and Gustafson (2006): "explored the possible differences between intensive and traditional semester-length courses by using a database of over 45,000 observations from different semesters and found out that intensive courses were more beneficial for the learners". (p.15) Similarly, the findings of Raymond's study 1995 (as cited in Jayakaran Mukundan, et.al... (2012) shows:

An intensive English program could have a significant positive effect on language knowledge development of the learners. More precisely, Raymond compared the oral and written competencies of the students in an intensive English course with the students in a regular course and showed that the students from the intensive program outperformed the regular students in both oral and written comprehension abilities. (p.3)

5. Intensive Language Course Program

The intensive course program was initiated by Majmaah University in the 2017-2018 academic years to promote students' English standards. The program was conducted full-time over 14 weeks (20 hours). The subjects are listed below:

5.1. Reading and Writing

Students previewed vocabulary, read paragraphs, and did quick writes. The reading exercises presented examples of the sentence structure and vocabulary needed to perform writing tasks. Writing models were presented to scaffold the shape of the writing tasks. This was followed by graphic organizers that showed the structure of the paragraphs, and then grammar exercises. Writing activities mostly consisted of paragraph writing by giving the students main ideas, supporting sentences, etc...

5.2. Listening and Speaking

Listening and speaking were combined to give students more language practices in authentic circumstances similar to real-life conversations. More focus was given to accuracy by having students listen to different topics and then answer questions and complete activities from the book. Speaking activities focused on grammar, pronunciation, and fluency.

6. The Study

6.1. Sample of the Study

Experiment Sample

All of the students in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) enter secondary school, after spending three years studying English at intermediate school. During secondary school, the students are 14-17 years old. They all speak Arabic as their first language, and; nearly all of them have studied English for three years at school. The pupils who took part in the study were a mix of females and males. There were 283 students from five English departments in different towns.

Interview Sample

The interview group consisted of eight English instructors with M.A. degrees in the English language. Their teaching experiences varied considerably from 5 to 15 years.

Text book

Skills for Success by Lyn & Scanlon (2016) were used in the intensive English course program. Levels 1& 2 were used. Skills for Success is widely -used series in Saudi universities and institutions.

6.2. Methods**6.2.1. Study Experiment**

Six classes participated in this study. All of the students from these classes studied English for the same amount of time and used the same textbooks. The pupils in the six classes were taught reading comprehension passages, writing skills, listening comprehension and speaking from their text book for three months during the intensive language course program as a prerequisite to join the Bachelor of English program. The experiment involved three phases:

Phase 1: Students took placement tests or pretests before starting the program. The tests consisted of reading comprehension, writing, speaking and listening quizzes.

Phase 2: Posttests were administered to students within three months after the program's completion. The test used was similar to the tests that students practiced in their text book and including: reading, listening, speaking, and writing quizzes.

Phase 3: A paired samples t-test was used to compare the students' grades between the pretest and posttest.

6.2.2. Interview

Semi-structured interview questions were emailed to 10 English instructors. Eight of the instructors replied back. They were asked to answer the following questions:

- 1- To what extent did the students' linguistic repertoires improve after the completion of the intensive language course?
- 2- Which language skill improved as a result of the intensive language course?
- 3- Which language skills do you think still need further improvement?
- 4- Do you have any suggestions that may contribute to improving the current practice of the university's intensive language course?
- 5- Do you think there are any differences in language performance between students who underwent the intensive language course and former students who did not take the intensive language course?
- 6- Do you have any further suggestions?

7. Results and Discussion**7.1.Experiment Analysis**

The analysis of the experiment focused on answering the vital question: To what extent did the intensive language course at Majmaah University improve students' linguistic repertoires?

Table 1. *Distribution of Pre-test and Post-test Scores Within the Paired Samples*

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Pre test	15.1943	283	7.27263	.43231
	Post test	30.9435	283	11.50348	.68381

To answer this question, we computed the mean, standard deviation, standard error, and ranges for the pre-test- and post-test scores. To determine whether the progress was a direct result of instruction, T-test was used to compare the pre-test and post-test means scores. Table 1 clearly shows that after the intensive language course was administered, students scored higher on the posttest than they had on the pretest (mean = 30.9435 and 15.1943, respectively).

Table 2. *T-test Comparing the Results of the Pre-test and Post-test Means.*

Groups	N	Mean	St. Deviation	df	t	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pre test	283	15.1943	7.27263	282	-21.036	0.01
Post test	283	30.9435	11.50348			

Table 2 clearly shows that the comparison of the mean scores yielded a difference of (+ 15.75) between the pre-test and post-test. Further, the results of the t-test yielded a t-value of 0.01 ($p < 0.05$ ***), meaning that the difference between the pre-test and post-test scores was statistically significant. This suggests that the students' linguistic repertoires improved significantly as a result of introducing the intensive language course program. This result could possibly explain why some Saudi universities have initiated and adopted intensive courses or preparatory years to promote student standards in English and to bridge the gap between secondary intake and university demands. It also advocates the effectiveness of the intensive language course as a successful policy for improving students' linguistic repertoires. Qualitative data from the interviews aligned with the quantitative results, showing that there was a remarkable positive change in students' repertoires. This result was echoed in all of the interviewees' respondents, one of whom said:

"Students' linguistic repertoires have been noticeably improved in a way that almost all of them have built up a strong base as beginners. They all can keep up with the teacher in each and early point, as their level of comprehension and vocabulary is very good. No use of Arabic in the class, even simple words or sentences, due to their enhanced level of English language", (Interviewee 6).

This finding is in harmony with Nagano (1995) who obviously pointed out that seven days intensive English course could positively affect the learner's performance and their attitude towards learning English. In addition, Austin and Gustafson (2006) argued that intensive language courses for the learners were more valuable. Likewise, the findings of Raymond's study 1995 (as cited in Jayakaran Mukundan, etal. (2012) showed that an intensive language course for the learners could have a notable affirmative influence on their language competence progress.

7.2. Interview Analysis

The thematic analysis technique was used in this study to categorize the results of the interviews into significant themes. The most important themes are discussed below:

7.2.1. Remarkable Improvement in Language Proficiency

The interview data showed that there was a significant change in students' language proficiency at the end of Intensive English Course (IEC) comparing to their level at the beginning of IEC. Thus, it appears from the interviewees' responses that the current intensive language course at Majmaah University helps prepare the students and develops their language skills. Students' linguistic repertoires were noticeably improved: their level of comprehension and vocabulary is very good; no use of Arabic in the classroom, even simple words or sentences. This result was echoed in all of the interviewees' responses one of whom said:

"Students with IEC have comparatively good linguistic and language proficiency; listening, speaking, vocabulary and reading etc. They seem to be motivated towards English and can accomplish any learning task with confidence", (Interviewee, 1).

This result was in line with the quantitative results, mentioned earlier, which showed that there was a remarkable change for the better regarding students' scores on the post-test compared to the pre- test.

Another advantage of the intensive language course is that the language proficiency for those students who took the IEC was much better than that of previous students who had not taken any language foundation courses. One of the participants summarized this result when he said:

"There is a massive difference between the previous students and the students who are coming after passing the intensive language course. The former had a weak English background. So, they were not very motivated and faced a lot of problems in understanding pedagogical activities. However, the later students have better understanding and they can communicate fluently. They also have a sound foundation for going ahead easily", (Interviewee, 4).

Another participant added that:

"Students who have taken Intensive English Course (IEC) have an improved level of English language at all levels as noticed. They have very good communication skills in class and with the teacher. They have a great deal of responsibility regarding their courses and their assignments" (Interviewee, 2).

From the results of the data, one can say that the intensive language course at Majmaah University gave the students a chance to examine their skills and their English level in general, so they really know where they stand. Thus, it seems that students who took the intensive language course were better prepared for a variety of skills and topics.

7.2.2. Receptive vs. Productive Skills

The data showed that while there was an improvement in language skills in general, some of these skills improved more than others. According to the results of the interviews', the receptive skills (listening and reading) and to some extent speaking skills, improved more than writing skills.

"Definitely speaking is a noticeably improved skill, along with reading as students have a rich storage of vocabulary. In addition, students' level in listening is very good as well", (Interviewee, 3).

The limited improvement in writing skills can be attributed to the fact that mastering writing skills requires a great deal of practice and additional time, as stated by one of the interviewees:

"I think listening and speaking still need improvement because they require more time and practice due, to a large extent, to their nature as opposed to reading and writing, which rely more on analytical skills until you can see the results", (Interviewee, 5).

These results are similar to other studies regarding teaching and learning language skills. These studies, (eg. Djigunovic, 2006; Sebestova, Najvar, & Janik, 2011; Weshah, 2011) showed that productive language skills progressed the least during language courses.

Furthermore, improvement was not limited to major skills, sub-skills such as grammar, spelling, and pronunciation also improved:

"As compared to those who have not taken any such intensive course, our intensive course students demonstrate remarkable skills in pronunciation, grammar, syntax, pragmatics and discourse", (interviewee 5).

7.2.3. Motivated and Confident Students

The data showed that the courses not only improved the students' language proficiency but also their personal skills. Students' motivation and confidence for learning English increased in comparison to those who did not take the intensive language course. One of participants mentioned this:

"Students seemed to be motivated towards English and could accomplish any learning task with confidence", (Interviewee, 1).

8. Conclusion

Given the recent deterioration of student English skills at Saudi universities, Majmaah University initiated the Intensive English Course in the 2017-2018 academic years as a prerequisite to join the bachelor program in English. This study investigated whether the intensive language course at Majmaah University improved students' linguistic repertoires? It explored instructors' perceptions on students' performance after the intensive language course. The study employed a mixed – approach using: qualitative and quantitative methods to obtain the aforementioned aims of the study. The study found that students' linguistic repertoires improved significantly as a result of

introducing the intensive language course program. Improvement was not limited to their language skills but also extended to personal skills, such as: motivation and confidence in learning the English language in comparison to those who did not take the intensive language course. Furthermore, the interview analysis revealed that receptive skills were improved more than other skills.

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