

“I Got Accepted”: Perceptions of Saudi Graduate Students in Canada
on Factors Influencing Their Application Experience

by

Maha Alzahrani

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
Graduate Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto

© Copyright by Maha Alzahrani (2016)

**“I GOT ACCEPTED”: PERCEPTIONS OF SAUDI GRADUATE STUDENTS
IN CANADA ON FACTORS INFLUENCING THEIR APPLICATION
EXPERIENCE.**

Master of Arts (2016)

Maha Alzahrani

University of Toronto

Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning

Abstract

This qualitative study aims at examining a number of challenges faced by Saudi students in the process of learning English while studying in an anglophone country. Through the lens of gatekeeping scholarship, progressive educational theory and formal, non-formal and informal learning modalities, certain factors such as the students’ linguistic background and their current experience were explored in an effort to shed light on these challenges. This study sought to uncover lesser known factors which come into play when predicting the success of Saudi students who study overseas. I examined students’ perceptions about their English learning experience in Saudi Arabia and Canada and how prior learning facilitates acceptance into graduate programs. Discourse analysis was conducted on data collected mainly through semi-structured interviews and analysis of the students’ letters of intent and curriculum vitae. Barring special circumstances, the IELTS was found to be the defining factor in successful graduate applications.

Keywords: Saudi, scholarship, learners, language, difficulties, ESL, EFL, exam, academic, linguistic, socio-cultural, effective learning

Acknowledgments

First of all, I would like to thank God for this accomplishment. This thesis is dedicated to the soul of King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz who had given me the opportunity to study abroad.

From the beginning to the completion of this thesis, I owe a debt of gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Enrica Piccardo who had guided me with her expertise, advice and continuing feedback throughout this project. I also would give thanks to Dr. Julie kerekes for accepting to be a member of my committee, for your time, effort and insights.

To the most important people in my life, my family, I really appreciate all your support. To Mom and Dad, without your encouragement and unconditional love, I wouldn't be the person I am now. To my sisters, thank you for being always there for me. To my brothers, thank you for your caring and support.

A massive thanks to those who agreed to participate in my study, without your effort, this study would not have been completed. Finally, to all my friends in Saudi Arabia and in Canada and to everyone who supported me throughout my journey, thank you.

I extend my deepest appreciation to all of you.

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iii
List of Tables.....	vi
List of Figures.....	vi
List of Appendices.....	vii
List of Acronyms.....	viii
List of Definitions.....	ix
Chapter 1: Introduction to the study.....	1
King Abdullah Foreign Scholarship Program (KASP).....	2
Researcher background.....	6
Significance of the Research.....	8
Research Questions.....	10
Organization of the study.....	11
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	12
Gatekeeping in University Admissions.....	12
Traditional Education	18
Educational Reform	19
Learning Types.....	25
Language Instruction- Relevant and Related Research.....	31
Success factors in ESL acquisition	42
The Current Study	44

Chapter 3: Research Design.....	46
Research Context	46
Participant Recruitment	49
Participants Profiles.....	50
Research Design.....	62
Analysis.....	65
Chapter 4: Findings	70
Educational Pioneer	70
The Unprepared Learner	75
The Engaged Learner	87
Analysis of the Documents (Letter of intent and CV).....	105
Chapter 5: Discussion.....	115
Educational Pioneer	115
The Unprepared learner.....	118
The Engaged Learner	121
The written documents (letter of intent and CV).....	124
Limitations.....	127
Suggestions for Future Research.....	128
Conclusion.....	130
References.....	132
Appendices.....	149

List of Tables

Table 1.1: Scholarship timeline for Saudi scholarship students in Canada.....	5
Table 2.1: Learning Types.....	27
Table 3.1: Summary of participant profiles.....	51
Table 3.2: Template of an ideal letter of intent.....	68
Table 3.3: Template of a model Canadian chronological resume divided into coded categories.....	69
Table 4.1: Participants' descriptions of learning types experienced in Saudi Arabia versus in Canada.....	88
Table 4.3: Summary of Analysis of Letters of Intent and CVs by move type...	109

List of Figures

Figure 4.2: Flow chart demonstrating student participant admission paths.....	101
---	-----

List of Appendices

Appendix A: Consent Form for Student Participants for Main Study.....	149
Appendix B: Interview Questions.....	153

List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

CV: Curriculum vitae

EFL: English as a foreign language

ELL: English language learner

ESA: English for Saudi Arabia

ESL: English as a second language

GPA: Grade point average

IELTS: International English language testing system

KASP: King Abdullah scholarship program

L2: Second language acquisition

OISE: Ontario Institute for Studies in Education

SLA: Second language acquisition

TESL: Teaching English as a second language

TOEFL: Test of English as a foreign language

UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

U of T: University of Toronto

List of Definitions

Academic/college preparation program: a full time, intensive program for non-native speakers of English who aim to develop their language skills in order to enter a college or university program.

Bridging courses: courses taken before starting a Master's program that are mandatory for international students and others who do not yet possess the required IELTS score.

Learning Types: refers to formal, non-formal and informal learning-

Formal learning: a type of learning that occurs in schools and other educational institutions. Books and materials are used. Grades are official. Instruction is intentional and has specific learning objectives.

Non-formal learning: a type of learning that takes outside of school including homework for formal courses or classes (tutoring, continuing education) taken outside of the formal educational system. It is also organized and has clear learning objectives.

Informal learning: a type of learning that happens spontaneously without the intention to learn as that which is acquired from one's experience, from family and peers or during leisure time. It has no pre-determined learning objective.

Letter of intent: a letter containing the applicant's previous experience, career goals, personal traits and subjective information designed to reflect the applicant in the best light. It is submitted when applying to graduate programs.

Preparatory English period: a period of one to two years granted from the Saudi government for students to study ESL in an anglophone country before starting graduate programs.

The common European framework (CEFR) categorized foreign language proficiency in six levels: A1 as beginner and A2 as elementary (basic user). B1 as intermediate and B2 as upper intermediate (independent user). C1 as advanced and C2 as mastery (proficient user).

CHAPTER 1: Introduction to the Study

Studying overseas has always presented students with unique challenges as well as benefits, ranging from socio-economic and academic to individual. Perhaps the most important of these challenges is the linguistic barrier, where many students do not yet have sufficient command of the language of the host country. With the introduction of a government scholarship program in 2005, a significant number of Saudi bachelor degree holders now have the opportunity to pursue their goals of achieving post graduate degrees overseas, particularly by studying in English speaking countries such as Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom. But before gaining entry into graduate school, they must undergo a series of high stakes academic encounters, usually culminating in passing the IELTS (International English Language Testing System). The linguistic barrier, if unsurmounted, has the potential to derail a student's academic goals.

Theoretical intersections of gatekeeping, progressive education and learning modalities have been used in this study to qualitatively explore student perceptions of the effectiveness of English as a second language (ESL) instruction both in Saudi Arabia and in Canada. A substantial body of research has already scrutinized ESL learning for Asian international students from countries such as China, Korea and Thailand (Crowe, 1992; Savignon, 2003; Wong, 2004; Sawir, 2005), apropos, as Asian students comprise the majority of internationals. However, the advent of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program has propelled Saudi Arabia to fourth place in the Canadian educational system as of 2014¹, making this study an important addition to the field.

¹ As reported by the Canadian Bureau for International Education.

King Abdullah Foreign Scholarship Program (KASP)

Back in 2005, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia announced a scholarship program called the King Abdullah Foreign Scholarship Program, designed to provide significant funding for Saudi students so that they could enrol in undergraduate and graduate programs in anglophone foreign countries including the United States and Canada as well as many other countries around the world. The program was initially implemented for a period of five years but has since been renewed until the year 2020. As part of the scholarship program, students are free to choose areas of study in various fields and in a range of educational settings.

In order to be eligible for this program, applicants must attain a specified minimum grade point average (GPA) in their early education, for example the GPA of an applicant entering a Bachelor's degree program must be no less than 2.75 out of 4.00 or 3.75 out of 5.00 or 80 out of 100 percent. In addition, applicants must complete other preparatory steps before they can travel overseas to pursue their studies. First, they apply online for the scholarship and wait approximately six weeks for preliminary application results to be announced. Successful applicants are then required to provide further proof of eligibility including transcripts, proof of male guardianship in the case of women, and a valid passport.

Once applicants have been qualified for scholarships, they must attend a preparation course during which they learn about their country of choice, its culture, social customs, laws and so forth. During this course, students are also given the opportunity to ask questions and make comments. Finally, as part of the eligibility process, the students are required to undertake an intensive English as a second

language (ESL) learning program² in the country where they intend to earn their degree, which is fully funded by the Saudi government.

However, what might seem surprising is that the students' background in terms of their English competency remains unchecked. In other words, the scholarship program does not require any test of English language proficiency nor does it require students to have maintained a certain grade level within their English courses in high school or in any undergraduate programs while living and studying in Saudi Arabia.

The same applies to students who choose to study in countries where the native language is neither Arabic nor English, for example France or Germany. While they would be required to become proficient in the language of instruction, French or German, the Saudi government does not check to ensure the student possesses the required proficiency level in the language of the host country. This thesis will focus solely on students studying in anglophone regions of Canada.

As a result of their apparent lack of preparation, the difficult nature of university applications in both Canada and the United States often comes as a shock and a barrier to hopeful students. It must be noted that standard practice in Canada requires those whose first language is not English to achieve scores on such standardized exams as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or International English Language Test System (IELTS) that demonstrate specific levels of competency. The IELTS measures 10 competency levels with zero being the lowest and signifying that the student merely transcribed "totally memorised

² Students are allowed a grace period of six additional months; therefore, the total time allotment for preparatory English language programs including IELTS, pathways and pre-academic courses may extend to as much as two years and six months.

responses” (British Council, 2015, p. 2) and did not understand English at all. The highest score of nine indicates the student comprehends English to an advanced degree because they fully addressed all exam tasks, communicated with skill and presented well-supported ideas, a wide range of vocabulary and grammatical structures that flowed naturally. Errors if any were minor and rare in occurrence (British Council, 2015).

In Canada, the average required score for IELTS is between 6.5 and 7.0. Conversely, in the United States and Australia, a lower average score of 5.5 to 6.0 is accepted. In some cases, even a score as low as 5.0 is sufficient for a student to enter university.

The higher Canadian requirements have produced a confusing and perhaps rather frustrating situation where students have been granted full scholarships to cover all the costs related to their education, and yet, after commencing studies in this country, find the required skills in English a barrier to their academic success. This has led to students having to initiate yet another round of applications to US or Australian universities, waiting for acceptance and, if successful, relocating. Other students, unfortunately, terminate their scholarship and return disappointed to Saudi Arabia after 18 months abroad (See Table 2.1). In some rare cases, students enroll in private career colleges in Toronto and study diploma versions of their desired major instead of discontinuing their scholarship altogether.

Table 1.1

Scholarship timeline for Saudi scholarship students in Canada

Scholarship timeline					
Year 6					
Year 5			Must return to home country if graduate admissions not granted at the end of this extension ↓	Graduate program	
Year 4					
Year 3					
Year 2					
Year 1					
Year	ESL	Extension for ESL/IELTS preparation	Extension for academic programs such as Pathway...	Graduate program	Extension to complete graduate coursework
Activity					

⇐ Must return to home country if program not completed

Researcher Background

In Saudi Arabia

As a Saudi student who came to Canada to pursue my academic studies, I have experienced a number of challenges. Like many of those whose native language is Arabic, I have come to the realization that learning English can be an arduous task. These difficulties can quickly become intensified and magnified once a student enters into higher education by enrolling in a Master or Doctoral program. In the course of my application to the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), it quickly became apparent that I did need to improve my English language proficiency level.

Prior to my journey in Canada, I studied in a public school as well as a public university. I had a limited exposure to English in a formal setting. However, studying in the European languages department and majoring in French had helped me to improve my linguistic skills and become multilingual. As I have always been keen to learn languages, after I graduated from university I put great effort into improving my English on my own. I studied in a language institution for five months and I spent time in watching movies and TV shows in English to become familiar with colloquial North American language.

In Canada

In 2011, I came to Canada to pursue my higher education. I studied English for almost a year, during which I attained score of 6.5 in IELTS without difficulty. Then I applied to at least 17 universities within Canada. Sadly, my applications were refused by all of them except for the University of Toronto, which offered conditional acceptance provided that I increase the IELTS score. Throughout 2012, I dedicated

my time to study the language in order to get a higher score on the IELTS test and consequently to obtain the final offer of admission from OISE, which I did obtain by the end of the year.

Admissions departments usually require high scores on one of the standardized tests such as TOEFL or IELTS. Many of my Saudi friends have struggled to earn the required grade for entry because they did not study English independently in Saudi Arabia as I did. This additional practice has been crucial for developing the skills I needed in order to actively participate in graduate school. Becoming proficient in English is no doubt highly difficult. However, Saudi students that hope to apply to graduate school must also develop a strong command of more advanced academic English. The difficulty of this task in part helped to prompt the research conducted in the current study.

Through coursework at OISE, I have also discovered that more steps must be taken to overhaul and improve the methodology currently used to teach English in the Saudi school system. There appears to be a direct relationship between students' attendance at public and private schools in Saudi Arabia and their level of English proficiency (Abdan, 1991). The students in private schools typically study English for more than twelve years, compared to less than half that time spent by those in the public education system (Gawi, 2012). Therefore, it is not surprising to find that (anecdotally) private school students seem to achieve considerably greater success in their Canadian and American university applications.

In order for students to compete and communicate effectively, it is necessary that more attention be paid to the English language curriculum currently being taught in public schools in Saudi Arabia. By addressing key areas such as classroom

structure, teaching methodologies, and by encouraging a higher level of motivation and participation in students, I believe that many of those relocating to an English speaking country with hopes and aspirations of higher education and success will be far better equipped to begin their new lives.

Significance of the Current Study

Primarily, this study aims to examine the current pedagogical practices participants have been exposed to in Saudi Arabia. It is also worth mentioning that decisions made by the Saudi government to fund English language learning programs depend in part on a number of considerations such as enabling Saudi learners to acquire the competence which would help them to present issues of their religion to the world; assisting them to achieve the linguistic level required for different professions; empowering students to benefit from English speaking nations and qualifying Saudis to be able to transfer scientific and technological breakthroughs of other nations to their own country (Ministry of Higher Education, 2015). Therefore, the ESL preparation that Saudi students receive prior to their move to Canada is of utmost importance and must be examined to see whether this preparation is appropriate.

There has been an increasing trend in Saudi education in which students move overseas to pursue their academic studies after they have completed their primary and secondary education (Ministry of Higher Education, 2011). In addition, many individuals complete a first degree at Saudi universities before deciding to continue their postgraduate studies in North America. Oftentimes, the students are studying entirely in Arabic and neglect to keep up with English learning. Then, by the time

they decide to study in North America, they have experienced learning loss and have to start English instruction at very low levels upon arrival. These students are at a great disadvantage compared to students who have spent a larger proportion of their primary and secondary school years being exposed to English as a second language and who continue studying English during university in Saudi Arabia. This disadvantage manifests when students are faced with the demands of higher education in terms of speaking and writing only to find that their level of competency is not adequate to those demands.

Through a series of semi-structured interviews with students who have spent their early years learning English in both public and private Saudi schools prior to moving to Canada, this study will examine the difficulties which are generally experienced by this group of learners. Factors such as prior knowledge and English language learning in Canada and their impact will be investigated together with an analysis of documents related to the applications process such as letter of intent and CV.

This study seeks to gather useful data about the students' perceptions of the entire language learning process. Finally, it should be noted that the inclusion of both public and private school students serves to provide an opportunity for questioning possible differences between private and public schools in terms of English competency.

Research Questions

While examining the factors that influence a student's learning experience, certain questions emerged which required further exploration and detailed examination. Building on a layered foundation of gatekeeping, active learning and learning type theory, I sought to examine the following questions:

1. What are the perceptions of Saudi students about their English language learning in Saudi Arabia?
2. What are the perceptions of Saudi students about their English language learning during English programs in Canada (program duration ranges from one to two years); specifically, what learning experiences do those students report to be the most effective?
3. What strengths and success strategies do Saudi Arabian students engage in order to be accepted at Canadian universities?
4. Does the verbal discourse the students express in their interviews correlate with information contained in their supporting documents (letters of intent and CVs), and, ultimately, did these supporting documents help to bring about the desired outcome?

In particular, I intended to study the differences between the students who were successful in their applications to Canadian universities and those who were unable to have their applications approved. Using a qualitative, narrative approach, I collected data from 14 voluntary participants through live and computer mediated semi-structured interviews, examination of letters of intent and CVs, and e-mail communication.

Based on the above, this study seeks to provide suggestions in an effort to help guide Saudi students who have a strong desire to pursue their post-secondary studies overseas in the future.

Organization of the Study

The study contains five chapters, beginning in Chapter 1 with a brief overview of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP), English language instruction in Saudi Arabia and aspects of my background that inspired my attraction to the topic. This chapter will conclude with my research questions and the significance of the study. Chapter 2 reviews literature germane to international student ESL and to theoretical constructs which informed this study, namely: gatekeeping, progressive or active learning, and the triad of formal, non-formal and informal learning. Chapter 3 details the research methodology informing the study followed by Chapter 4 which will discuss the findings in depth and form preliminary interpretations. Chapter 5 further analyzes the data by relating it to extant research, discusses study limitations and concludes with theoretical and practical implications of the results.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In light of the high numbers of Saudi students who arrive in Canada with aspirations of completing graduate school, it is important to consider how, or even whether, their English as a second language learning adequately prepares them for success in attaining their goal. I am one of these students and based on a second language theory course I took which enabled me to make sense of my reflections, I decided to draw on a wealth of research encompassing gatekeeping as well as scholarship on progressive education in contrast to that of passive learning, as a lens through which to investigate my topic, namely the challenges and experiences of international students learning English to the high degree of proficiency which will allow them to pass the fearsome IELTS exam, gain admission into their desired graduate program and successfully matriculate from same.

Furthermore, three types of learning formal, non-formal and informal are discussed because these are the environments in which progressive or traditional or both styles of teaching and learning take place. The prevalence of each style in the three learning environments and the ways in which they foster ESL learning will be discussed.

Gatekeeping in the University Admissions

The concept of gatekeeping refers to a metaphor associated with the procedure of checking progression over stages through critical points of entry (Homrich, 2009). This term also refers to an individual who makes evaluation decisions and allows

entry via specific points when certain competencies have been successfully proven. (Homrich, 2009; Brear, Dorrian and Luscri, 2008).

A similar definition was introduced by Dora (2003), who described gatekeeping as a method of evaluating and screening students' performance where academic staff and field professors are responsible for playing the role of gatekeepers. According to Husu (2011) gatekeeping serves two roles. The first is to enable and promote ideas, people and policies as well as provide opportunities. The second role is to help to control, exclude and block people and ideas not in keeping with the status quo of the system. Gatekeeping manifests in every social system (Husu, 2011). For example, in universities gatekeeping impacts the creation of academic appointments, agenda setting, establishment of policy, resource allocation to different departments, who gets recruited and promoted within the departments, who gets funding, and other recognition such as awards and prizes. In academic journals the phenomenon affects which researchers' ideas get published versus those who are sidelined.

Furthermore, Koerin & Miller (1995) stated that gatekeeping in the educational process refers to a monitoring system applied in order to hamper the entry of students who do not possess the required skills and knowledge in education programs. In other words, the admissions process plays a gatekeeping function to increase the likelihood that admitted students will perform to acceptable standards and successfully obtain their degrees. Other examples include completing required courses, achieving specific minimum grades, and successfully defending a thesis or dissertation.

In the graduate application process, gatekeeping factors include grade reports from prior institutions, the student's personal statement and CV outlining prior work experience. International students whose first language is not English must also

demonstrate language proficiency, most often through the IELTS which consists of written, reading, oral and listening sections, all of which serve gatekeeping functions. This study did not include grade reports along with the other gatekeeping factors because the grade reports are objective factors while the letter of intent and CV are subjective.

The Letter of Intent

The letter of intent is a key albeit subjective component of the graduate application. It is an opportunity to introduce the applicant's personal and professional development, research areas and work experience, academic background and career goals to the admissions committee (Keith-Spiegel & Wiederman, 2000; Brown, 2004; Early & DeCosta-Smith, 2012). On a simplistic level, it is considered appropriate when the information is written using correct grammar, spelling and presented in a clear and brief style (Smith et al 2005). On a deeper level, it has the potential of serving as a gate opener due to its impact if it is written in such a way as to "illustrate [the applicant's] character in action" and relay academic and practical experiences in a reflexive manner, demonstrating how these experiences have affected their professional development (Brown & Barton, 2004), in other words, if the personal statement makes a strong case for how the candidate would be an ideal fit for the program.

Curriculum Vitae

The CV summarizes a professional's skills and experiences in a short and customizable format (Harper, 2013,). A graduate school CV provides the admissions

committee with more information than what is included in the application and focuses on what they need to know to better evaluate applicants' candidacy. Graduate school CVs are designed to enhance an application to a school and provide additional opportunity for applicants to "sell themselves" (University of Miami, 2015). Psychology professor and graduate school admissions expert Tara Kuther (2015) stated that the CV's role is to provide the graduate admissions committee with a concise outline of applicants' achievements; consequently, it can help the committee decide if an applicant is a suitable candidate for a graduate program. The CV provides a complete profile of the applicant's academic achievements, publications, scholarly interests, skills developed through academic degrees, and related teaching or research experience (Biggerbrains, 2013; University of Toronto, 2015). Unlike the letter of intent, the CV is in abbreviated point form and lacks the personal details of the letter. Others (Frost, 2015; Biggerbrains, 2013, University of Kent, 2015) have focused on the factors that influence whether a CV will be successful or not. The formatting should facilitate easy reading with a legible font and a consistent style for headings and subheadings. In terms of content, the CV should include past achievements with compelling details which command the attention of the decision-makers. Work history should be detailed and career objectives clear. The document should be free of grammatical errors and inaccurate information and its length should not exceed two pages; (Frost, 2015; University of Kent, 2015).

IELTS

The third factor that acts as a gatekeeper is the IELTS exam. One of the weightiest requirements for international graduate student applicants in Canada is to

demonstrate the ability to perform on par with domestic students in English. Assessment tests such as TOEFL and IELTS serve as gatekeepers of global mobility and are requirements for entry to higher education in the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and the United States (Ng, 2007; Hamid, 2014). The IELTS is considered a “high stakes” test where major decisions such as promotion to a subsequent level or retention, are based on the results of these high stakes testing system (Fairtest, 2007). Thus, test takers commonly experience anxiety and pressure when taking these tests as the results determine whether the student can take the next step in achieving a specific educational, and ultimately, career goal. Concern over whether a high enough score will be attained renders the test even more difficult to the extent to where test takers may perform poorly under these conditions, thereby nullifying the test as an indicator of their ability (Zuriff, 1977; Fairtest, 2007; Dooney, 2008). Other negative effects that students may suffer from are low self-esteem as well as loss of interest in learning, increasing the likelihood of their dropping out of school altogether (Fairtest, 2007).

It is not only the student that suffers from the negative effects of high stakes testing, but also teachers, who may fall victim to the “washback” effect. Researchers have defined the term “washback” as the influence of standardized tests on teaching materials, curriculum and pedagogy (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Lewthwaite, 2006; Pan, 2009), specifically “the extent to which the introduction and the use of a test influences language and teachers to do things they would not otherwise do that promote or inhibit language learning” (Messick, 1996, p. 241). One school of criticism alleges that the content and format of these tests are based on a limited definition of language ability, and thus constrain both teaching and learning (Taylor,

2005). In a mixed method qualitative and quantitative study conducted by Coleman, Starfield, and Hagan (2003), participants confirmed the functional role of the IELTS as a means of gaining admission into university programs; however, they minimized the value of the test in terms of its educational purpose. When gatekeepers are required to provide test results to pass through a vaunted door, they usually focus on fulfilling a set of criteria that do not prove effective to their learning process.

Although these tests scores are necessary, they are not enough for the applicants to enter the program. Rea-Dickins, Kiely & Yu (2002) state other factors that contribute to admissions decisions: work experience in the field, prior academic achievements, the quality of the application including the covering letter, and the applicant's overall enthusiasm. For doctoral applications, the quality of the research proposal may also play a role in admission. Allwright & Banerjee (1997) note that many other factors contribute to academic success or failure. Frequently, students perform successfully in their studies regardless of their low English language proficiency at entry.

In discussing the role of the proficiency test in the admissions process, Raghunathan (2010) explains that it would almost be impossible for an applicant to be rejected solely on account of a poor score. In some cases, when the score is low and the rest of the application is sufficient, applicants may be admitted on the condition that they take an English proficiency class and/or pass an additional English test after admission. Furthermore, Banerjee (2003) identified other factors as influential in the admissions process such as the timing of application, the letter of recommendation, and the scholarship student. Banerjee (2003) also pointed out another factor: the recommendation of a specific professor or academic staff member

might facilitate an applicant's admission. In fact, some academic staff and professors admit applicants without considering their proficiency tests scores.

Work experience is an additional requirement for graduate applicants. Yet in some graduate programs, for instance, science, work experience does not necessarily play a role in improving applicants' profiles or increasing their chances of being accepted. Therefore, applicants who have recently graduated from university are just as qualified to gain admittance as those with work experience (Raghunathan, 2010).

Traditional Education

The passive learning style is dominant in Saudi culture (Aljohani, 2009; Farah, 2010; Alkubaidi, 2014; Fakieh, 2014). While passive learning is not completely absent in the North American educational system, it is apparent that a multiplicity of pedagogical methods are available to the student including more active approaches. Such active approaches encourage students to engage with the curricula through experiential learning, critical thinking, development of analysis and opinion, and independent study where they are allowed to conduct in-depth pursuits of topics of personal interest (Bonwell & Eison, 1991; Sarason & Banbury, 2004).

Traditional methods in teaching consider the learner's mind a "sponge" which could be filled with information with the expectation that the learner will absorb all that information; this leads to passive learning where learners listen to what the teachers say, look at slides of presentations and memorize information presented (Stewart-Wingfield & Black, 2005; Upadhyaya, 2013). This focus on rote memorization deprives learners of the impetus for creative thinking. Passive

education and gatekeeping share the distinction of being undemocratic elements in the educational field and thus have bearing on this study.

Educational reform

Compulsory learning never sticks in the mind

Plato

The passive learning and teaching style discussed above is contrasted with active learning. As will be discussed throughout my thesis, active learning of English in terms of grammar, vocabulary, and dialogue will emerge as an important theme. I will also consider whether students who have been more active in their learning are more likely to be admitted into graduate school. The voice of active learning has been calling out to educators for over one hundred years, an increasingly large thorn in the side of proponents of teaching methods that conform to more traditional, or passive learning pedagogy (also known as back to basics, conventional and didactic education). Active learning is defined as any instructional method that places an important emphasis on engaging students in their education. Active learning also requires students to undertake personally meaningful learning activities and frequently reflect on the work that they are doing (Prince, 2004). Active learning is used interchangeably with the terms “constructivism” and “progressivism”. Among the foundational scholars of active learning were John Dewey, Paulo Friere and Jerome Bruner.

While many individuals have called for progressive education, one of the major proponents that of late 19th and early 20th century philosopher and educator John Dewey. He advocated for an educational environment where a student would be capable of holding and expressing fully formed opinions and eventually be able contribute to civil society in a democratic way, in contrast to the typical American

school of the era which he felt was structured to “suppress children’s natural curiosity, eagerness to learn, and dynamic activism” (Benson, Harkavy & Puckett, 2007, p. 28). From 1897 and into the 1920’s, he published his then radical thoughts on the learning process which contained recurring liberatory themes, specifically that learning was an interactive process where students could thrive if allowed to interact with the curriculum and take an active role in their own learning, now referred to as “agency”. He concurred with traditional theorists that specific content knowledge was necessary; however, he argued that the acquisition of a predetermined set of skills should play a secondary role to the realization of a student’s full potential (Dewey, 1938), an idea that can now be encapsulated into terms such as “critical thinking” (Bonwell & Eison, 1991), engaged learning (Bowen, 2005) and reflective practice (Bolton, 2010). A cognitive theorist and psychologist, Jerome Bruner (1961) took the concepts of Dewey, Vygotsky and other constructivism education theorists even further by proposing the concept of “discovery learning” meaning that learners construct their own knowledge for themselves through discovering not receiving from the teacher. He also believed that the best way for learners to acquire the knowledge was through active participation, with “scaffolding” of the teacher when needed (Macleod, 2008). Scaffolding occurs when teachers (or other more advanced learners) support learners to move beyond their zone of proximal development (ZPD) to enable them to accomplish with assistance what they cannot yet do unsupported. When they achieve independence, the scaffolding is removed, and a higher goal is set” (McCloskey, Orr, Stack & Kleckova, 2010, p. 1). The actual support may include coaching from the instructor, task modelling, audio and/or visual guides and other resources. Scaffolding could boost ESL learner outcomes, specifically in

students' ability to produce complex sentences (Lucero, 2014; Nin.edu, 2015). The instructor intervenes only insofar as is necessary to guide the learner in the appropriate direction (Cooperstein & Kocevar-Weidinger, 2004) instead of providing the solution to the question, case or problem. This is a key feature of discovery learning that differentiates it from passive learning models in that the former is geared towards producing active learners where students are obligated to participate in problem-solving projects rather than mere knowledge transfer (Castranova, 2002). In turn, this process of discovering, processing and applying information, has been found to greatly enhance learners' critical thinking abilities (Allen & Tanner 2003).

In the tradition of Dewey, Paulo Freire is considered a major contributor to the progressive education movement whose ideas grew out of his adult literacy work throughout Brazil prior to that country's 1964 military coup. Freire (1970) proposed an alternative to the "banking concept" of education. Freire critiqued banking by defining it as an act where the teacher (subject) "deposits" information into the student (object) who meekly receives, memorizes and repeats the program content delivered. In other words, the teacher is the depositor while the students function as the depository. Reality is presented as if it were "motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable...[o]r expounds on a topic completely alien to the existential experience of the students" (Freire, 1970, p. 71). Freire characterized a banking environment as one where the teacher knows all, thinks, speaks, and chooses the program content; conversely the student knows nothing; is thought about, listens, and most important, has no say in the program content, and instead must adapt to it.

In his role as Coordinator of the Adult Education Project of the Movement of Popular Culture in Recife, Brazil, Freire, in collaboration with his colleagues,

established a literacy program consisting of culture circles in the villages of Recife to make inroads into educating the approximately sixteen million illiterates aged fourteen and older. The program was deliberately designed to counteract what Freire saw as the passive nature of the traditional school. Of this initiative, he wrote “Instead of a teacher, we had a coordinator; instead of lectures, dialogue; instead of pupils, group participants; instead of alienating syllabi, compact programs that were “broken down” and “codified” into learning units (Freire 1973, p. 42). Course content such as nationalism, vote for illiterates, and the political evolution of Brazil was offered on request of the participants thereby mirroring their lives and interests. Knowledge was schematized, presented with visual aids and discussed through an exchange of ideas among participants and with the coordinator whose role was to engage them in critical dialogue aimed at clarifying their social reality, realizing possibility for change and spurring action (Freire, 1973).

Freire’s program sought to go beyond a mere “mechanistic” literacy to one where adults would read and write “in relation to the awakening of their consciousness” (Freire, 1973, p. 43) showing people they had the power to think for themselves, act based on their thinking and thus determine their future, in contrast to the silence and conditioned apathy under which they had lived before (Freire, 1970). Within these culture circles could be found elements of five major agreed upon principles of constructivist learning that researchers have induced in the decades since Freire began his work:

1. Engaging in activities simulating those found in real life, presented in a way that allows the learner to discover their own truths.
2. Manipulating and extending learning discoveries while incorporating this

knowledge into pre-existing belief systems.

3. Making sense of new information within the context of prior knowledge through comparing, contrasting, questioning, and challenging this information.
4. Focusing more on the development of the skills than on the conveyance of facts.
5. Interacting socially with others, giving the learner the opportunity to compare and share ideas collaboratively and resolve any conflicts that may arise (Bonwell and Eison, 1991; Good and Brophy, 1994; Cooperstein & Kocevar-Weidinger, 2004)

Key to the active learning process are the reflectiveness of the process where learners critically reflect on what they learn (Barnes, 1989) and the relevancy to the learner's needs and concerns. The tasks provided to learners should help the students to be able to make the comparison with the complexities in the real life. Negotiation of the goals and approaches of learning is essential between both parties- teacher and learner. That is, active learning, in contrast to the passive, is a negotiated process.

Up to the late 1980s, passive education was the dominant mode of instruction in the North American educational system (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). Throughout the 1980s, several leaders in the field of higher education began to advocate for an increased use of active learning within college and university classrooms. These calls for active learning were supported by a collection of national reports that noted the importance of this pedagogical approach (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). In the decades since, the active learning movement has continued to garner theoretical and empirical support. Ongoing research has consistently supported the finding that passive, superficial learning engendered at the undergraduate level could lead to students completing their degrees while lacking the important critical analysis and thinking skills required for professional success (National Research Council, 2007). The

problem assumes a political dimension since the US seeks intellectual dominance in the global market and needs an extensive cadre of critical, problem-solving and innovative professionals in all major disciplines, especially in mathematics and the sciences, to accomplish this.

Several empirical studies have shown the positive effect of active learning on students' overall learning (attitude and performance), for example, their performance in writing essays, scientific inquiry, class participation and cognitive outcomes (Seipel & Tunnell, 1995; Benek-Rivera & Matthews, 2004; Strow & Strow, 2006; Armbruster, Patel, Johnson & Weiss, 2009; Khalid & Azeem, 2012).

Bean (2011) advocates for the active learning method in classroom instruction, believing that this kind of learning should change the role of learner from passive listener to active participant as well as help the learner gain a deep understanding of the lessons through asking questions and gathering and analyzing the materials, lending credence to the earlier work of Bonwell and Eison (1991) who also emphasized the learner's role in reading, writing, discussing and being engaged in solving problems; in short, to be actively involved. Bonwell and Eison (1991) contributed significantly to the development of active learning, suggesting several methods to promote active learning in the classrooms. Among them are the following: learners can work together, negotiate the materials while role-playing, debate the pros and cons of an issue, and compose short written exercises. Moreover, students have to engage in tasks that require them to analyze and evaluate. In this context, activities that promote active learning are defined as instructional activities that involve students in not only producing things (projects, assignments etc.) but also in analyzing and thinking about what they are performing. Learning is

further constructed through social interaction with peers and with the teacher whose communication encourages an inductive route to solution finding (Cooperstein & Kocevar-Weidinger, 2004).

Active learning appears to be more consistent with human functioning. Children love to explore the world from a very young age including touching and pulling apart objects they encounter, all the way to engaging in activities adults would consider dangerous. This drive opposes notions of passivity. In other words, children's early years are replete with opportunities to learn informally and actively. It is the act of being placed into the formal school system that begins the socialization process where children are forced into the role of passive listener student (Upadhyaya, 2013).

Learning Types

Learning, be it active or passive, may take place in a variety of different settings, whether those settings are considered part of the formal education system or beyond it. Individuals are constantly adding to skills, competencies and knowledge on the job, in the home and elsewhere. It has been noted that this relevant and important learning acquired outside of the formal learning system has not been "well understood, made visible, or probably as a consequence, appropriately valued" (OECD, 2015).

The paucity of research in this area led the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to embark upon a long term investigation into learning types beginning in 1996. The Organization has identified three main types of learning: formal learning, non-formal, and informal: Formal learning is

traditionally carried out in government regulated institutions such as schools, colleges and universities. In this category, teachers play a vital authoritative role in the transmission and consolidation of knowledge. To this end, materials in the form of course books, and online lessons are provided to support learners. High stakes assessments occur at regular intervals, culminating in the issuing of credentials such as degrees or diplomas to those to successfully navigate the system.

The second type of learning, i.e. non-formal learning, refers to organized educational programs or activities that take place outside of the formal education system. This type of learning usually consists of short-term and voluntary programs characterized by flexible and adaptable ways of learning. Assessments, if any, are not recognized by the formal system and may take the form of a certificate of completion.

Informal or accidental learning consists of knowledge acquired in the course of living one's life. It can be accomplished in any setting, the content of which falls outside of "the curricula provided by formal and non-formal educational institutions and programs" (Schugurensky, 2000, p. 2). This type of learning is never intentional or pre-planned. Knowledge gained depends on the self-motivation and interest of the learner. The main characteristics of these learning modes are summarized in Table 2.1.

Table 2.1
Learning Types

Learning type	Learner Intention	Instructional Environment	Status of grades/Legitimacy of evaluation/Recognition of learning experience	Major Benefit
Formal learning	Learner intentionally seeks out knowledge. Learning occurs in official schools and institutions.	Institutionalized and hierarchical system overseen by a governmental authority (eg. Ministry of Education). System is propaedeutic in nature.	Grades are official; recognition in the form of certificates (grade, report card, diploma, degree) issued allowing individual to progress to subsequent grade level or into formal labour market.	Fulfills gatekeeping requirement for entry into more well-paying jobs.
Non-formal learning	Learner may or may not take the initiative in seeking a learning experience. Learning may also occur passively as a by-product of more organized activities.	Educational program is organized but occurs outside the formal system. Program is usually short-term and voluntary. Unlike formal learning, prerequisites are not usually required. Usually a feature of adult education, e.g. ESL programs, driving lessons and fitness classes.	Grades frequently are not officially organized. However, sometimes a certificate indicating completion and/or competence is granted.	Flexible and adaptable structure of courses makes non-formal learning more accessible to a variety of learners.
Informal learning	Never intentional. Occurs via experience in that learner is exposed to teachable moments in work situations, at home or during leisure time. Takes place independently, based on learner's self-motivation and interest.	Learning takes place outside formal and non-formal educational institutions and programs. Learning occurs independently through spontaneous activities such as from family, personal experience, incidentally or by research.	Not usually recognized by formal educational institutions and by the workplace.	The result of informal learning is often better than formal learning.

Considering that the environments in which a language is taught impacts the effectiveness of language acquisition, the above three types of learning bear relevance to the study. For example, students who experience formal learning in school and university while studying English as a mandatory subject, often lack sufficient support when it comes to informal learning outside the classroom such as access to internet and multimedia resources. This lack of exposure to informal learning is particularly acute for those students who are limited by their inability to travel to English speaking countries. Given the fact that informal learning is instrumental in the development of English proficiency, more emphasis should be placed in the student's participation in settings outside of the classroom through the use of various educational tools and resources associated with that learning modality (Kuh *et al*, 1994).

Contested terms

Since the term formal learning was coined by Osherson et al (1986), the concept has been refined, and comparisons between it and either non-formal or informal learning have been widely debated (McGivney, 1999; Schugurensky, 2000; Colley & Malcolm, 2003; Andronie, 2013). Dib (1988) notes that formal education may include such activities as visiting museums or scientific exhibitions, listening to radio broadcasts or watching TV programs on educational or scientific themes, reading texts covering science, education, or technology, participating in scientific contests, and attending lectures or conferences. These activities may take place in a non-formal milieu; however, the major difference between non-formal and formal

learning lies in the fact that the results of non-formal learning are not officially recognized. Further elaboration as to what constitutes non-formal learning has been suggested by the Non-formal Education Book (NFE) (Novosadova *et al.*, 2007). It explains non-formal education within the context of youth organizations, defining the phenomenon as the following:

Voluntary, accessible to everyone (ideally), an organized process with educational objectives, participatory and learner-centered, about learning life skills and preparing for active citizenship, based on involving both individual and group learning with a collective approach, holistic and process-oriented, based on experience and action, and starting from the needs of the participants (p. 10).

Dib (1988) points out that researchers do not always agree on the precise meanings of concepts related to the three learning modalities, making it impossible to attain consensus. In an instance of bridging this divide, the European Youth Forum has drawn upon the various definitions of formal, non-formal and informal learning elaborated by UNESCO as well as the European Commission and its member organizations (2005). And finally after much discussion, they all reached a consensus. They stated that both formal and non-formal education are both examples of organized educational processes. Formal education is traditionally provided by formal educational institutions. In these institutions, teaching is structured hierarchically, incrementally and sequentially which ultimately leads to accreditation and qualification. On the other hand, non-formal education occurs alongside mainstream systems of education and training even though it does not provide formal

recognition through certification. Individual learners participate on a voluntary basis and as a result, assume an active role in the learning process. Unlike informal learning where the process develops less consciously, in the non-formal process, the learner is often conscious of the fact that he or she is learning through a non-formal type of education (Novosadova *et al.*, 2007).

Informal education does not take place in a conventional setting as such and can be carried out anywhere; for example at work, at home and in any daily situation. It may be defined as any activity a learner embarks upon based on interest and self-motivation (Dib, 1988). Informal learning may even be carried out completely independently of schools or universities. In many cases, the outcome can be rated as better than that of formal learning. In addition, in this type of learning, no curricula or objectives are provided by educational authorities. Rather, learning is viewed as a spontaneous activity on the part of the learner which occurs naturally and informally (Andronie, 2013). According to Andronie, informal learning is the most natural and varied. Some examples of this type of learning are as follows:

- **Learning from the family, in the first formative years** is considered one of the most important times in life during which the child learns speech, walking, different habits, to name but a few skills.
- **Learning from colleagues and peers, at school or at work** sometimes takes place in conjunction with formal learning activities. Andronie (2013) suggests that students learn better together than individually, partially due to the informal setting that is created during the course of group learning.

- Learning from one's own experience is viewed as one of the best ways to learn due to the fact that experiential learning is more easily retained than material learnt from formal courses.
- Learning from trial and error is similar to learning from one's own experience. Usually no intentionality is involved and no curriculum followed.
- Incidental learning is a type of informal learning which in most cases does not imply forethought or follow any clear objectives.
- Learning by research often involves the intention of the person who acts as a researcher and therefore the knowledge obtained this way may not come from other people.

In my interviews, I seek to ask participants the extent to which each learning modality featured in their English language learning and which they view as most effective in helping them adapt to the Canadian educational system.

Language Instruction- Relevant and Related Research

This part of the study will present three categories. The first section will discuss English language instruction in Saudi Arabia and examine linguistic problems faced by Saudi students. The second section will be looking at the ways by which international students study English, in particular, those from Korea, Japan, Thailand and China as well as the difficulties they face. Finally, the third section will be exploring factors that can help international students in their quest for English proficiency.

English Language Instruction in Saudi Arabia

Historically, English has been part the school curriculum in Saudi Arabia since 1932 (Alhosaini & Rahman, 2013). However, it was not until 1958 that teaching English became fully standardized and widespread in all Saudi schools from Grade 7 onwards. Alhosaini and Rahman argue that English education failed to meet the needs of the students as evidenced by their inability to speak English at a proficient level even after a number of years of study. Following the re-evaluation of the curriculum, some changes and modifications were made, including the introduction of English as early as grade 4 thus allowing for a longer period of exposure prior to entering university. These changes were designed to enable the students to develop the language skills and vocabulary necessary to acquire proficiency in the language.

The overall structure of English language education in Saudi Arabia is divided into three stages. Learners are first exposed to English between the ages of 9 and 11 years old. Instruction continues during intermediate education (ages 12 to 14). Finally students aged 15 to 18 attend secondary school, the most advanced stage before entering university. This advanced stage or, Secondary school English language learning is critical for students who wish to attend university, especially universities abroad (Al-Shumaimeri, 1999).

The new curriculum, which was mandated and implemented by the Ministry of Education, is called English for Saudi Arabia (ESA); however, teachers and students were not consulted as to the design and the content of the new curriculum nor as to its objectives. The overarching goal of ESA is to prepare students for

participation in further education and employment through English. Thus, the Ministry views English as the most important language for global communication and consequently has prioritized its learning over other foreign languages (Al-Subhi, 2014). Furthermore, the curriculum emphasizes the understanding and appreciation of anglophone cultures through the knowledge of their language (Al-Kamookh, 1981).

It is important to note that a student's prior knowledge of and exposure to English plays a role in the development of his or her proficiency, thereby influencing the student's level of engagement with the English curriculum. For example, some students may have travelled around the world and visited places where English is spoken while others may have had parents who speak English and/or were educated in English institutions. In addition, a student's socio-economic status can affect their level of learning and language acquisition. Wealthier parents hire tutors, send their children to private schools and supply other enrichments. These students tend to excel in their English studies to a greater extent than students who have to rely solely upon what they learn in school. Therefore, it is safe to say that a lack of resources such as textbooks written by native English speakers, computers and other audio-visual facilities in school can hamper the ideal linguistic development in learners.

Having been granted a full scholarship, a Saudi student has to now brace himself or herself for another equally, if not more, important challenge, that is, studying overseas in a foreign language. In fact, Saudi students have to face a number of unique challenges during the course of their English learning process. These challenges can directly impact upon their ability to comprehend and process

the information presented during lectures as well as their ability to compose written work, and to fully participate in their new educational setting.

Thompson-Panos and Thomas-Ruzic (1983) point out that the organizational structure of written composition differs between English and Arabic. Consequently, students may find it difficult to switch between writing styles. To illustrate this point, the authors note that English is typically based on the subordination of ideas (Thompson-Panos & Thomas-Ruzic, 1983), which contrasts with the Arabic system of writing. In Arabic, composition is primarily predicated upon coordination between ideas. Thus, Arabic students' English compositions may appear unsophisticated and their work read like stories rather than academic papers. However, little has been done to examine and address these difficulties experienced by Saudi students who study in Canada (Altamimi, 2013).

Several previous studies have examined the challenges encountered by Saudi students in the course of developing English proficiency. These problems are particularly noticeable in terms of orthography (the way of writing another language such as spelling and capitalization rules), verb usage and form, composition, lexical resource and vocabulary (Hashim, 1996; Muortaga, 2004; Zahid, 2006 in Javid & Umar 2014; Tahaineh, 2010). Thompson-Panos and Thomas-Ruzic (1983) noted that the single most striking category of errors in university level papers composed by Saudi English learners occurs in the area of spelling. They identified five main reasons why such errors occurred, including: mistakes due to the non-phonetic nature of English, phonological differences between English and Arabic, analogy-based errors, and inconsistency in English word spelling (Thompson-Panos & Thomas-

Ruzic, 1983, Khan, 2011). These errors were commonplace and persistent at all levels of schooling up to higher education.

Another identified area of major concern for Saudi students is the correct usage of verb tenses (Mukattash, 1981; Muhammed, 2005). This problem is further exacerbated by the learner's inability to switch between past and present due to the fact that the Arabic language typically includes very little reference to time (Thompson-Panos & Thomas-Ruzic, 1983). Thus, in many cases, direct translation from Arabic into English may lead to the creation of awkward phrases such as "my teacher very angry". Thompson-Panos and Thomas-Ruzic (1983) argue that while this sentence is grammatically accurate in Arabic, its translation is far from correct in English. Problems of this nature mean that Saudi learners must embark on a contextualized understanding of verb usage in English rather than simple translation of the verbs.

Challenges and Experiences of English Language Learners in General

Saudi Arabian learners are but one group of internationals who face hurdles in attempting to master English. As a result, a wealth of research has been conducted in order to examine English learners from different backgrounds and learning styles. The following studies I selected examined the impact of prior learning along with the teaching and learning pedagogy of those population.

Arab learners beyond Saudi Arabia

An investigative study by Abukhattala (2004) into the challenges in the course of the educational and cultural re-adjustment of ten Arab students in Canadian university classrooms revealed that although these students had been taught English prior to coming to Canada, their knowledge of English did not significantly help them to survive and succeed in their academic studies. As reported by Abukhattala (2004) the English language taught in Arabic classrooms is mostly treated as “static rather than living” (p. 93) and emphasizes vocabulary and grammar.

There is no doubt that EFL students want to be taught how to speak and write fluently. Rizvi (2005) found that 100% of the undergraduate business students in Oman he polled stated that they needed to develop the ability to speak English with confidence so they could deliver effective oral presentations.

In a similar vein, Hamedand, Abdelfattah and Ghenghesh (2011), examined perceptions of the linguistic needs of undergraduate business students and their business faculty at the British University in Egypt. To this end, data was drawn and collated using four sources: a student questionnaire; a teacher questionnaire; a series of semi-structured interviews for students and a series of semi-structured interviews for teachers. Upon completion, the findings revealed that participants felt that four curriculum components should be incorporated into language instruction: reading, writing, listening and speaking.

Jdetawy (2011) conducted a study of problems faced by Arab English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students whose mother tongue was Arabic as well as the underlying reasons behind these problems. The results showed that Arab EFL

learners encounter many serious challenges in gaining competency in the four language skills. The reasons that lie at the heart of these problems range from the lack of target language exposure as spoken by its native speakers and the fact that the Arab EFL learners' generally prefer to use Arabic in EFL classrooms rather than English, to the inappropriateness and weakness of the English language curricula adopted by some academic institutions, as well as the lack of Arab EFL learners' personal motivation.

Hassan (2000) observed listening problems encountered by EFL learners at Damascus University, Syria, focusing on the influence of the students' strategies, characteristics of the speaker, features of the listening text, and attitudes of the listener. He then concluded that EFL learners at Damascus University experienced a range of listening problems that could be solved by an increased focus on listening comprehension skills and strategies. Hassan (2000) further highlighted the importance of listening comprehension in stating that it "provide the right conditions for language acquisition and development of other language skills" (p. 138).

Muna Taher (2005), a researcher based at An-Najah National University in Palestine looked into the factors which could contribute to what is called communication apprehension (CA) defined as an "individual level of fear or anxiety associated with real or anticipated communication with another person or persons" (McCroskey, 1977, p. 74) in an EFL classroom. She developed a questionnaire to investigate the relative importance of a number of sources of this apprehension such as socio-cultural and psychological. The findings of the study were noteworthy; they showed that the majority of the students felt uneasy or apprehensive about their

learning experience and this had hindered their language learning process. Among the reasons cited were fear of being laughed at or criticized by others because of inaccurate pronunciation, fear of making errors and fear of negative in class evaluation.

Learners of other nationalities

Arab learners are not the only population which faces hurdles in attempting to master English. ESL students from a number of nationalities besides Arabic experience a range of challenges and must wrestle with learning how to increase their competency in English. These challenges include linguistic, cultural and educational differences.

Wong (2004) interviewed international students who were studying English in Australia. He discovered that the participants had different opinions about their learning preferences. Those who were taught within a teacher-centered environment with limited peer-to-peer classroom interaction had difficulty when making the transition from passive to active learning. In addition, the students claimed that cultural barriers together with different teaching and learning styles were the main reason for their lack of English language proficiency in classrooms. This can also present important implications for Saudi students, as they often face cultural barriers when traveling overseas.

Sawir (2005) notes that it may not be reasonable to attribute a learner's difficulties in English language development solely to personal shortcomings. One should also consider the role of their previous institution, as well as that of their country's primary and high school education system in shaping learners' English

proficiency. Sawir (2005) asserted that various studies have primarily highlighted the language limitations and difficulties which are experienced once the learner arrives in a new academic environment. However, these studies exclude the influence of a student's prior learning experiences. To bridge this research gap, Sawir (2005) interviewed twelve international students from Indonesia, Hong Kong, Thailand, Vietnam and Japan to see how a pedagogy based on learning grammar and reading skills but not conversation in their home countries, impacted on students' ability to perform in the Australian higher educational system. The author sought their feedback on different aspects of English learning, classroom activities, and resources available to help them to use language in a practical way. She also asked them to discuss the difficulties they had experienced while studying English. Sawir discovered that the students' prior English instruction in their home country was mainly based on English grammar and areas of standard usage, oral skills such as speaking and listening were largely ignored. The study also found that students' prior language learning experience had a significant effect on how successfully they could cope with the academic demands of Australian universities.

In a study aimed at Thai students studying in the US, Songsangkaew (2003) found that many students experienced problems adjusting to the different learning styles as well as American culture. Despite the fact that many of those students had passed the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) as a barometer of their language proficiency level, they were still faced with a significant problem communicating in English to the extent required to achieve their academic goals.

As far back as 1992, Crowe had already observed Asian students experiencing difficulty in composing long research papers. Crowe's (1992) analysis found a high number of errors in students' attempts to integrate sources from research. The researcher also found deficits in the proper use of transitions as well as overall problems with the unity and cohesion of their work. They tended to reproduce the formulas and patterns from model papers since they found it hard to process research studies. In addition, plagiarism was also another issue, which seemed to stem from the students' educational system which seems to emphasize memorization over reasoning thus making the students feel unable to paraphrase.

Pawapatcharandom (2007) showed that Thai students struggled with writing skills as the most serious obstacle, while communication barriers caused by cultural differences seem to be the least serious problem. The study also reported that another impediment was the student's inability to complete essay assignment within specified time limits. The success of Thai graduate students in American universities depended upon factors such as a clear understanding of Western cultural norms and habits and the ability to adapt oneself to a different style of learning (Thongsongsee, 1998).

Savignon and Wang (2003) studied Japanese students' perceptions and attitudes towards English and concluded that more research in this area was needed from the perspective of learners themselves, as the majority of the previous studies had focused on the perceptions of teachers rather than those of students. This has led to inconsistencies in terms of the perceptions expressed by teachers and students. To rectify this, the researchers conceived of and distributed a questionnaire to 174 first-year college students in an effort to examine their attitudes towards language learning

as well as their prior learning experiences (Savignon & Wang, 2003). The students' perceptions revealed a preference for the type of instruction which is implemented in a communicative approach rather than that of the grammatical method they had experienced in their previous schools. The researchers also commented on how a student's prior English experience could have an impact on his or her current learning experience (Savignon & Wang, 2003).

Within a French-speaking Canadian environment, Foscolos (2000) examined perceptions of high school students by asking them about their experiences of learning English as a second language. The author found that the quality of students' experiences might depend on a variety of factors such as the student's degree of exposure to English, educational support, and personal motivations, as well as socio-cultural influences. The researcher concluded that the common denominator was the student's perception of importance of English language proficiency to the students. Thus, in situations where students place more value on the importance of learning English, teachers are likely to find a higher level of participation and proficiency among students.

Rodriguez (2000) conducted research with students in their first year of English study in a Puerto Rican college. The primary focus was to find out what the students thought about English and how their prior learning experiences might have affected their learning in college. He later discovered that the primary reason behind their negative attitudes towards English learning could be traced back to the students' early learning experiences. Subsequently, the students reported that poor experiences with teachers as well as curricula which were devoid of higher levels of English

exposure resulted in poor language levels. This in turn led students to have additional difficulty upon entering college. They also stated that they would have preferred a curriculum which could have allowed them to more direct exposure to English thus enabling the students to practice at a much earlier age.

The studies have revealed a common factor among international learners; they described that their prior learning experience had an impact on their achievements abroad; specifically, that they struggled with teaching styles of English in their home countries, with the students from Asian countries reporting they learned English by rote, focusing on memorizing grammar more than on developing speaking skills.

In sum, while some extant studies have examined the specific learning challenges common to foreign born students studying English, more work is required to understand the particular difficulties that are experienced by Saudi students. Therefore I drew upon the insights of those studies to see where and how they would intersect with the Saudi international student experience of passing the IELTS and gaining admission to graduate school.

Success Factors in ESL acquisition

There have been numerous studies on the problems faced by international students who travel overseas to earn degrees or to improve their language skills. Selvadurai (1988), Fletcher and Stren (1989), and Trice (2001) pointed out several problems experienced by international students at American universities: among them speaking and writing proficiency were considered the biggest contributing factors. In addition, language proficiency has also been found to be a contributing factor to the

individual's satisfaction or lack thereof, with his or her experience in the host country. In other words, difficulty with English can in fact negatively affect the overall experience of international students by undermining their satisfaction with their academic courses

Light et al. (1987) observed that factors such as motivation and attitudes, prior knowledge of a particular field of study, faculty evaluations, as well as the students' perceptions and evaluations of their own success, were additional variables affecting international students' academic success. To illustrate, Bryan, Min, Ren, and Wei (2007), who studied East-Asian international graduate students from China and Korea who had never been educated in an English speaking country before, showed that the majority of the participants in the study insisted that their English language preparation prior to arrival in the U.S. was effective with respect to the first year of graduate study. They also reported that English preparation was helpful for them to achieve high scores on exams, receive satisfactory to excellent grades, communicate with classmates, and adapt to their new environment.

All the participants provided Bryan et al. (2007) with a great deal of insight on how to boost language skills. For example, towards improving listening and speaking skills, they recommended a combination of methods such as watching TV or listening to the radio, listening to pre-recorded lectures, forming friendships with native speakers and communicating with them, adjusting to a variety of American accents, attending extra English classes, living in an English environment, adapting to the speaking culture in the U.S., practicing speaking regularly, attending English study

groups in the community, and developing a consciousness of the language and its subtleties.

The Current Study

The studies discussed above shed light on the role of students' prior language learning history and its impact on their development of linguistic competency and success in an English-speaking environment. It is clear that a singular focus on passive learning can often put the student at a disadvantage, as opposed to a constructive method which also emphasizes developing the student's communicative competence. In this study I seek to provide insights to teachers in Saudi Arabia and the students themselves based on my participants' reflections on their inside- and outside-classroom experience. My self-reflexivity and semi-structured interviews of the participants, together with my review of selected literature on the topic, have led to the formulation of the research described below.

This study will rely on a number of theoretical dichotomies including active vs. passive learning and formal vs. non-formal education. As well, I will consider the role of gatekeeping in relation to the graduate school admissions process. Gaining admission necessitates overcoming a number of gatekeeping factors embedded within the admissions process that include preparing application documents in a North American style, complete ESL steps, and studying for the IELTS. As a researcher, I expressly underscored the concept of gatekeeping in the educational context along with examples of factors which play gatekeeping roles in the application process of graduate school applicants.

Influenced by the passive learning I received prior to coming to Canada which does not adequately prepare students to easily acquire English proficiency, my theoretical framework comes from the concept of investigating the effectiveness of a progressive learning environment typified by more student engagement, learner reflection on topics and projects of interest, and discovery learning (Allen & Tanner 2003). Progressive (active) education allows students to assume more agency, participation and choice, all of which mitigate stress and lead to more successful outcomes. Further, it is possible that progressive education may empower students to “pass through” gates that are established, such as commonly used English proficiency test scores. This concept will be explored further in my thesis.

Taking into account an educational system comprised of formal, non-formal and informal education, these three learning types have been discussed above because they are the venues in which teaching and learning take place. They will be further discussed in the study within the context of how they may help or hinder learning as well as their role in influencing gatekeeping.

Chapter 3: Research Design

This study looks at the experience of Saudi students in Saudi Arabia and Canada while learning English. In the first part of this chapter, I will reflect on several relevant contextual factors that helped to inform decisions regarding research designs. In the second part of this chapter, I will outline my participants' profiles as well as the data collection stage which consisted of semi-structured interviews and analysis of letters of intent and CVs.

Research Context

The prime context for this research is studying the phenomenon of Saudi Arabian students who are funded by the government to pursue their higher education in Canada; however, for the most part, the journey of these students from the day they landed to the day they attained their graduate acceptance was fraught with obstacles and challenges. My passion as a former teacher and a current language learner and researcher in the field of second language acquisition led me to conceive of this topic.

As a language learner and a student who underwent many challenges in Canada, I noticed my fellow Saudi friends struggling with the same issues I had to withstand when learning English. These challenges were not only regarding linguistic skills, but also gatekeeping encounters such as performing the IELTS, writing the letter of intent and applying to universities. My research was initiated from personal experience as I already mentioned in the introduction; thus, I considered myself not a mere researcher for this study but a reflexive researcher (Watt, 2007) as I reflected on my personal experience background and motivation for the study. Reflexivity is essential in qualitative inquiry as a means of facilitating the understanding of the case of the study and the research process (Watt, 2007).

In my personal experience, the IELTS seemed the only way for me to gain acceptance into my program because I was not aware of the existence of Pathways. Although I could have studied in the ESL program at the University of Toronto and been accepted into my graduate program based on that certificate, I had no knowledge of this opportunity until I received my conditional acceptance letter for the Fall semester in July 2012. The document explained that the school required either an IELTS score of 7 or a University of Toronto English certificate with a minimum grade of B+. I would have to present either of these credentials in one month, i.e. by mid-August, to gain full acceptance, which meant that enrolling in the U of T ESL program was out of the question, as that program consisted of six levels, each taking two months to complete. In that case I would miss the Fall 2012 due date and have to wait until either January or September 2013 to start the Masters program, an option I did not wish to consider.

The importance of moving forward in my educational journey was readily apparent. I knew that it was critical to maintain the momentum of my studies, knowing that if I paused too long there was a possibility that I would not return, much like other students who interrupt their studies (Laplante et al., 2010). As well, I feared that I might lose my initiative and not complete the task I had travelled so far to achieve. The clock was ticking as far as my government scholarship was concerned and it was imperative for me to press on.

The scholarship provides financial support for up to five years of study including a maximum of two years of preliminary language instruction. At this point, I had used up 14 months of language instruction. The program will allow students a

six-month hiatus from studies at any time during the scholarship period. A break is possible, for example, when students do not get acceptance into a masters' program or for personal and family emergencies. A student who exercises this option must provide an explanation to the authorities and return to Saudi Arabia during that period.

Due to this time constraint, I decided to focus on the IELTS test. I already had a 6.5 score and needed to improve by a mere 0.5, so, shortly after receiving the letter, I retook the test. The score- a disappointing 6.5 yet again. I emailed OISE admissions informing them of the result and attempting to convince the gatekeepers that this score was adequate. They disagreed and I was back in the IELTS marathon. In August, I tested for the seventh time only to receive the same frustrating result- 6.5! My eighth and final attempted yielded the desired and required score, opening the admissions gate and I was finally admitted into OISE.

Most Canadian universities require a certain score in the IELTS or TOEFL from international students for the sake of gaining admission. The test costs \$295.00, and students have to pay every time they take the test. Often, like me, they write it more than five times. Refunds are provided from the Saudi Arabian Cultural Bureau, the office responsible for monitoring these scholarships academically and financially, but the Bureau will only refund the cost of one test per calendar month after students have submitted the receipt and official score report. I knew someone who was so desperate to attain the required score that she took the test three times in one month even with the knowledge that only one test fee would be refunded.

Participant Recruitment

After obtaining approval from University of Toronto Research Ethics Board, participants were recruited via the internet, personal knowledge and snowball sampling. Specifically, advertisements and notices were placed on social networking sites such as Facebook besides other websites and social networks often frequented by the target sample. I contacted those whom I personally knew to introduce my study and ask for their participation. Then I asked both those recruited from the internet and from my personal contacts to spread the word about my work and encourage others to sign up for the study. After receiving their letters of consent, I set a date and time to call them. Other Saudi students assured me that they were interested, yet they did not follow up when I tried to set an appointment. I then realized that since participation in the interviews was voluntary, I should not pursue them to the point that felt coerced into being part of the study. I ensured all participants that I would be using pseudonyms instead of their real names to protect confidentiality.

Fourteen participants were interviewed, one man and 13 women. Both genders were invited to participate in the study. I was seeking a more equitable distribution of male and female participants, but only two men showed interest and only one followed through with an interview. Participants were solely composed of individuals educated in Saudi Arabia prior to their move to Canada. It was important to ensure that these individuals underwent the largest portion of their education in Saudi Arabia, including their time spent receiving English language instruction, as the amount of time students spend learning English is a major factor in terms of

developing proficiency (Mukattash, 1981; Thompson-Panos & Thomas-Ruzic, 1983; Muñoz, 2010). The other requirement from the participants was their interest and willingness to be a part of my study as well as their providing me with their letter of intent and CV which were essential to completing the data. Participants were between the ages of 22 and 30 since one of the conditions for the applicant to be eligible for scholarship is that he or she must not be over 27 years old at the time of application.

Taking into account the time participants dedicated to learning the language and the period of graduate studies, I thought that limiting the age to 30 years old seemed like an adequate barometer to ensure that the length of their English exposure was similar.

Participant Profiles

The rich, detailed information gleaned from the participants will be discussed thematically in the findings section (Chapter 4). In this chapter, I introduce the participants through their assigned pseudonyms, English proficiency levels, their route to graduate school and current graduate student status. These attributes are summarized in table 3.1, followed by a brief introduction of each individual.

Table 3.1

Summary of participant profiles

Participant pseudonyms	Self-reported English proficiency level and test scores	Path to graduate program admission	Graduate program status at time of interview
Afnan	Intermediate level as assessed by English school. Score of 6.5 in IELTS	Bridging courses	Graduate student at Mount Saint Vincent University
Ahmad	High level of English (near native). IELTS score 7.5. TOEFL score 100 out of 120 which is sufficient for admission.	Not yet admitted to program	Waiting for acceptance into dentistry program. Taking academic courses at his parents' expense. Scholarship on hold until admission gained.
Basmah	Beginner level as assessed in ESL program. No IELTS test score.	Bridging courses	Graduate student at Mount Saint Vincent University.
Deema	Intermediate as assessed by George Brown College. No IELTS score.	Pathway program was taken.	Waiting for acceptance, returned to Saudi Arabia
Kadi	Pre-intermediate, level 3 as assessed by U of T ESL program	Bridging courses	Graduate student at Mount Saint Vincent University
Leena	Intermediate level as assessed by English school in Toronto. No test score.	Certificate of English language was sufficient to prove language competence.	Completed a Medical Aesthetics diploma at George Brown College.
Muna	Pre-intermediate level, level 3 (out of 6) as assessed by U of T ESL program. IELTS < 6.5. Would not divulge exact score.	Bridging program at the University of Waterloo consisting of courses related to her major (physics).	Graduate student at the University of Waterloo
Nada	Beginner, level 2, as assessed by U of T ESL program. No test scores.	Successfully completed Pathway Program.	Graduate student at Lakehead University

Noura	Beginner, level 2 based on U of T program. No IELTS score.	Pathway program	Waiting for acceptance, returned to Saudi Arabia
Rama	Intermediate, level 4 as assessed by U of T ESL program. IELTS score- 6.5.	Not admitted to Nursing program due to IELTS score.	Waiting for acceptance into graduate program. Studied towards a laboratory diploma at private career college for 11 months. Program interrupted due to school closure. Student had to return to Saudi Arabia.
Rawa	Pre-intermediate level in English as assessed by York English language program. No IELTS score.	Laboratory diploma	Could not find an acceptance in Canada. Started Master program in an Australian university
Reem	Pre-advanced, level 5, as assessed by U of T ESL program. IELTS 6.5.	Pathway program	Graduate student at Lakehead University
Sara	Beginner level, level 2 as assessed by U of T ESL program.	Professor admitted her even though required IELTS score was not attained.	Graduate student at Memorial University
Shahad	Intermediate, level 4 as assessed by U of T English program.	IELTS score of 7.	Graduate student at McMaster University

In this section, I will expand on table 3.1 with more information about the participants, their educational journey in Saudi Arabia, in Canada and any other country in which they may have lived. Profiles are listed in alphabetical order except for Leena, who is discussed together with her husband Ahmad.

Afnan

Afnan studied Nutrition and Food science as an undergraduate; after that she worked as a teacher to gain experience in the field. She believed that this teaching experience was valuable in motivating her to pursue higher education in order to become a professor in the field of nutrition and food science. When she came to Canada, Afnan studied English in Vancouver then relocated in Halifax to complete the series of bridging courses that would admit her into the program to which she applied.

Ahmad and Leena

Ahmad and Leena are a husband and wife in their 20s. Ahmad is proficient in English and is seeking acceptance into graduate dentistry schools. Ahmad was born in Britain and spent all his childhood there, speaking English at home and at school. Thus, he did not study in an ESL program once he arrived to Canada. Ahmad attained high scores in TOEFL and IELTS tests, with scores 100 out of a maximum of 120 and 7.5 out of 9 respectively. Until recently, he was still taking academic courses related to his desired major of dentistry to improve his chances of admission. He undertook these studies at his parents' expense as he had used up the amount of time allowed by the scholarship for remedial English and non-graduate coursework.

Leena came to Canada with a bachelor's degree in Islamic Studies. She was not able to apply for the scholarship as she had to wait until her husband had gained graduate admission in the event that he needed to relocate to another part of Canada

or to another country. However, while waiting, she saw the opportunity to study Medical Aesthetics, a field she enjoys immensely that focuses on the latest popular techniques of facial rejuvenation, make-up application, and hairstyling. She completed the program in 11 months and studied event planning courses. Leena had studied English in both Saudi Arabia and Canada; consequently, she was a good fit for the study.

Basmah

Basmah was my third participant who completed her bachelor degree in Nutrition and Food science. She believed that when she came to Canada, she started from the beginning in terms of her level in English. She was assessed at level 2 at the ESL program. She struggled with understanding native Canadians based on accent and rate of speech, but being immersed in the environment helped her to pick up the language quickly. After a number of attempts to achieve a high IELTS score without success, Basmah chose the secure route of bridging courses.

Deema

Deema's goal of pursuing a master's degree in a Canadian university has been a tortuous journey. Armed with a bachelor of computer science, she immediately sought and obtained work as a volunteer university instructor in an undergraduate computing laboratory with students needing to upgrade their computer skills. Then, in Canada, she studied ESL in preparation for the IELTS. Deema sat for the example multiple times and changed language schools whenever she finished the institution's

program, took the IELTS and did not achieve the required score. She finally resorted to Omnicom's Pathway course, discovered through confiding her trials to a friend. In spite of her efforts, Deema received not one admissions offer from the computer science departments to which she applied, even from Lakehead, the lone signatory with Omnicom. Eager to remain in Canada, she attempted Noura's strategy of applying to Lakehead's Economics department for the Fall 2015 semester. The temporary euphoria of an admissions offer was quashed when the Saudi bureau refused her letter of admission. Hence, a third participant in this study returned to Saudi Arabia without a western degree.

Kadi

Kadi majored in Nutrition in her bachelor's degree. She expressed her love for and ambition to learn English throughout her schooling in Saudi Arabia, all the while nursing the feeling that one day she would go abroad and pursue her dream of postgraduate studies in an anglophone country. In fact, she made it to Canada in 2012 with her brother. Similar to a number of other study participants, she enrolled in the U of T English language program followed by earning a laboratory diploma. When she started to apply to universities, Kadi found out that only three universities had a master's program in her field including Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax. After contacting the department there to learn of admission requirements, she was able to take a series of bridging courses consisting of nutrition and science, but not English, leading her into the program she always wanted.

Muna

Muna had been an undergraduate student of my mother, who is a professor of nuclear physics in Saudi Arabia. I reconnected with her through a chance meeting at a movie theatre in Toronto. We kept in touch since that meeting.

Muna completed the University of Toronto English language program, but before this she had majored in physics in Saudi Arabia. After completing her bachelor's degree, she worked as a physics teacher but felt that she needed to do more than teaching in her field so she applied for the scholarship and came to Canada with her father who was indeed the reason behind her ambition and success. Muna took the IELTS several times but could not achieve the required score.

Then she found out about the University of Waterloo's physics bridging program and was informed that she would be admitted if successfully completing it. Elated at not having to endure another remedial English class, she took the chance on the program instead of sitting for the IELTS yet another time. The gamble paid off, and indeed Muna was able to progress through these courses into her Master of Science program.

Nada

Nada studied business before coming to Canada; she knew about the scholarship program and wanted to take advantage of it as her GPA was good enough to earn a place. She started at level 1 of the U of T ESL program without earning the diploma because, like Noura, she failed the fifth level and dropped out.

Subsequently, Nada bounced around other ESL schools along with taking the IELTS many times. Frustrated and overcome with exhaustion during her second year, she paused her study for six months. After the break, Nada enrolled in the Omnicom Pathway program which granted her a full admission into Lakehead University after completion. As a matter of fact, she became a graduate student there in Fall 2015.

Noura

Noura was another friend of mine who I met in Toronto through a mutual acquaintance. She had studied Mathematics in Saudi Arabia and came to Canada to continue in this major at the graduate level. First, she studied in the U of T English language program while also preparing for the IELTS through taking classes at a private school. In addition, she hired a tutor for additional private lessons. Within 18 months of intense studying, Noura became overwhelmed by the demands of work. The anxiety led to weight loss and to her becoming antisocial by refusing to go out with me and other friends. Despite constant studying, she failed the fifth level of the U of T program and feeling despondent under the pressure, she returned to Saudi Arabia for six months.

Upon her return, Noura opted to enroll in a three month Pathway program at Omnicom English School on the advice of a friend. Omnicom language school has an agreement with Lakehead University guaranteeing admission to students who successfully complete the program. In addition, this option provided an escape from the dreaded IELTS test.

She applied to Mathematics programs at Brock, Concordia and Windsor Universities in addition to Lakehead. She finished Pathway assured of the next step-graduate school, only to be surprised when rejection letters streamed in from all the Mathematics graduate departments. Upon further investigation at Lakehead, Noura was told that there were two levels of acceptance, one with the university and another with each specific department. Therefore, while the department of Mathematics had declined her application, she was free to apply to other departments within the graduate school. Noura followed this advice and was accepted into the Economics MSc program in July 2015 for the Fall program.

There was just one hitch- under King Abdullah Scholarship guidelines, a student's graduate major must be the same or closely related (as determined on a case by case basis by Scholarship authorities) to the student's undergraduate degree. Noura went to the Saudi Embassy in Ottawa to plead her case and was turned down after being unable to convince the gatekeepers of the relationship between Mathematics and Economics. She went back to Saudi Arabia with hopes that she will return soon.

Rama

Rama came from Saudi Arabia as a nurse with work experience in her field and a fluency in English, arising from four years of a nursing degree program conducted entirely in the language, and from working in a hospital where she had to speak English with the many Philipino nurses working there.

She applied to more than 10 nursing programs in Canada without garnering a single offer of admission due to an inability to achieve the required IELTS score of 7. After multiple exam attempts, the best she could manage was a 6.5. Notwithstanding, Rama did not lose hope; instead, she commenced studies for a laboratory diploma in the hope that it would improve her application. Sadly, the private career college closed two months shy of her completion date. With neither a diploma or university acceptance letter to show for her efforts, Rama returned, dejected, to Saudi Arabia.

Rawa

Rawa studied chemistry as her undergraduate major before being granted a scholarship. She finished an advanced level ESL program at York University (advanced level) followed by completing an 11 month laboratory diploma program at a private career college in which she was able to improve her language as well as her interpersonal skills. After graduating from her diploma, Rawa did not receive an offer to pursue her desired graduate program. Like Rama, she returned home, but only briefly as, much to her relief, an offer soon arrived from a university in Australia. She is now progressing through a Master of Science chemistry program.

Reem

One of my dearest friends in Toronto, Reem came to Toronto after earning a Bachelor of Business Economics. She has loved learning English and has studiously applied herself to the subject since she was in Saudi Arabia. As a result, when she started her ESL journey in Canada, she tested into the fifth level of the six-level ESL

program at University of Toronto, completing the diploma program within four months with an overall grade of B+.

Unfortunately, the diploma was not enough for Reem to gain admission into the desired Master's program at Lakehead University, the only post-secondary institution to which she applied. Consequently, she was compelled to take the IELTS and, although only attaining a 6.5 score, she was admitted. Reem joked about this saying she was lucky when this happened, as it is rare.

Sara

Sara qualified for a scholarship while working as a physics teacher after completing her bachelor of science degree in Saudi Arabia. Sixteen weeks at an Ontario English language school yielded a pre-intermediate level certificate. After that, when she saw almost all of her friends enrolled in the U of T English language program; she followed suite, completing 12 months worth of courses. Her IELTS attempt was unspectacular; undaunted she reached out to a professor in Memorial University (as will be detailed in the findings) and was admitted based on that professor's recommendation.

Shahad

Mathematician, tutor and teacher Shahad arrived in Canada feeling confident of her English proficiency, having learned the language not only formally in school but also non-formally in a summer course in Saudi Arabia. Then, she studied English in Toronto for one-and-a-half years. So it came as a surprise to her to have to fill out

an astounding 30 graduate applications, all the while taking and retaking the IELTS until she achieved the magic score of seven. This proved to be the magic number in more ways than one, as upon notifying institutions of her improved result, seven offered her unconditional admittance. I could relate to this particular individual as I had a similar experience with my university applications, rejection after rejection until receiving the gate-opening score.

Participant Common Characteristics

All the participants were in their twenties at time of interview and each possessed a scholarship from the government of Saudi Arabia except for Leena who was accompanying her husband Ahmad. Twelve of the 14 also studied in ESL programs in Toronto (an additional participant studied in Vancouver) before moving to another cities where they have been admitted into graduate programs. Only Ahmad managed to evade the drama of IELTS, thanks to being a British passport holder.

Research Design

Narrative approach

In this study, I employed a qualitative study to investigate the particular difficulties encountered by Saudi students who have moved to Canada. Specifically, I utilized a narrative approach. Creswell (2013) describes the methodology as a mechanism for information sharing, particularly using tools such as interviews. For the purpose of this study, this approach was ideal as it involves in-depth investigation while allowing for data collection through a variety of avenues.

Data Collection

To collect the data for this study, I used three types of participant interviews including one-on-one live interviews, one-on-one skype interviews and one focus group. Letters of intent and CVs were also used. I will explain each of the methods in details in the following sections.

Participant interviews

This study primarily relied on semi-structured interviews of current graduate students. Additional students who had applied to post-secondary education but had their applications rejected were also queried. These participants provided information relevant to the afore-mentioned research questions. In addition, the respondents were asked about their scores on standardized language tests, the number of years they spent studying English, as well as their education history and high school grades. To further examine their experiences, past and current feelings about their competency

were also queried and discussed. Data collection and collation proceeded over the course of three months, which provided ample time to find participants, gather interview information, and collate and analyze the data.

Interviews proceeded smoothly with everyone; I interviewed the participants separately except for three (Leena, Deema and Rama) whom I interviewed as a focus group. I conducted eight interviews over Skype with students located outside of the GTA in cities such as Thunder Bay, Saint John's and Waterloo, who were not planning to travel to Toronto in the near future.

Participants were asked to respond to a series of semi-structured interview questions. Semi-structured interviews are designed and scheduled in advance and usually take place at a designated time and location away from everyday events. These interviews are usually centred on a set of predetermined open-ended questions, with other questions deriving from the dialogue between interviewer and interviewee (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). I decided to use semi-structured interviews in my research simply because this approach could provide a very flexible technique for a small-scale study (Drever, 1995).

A number of researchers tend to employ semi-structured interviews since the questions can be prepared ahead of time. This also allows the interviewer to be prepared during the interview, adding more to his or her competency and control. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews also offer informants, i.e. interviewees, the freedom to express their views in their own terms. Finally, semi-structured interviews can provide reliable, comparable qualitative data. (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006)

Appendix B includes a copy of the interview questions which were utilized in the study. The interview protocol was intended to tap into the research questions outlined above. It was tried and tested on two volunteers and was found to be of an appropriate length and easy to follow. This protocol took approximately 45 to 60 minutes to complete. As part of the study, all interviews were recorded in order to maintain a natural flow of conversation. The interview protocol included a range of both closed and open-ended questions. This mixed form was selected as the two types of questions serve different purposes. Close-ended questions such as *How old are you? How many years did you study English? and What was your level of English when you moved to Canada?* confirmed participant eligibility and points which do not require significant elaboration. Open ended questions along the lines of *What steps did you take or are you taking to improve your English? What is your opinion of the English language curriculum in Saudi Arabia? and How easy is it for you to complete term papers that will get an A grade?* allowed participants to speak more openly on other, more substantive questions (Sincero, 2012). Questions fell into four major categories, which were aimed to elicit the following: Background Information, Move to Canada, Difficulties related to Learning English, and Individual experiences. These questions were designed to help the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the participant and an insight into their language learning experience. Some of the sample questions were as follows:

Under the category of Difficulties while Learning English would be asked *In what context did the majority of your English learning occur?* To further clarify the question, the Interviewer provided sample contexts.

Follow up e-mail exchange

On several occasions I needed clarifications for some answers, For example, Reem said that she had a word bank now without stating how she saved the fascinating words, phrases and sentences she encountered (e.g., on flash cards or in a notebook). I then exchanged e-mails with participants to follow up. I needed some clarification on terms such as their diplomas and courses that participants have mentioned during the interviews but then when analyzing I have become confused and demanded more details for the sake of clarity. Furthermore, I kept making notes during the interviews of what the participants say and then asked them to validate the information for accuracy purpose. This process is called “member checking,” which is used in qualitative research to improve the accuracy and validity of the information provided by the participants in the interviews (Barbour, 2001; Doyle, 2007).

Analysis

The analysis of qualitative research presents a number of opportunities which can help the researcher to gather thick description in response to the questions required to derive full benefit from the process (Creswell, 2013). Primarily, interview questions were considered in terms of major themes that may arise upon analysis. These themes were derived from both an inductive and deductive approach. Inductive reasoning moves from specific, often anecdotal observations, to broader generalizations and theories in what is known as a “bottom up” approach. It involves

a degree of uncertainty in that new information that the researcher does not anticipate may arise from participant answers.

In contrast, deductive reasoning works top down, or from the more general to the more specific. The researcher enters the process with a theory that he or she is testing through the formulation of a hypothesis, observation and a conclusion that follows logically from available facts or premises. Inductivity allows for patterns to emerge during analysis, while deductivity examines the appearance of themes that have been determined beforehand based on the literature (Bulmer, 1979; Burney 2008).

Bogdan and Biklen (1982) pointed out that responses should be read several times before developing hypotheses and determining relevant themes. In other words, themes may not appear immediately and thus they require closer inspection and a considerable amount of time in order to allow ideas to finally emerge (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982).

I decided to index the interviews instead of transcribing them in their entirety. The difference between the two methods is that transcribing means typing the whole interview word by word and describing exactly what the interviewee said, while indexing refers to categorizing the data into major concepts and themes to bring meaning to the data discussed in the interview and disregarding the irrelevant points (Library of Congress, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Creswell, 2013). In my case, I was only focusing on relevant details such as learning types, experience in Canada with the graduate applications. In addition, responses were examined for common themes such as their experiences after moving to Canada, attitudes toward proficiency

tests and also their views on the effectiveness of the Saudi education system.

Subsequently, similarities and differences between the participants and their views expressed in their responses were determined.

During the interviews I noticed similarities in the participants' answers, each time I heard the same or nearly similar answer, I made a note of it so that I could keep track of and facilitate the data analysis. Regarding the coding, I indexed each interview separately. Instead of coding 14 transcripts at the end of the data collection process, each time I completed a transcript, I coded it on the same day while the event was still fresh in my mind and the data accessible. To code the themes I first divided the interview questions into three sections: prior learning, experience, and difficulty in learning the language. While interviewing the participants, I went over the three categories with each of them. Based on the interviews, I had initial codes including prior learning experience, learning experience in Canada, application experience and, finally, difficulties. Then, I had more precise codes that consisted of feelings expressed in the interviews (fear, enjoyment, confidence, etc.); learning types in both Saudi Arabia and Canada; and how participants assessed themselves.

As for the letter of intent and CV, I asked participants to provide me with their documents during the interview or via email. Analyzing these documents took place by focusing on two attributes, first, their content, and second, that they were written using the grammatical and stylistic conventions expected for North American style professional documents. Documents of those who have obtained acceptance versus others who have not, were examined. I adapted two templates for both documents which I used to analyze the letters of intent and CVs. Each aspect of the document

was given a code; for the letters of intent, the codes are alphanumeric, and for the CV, the codes are numeric, see tables 3.2 and 3.3 below.

Table 3.2

Template of an ideal letter of intent subdivided into coded categories and inspired by Bhatia (1993) Furka (2008) Smith et al. (2005) University of Toronto (2015) and Purdue University (2015)

Move Code	Move type category	Example	Description	
			<i>Ineffective</i>	<i>Effective</i>
A	Introduce candidature	Candidate introduces self and states objective	Career objective not clearly stated	Introduces self and states objective clearly
B	Establish credentials	Academic history	Factual description of achievements without a strong interpretive element.	Applicant describes past academic activities such as summer research jobs, independent-study projects, with an emphasis on what was learned from these activities, and indicating how studies in graduate program will extend that learning.
		Personal attributes that would affect training		Candidate uses this prompt to highlight a personal strength e.g. that they are a proven achiever, or that they can overcome challenges.
C	Essential Detailing of Candidature	Connection to program/area		Discusses interests in terms of key issues and theories in discipline. Claims made are backed up with facts. Reference made to facts in other parts of the application ("as my academic record shows"), offering enough examples. Language is concrete, specific with nouns and adjectives which describe desirable qualities
D	Offer value of candidacy to university department	State expectations student has of program and future plans	Outlining the topic candidate wishes to work on without offering value of candidacy to the department	Answers the central question of why candidate is an ideal match for the program, has something special to contribute to the profession. Predict contributions to the field.
		Personal information such as hobbies and other details not necessarily related to the major	Self-centered description of personality i.e. mere "showing off".	Use to demonstrate the candidate is clear minded, sensible and mature, able to handle the demands of graduate school. Mention attributes not placed elsewhere in the application if relevant to candidacy.

Table 3.3

Template of a model Canadian chronological resume divided into coded categories

Code	Category
1	Name, Address, Telephone, and Email
2	Objective- The earn my masters in (the field)
3	Education- degrees, diplomas, certificates in descending order
4	Work Experience- bulleted list highlighting key aspects of work responsibilities using action verbs and words
5	Activities- Volunteer experience; extracurricular activities
6	Skills- related to the academic field such as additional languages, computer skills etc.

Table 3.3 is based on the chronological resume and format recommended for college and university students with limited work experience (Jobsearch, 2015; Internationalstudent, 2015; University of Toronto, 2015).

Each attribute may be coded in four different ways as follows:

If the candidate provides an effective answer, the attribute is coded as “yes”.

If the candidate provides an ineffective answer, the attribute is coded as “no”.

If the answer was effective but the candidate did not completely follow native speaker conventions, the attribute is coded as “CNF”.

And finally, if the information was not provided at all, the attribute is coded as “N/A”.

A document containing over 50% of “yes” codes would be considered successful, while one which contained 50% or more “no”, “CNF” and “N/A” codes would be considered unsuccessful.

Chapter 4: Findings

This chapter presents an overview of the three essential themes that emerged during data analysis. Each theme explores the relationship the student is having with their educational landscape as a learner at a particular time between applying for the scholarship in Saudi Arabia and completing their studies in Canada whether through graduating or concluding their studies under less ideal conditions.

The first theme addresses those who come to Canada as seekers of more than a mere degree; they are seeking a new experience. The conversations brought to mind the idea of their being modern day pioneers. The second theme highlights the struggles and complexities of the learner who is seeking to overcome the difficulties being an international ESL in Canada. In contrast, the third theme focuses on learners at ease in their environment, navigating the system easily.

Educational Pioneer

A major theme that sprung up during the interviews was the concept of the modern day pioneer. The metaphor aptly describes all the participants in the study since a pioneer is one who originates or helps open up a new line of thought or activity; or is one of the first to settle in a new territory (m-w.com, 2015). The KASP is a new initiative designed to enable Saudi citizens to engage with the western world in new ways, not just as casual tourists, but as professionals well versed in western thought. Encouraging Saudi students to visit and learn in new regions also helps to promote knowledge transfer and exchange. Specifically, Saudi students are afforded an opportunity to learn about their new country. Similarly, these students have much to offer to other students and members of the community. Indeed, much language learning occurs in the context of natural encounters in places such as coffee shops,

libraries, and elsewhere in the community. None of us would be here from an economic standpoint without the generous support of the government.

I was interested to know at the beginning of the interviews why these students decided to come to Canada, and if they had reasons other than pursuing higher education. Indeed during our conversation, several answers reflected participants' ambitions, desires and needs while they are living in an anglophone country. The common trend among the participants was that they were not just in Canada to get their Master's degree; had this been their sole aim, they could have remained in Saudi Arabia. Instead, they talked about the newness and the adventure of being here, the added benefits of studying abroad, namely being immersed in the culture of Canada and also having access to other countries beyond Canada so to speak, as a result of the many persons they interact with of other nationalities that live and study here. Still, Rama stated: Besides doing a Master's, I want to experience new things.

Maha: What do you mean by new things.?

Rama: I mean being in class where there are so many different nationalities, I can also talk to native speakers. Sometimes, I feel like I am really lucky to be in Canada and I want to make it the best experience in my life.

While Rama talked about seeking interaction with native speakers, getting to know other cultures, and sightseeing as a means of fulfilling her dreams, other such as Deema, Rawa and Nada considered this opportunity of traveling abroad as a welcome change from the restricted life of females in Saudi Arabia.

The living abroad experience empowered these Saudi women to be independent, make their own decisions and move around the city unaccompanied. They were receiving education in preparation for lives beyond those of wife and mother. A number of the participants were the first females in their families to study in a foreign country including Muna and Basmah who described going over the traditions in their family by applying to scholarships and pursuing studies in a western country. The idea is remarkably new to their relatives and to their community, making Muna and Basmah eager to return to Saudi with a degree in hand to have a source of pride.

Muna: "I came to study Master's degree. My father came with me here. He left my family to be with me so I don't want to go back without my degree."

Shahad weaved in an interesting point on how beneficial this experience is to her, not only she is an educational pioneer in her family, but by virtue of her English immersion, she is now also considered an English teacher in her extended family and beyond as relatives and community members consult with her on proper English usage. This mere idea of living abroad has allowed her to be granted such a useful informal teaching opportunity.

Some participants were in Canada within the role of supportive accompanying spouse. Leena for example, did not have a scholarship; she came with her husband who had one and was looking for acceptance into medical school. As a result, she could not apply to universities until her husband found admission (the guardian male must live in the same city as per Saudi law). Still, instead of staying home being the typical Saudi wife, doing housework, having children and socializing, she resolved to make good use of her time here by choosing to study towards a medical aesthetic

diploma and taking courses in party planning. These skills would enable her to open two different businesses serving a female clientele upon returning to Saudi Arabia.

Leena: I was thinking about doing Master's degree in Canada when I came with my husband but I heard many of my friends saying that graduate acceptance is hard to get and my husband has a scholarship and needs to study too.

Maha: What did you do?

Leena: I applied to study diploma in Toronto while Ahamd [her husband] is studying courses until he gets admission.

Maha: What do you study in the diploma?

Leena: It is makeup and hair styles courses which I really enjoy.

Maha: Any plan for the future?

Leena: Yes, I will open a business in Jeddah [her city in Saudi].

On the other hand, Reem's husband went so far as to subordinate his career goals for hers. She was accepted into Lakehead University's Business Economics program while he was still going through the process of ESL and had no graduate school prospects. Her husband did not make her wait until he passed the IELTS and gained acceptance into a university so she could then adjust her plans to attend either his same institution or another in the city where he would be studying. This would be the culturally expected behaviour of a wife. Instead, he agreed to relocate in Thunder Bay just for Reem to start her program, enabling her to continue her scholarship

without interruption. They reached an agreement that “one degree for one of us” is better than nothing, not caring whether people would ask why the wife had gotten the credential instead of the husband.

The Unprepared Learner In Saudi Arabia

Prior learning

The initial excitement of being in Canada is soon tempered by the challenging reality of ESL study and the high stakes testing over which students must prevail. A great amount of time was spent during the interviews discussing the endless cycle of IELTS test attempts and other efforts students made to demonstrate English proficiency to Canadian standard.

Most of the participants felt their prior learning in Saudi Arabia had not prepared them adequately for their studies in Canada and furthermore, that their ESL and IELTS preparation studies in Canada did not prepare them adequately to compile their graduate school dossier. This led to the emergence of the notion of the *unprepared learner*. The participants shared their learning histories with me at great length and depth, then indicated to what extent this preparation furthered or hindered their scholarship experience: first, their ability to navigate the ESL studies and IELTS requirements for graduate school, and second, their ability to prepare the more subjective aspects of their graduate school application package, namely the CV and the letter of intent. These revelations created two subthemes, *a) the unprepared learner in Saudi Arabia* and *b) the unprepared ESL learner in Canada*.

Regarding their prior English learning in Saudi Arabia, 11 of the participants began learning English in public school at the intermediate level when they were 13 years old. Intermediate level is equivalent to grade seven in the Canadian education system. Leena, Nada and Rawa reported that they had studied English in private school from grades one to three, and in grade four were transferred to public schools where no English instruction was offered until grade seven. Those participants did not perceive having an advantage over those who had studied in public schools from grade 1 in terms of reading comprehension and speaking.

Maha: Did you study in public or private school?

Nada: I studied from grade one to three in private school then I went to public [school].

Maha: Did you benefit from the three years?

Nada: To be honest, no. I don't remember that I was good in English.

No participant learned English entirely in private schools. Participants' university backgrounds differed; some were science majors while others were business majors. Most of them had received instruction in Arabic. Kadi, who studied nutrition, said that even "when some courses were supposed to be given in English, the instruction was in Arabic". However, Rama, who studied nursing, did take her courses in English for four years along with Ahmad who completed his degree in dentistry schools in English instruction only. Ahmad shared his story saying:

I studied Dentistry on the undergraduate level for 6 years, during which English was the only language of professional education, exams, clinical,

and extracurricular scientific activities. That boosted my proficiency in English.

What surprised me the most about the participants' responses was the grades they had received in Saudi Arabia before they moved to Canada. Most of them reported that they had good grades in English, for example B and B+. Some hesitated before answering, perhaps to remember their grades and compare them to those earned in Canada.

Maha: How were your grades in Saudi Arabia?

Noura: Umm, I am not sure, I think they were good.

I believe that the participants did not struggle with grades since they learned the curriculum deposited by the teacher by heart and were able to reproduce memorized work during tests. Rather, their ability to speak and compose spontaneous writing became obstacles to their progress once they moved to Canada.

Nada, who said she had chatted through English classes in Saudi Arabia because of the boredom of listening to the teacher's soft voice drone on and on in lecture style, questioned whether her studies there had impacted her subsequent English studies in Canada. Once she arrived in Canada, she had to start at the beginner level after enrolling at a popular Toronto language school, a clear indication of a significant deficiency in the skills required to function at university. Similarly Basmah expressed uncertainty about her former learning- "all memorization and regurgitation from grade 7 through her undergraduate years". She had to enroll at beginner level English in Canada despite her prior studies.

All Saudi-schooled students agreed that English was categorized as a low-priority subject compared to other aspects of the curriculum such as mathematics and

science. All the participants were critical of their respective schools' English instruction. Views on English instruction varied among the participants, but most of them had negative experiences with learning the language for several reasons including teaching methods, curriculum, instructors' attitude and personal motivation. A common trend among the participants was the use of memorization when they were learning English in their home countries. Nine of the 14 participants: Sarah, Muna, Leena, Deema, Noura, Shahad, Rama and Nada reported that they had to memorize essays and regurgitate the exact same material on tests. In so doing, they always received high grades.

Rama: "Sometimes I did not know what I [was] writing; it was just like copy and paste."

Nada was especially frustrated by the memories this question evinced, noting that

"I remember we had to memorize writing for tests. How is that possible? [English] was just a course, not a skill."

Muna also commented on her ESL in Saudi Arabia:

Muna: The methods were ineffective and badly planned.

Maha: Could give me an example?

Muna: They were using traditional methods. I hated English during all my previous life. It was really boring.

Maha: What do you mean by traditional?

Muna: They write on the board, used CD players and gave us homework related to the lesson somehow.

When I asked Noura about her prior English learning in Saudi Arabia, she said,

Noura: I don't consider that as learning.

Maha: Why?

Noura: You know how they teach English there. I just memorize.

Maha: You compared it to the Canadian experience, I think.

Noura: Yes, sure. I started here from the beginning, I knew that I did not learn that much in Saudi.

She did not value what she learned there as much as what she learned in Canada.

Furthermore, Noura complained that the curriculum never helped her to speak English because, perhaps, the teachers regularly spoke Arabic in the classroom. She said,

I came here to Canada, and all people around me speak English; I managed to understand. So if in Saudi [Arabia] teachers [speak] English in the English courses, we will get used to it, and we will understand [even better].

Nada talked about the effect of her traditional learning in Saudi Arabia,

“It does not depend on the curriculum. It depends on how we are motivated.

At that time I was not motivated to [learn] English.”

Nada did not feel she had ineffective teachers, describing them as “kind” professionals who provided solid instruction. But, she said “The classes were boring”, leading the students to chat with each other instead of paying attention. For her, studying English was only a hurdle she needed to jump over to be promoted to

the subsequent grade. She memorized enough to avoid failing because students who failed would have to retake the test before being promoted; yet, it was not a subject to be taken seriously like mathematics or science. At that time she did not realize how crucial the language would be in meeting her career goals. Rama, Deema and Leena agreed that teachers in Saudi Arabia did not focus on creative writing skills; they focused on grammar and vocabulary. They did not know how to deliver the information. Leena lamented the irrelevancy of course content, recounting that

“We learned things that I am not going to use in my daily life.”

Kadi reflected on her prior learning experience in Saudi Arabia:

Kadi: I remembered in Saudi Arabia, teachers focused on just delivering the content from the textbooks instead of making effort to make the lessons interesting for us.

Maha: Can you give me an example?

Kadi: Yes, for example, a grammar rule that needs to be practiced not only writing the rule on the board, explain it out loud and that's it. Teachers also do not make sure if we understand or not.

Maha: That's hard, I know.

She believes that her teachers were only focusing on delivering the information without checking if the students understood the material. In other words, teachers were not interested in how the students were doing. I assumed that this lack of both interest and scaffolding method impacted the learners.

Basmah commented on the same point that Saudi teachers focused on “grammar without asking us to give examples”. She meant that teachers did not give

them the time to discuss the lessons and practice reflection on what they learned.

Afnan and Leena concluded on their prior learning by noting that she thinks the teaching methods have changed since she was a student in Saudi Arabia. They were optimistic about the current status of ESL in Saudi Arabia.

The Unprepared Learner In Canada

As noted in the introduction, students from countries where English is not the first language must undergo a rigorous series of language assessment and testing to ensure they meet near native speaker facility in the language. A test score of 7 on the IELTS is a partial indicator of readiness that allows the student to prepare their graduate school applications immediately and not detour into the land of language courses and test score preparation classes.

Most of the participants in this study had to make the detour, a route so predictable that the scholarship includes financial support for up to two and a half years of preparatory English study. I asked them about their English level when they moved to Canada. The levels of the interviewees varied from pre-beginner, (level 1 out of 6, where 6 would be advanced) to level 5 or pre-advanced based on written and oral test assessments performed on the first day of enrollment. Sara, Nada and Noura started at the beginner level 2 in the same program at the University of Toronto while Muna Basmah, Afnan, Rama, Leena and Deema stated their level was assessed as intermediate or 3, shortly after arrival. So into the U of T ESL program.

Kadi: I was in intermediate level. But, I asked the ESL institute [school office] to put me in a higher level because I already know what is being taught in intermediate level. After two weeks I moved to upper-intermediate level.

In tandem with ESL, students began attempting the IELTS where their unpreparedness was also reflected in the number of times most of them had to write the test before emerging with a high enough result. As I discussed earlier in the paper, neither a specific level of English nor a language proficiency test score was required from applicants to the King Abdullah Scholarship Program. However, the IELTS (or TOEFL) is mandatory to gain admission into a Canadian graduate program.

The number of attempts to reach the minimum score differed; ranging from a high of eight to a low of two, and the average number of five. Some refused to disclose the exact number of times they tried, perhaps out of embarrassment or fear that I would judge them. In hindsight, I wish I had pushed more or attempted to create a deeper rapport by revealing that I had taken the test eight times myself. Noura shared her experience with writing the test several times, studying for a year and a half to the point of burnout:

Maha: How many times did you take the test?

Noura: More than four times I think.

Maha: Did you take preparation courses?

Noura: “Yes. And I also had a tutor for the IELTS test, but I could not get the score I needed.

Maha: What did you do after that?

Noura: I could not stay in Canada. I was tired. I went to my family then I came back to study Pathway.

Rama also was so determined to get a 7 score in the IELTS that she kept trying for over two years, even up to her last months in Canada:

Maha: How many times did you take the test.?

Rama: Too many. I started to take the test once I arrived to Canada in 2012 and the last time I wrote it was in February 2015.

Maha: Did you get the score?

Rama: I did get 6.5, but I could not improve it to 7.

Maha: That's unfortunate. This is always the case here in Canada.

According to the participants, reading and writing were the most difficult skills to learn. Among the 14 participants, six said that reading was the most difficult. Seven, on the other hand, considered writing the most difficult, while only one participant, Sara, felt that listening, followed by reading, posed the greatest challenge for her. She was also one of the nine who had experienced difficulties with academic reading. All identified speaking as the easiest part of L2, a perception reflected in IELTS in which speaking was the section with the highest average score for all the participants.

Deema:” Writing is hard because I found it hard to support my paper with research and do the paraphrasing.”

Rama explained her struggle with the writing skill saying: When I write essay in class, I find it easy but if the teacher asks me to put references in the paper, I find it hard because I have to read and summarize research.

Sara commented by saying: Listening is the hardest to be good at.

Maha: Why?

Sara: I do not usually get the vocabulary people are saying. I mean, I don't know...I have to ask for repeating. In the test [IELTS] the accent is British and it is even harder.

Shahd shared her story by saying:

Reading for me was the hardest skill because I do not use to read in English then when I came to Canada I had to take the IELST and read hard passages. I was not able to read and answer the questions very quickly, the time ends and I still do not get all the answers.

Two outliers emerged from the “unprepared learners” in Canada was Ahmad who is as proficient at English as a native speaker, did not study ESL in Canada, and he had an outstanding score on both the IELTS and the TOEFL. He assessed his level as “near native speaker.” Reem started at level 5 pre-advanced in the University of Toronto English program, which meant that she had only one level to complete the program. I considered her a student who possessed an outstanding a standout level of English. It is fair to say that she was prepared for ESL and graduate school.

The Applications treadmill

While upgrading their English in Canada, participants sent many applications to various Canadian universities since the only purpose of their scholarship was to

continue their higher education and not remain in remedial English programs for an extended time.

Rama spoke of her experience applying to Canadian universities:

Rama: I applied to almost 11 universities. I also sent three applications to the same university, but the problem was that my major, [nursing]...required 7 in the IELTS

Maha: Did you get a high score in the test [IELTS]?

Rama: Yes, I have [a] 6.5, which is a high score, but unfortunately in my major, they [asked] for 7 out of 9, which is a bit hard to get.

Rama is still looking for acceptance. Deema was not successfully admitted to Lakehead University in spite of completing the Pathway program (as noted in her profile). When I asked her about being rejected by other Canadian universities, she explained that many of the applications she submitted were incomplete, lacking crucial documents such as references and test score results:

Deema : “I have never [received] a letter of refusal. It was just I [didn't] complete the files every time I [applied].”

Her answer gave the impression that she did not really care about exploring options other than Lakehead, or maybe she was depending on someone else to submit her documents for her and complete her application. This passivity may have been inherited from her prior learning.

Noura had burnt out and consequently paused her studies; at the time of the interview, she was still looking for graduate school acceptance after finishing the Pathway Program. She was trying to stay in Canada as long as she could to apply for

universities instead of terminating her scholarship and returning to Saudi Arabia. Unfortunately, Noura applied to more than three universities without success. In her opinion the main reason she was unsuccessful was her low IELTS score. Completing the Pathway Program was not sufficient alone to secure admission to her desired program as explicated in her profile. Furthermore, Noura complained that her professors in Saudi Arabia do not always complete and send recommendation letters to Canadian universities, complicating the application process.

Native speaker avoidance

An overall theme of apprehension towards engaging with native speakers unfolded. Deema and Leena were frequently baffled by what native speakers were saying during face-to-face encounters due to the accent and speed of speech, while Rama and Reem found that speaking on the phone was more difficult. Rama had little trouble with live conversations, noting that they were much easier because of facial expressions instead of a disembodied voice.

Leena's outlook showed hesitancy to any conversation with native speakers, avoiding contact as much as possible:

I don't like talking in English; if I find someone who speaks Arabic, I would rather communicate with him- Arabic with Arabs. [And] English with English [only when I have to].

The Engaged Learner

Not all ESL students find the journey to proficiency an uphill battle. Many immerse themselves into the world of language learning with gusto, embracing not only the curricula offered through formal programs, but employing any number of strategies that align with non-formal and informal modes of learning to familiarize themselves with North American style English. These became my *engaged learners*. Engagement in my study context refers to the learning modalities the participants reported to be the most effective in their language acquisition. I deliberately used the word “acquisition” to distinguish from “learning,” which insinuates hard work that is sometimes not fun.

I asked participants to appraise their Canadian ESL experience along a continuum of ease to difficulty and in comparison to ESL experiences in Saudi Arabia. They all noted and appreciated the chance to explore techniques in Canada that differed from the formal traditional model that held sway in Saudi Arabia. Despite an unawareness of the formal/non-formal/informal nomenclature, their descriptions matched one or more of the categories outlined earlier in Table 2.1. Participants’ descriptions of language encounters in both countries are outlined in Table 4.1 below.

Table 4.1: Participants' descriptions of learning types experienced in Saudi Arabia versus in Canada

Learning types	In Saudi Arabia and other countries before arriving in Canada	In Canada
<p>Formal learning: Overseen by governmental authority, takes place in traditional schools, scores are official and process fulfills gatekeeping requirement for progress to higher grade level</p>	<p>Participants reported that formal learning dominated their prior experience with L2. They studied English in school from grade 7 until grade 12. Then as undergraduates, they were mandated to take between two and four English courses as prerequisites for graduating.</p> <p>Ahmad and Rama's undergraduate majors were conducted entirely in English.</p>	<p>All participants except Ahmad completed one of the following three proficiency programs-U of T esl, Pathway or Bridging. A U of T ESL certificate guaranteed admission to graduate school at U of T. Pathway certificate guaranteed admission to Lakehead and institutions specific Bridging programs guaranteed admission to University of Waterloo and M St. Vincent.</p>
<p>Non-formal learning: Not necessarily offered by governmental authority, occurs outside of the schools. Its flexibility and adability makes easier to access.</p>	<p>Afnan studied in a private English language institution after school.</p> <p>Shahad studied English in a summer course offered by a private language school, not regulated by the government.</p> <p>Tutors had provided some help for two of the participants allowing for individual attention, a slower pace, detailed answers to questions and materials tailored to the students' needs and interests.</p>	<p>Tutors were hired for preparation for the IELTS test by some of the participants.</p>

	Reem and Kadi studied English on their own. They sourced textbooks independently from school and sought to understand the content in a self-directed manner.	
<p>Informal learning:</p> <p>Initiated by the individuals. Never organized by official institutions. Not intentional. Has no premeditated objectives. Its result is consider the most effective and least laborious.</p>	<p>Ahmad acquired L2 proficiency through immersion by virtue of being born in England and living there until age 6. In addition, his babysitter was English</p> <p>Working at a hospital with international nurses provided a learning rich environment for Rama and Basmah to practice English and unintentionally improve their competence on a daily basis</p>	<p>Participants were constantly exposed to English in public places such as the airport, restaurants, coffee shops and school lounges which helped them to improve their L2.</p> <p>Participants engaged in popular culture by watching popular Western movies, making friends with native speakers plus reading books and newspapers, making ESL seem effortless relative to the perusal of textbooks and study manuals.</p>

I was first introduced to the three learning types when my supervisor suggested that I include them in my literature review. Formal and informal learning were familiar terms to me, but the non-formal was totally new. Consequently, I dug deep to uncover more about the difference among the three terminologies. I intended to ask the participants about the extent of each learning type they had experienced in Saudi Arabia and how effective they were compared to what they had encountered during their studies in Canada. The three terms could be confusing; ergo, I needed to

explain the three types to the participants each time I conducted an interview. The three modes are defined as follows (Andronie, 2013; OECD, 2015): Formal learning is associated with traditional schooling whereas non-formal learning is more learner centered than formal education. They are both organized and involve varying degrees of structure. Informal learning refers to learning by experience such as when a child learns to speak almost by osmosis. In more detail, according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2015), formal learning has preplanned learning objectives and always transpires intentionally; for example, the learner has a clear objective and goals to gain knowledge and skills. Non formal is organized and can have objectives; it is known as a less structured and more flexible type of learning that occurs outside the traditional classroom. Informal learning is never organized, nor is it intentional. It has no premeditated objectives regarding learning outcomes.

Language encounters in Saudi Arabia

Predictably, interviewees all answered that the dominant learning available in Saudi Arabia was of the formal variety. They juxtaposed this somewhat restrictive mode with informal language acquisition, which results from being immersed in a culture where the language is present in a multitude of formats all the time and choosing to engage, that is, actively participate in that culture. This was felt to be the most effective type of learning and underscored the participants desire to study in Canada instead of remaining in Saudi Arabia.

Still, the engaged learners, unlike the unprepared learners, were able to acquire crucial language skills from the formal, didactic structure that constitutes the Saudi ESL classroom.

Kadi and Sara opined that a strong formal background in grammar gained from schooling in Saudi Arabia had a positive impact on their subsequent English proficiency. Sara said:

I found my grammar good when I came to Canada. I think because in Saudi we focused on grammar more than speaking. Maybe this was the reason. I just studied English in school [in Saudi].

They both claimed that learning under supervision was the best way for them to strengthen their English.

Maha: What can you tell me about your learning types: formal, non-formal and informal.?

Sara: I prefer the formal learning and I only had it in Saudi.

Maha: Why do you prefer it ?

Sara: I think it is better to learn with the teacher. I mean under supervision.

For me, I need some one to help me and answer my questions.

In addition to the probability that Kadi may be one of those students who need external structure at the foundational level of learning a new discipline as a stepping stone to building intrinsic motivation, her love of English perhaps transcends the mode of learning. Her focus in mastering the language may be so strong that it does

not matter whether teaching is didactic or constructive or whether it takes place formally, informally or non-formally. This is supported by the fact that Kadi (as well as Reem) actively pursued self-directed, non-formal learning, prior to coming to Canada. Their love of the language prompted them to source books which they worked through on their own to improve themselves. Their efforts were to later have a positive effect on their adjustment to an all English environment in Canada.

In Saudi Arabia, Reem went so far as to carry a notebook around with her, writing out individual words and sentences that appealed to her wherever they popped up, in movies, books, or conversations. She regularly memorized vocabulary that appealed to her and was relevant to her life.

Basmah and Rama verbalized their practical knowledge in Saudi Arabia. They both worked in a hospital in their home country where they were constantly exposed to the language when they talked with staff and patients.

Ramd talked about her informal learning:

“ I worked in hospital before coming to Canada. I got the opportunity to speak in English with other nurses which helped me a lot.”

Afnan, on the other hand, had studied English in private institutions before coming to Canada. This kind of non-formal learning impacted her competence. Conversely, for Basmah watching American television shows was an effective informal means of learning English. She said that “ I learned a lot from movies not the textbooks.”

Rama said that she lived with her aunts during her university studies, and she sometimes spoke English with them in an attempt to improve her proficiency level.

Ahmad, who was fluent in English, had benefited from having a babysitter who always spoke to him in English and from living in the United Kingdom where Ahmad was immersed in the language.

I had a babysitter who spoke to me in English all the time over 2 and a half years, so I was exposed to English as a second language early in life and started learning it then. I also took English classes in public schools between 1996 and 2003, plus advanced English courses in dental school between 2003 and 2005, which helped me perfect my English skills.

Nada reported that she had a tutor in secondary school from grade 10 to 12. Deema had her aunt tutor her as she was a qualified English teacher and, in Deema's opinion, an "excellent instructor".

Passive learning has its advantages for Rawa, Sara, Shahad and Afnan who claimed that their limited background had helped them in the new environment.

Rawa was enthused about the advantages of learning English in Saudi Arabia:

I already knew the basics, the grammar and advanced vocabulary. Even when I came to Canada and applied to English school, I was [at a] good [level], and my grades were almost perfect.

Similarly, Sara recalled that when she came to Canada, her level was acceptable, for she could understand a substantial amount of what people were saying. Shahad, who was unsatisfied with how English was taught in Saudi Arabia, said that her basic grammar and conversation helped her when she moved to Canada in 2012.

Afnan believed that her background in English allowed her to speak in the first weeks in Canada. This proves that her traditional learning had impacted her to some extent but not to a great level.

Afnan: my level in English when I came to Canada was not that good but I could speak with people in café and restaurant and made orders. In my school [ESL in Canada], my grammar was good compared to my classmates.

Language Encounters in Canada

Participants juxtaposed the somewhat limited opportunities to learn English in Saudi Arabia with the 24/7 English environment they enjoy in Canada. They appreciated the informal language acquisition which results from being immersed in a culture where the language is present in a multitude of formats all the time and choosing to engage, that is, actively participate in that culture. This was felt to be the most effective type of learning and underscored the participants desire to study in Canada instead of remaining in Saudi Arabia.

Participants gave positive responses when I asked them if the informal activity of watching movies had helped them improve their L2. Deema and Leena reacted similarly toward this question. They both felt that the vocabulary they encountered in movies benefited their learning and was so enjoyable, that it did not feel like learning. Rama observed:

“I learn from movies the informal language; if we learn English from one source, which is schools, we will not be able to improve our language.”

Likewise, Noura expressed that she learned more from watching movies than from reading or making friends with native speakers. As she said:

“Yeah, sure. I love movies, and when I watch them, I save [interesting] sentences I hear in my notebook.”

Some participants preferred learning from each other rather than always consulting inanimate reference materials to clarify grammar and vocabulary, even though these reference materials such as books, computers and cell phones were close at hand and more easy to access than a friend. They would memorize a word they had encountered and ask their friends about it later. For example, Reem called me recently and asked, “Maha, what does ‘alternative’ mean? I heard the word in a movie yesterday.” Waiting until she could call me represented an excuse to socialize with another language learner, share experiences and discuss ESL concepts encountered with one another.

Participants were particularly engaged in this part of the interview. They had much more exposure to the English language in Canada than they did in Saudi Arabia. Most participants reported that movies were the most effective way to learn English. For Reem and Rawa though, the ESL programs were the most effective.

Participants were required to study almost two years in English programs including Pathways and diploma programs. When I asked them about their L2 levels after moving to Canada and residing in a country where English was the official language, they reported positively about their experience. For example, Sarah stated,

Before I could not speak very well, and I can’t understand anyone who speaks with me. But now I can speak very well, and I can understand anything I am

hearing. I can speak with my supervisor and discuss all things related to the study. Also, I can speak English with anyone, whatever their nationality.

Rawa also commented on her progress: “Yes, it has improved, especially in speaking, because I have the vocabulary now, but I was shy in speaking [before].”

Ahmad, the only C2, reflected that “I improved a little, especially in conveying what I want to say in short clauses as people here generally use simple words.”

Nada agreed that her speaking level had improved the most. From being unable to form a correct sentence in Saudi Arabia, through ESL, she could now participate during discussions and clearly express her opinion. In addition, Reem noticed that her pronunciation had improved in terms of certain phonemes. She began developing an extensive word bank in a notebook, and has improved her ability to guess the meaning of words based on the context within which they occur.

Remarking positively on her L2 speaking skills, Rama showed pride at being able to use them anywhere as did Shahad who became more confident about her speaking competence. Their reflection on speaking surfaced as a common trend.

With respect to writing, Muna said she can now edit her own work, and she feels more confident when talking with native speakers. In a similar vein, Kadi assessed her progress in writing observing that

“Now I can understand and write an essay in one week compared to a year ago.” (It used to take her over a month).

While Deema and Leena felt an improvement in their L2, they were still eager to hone their skills. Whereas most participants saw room for L2 augmentation, Rama took a more complacent approach:

“I am satisfied with my level, and that’s the problem because I should not feel that way. I need to improve my language more.”

To recap, technically, a student who takes the IELTS several times and fails to receive a score of 7 must return to Saudi Arabia (review Table 2.1) However, not every student who encounters that roadblock throws in the towel. A number of participants propelled themselves from unprepared learner to *engaged learner* using ingenious and little known strategies.

Take Muna, for example: Three IELTS attempts failed to yield a high score, and held up her admission to University of Waterloo’s Physics program. Other aspects of her profile were strong, such as her 3.49/4 GPA, and she felt strongly that she deserved entry despite the low score. She emailed the admissions department seeking a way around the IELTS gate, and was rewarded by an offer of another means of entry- a series of department specific bridging courses. Although this represented yet another gate, it was one she knew she could overcome. And she did. Muna is now completing her Master of physics.

Reem completed the Pathway Program and was admitted into Lakehead University with only a score of 6.5 in the IELTS. The existence of Pathway is something of a secret. Students discover it through word of mouth or by reading deeply into the website of Omnicom School of Languages (Omnicom, 2015), considering that the school does not blatantly advertise Pathways as a means of entering partnered universities without English proficiency tests. The advertising also does not specify exactly which series of academic courses constitute Pathway. One suspects that because the school is run on a for-profit business model, the advertising

is designed to leave room for the student to follow up with company representatives, and be sold an individualized package of courses.

At any rate, Reem was one of the few lucky participants to pursue this option on the advice of a friend and have it open the door of graduate school for her.

She said: "I applied once, and I got accepted in that one university."

Reviving the idea of the pioneer, Sara, I think, is a great example - someone who is the first among her friends who thought of an innovative solution to overcome the IELTS roadblock by finding a way around the score-of-7 gate beyond bridging courses or Pathway. Undaunted by her low score, Sara, asked a Saudi PhD student already in the program she wished to enter, to recommend her to his advisor. She then personally lobbied this professor, extolling her positive attributes and value she could bring to the program. Sara exchanged e-mail communications with the professor and waited for three months before he approved her application.

The C2 Ahmad had applied without success to more than 16 universities in Canada and the US. The main reason for being rejected was not English proficiency; rather, it was his lack of lab experience. Had he chosen a less competitive branch of science than dentistry (as did Reem and Muna), he would have easily been admitted to programs of his choice. But he insists on single-mindedly pursuing this field. At the time of writing (Fall 2015), Ahmad is still in Canada completing academic courses related to dentistry at his own expense.

Shahad, one of the most ambitious and persistent participants that I interviewed, mentioned that she had sent 30 applications to different Canadian universities before receiving acceptance. She felt that she had been rejected so often

due to her IELTS score of 6.5 and missing reference letters. Even when she gained acceptance, it was conditional on her retaking the IELTS and producing a higher score. Accordingly, she worked hard on increasing her score to 7. Upon reporting that score, she received an astounding 15 unconditional admission offers around the same time. Now, she is a graduate student at McMaster University.

In 2013 I applied for 30 universities. 15 of them give me a conditional acceptance until I achieve the IELTS score and complete the references, which was the hardest thing for me. Most of my professor are not helpful or even not responsive at all. In 2014, I achieve the IELTS score and talked with the universities about the situation with the references then I applied for 10 universities and 6 of them gave me the final acceptance without conditions. It was hard because of the high competition between international students and for me contacting with my professes in Saudi Arabia to complete the references.

The road to admission was less difficult for Kadi, Basmah and Afnan. Kadi did not have sufficient experience in her major (Nutrition) to gain acceptance into Canadian universities, but she was able to take bridging courses before receiving offers of admission. Her IELTS score did not impede her. Now, she is a graduate student at Mount Saint Vincent University.

Kadi pointed out : I got accepted in MSVU but I have to take bridging courses because I have one low skill [score] in IELTS test. I got rejected from other universities because of the experience and other requirement [English competence]

The innovative methods students used to subvert the IELTS are summarized in the following figure (Figure 4.2).

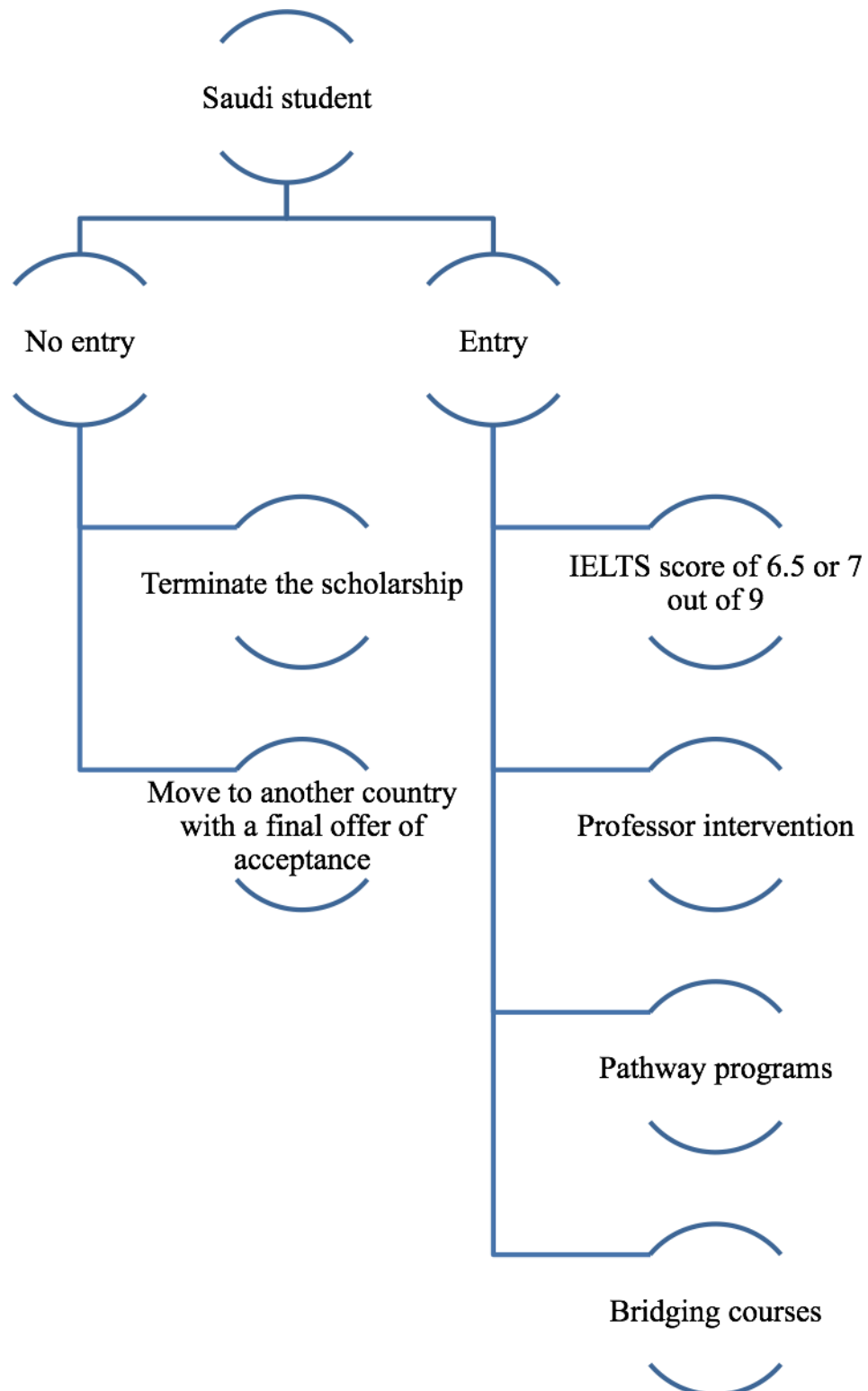


Figure 4.2 Flow chart demonstrating student participant admission paths.

Participants enjoyed their academic L2 classes where they frequently practised the language with other learners holding similar skills; however, when talking with native speakers, they reported decreased levels of confidence and ability.

Nada reflected: I enjoy talking in English but not with native speakers.

Maha: Do you feel confident when you speak?

Nada: Yeah, but it depends with whom I talk.

Sara spoke about her English ability with self-assurance:

“Actually, yes, I am very proud of myself when I want to speak English. That is my goal.”

She stressed how much she had improved since being immersed in the L2 culture.

Muna still enjoyed L2 conversation, lack of confidence notwithstanding.

Unlike the *unprepared learners* mentioned earlier, Rawa had cultivated a number of native-speaking friends with whom she interfaced very easily. She affirmed that she had no problem communicating with them because she managed to understand most of what they said, and she expressed herself clearly.

Even though most of the participants had been learning English in Canada for almost two years, they made a number of basic mistakes that someone who had studied an L2 for that length of time should no longer be making (Ellis, 1994). These mistakes appeared both during the interviews and in e-mail correspondence.

Discussion on the measures they employed to amend their L2 formed a salient part of the interviews. Again, Saudi students do not usually make friends with native speakers of English, but when I asked them about ways to improve their language, some expressed a willingness to live with a host family who speaks only English so

as to boost their communicative skills. Sara, Leena and Deema intended to target reading, assuring me that after this interview, they would actually open up some of the many English language books they had purchased but subsequently ignored. Two primary modes of learning emerged from this interview. First, the importance of having native English speaking friends was critical. Access to these individuals helped to encourage conversation and interaction in a natural and realistic format. Second, the majority of participants decided to centralize their reading, which is a skill that they had previously establish as most critical to mastering their studies in their L2. Finally, having native speaker friends also appeared to encourage these individuals to place a greater emphasis on the value of learning English through reading. Rama vowed to push herself beyond her comfort zone of Arabic friends and meet Canadians. Shahad ruminated that if she could go back in time, she would rather have studied all her courses in English with no Arabic instruction. Meanwhile, Muna is planning to read more scientific articles; use an application on her phone to listen to and read the news in English and conduct research in her field. Consequently, she will be focusing on reading and listening. In addition to reading, Reem, whose major challenge had been properly structuring her written assignments, set a goal of polishing her writing craft.

In lieu of pinpointing a specific area to refine, Nada felt her immersion in the L2 culture, living and learning on a constant basis, was sufficient for the time being.

Basmah and Sara planned to practice English more with native speakers to boost their speaking ability. Furthermore, Noura said the the multicultural nature of Toronto will help her understand a variety of English accents beyond the standard

Canadian version. Overall, the above-described measures constituted a goal of these students to obtain a C2 level of language competence.

I composed a question asking the participants to define what a good sentence was in their opinion, and I reflected on whether it is hard to form this type of sentence. Some answered while others needed time to think of the perfect definition. A Memorial University student participant admitted that she still found it difficult to write a paper independently; assistance from tutors is sometimes necessary. Although constructing a grammatically correct sentence was not difficult for her, she made grammatical errors in her papers. Most participants used the word “grammar” as an indicator of a good sentence. Their frequent use of this term belies the fact that Saudi Arabian teachers focus on grammar as a means of learning English more than other means (e.g., presentations, speaking, and book clubs). Thus, it appears that the reliance on teaching grammar in Saudi schools has resulted in a positive impact on students during their educations in Canada. Students are better equipped to communicate and interact within the classroom given this additional focus on grammar. For instance, Reem came first in a University of Toronto English language program grammar competition. For Deema and Leena, Nada and Afnan, a good sentence is simply a subject, a verb and a clear meaning whereas for Rama, a good sentence is also about style. For instance, it should not be too long. Others (Ahmad, Sara, Rawa and Shahad) stressed the importance of grammar in a sentence when they stated respectively that “a good sentence incorporates appropriate grammar, vocabulary and most importantly, the proper verb tense that best serves the meaning.

It just has to [use proper] spelling, grammar and vocabulary.” Rawa, who expressed facing difficulty in learning English grammar, said that “ it means good grammar.” .

In Shahad’s opinion: It should be understandable and have a few grammar mistakes.

Maha: Why did you include mistakes.?

Shahad: We make mistakes in our own language. I guess it is okay to have a sentence with grammar mistakes that do not change the meaning.

Analysis of Letters of Intent and CVs

Letter of intent

One of the requirements for graduate program entry is to prepare a letter of intent. The participants provided me with the letters of intent submitted when they applied to their graduate programs. Most of my interviewees disclosed that they did not write their letters by themselves but sought outside help to understand what was required in terms of content and structure. They consulted people who had experience with this genre of writing. According to the 14 participants in my study:

- 11 of them admitted that they did not write their letter; instead, they had someone else (a friend, husband or editor) write the whole statement.

The reason unanimously given for seeking outside help was the participants’ concerns about their level of proficiency in English. Since they had to write the letter early in their preparatory ESL period, they felt they did not possess the required level of writing. They wanted the letter to be perfect as they knew it would play a crucial role in their applications. In addition to citing the mechanics of English as being a

stumbling block, the participants also explained they did not have experience with writing that involved self-reflection on the part of the applicant. Hence, they enlisted the help of Saudi graduate students who had written letters of intent the previous year. Deema, Nada, Sara, Reem and Muna all said they had easy access to acquaintances and friends ahead of them in the scholarship program who were more than happy to lend a hand. Leena was even more fortunate; her husband Ahmed, the sole participant with native speaker ability, wrote her letter of intent. He did ask her several questions, but with an in-depth knowledge of her personality, penned a comprehensive exposition accentuating her strengths.

Maha: Who did help you in writing the letter and CV?

Deema: I asked my friend first if she knew someone to help. She contacted me to Saudi student who helps in writing.

Maha: Did he wrote everything?

Deema: Yes, he asked questions about my degrees and experience then wrote the draft.

Maha: You did not try to write a first draft by yourself?

Deema: No.

Maha: Can I ask why?

Deema: I can't at that time, my writing was not very good.

Others who were prepared to study in Canada and had the ability to write their letters of intent and CVs by themselves at least wrote a first draft and only later sought editing. Rama had not procured an acceptance at the time of writing although she had become fluent in English, having completed a four-year nursing degree in

English and earned an IELTS score of 6.5 out of 9. She wrote the letter independently after consulting with her teachers in schools in addition to going online to investigate more about her program. She had the courage to draft it. Then she made use of the skills of a native speaking English editor plus a non-native speaker to doublecheck her writing.

She recalled that “it was a shock when I [learned] that there is something called [a] letter of intent that I have to submit with my application.”

Ahmad was proficient enough in English that he wrote his letter by himself. He consulted his father and researched online; nonetheless, he did not employ an editing service. Shahad, on the other hand, noted, “ I tried to write it and then had a non-native speaker [go] over it.” She also insisted on the importance of reading sample letters because it helped her to form a clear idea of the requirements.

Regarding the letters themselves, first, I started to read each letter individually and formed my first impressions on them. Most of them were well written with minor errors consistent with those that the non-native speakers who had composed them would make. Then I reread the letters to examine whether they contained the four components expected by an admissions committee: namely, an introduction of the candidature, the establishment of credentials, essential detailing of candidature and an offer of value of the candidacy to the department (see table 3.2). I applied one of the four codes (yes, no, CNF or N/A) to each component of the letter. After examining the letters in depth, I would describe them as successful or strong “s”, versus unsuccessful or weak “w”. A letter that contained over 50% of “Yes” codes would be considered successful, while one which contained 50% or more “no”,

“CNF” and “N/A” codes would be considered unsuccessful. Results were tabulated in Table 4.3 below.

Results

Table 4.3

Summary of Analysis of Letters of Intent and CVs by move type

Document and move code	Participant													
	Afnan	Ahmad	Rawa	Shahad	Deema	Kadi	Leena	Muna	Nada	Basmah	Noura	Rama	Reem	Sara
LOI														
A	Yes	N/A	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A	Yes	Yes	N/A	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
B	Yes	N/A	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A	No	Yes	N/A	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
C	Yes	N/A	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A	No	Yes	N/A	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
D	Yes	N/A	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A	Yes	Yes	N/A	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Overall Strength "S" Or Weakness "W" of Loi	S		S	S	S			W	S		S	S	S	S
CV														
1	Yes	N/A	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A	Yes	Yes	N/A	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
2	No	N/A	Yes	No	No	N/A	N/A	No	No	N/A	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
3	Yes	N/A	CNF	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A	CNF	Yes	N/A	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
4	Yes	N/A	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A	Yes	Yes	N/A	CNF	CNF	CNF	Yes
5	Yes	N/A	Yes	Yes	Yes	N/A	N/A	Yes	Yes	N/A	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
6	No	N/A	Yes	Yes	No	N/A	N/A	No	No	N/A	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Overall Strength "S" Or Weakness "W" of Loi	S		S	S	S			W	S		S	S	S	S

Key

Yes= Effective answer

CNF= Answer effective but Native speaker conventions not followed

No= ineffective answer

N/A = not completed

All but one letter of intent and CV pair were strong. This suggests that it is possible letters of intent and CVs may play a reduced role in decisions relating to admissions. It is possible that some letters and CVs may never be reviewed in situations where a student's level of English proficiency scores are too weak. English proficiency level thus acts as a gatekeeper for continuing on in the admissions process. Importantly, this finding also highlights the critical importance of conducting phone or in-person interviews with potential candidates. The interview provides valuable information that cannot be edited or completed by anyone other than the student themselves. Thus, it may be prudent for admissions committees to place additional weight on these interviews along with a somewhat reduced weight on letters and CVs.

The only weak letter I received was submitted by a science major. While her objective was clearly stated, other factors had a negative effect on her letter, for example, the description of her achievements, which simply comprised a list of undeveloped points. She also did not demonstrate her topic and show her ability to offer value to the program. Muna had been accepted through bridging courses. In contrast to Muna's positive results were the negative results of two candidates who nevertheless had strong documents.

One was a letter composed by the participant herself, and then edited by a native speaker. As of Fall 2015, the applicant had not yet attained an offer of graduate admission. This was Rama's four page letter which contained effective (as defined in table 3.2) versions of all four moves; it contained well-developed details about her background in nursing, reflexive in describing what being a nurse meant to

her, unequivocal on the value she would bring to the graduate program and straightforward about her mature, cooperative and capable personality. In my opinion, the paper demonstrated excellence for a number of reasons. First, because Rama wrote it herself in the first place she was able to expound in detail about her own experience and of her eagerness to pursue that major. Having a letter written by an outside individual may yield improved grammar and vocabulary. However, this can come at the expense of creating a touching and personal letter that truly encapsulates a student's life history and goals. In addition, this practice is also unethical.

Another letter written by a successful applicant started with an introduction about the major "Physics," in which the prospect stated her previous experience in writing a research paper in her major with specific details including feedback and impressions from her professor. After that, she talked about her spare time activities. The strongest point in the letter is when she introduced the scholarship program and its goal. The last two paragraphs contained experience in Canada and future career goals. Yet, the low IELTS score, barred her from entry and she resorted to lobbying the professor as described in the profile (Chapter 3) and results.

One interesting case involves a student applying to a business program. This individual applied to a single school and was accepted. Given that students often must apply to 5 or perhaps 10 schools to increase their likelihood of acceptance, it becomes important to review their letter of intent in more detail for possible evidence that might explain her acceptance. Several factors emerged in her letter: formatting, organization of the paragraphs and content. In the first paragraph, she introduced the

content of the letter and by so doing so, gave the reader a clear idea of what to expect in subsequent paragraphs. She then proceeded to discuss at length her academic background, major, paid work experience, volunteering and personal qualities. The last two paragraphs included statements of how the applicant had compared different graduate programs in Canada and decided to pursue her study in her chosen university to assure the gatekeepers she was serious about attending there and had thus thoroughly researched the program and its Canadian alternatives. Thus, it appears that this student's likelihood of acceptance was improved by ensuring that critical letter components were conveyed in a concise and accurate manner. This speaks to the importance of presenting a strong letter that can be reviewed once a student's moves past the common gatekeeper of English proficiency scores.

Curriculum Vitae

One of my concerns when I formulated the methodology for this study was getting the letter of intent and CV from the participants. I was worried that they would refuse to disclose these documents, but when I clarified the situation and the fact that their real names would not be in the study, they willingly provided the two documents. However, four out of the 14 participants did not forward their CV as requested, and, after consulting with my supervisor, I decided to analyze the CVs I had received. Thus, the second document to analyze is the CV of the participants, mainly by focusing on how well it is written according to North American conventions including formatting, listing work experience and demonstrating the ability to promote oneself through point form. By examining what the applicants had

listed in comparison to what they had said in the interviews about their formal and informal learning, evidence of their experiences and certificates correlated with their verbal discussion. More important, all the CVs were rich with extra English language certificates taken in Canada. All the CVs were short and easy to read with candidates reporting in interviews that this document was the easiest and most straightforward part of the application.

As for the formatting expected from students applying for university admission, the format of the CVs I gathered were not entirely consistent with the Canadian style. Some of them commenced by stating an objective, others by giving a summary of educational qualifications. Of particular interest were two CVs from aspiring science graduate students, one demonstrated excellence and keenness, while the other contained dry facts that did not inspire reading. The section headings were in accordance with those recommended by experts and were compact yet detailed. Taking one individual as an example, the candidate referred to her dedication to the field, ambitious nature, excellent laboratory skills, impressive grades and ability to understand instructions and produce results. Given the exacting and specific nature of work in the sciences, it is possible that these concise and informative CVs provided some clues as to how these candidates would perform as students. For example, I believe that these CVs suggested that these individuals may be more independent while able to make substantial contributions to the program. Interestingly, basic conventions were not always followed, for example the parallel presentation of ideas in bullet points and descending chronological order of educational credentials. Unfortunately, this student did not gain admission.

The second CV was much less impressive, informative and detailed even at first glance. An objective was absent while the two-point summary listed only her language fluency and computer skills. There was no attempt to engage the reader by listing compelling aspects of her personality or academic achievements. Under her work experience as a teacher, only one point is listed- that she could keep order in a large class. Comparing the CVs of these two candidates from the sciences, I noticed how well the first CV was written compared to the latter . Further, I was surprised to learn that the student with the poorer CV was admitted into a top rated Ontario university. Based on this analysis, I believe that the admissions committee must have considered other factors (e.g. letter of intent, match in terms of research interests) in their decision.

Another comparison of a pair of disparate CV's yielded a similar surprising result, the candidate with a vague and rather unimpressive CV gained admission to graduate school, while another candidate with a strong CV bolstered by a solid, reflexive letter of intent, ended up leaving Canada empty handed. The career objective statement of the weaker CV trailed off mid-sentence similar to the following:

An opportunity to hone my scientific skills and contribute to the research mandate of a well known....³

This could inhibit an admissions committee from reading further, although pages two and three of the document were acceptable and did promote the student's potential value to the department. In contrast, the more impressive CV thoroughly

³ Details have been changed to protect the participant's identity.

detailed work experiences in addition to communicating the candidate's positive attitude, ability to overcome challenges and high motivation.

Analysis of these and the other CVs suggested that they played only a minor role in the admissions decision. English proficiency in the form of IELTS, or the completion of Pathway or a bridging program weighed far more heavily in gaining admission. However, it is also possible that students can use CVs to highlight additional experiences or coursework that may factor into admissions decisions. For example, the writers of two of the weaker CVs did add some important information on the completion of bridging courses while the other finished a Pathway program prior to their both becoming graduate students. This could have increased their likelihood of acceptance, especially when this additional information relates specifically to their proposed graduate work.

Chapter 5: Discussion

This chapter analyzes the themes emergent from the data in view of my research questions within the context of the theoretical implications and studies introduced in the literature review. My four overarching questions were: 1-What are the perceptions of Saudi students about their English language learning in Saudi Arabia? 2-What are the perceptions of Saudi students about their English language learning during the ESL program portion of the scholarship timeline in Canada, specifically, what learning experiences do those students report to be the most effective? 3-What strengths and success strategies do Saudi Arabian students engage in order to get accepted at Canadian universities? 4- Does what the students express in their interviews correlate with their written letters of intent and CVs, and ultimately, do these documents help to bring about the desired outcome? This chapter concludes with the limitations of the study, implications of my research and conclusion.

Educational Pioneer

From the narrative stories of the participants in the study emerged the theme “Pioneer” where these students, especially the women, had been given an opportunity to come to Canada. The main goal as I outlined earlier was educational, but a mosaic of additional reasons emerged during the conversations. Choosing to study abroad while there is a chance to pursue studies in Saudi Arabia manifested the need of the participants to escape the cultural norms of Saudi Arabia in general and its education in particular; to access new, active and more liberatory learning environments; to

understand Canada, a country representative of Western culture; to interact with people from many nationalities in order to improve their language competence along with becoming familiar with other cultures; and for women, to experience a higher degree of autonomy than what would be allowed in Saudi Arabia.

Dissatisfied with thought and behavioural norms of a traditional culture, students may choose to study abroad as an opportunity to discover their own truths, instead of merely living within truths formulated by others. This desire to experience other ways of learning is a constructivist pursuit that aligns with Friere's (1970) idea of men's knowledge of his "incompletion", "from which they move out in constant search" (p. 91) of ways to create and transform their worlds. The process of moving to a new country to learn not only a profession but a new language as well is indeed quite daunting. However, it adds richness in terms of new knowledge. These students also return to their home countries to inspire others around them to continue exploring and learning.

As noted in the findings, women participants came to Canada to experience more freedom that empowered them to make important decisions about their studies. Here, Saudi women can sit in classes with male students and a male professor in the same room, with whom they can interact directly instead of mediating conversation through a male relative; they can travel from their homes to classes or to the library unaccompanied; if they are studying ESL in Toronto then receive an offer of admission in another town or even province, they can go as long as the male guardian agrees to relocate. So while Freire (1970) discusses education as a practice of freedom in the sense of dialogical content (relevant dialogue and teacher who is will

to be taught by the student), I would argue that just being able to physically access education with little or no limitation constitutes a liberatory praxis.

In the past, when a Saudi wife travelled abroad with her husband, she adjusted her plans to suit his academic goals. Leena appears to fit this mold until she reveals her many efforts to educate herself within this constraint. While a graduate degree is out of reach for the time being, she still makes a critical assessment (Bonwell & Eison, 1991) of her options relative to her goals of advancing her education and earning a living independently of her husband. The non-formal learning options of medical aesthetics and party planning achieve this end.

This study also reveals a new pattern of women being able to influence husbands to follow them instead. Their Canadian experience took them beyond the “mechanistic” literacy (Freire, 1970) that they used to have; they developed the power to think critically, advocate for themselves and change the course of their future.

The Unprepared Learner

As explained in the results, most participants complained about ESL instruction in Saudi Arabia and felt that pedagogy put them at a disadvantage when they came to Canada. In Saudi Arabia, English is usually taught by employing a passive pedagogical style and as a result through lectures and memorization for tests with a glaring lack of speaking practice. The theme “unprepared learner” emerged from the fact that the participants did not benefit from the ESL in Saudi in terms of absorbing the foundational content of English (creating the subtheme of *unprepared*

learner in Saudi Arabia); therefore, when they arrived in Canada, none qualified for direct entry into graduate school and many had to recommence their ESL studies as beginners after at least 6 years of formal instruction in high school and a further 4 years of instruction at the undergraduate level (hence, *unprepared in Canada also*).

Unprepared learner in Saudi Arabia

When a young student must endure learning to adult standards, subject matter and methods imposed from above and from outside, the material is inaccessible (Dewey, 1938). Dewey notes that “The gap is so great that the required subject matter, the methods of learning and of behaving are foreign to the existing capacities of the young....Consequently, they must be imposed; even the good teachers will use devices of art to cover up the imposition so as to relieve it of obviously brutal features” (p. 6). This could account for the inability of students to perform in a language that had been with them from childhood.

Those who blamed their teachers, the content of curriculum and the methods employed back home used words as “boring”, “not motivated”, “uninteresting”, “ineffective” to describe ESL in Saudi Arabia. Students did not choose materials or introduce topics they were interested in for discussion in class. This connects with the concept of “banking education” (Freire, 1970) where each Saudi student was indeed a “depository” of what the teacher said and presented.

The banking method of knowledge transfer had not allowed Saudi students to engage deeply and meaningfully with English in the simulated environment that is the classroom. Thus they could not go on to apply the knowledge in the real world,

particularly in a community populated by native speakers of English. Had the Saudi classroom provided students with the opportunity to practice English in class, and incorporate class resources to create written and spoken material relevant to their interests, and other experiential supports as suggested by Barnes (1989), Prince (2004) and others, they would have more than likely developed their ESL skills to a greater degree.

Dewey's observation that even good teachers used devices in an attempt to obscure the imposition, dovetails with Nada's description of her English teacher "as kind". However, the pleasant nature of an instructor is not sufficient compensation for a stifling curriculum as demonstrated by the students' lack of attention in class in favor of chatting with each other. Plus, I do not think those teachers themselves were then, or are now, critically aware of their role in the system. They just follow instructions from the Ministry of Education, which in turn is part of a society that follows strict religious rules.

Unprepared learner in Canada

Some of the participants felt unprepared to navigate the education system in Canada, a perception that was reflected by the many attempts in taking the IELTS, multiple graduate applications submitted and studying ESL to the point of burn out. In line with prior research (Zuriff, 1977; Fairtest, 2007; Dooley, 2008) participants of this study suffered from anxiety and loss of interest which led them to burning out; for Noura and Nada, they had to step away from their courses entirely.

The test not only resulted in stress for the students, but it also interfered with the improvement of their language skills, an interference that was evident in their low scores. This connects to the detrimental effects of high stakes testing on learners observed by Taylor (2005) and Fairtest (2007). The many test attempts along with the pressure of the scholarship timeline negatively affected participants in their ESL journey.

This finding also supports the assertion that passive learning creates undue stress for the learner because humans are not simple receptacles who easily process and transfer information passively received. The integration of new knowledge requires effort to make sense of the input and take ownership of it (Cooperstein & Kocevar-Weidinger, 2004). The students who burnt out were operating within and relying upon a formal, passive learning system and repeatedly using the same unprofitable strategies in an attempt to overcome IELTS-gate. Those who interrupted this pattern, and embarked upon a critical reflection of what they were doing (Friere, 1970; Sarason & Banbury, 2004) managed to step out of the ESL class/IELTS test cycle and figure out alternative, more profitable strategies of getting into graduate school. These participants gave rise to the theme “engaged learner”.

The Engaged Learner

Non-formal learning was experienced by two of the participants. loving the language and keen on improving it in their home country, they had positively differentiated themselves from other newcomers to Canada. These two participants had been placed in a relatively high level in ESL programs and had subsequently

obtained a high score in the IELTS; I would say this previous effort had truly paid off. Gardner, Lalonde, & Moorcroft (1985) defined motivated learners as those who establish a certain goal and proceed to achieving it. They also enjoy the activities leading to the accomplishment of the goal.

Other participants were not only engaging in the classroom's formal context, talking with colleagues and professors, but also got the best of the informal language encounters by using their natural and fluent language to interact with non-Saudi friends. These were successfully transcending the unprepared learner to the engaged one through the informal learning they had. They did not only watch movies for fun, but they also made an effort to update their vocabulary and phrases. The participants affirmed the preference of watching movies over reading books, especially with regard to learning new vocabulary. When they read a book, they are less likely to translate unfamiliar words whereas during a movie they would ask their friends about, and discuss any new vocabulary encountered. For them, it is much more interesting to come across a new word in a movie within a specific context than to sit alone, holding a dictionary while reading a book. They pursue an active learning, reaching out a feature of constructive education through socializing and peer-to-peer interaction (Good & Brophy, 1994; Cooperstein & Kocevar-Weidinger, 2004).

This socializing and peer-to-peer interaction served as active alternatives to formal, passive learning. Participants stumbled on the existing of pathway programs mainly through being actively and socially engaged learners. The option of studying Pathway was not available for all the participants; they had to ask friends about their plans with the Language proficiency assessment gatekeeping factor. Through reading

deeply, comparing and contrasting (Friere, 1970), it was obvious that Pathway programs became a gate opener for those who planned to study at Lakehead University.

Before conducting this research study, I was not aware of the Pathway programs that the participants had taken to be admitted to their programs. Such programs intend to improve students' skills and prepare them to be able to write major research papers and give presentations, whereas the proficiency tests focus on the four skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking). According to Murray and O'Loughlin "It can be argued the preparatory programs that allow for direct entry are meeting the needs of students entering their main course through a more comprehensive development of English language and academic preparation skills required, as opposed to simply gaining a test score minimum" (2007, p. 10).

I agree with Murray and O'Loughlin (2007) that bridging courses, which are taken as pre-master courses, may be even a better determiner of English proficiency required for the student's academic field as he/she is simultaneously demonstrating both her/his capability in the field and in academic English. These participants did not trust the formal system's assessment based on IELTS; they discovered other innovative alternative routes to graduate schools.

Sara took the concept of not accepting the evaluation of the formal/passive system even further by lobbying a specific professor in her desired program to try and promote herself the best she could. Similarly to a job seeking through making unsolicited contact with an employer, reaching out to professors demonstrates

initiative. The student took the time to research the professor to ensure similar interests, illustrating that she would be of value to the professor as well as the program. Sara, as a “constructivist” learner, did not just take the word of her fellow Saudi PhD holder as a mere step or source of information. Instead of submitting an online application and waiting for the good news, she manipulated and extended what she discovered for her future’s best interest.

Finally, Shahad was the one who persisted on continuing the formal education by taking the test until she was admitted based on her 7 score in the IELTS. Her admission opposes to Raghunathan’s claim (2010) that an applicant would be rejected only on account of a poor score. Shahad was receiving letters of rejection due to her score, but when the score was improved she successfully started her graduate program.

The Written Documents (Letter of intent and CV)

In this section, I will discuss the findings regarding the letter of intent and CV as indicators of applicants’ ability to present themselves in the best light in written form to the admissions committee gatekeepers. The letters’ role as a gatekeeping factor will be discussed.

First, using the strategy of hiring someone to write and edit the document seemed helpful for the participants in terms of decreasing the tension and the stress they had. Ahmad was confident enough to write and submit a letter that he had written himself, because of his high IELTS and TOEFL scores as well as his overall competency in English, all of which he noted in our discourse in the first phase of

data collection. Others might not jeopardize their chances for acceptance with low quality writing in their letters of intent and CVs, given that the schemata and thought patterns of languages may differ (Kaplan, 1987; Furka, 2008) particularly in linguistically distant languages such as Arabic and English, and the competitive nature of university admissions landscape. As noted above, this finding also shows that admissions committees are only gaining a narrow understanding of a candidate's abilities when they rely too heavily on letters and CVs. Rather, the use of in-person or perhaps phone interviews are critical for ensuring requisite English communication skills. Given the necessity of these abilities to success in graduate school, admissions committees should place greater weight on this aspect of a potential student's application profile. Based on the answers given from two of the participants who did write their letters by themselves, I believe that there is a positive correlation between how competent the applicants are in their writing skills and how much risk they are willing to take when it comes to writing the letter (or at least the first draft of it) instead of handing the work to a professional editor or to peers.

As discussed in the findings, participants sought help when writing their documents due to two given reasons, namely the level of English and the unfamiliarity with how to write this genre of text. Early and DeCosta (2012) pointed out that students look for assistance from their English instructors or parents. In the case of the participants in this study, many asked their ESL teachers and two said they asked their fathers. This type of writing is hard for students who are still in the process of learning English and for those with parents unable to provide feedback (Early & DeCosta, 2012), a point that was reflected in all my participants' answers

except Ahmed, the lone C2. They were in their first year of learning English in Canada and did not feel confident in articulating their past achievements and future goals in English. That feeling of incompetence was a common theme in their answers, consequently, these participants fit under the unprepared learners.

The time of writing the documents required from the participants was also a main constraint, as I noticed during the interviews that the participants wanted to have their documents ready even before finishing their preparatory English programs. This kind of writing required students to be reflective but the major issue with Saudi students was their prior language learning, mainly the passive traditional way where they were not prepared to write or reflect. Even before coming to Canada, no workshops or sessions were given to the participants to introduce these two important elements of the graduate applications. Randazzo (2012) underlined the process of reflexivity in the resume and letters and that the assistance of a mentor is required for students who are unfamiliar with this technique.

Universities in North America, The United Kingdom, Australia and many countries around the globe look for specific criteria when assessing applications to graduate programs (Early & DeCosta, 2012). One of these criteria, as stated by the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC, 2008), is the applicant's ability to pay for the programs. Saudi students have an advantage when applying to graduate schools, for all of them are fully funded by the government. It is important to indicate this factor on their letters in order to sell themselves to the admissions committee. That was reflected in letters provided by the participants. The strongest point I found in the letters is how the applicants expressed their

gratitude about being granted a scholarship and linked these feelings to a high level of ambition and desire to pursue higher education in Canada.

All the CVs were short and easy to read in keeping with Harper's (2013) recommendation. He previously supported this feature by saying that the flexibility of the CV makes it easier for gatekeepers to scan the document quickly and decide whether to pass the applicant or not. However, there was no connection between weak and strong CVs on one side and their rate of acceptance on the other. A weak document as analyzed in the findings did not terminate an applicant's future as the factor of IELTS score would probably do.

Last but not least, the language improvement for these participants played a significant role in their pursuit of a university admission. Dreams would not come true without their endeavour, markedly their ability to succeed in their academic programs, plus engaging in the new environment.

Limitations

By conducting this research, I have assumed that many Saudi students encounter difficulties in their application process as well as their English learning. However, this is not the case for others who have been really successful in getting acceptance in a short time due to their strong background and English competence.

As pointed out earlier, participant selection posed a significant challenge to this study. The current research focused specifically on those students who have spent the bulk of their education in Saudi Arabia, learning English primarily through public and private educational settings. While finding participants that corresponded to such

criteria proved to be challenging, the qualitative narrative approach of this study allowed me to gather a great deal of information from the participants that I found. Given the narrative nature of the approach utilized to clarify research questions, generalization of results from this study can be another area of concern. Furthermore, the unique and specific data collected may be applicable to only a narrow band of the population. In other words, the results gleaned from this research are primarily relevant to other Saudi students currently studying and using English in Canada. Therefore, without further investigation and examination, it would be impossible, and therefore unrealistic, to draw conclusions and reliable comparisons against speakers of other languages such as Mandarin or Spanish. Additionally, these results could be used to inform admission committees of the potential that letters and CVs may not have been written by the applicant. This could lead to changes in decision making regarding the importance of letters compared to other aspects of a student's application profile (e.g. interviews, undergraduate academic performance, etc.)

Suggestions For Future Research

My study explored Saudi students' perceptions about their English learning experience as well as their university application experience in Canada. More research could look at specific individuals and track them in Saudi Arabia and in Canada, in view of the difference they make in their journey with ESL and subsequently graduate programs. In addition, more research could be conducted on graduate students' experience in their graduate programs, examining the correlation between their difficulties with the English language, their successes, and if what they reported as difficulties has affected them in any way with their thesis/dissertations.

As I mentioned in the findings, participants were placed in beginner and intermediate levels when they first came to Canada. So the Saudi L2 learner just grappling with the basics of English, operating under time pressures of scholarship length and, to a lesser extent, the stipulated time within which one must complete program requirements, faces a daunting task of communicating not just like a near native, but like a near native academic. I see that writing in a second language is one of the key fundamentals in the L2 process. Thus, students must master three categories of English to exceed at the post-secondary level (OLDAE, 2014): first, general vocabulary, i.e., common, general words used within the context of the eight parts of speech; second, sub-technical or general academic words in use across most if not all academic disciplines; and third, the highly specialized technical language and style specific to each academic discipline and consisting of material that can intimidate even L1 learners.

In addition, other studies may look at techniques that would help students learn more effectively and retain information in primary and secondary schools (first level) to gain fluency prior to arrival in Canada. Adapting these changes would require an overhaul of the Saudi English educational system that could take years. In the shorter term, the establishment of private workshops and schools, where category 1 English was strengthened and category 2 English was taught, would be a bridging stage designed to teach academic writing in Saudi Arabia, in addition to the vocabulary and recommended essay structures favored in the North American system. Eventually, when they arrive in Canada, they will only have to master category 3 techniques used by native speakers.

Learning, which can take place formally, non-formally and informally, will help students have the best possible opportunity to maintain their necessary level of participation in the learning process. Whereas these findings provide a number of guidelines as to the direction English instructors should take, more research should be conducted to determine which approaches can best benefit Saudi students when learning a foreign language.

Conclusion

My own inspiration has led me to conduct this study and I have come to the conclusion that the factors that affected Saudi students' applications to graduate programs were mainly related to the language proficiency of those participants. It is important to note that other factors have played a minor role in the Saudi Arabian experience in Canada. Formal, passive prior learning of English impacted the way these participants perceived the language, and then being immersed in the language changed their perceptions toward their L2. It was not easy for any of the participants to win admission to graduate programs, but after exerting more effort and knowing how to benefit from this experience, they were able to prove themselves academically regardless of the academic, environmental and cultural difficulties.

It is also clear that Saudi student's English language skills could be remediated at earlier stages as recommended by Lopez and Tashakkori (2004), who studied children exposed to both English and Spanish in the US. By rectifying early problems, teachers in Saudi Arabia could guide students to be able to speak and write at levels close, or even equal, to that of proficient English speakers. This in turn

would increase the likelihood of Saudi Arabian students successfully integrating into the Canadian tertiary education system.

The fact that women are only recently being allowed to leave Saudi Arabia and study more than before makes it even more imperative that they succeed. Otherwise, detractors who argue that women should not be given these scholarships may be taken seriously. Furthermore, it is important to realize that a new intellectual culture will be introduced in Saudi Arabia due to the large number of students studying abroad and their participation in social transformation of the Saudi educational and professional structures. The case for introducing critical pedagogy into the Saudi educational curricula needs to be presented in such a way that is not seen as disruptive to the Saudi culture and tradition, but as a means to ensure that its citizens can think at the same level and relate professionally on par with citizens of other countries on the world stage, which is the major reason for the KASP.

References

- Abdan, A. A. (1991). *An exploratory study of teaching English in the Saudi elementary public schools*, 19(3), 253-266.
- Abukhattala, I. (2004). *Educational and cultural adjustment of the Arab Muslim students in Canadian university classrooms* (Doctoral Dissertation). Retrieved on Nov. 30, 2015 from http://digitool.library.mcgill.ca/webclient/StreamGate?folder_id=0&dvs=1413158046834~803
- Alderson, C., & Wall, D. (1993). Does washback exist? *Applied Linguistics*, 14(2), 115-129.
- Alhaisoni, E., & Rahman, M. (2013). *Teaching English in Saudi Arabia: Prospects and challenges*. *Academic Research International*, 4 (1), 112-118.
- Al-Johani, H. M. (2009). *Finding a way toward the impact of teachers' strategies, beliefs and knowledge on teaching English as a foreign language in Saudi Arabia*. (Doctoral dissertation). University of Strathclyde: Glasgow, Scotland, UK.
- Alkubaidi, M., A. (2014). The relationship between Saudi English major university students' writing performance and their learning style and strategy use. *English Language Teaching*, 7 (4), 83-95.
- Al-Kamookh, A. (1981). *A Survey of the English language teacher's perceptions of the English language teaching methods in the intermediate and secondary schools of the Eastern Province in Saudi Arabia* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved on 15 Oct. 2015 from UMI: University of Kansas.
- Allen, D., & Tanner, K. (2005). *Infusing Active Learning into the Large Enrollment*

Biology Class: Seven strategies, from the simple to complex. Winter 2005. University of Delaware, Newark, Delaware, San Francisco State University. 13 March 2009.

<http://www.lifescied.org/cgi/reprint/4/4/262.pdf>

Allwright, J & Banerjee, J. (1997). *Investigating the accuracy of admissions criteria: A case study in a British university*, Lancaster: Institute for English Language Education, Lancaster University.

Al-Shumaimeri, Y. (1999). *Focus on the language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Al-Subahi, A. (2001). Evaluation of the English programme (ESA) at Saudi Intermediate School. *Journal of King Abdulaziz University, Educational Science*, 14(1), 1-155.

Anderson, R., A. (2013). Assessing the Readiness to Reveal: Resume Writing Strategies for LGBTQ Students. *NACE Journal*, 74(2), 1-27.

Andronie, M. (2013). The role of information and communication technology (ict) in formal, informal, non-formal learning and incidental learning. *Presented at the 9th International Scientific Conference on E-learning and Software for Education*. Bucharest.

Armbruster, P., Patel, M., Johnson, E., & Weiss, M. (2009). Active learning and student centred pedagogy improve student attitudes and performance in introductory biology <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2736024/> -

Banerjee, J. (2003). *Interpreting and using proficiency test scores* (Doctoral dissertation) Lancaster University.

Barbour, R., S. (2001). Checklists for improving rigor in qualitative research: A case of the tail wagging the dog. *British Medical Journal*, 322, 1115-1117.

- Bean, J., C. (2011). *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking and Active Learning in the Classroom* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Benek-Rivera, J., & Mathews, V. E. (2004). Active learning with jeopardy: Students ask the questions. *Journal of Management Education*, 28, 104–118.
- Benson, L., Harkavy, I., & Puckett, J. (2007). *Dewey's Dream: Universities and democracies in an age of education reform*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Bhatia, V., K. (1993). *Analyzing genre: Language use in professional settings*. New York: Longman.
- Biggerbrains, E. (2013). Writing an effective academic CV. Retrieved on 13 Nov. 2015 from <https://www.elsevier.com/connect/writing-an-effective-academic-cv>
- Bogdan, R., & Biklen, S. K. (1982). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods*. (2nd ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Bolton, G. (2010). *Reflective Practice Writing and Professional Development* (3rd Ed.). London: SAGE.
- Bonwell, C., & Eison, J. (1991). *Active learning: Creating excitement in the classroom*. ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No. 1. Washington, DC: The George Washington University, School of Education and Higher Education.
- Bowen, S. (2005). Engaged learning: are we all on the same page? *Association of American Colleges and Universities*, 7(2), 4-7.
- Brear, P., Dorrian, J., & Luscri, G. (2008). Preparing our future counseling professionals: Gatekeeping and the implications for research. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 8(2), 93-101.

- Brecht, R. D., & Robinson, J. (1993). Qualitative analysis of second language acquisition in study abroad: The ACTR/NFLC project. NFLC Occasional Paper. Washington, DC: National Foreign Language Center.
- British Council. (2015). IELTS task 1. Writing band descriptors. Retrieved on 20 Nov. 2015 from <https://takeielts.britishcouncil.org>.
- Brown, R., M. (2004), Self-composed rhetoric in psychology personal statements. *Written Communication*, 21(3), 242-260.
- Bruner, J. S. (1961). The act of discovery. *Harvard Educational Review*, 31, 21-32.
- Bulmer, M. (1979). Concepts in the analysis of qualitative data. *Sociological Review*, 27 (4), 651-77.
- Burney, S. M. A. (2008). Inductive and deductive research approaches. Retrieved on 20 Nov. 2015 from <http://www.drburney.net/INDUCTIVE%20&%20DEDUCTIVE%20RESEARCH%20APPROACH%2006032008.pdf>
- Canadian Bureau for International Education. (2015). Facts and figures. Retrieved on 21 Nov. 2015 from <http://www.cbie.ca/about-ie/facts-and-figures/>
- Castronova, J. (2002). Discovery Learning for the 21st Century: What is it and How Does it Compare to Traditional Learning in Effectiveness in the 21st Century?. *Action Research Exchange*. 1(1).
- Charney, D, Rayman, J (1989). The Role of Writing Quality in Effective Student Résumés. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*. 3(1) 36-53
- Cohen, D., & Crabtree, B. (2006). Qualitative research guidelines project. Retrieved from <http://www.qualres.org/HomeSemi-3629.html><http://www.qualres.org/HomeSemi-3629.html>
- Coleman, D., S. Starfield, and A. Hagan. (2003). The attitudes of IELTS stakeholders:

student

and staff perceptions of IELTS in Australian, UK and Chinese tertiary institutions. In IELTS Research Reports, 5, 159–236. Canberra: IELTS Australia.

Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEF). Retrieved on 22 Nov. 2015 from <https://www.englishclub.com/esl-exams/levels-cef.htm>

Cooperstein, S. E., & Kocevar-Weidinger, E. (2004). Beyond active learning: a constructive approach to learning. *Emerald group publishing limited*, 32(2), 141-148.

Crowe, C. (1992). Error patterns in research papers by Pacific Rim students. Retrieved on 23 Nov. 2015 from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED345299.pdf>

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. (3rd ed.). Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.

Daniel. (2012). Active vs. passive learning. Retrieved on 23 Nov. 2015 from <http://www.bowerscommunications.ca/active-vs-passive-learning/>

Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2011). The SAGE handbook of qualitative research. (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, SAGE publications.

Derwing, T. M., Thomson, R. I., & Munro, M. J. (2006). English pronunciation and fluency development in Mandarin and Slavic speakers. *System* 34 (2), 183-193.

Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. Retrieved on 24 Nov. 2015 from <http://ruby.fgcu.edu/courses/ndemers/colloquium/experiencededucationdewey.pdf>

Dib, C. Z. (1988). *Formal, non-formal and informal education: Concepts and applicability, Networks in Physics Education*. Proceeding from “Cooperative Networks in Physics Education”. American Institute of Physics, 300-315.

- DiCicco-Bloom, B., & Crabtree, B. F., (2006). The Qualitative Research Interview. *Med Educ*, 40, 314–321.
- Dooley, P. (2008). Language testing and technology: Problems of transition to a new era. *ReCall*. 20(1), 21-34
- Dora M.Y.,T. (2003). Gatekeeping in Bachelor of Social Work field education. *Women in Welfare Education Collective*, 6, 51-63.
- Doyle, S. (2007). Member checking with older women: A framework for negotiating meaning. *Healthcare for Women International*, 28, 888-908.
- Drever, E. (1995). *Using semi-structured interviews in small-scale research: A teacher's guide*. Edinburgh: Scottish Council for Research in Education.
- Early, J. S., & DeCosta Smith, M. (2012). Real world writing for secondary students: teaching the college admission essay and other gate-openers for higher education: *Teachers College Press and National Writing Project*. Retrieved from http://www.nwp.org/cs/public/download/nwp_file/17018/earlydecosta_chap4.pdf?x-r=pcfile_d
- Ellis, (1994). *Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Etlng, A. (1993). What is nonfomal education?. *Journal of agriculture Education*. 73-76.
- Fairtest. (2007). The Dangerous Consequences of High-Stakes Standardized Testing. Retrieved on 19 Nov. 2015 from <http://www.fairtest.org/dangerous-consequences-highstakes-standardized-tes>
- Fareh, S. (2010). Challenges of teaching English in the Arab world: Why can't EFL programs deliver as expected? *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 2 (2), 3600-3604.

- Fletcher, J. F., & Stren, R. E. (1989). Language skills and adaptation: A study of foreign students in a Canadian university. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 19, 293-308.
- Foscolos, T. (2000). *ESL students' perceptions of their high school learning experiences: Graduate Division of Educational Research* (Unpublished master's thesis). University of Calgary, Calgary.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. (30th Anniversary edition reissued in 2005). New York: Continuum.
- Freire, P. (1973). *Education for Critical Consciousness*. New York: Seabury Press.
- Frost, J. (2015). Effective Resume Writing Tips (Infographic). Retrieved on 23 Nov. 2015 from <http://www.grammarcheck.net/resume-writing/>
- Furka, I. (2008). The curriculum vitae and the motivational letter: a rhetorical and cultural analysis. *WoPaLP*, (7), 18-73
- Gardener, R.C., Lalonde, R. N., & Moorcroft, R. (1985). The role of attitudes and motivation in second language learning: Correlation and experimental considerations. *Language Learning*, 35, 207-27.
- Gawi, E. M. K. (2012). The effect of age on learning English: A case study of learning English in Saudi schools, Saudi Arabia. *Canadian Center of Science and Education*, 5 (1), 127-139.
- Ghenghesh, P. Hamed, M., & Abdelfattah, Y. (2011). A study of perceptions of English needs of business students and the Faculty of Business at the British University in Egypt. *Arab World English Journal*. 2 (1). Retrieved on 22 Nov. 2015 from <http://www.awej.org/images/AllIssues/Volume2/Volume2Number1Jan2011.Pdf>
- Good, T., L. and Brophy, J., E. (1994), *Looking in Classrooms*, HarperCollins College

Publishers, New York, NY

- Hamid, M. (2014). World Englishes in international proficiency tests. *World English*, 33(2), 263–277.
- Harper, R. (2013). The ‘killer’ CV: Is it useful for the information professional? *Business Information Review*. 30 (3),152–157.
- Hasan, A. (2000). Learners' perceptions of listening comprehension problems. *Language, Culture and Curriculum*, 13 (2), 137–153.
- Hashim, N. (1996). *English syntactic errors by Arabic speaking learners reviewed*. Retrieved on 21 Nov. 2015 from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED423660.pdf>
- Homrich, A. M. (2009). Gatekeeping for personal and professional competence in graduate counseling programs. *Counseling and Human Development*, 41, 1- 22.
- Husu, L. (2011). Gatekeeping of excellence and gender equality. Retrieved on 22 Nov. 2015 from www.genderscience.org
- Indexing and Transcribing Your Interviews - Project Kit (Veterans History Project, Library of Congress). (n.d.). Retrieved June 28, 2015, from <http://www.loc.gov/vets/transcribe.html>
- International student. (2015). Resume samples. Retrieved on 26 Nov. 2015 from http://www.internationalstudent.com/resume_writing/samples/
- Jacob N. K. Ng. (2007). *Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL): Good Indicator for Student Success at Community Colleges?* (Doctoral dissertation). Oregon University.
- Javid, C., & Umer, M. (2014). *Saudi EFL learners' writing problems: A move towards solution*. Retrieved from

http://worldconferences.net/proceedings/gse2014/toc/papers_gse2014/G_078 - CHOUNDHARYZAHIDJAVID_Saudi EFL Learners_ WritingProblems AMove towards Solution_read.pdf

Jdetawy, L. F. A. (2011). Problems encountered by Arab EFL learners. *Language in India*, 11, 19-27.

Job search. (2015). Resume Samples for College Students and Graduates. Retrieved on 20 Nov. 2015 from <http://jobsearch.about.com/od/sampleresume1/a/college-resumes.htm>

Kaplan, R. B. (1987). Cultural thought patterns revisited. In R. B. Kaplan, & U. Connor (Eds.), *Writing across languages: analysis of L2 text* (pp. 9-21.). Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Keith-Spiegel, P., & Wiederman, M. W. (2000). *The complete guide to graduate school admission: psychology, counseling, and related professions*. Retrieved on 23 Nov. 2015 from <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0805831215/sociapsychn0f-20> (2nd ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Khalid, A., & Azeem, M. (2012). Constructivist Vs Traditional: Effective Instructional Approach in Teacher Education. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*. 2(5), 170-177.

Khan, I. A. (2011). Learning difficulties in English: Diagnosis and pedagogy in Saudi Arabia. *Educational Research*, 2 (7), 1248-1257. Retrieved on 19 Nov. 2015 from <http://www.interestjournals.org/ER>

Koerin, B. & Miller, L.S. (1995). Gatekeeping policies: Terminating students for non-academic reasons. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 31 (2), 247-260.

- Kuh, G. D., Douglas, K. B., Lund, J. P., Ramin-Gurnek, J. (1994). *Student learning outside the classroom: Transcending artificial boundaries*. ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report No. 8. Washington, DC: The George Washington University, School of Education and Higher Education.
- Kuther, T. (2015). How to prepare your curriculum vitae. Retrieved on 27 Nov. 2015 from <http://gradschool.about.com/cs/curriculumvita/a/vitae.htm>
- Laplante, B., Constanza Street, M., Kamanzi, P.C., Doray, P., & Moulin, S. (2010). When young Canadian adults return to school: a decision anchored in the individual's social and academic past. (Projet Transitions, Research paper 12). Montreal, Centre interuniversitaire de recherche sur la science et la technologie (CIRST). Retrieved on 28 Nov. 2015 from http://www.cirst.uqam.ca/Portals/0/docs/projet_transitions/Note%2012/TransitionsSummaryNote12.pdf
- Lewthwaite, M. (2007). Teacher and student attitudes to IELTS writing tasks: positive or negative washback?. *UGRU Journal*, 5.
- Light, R. L., Xu, M., & Mossop, J. (1987). English proficiency and academic performance of international students, *TESOL Quarterly*, 21 (2), 251-261.
- Lopez, M. G., & Tashakkori, A. (2004). Effects of a two-way bilingual program on the literacy development of students in kindergarten and first grade. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 28, 19-34.
- Mahmoud, A. (2005). Collocation errors made by Arab learners of English, *Asian EFL Journal*, 117-126.
- McLeod, S. A. (2008). Bruner. Retrieved from www.simplypsychology.org/bruner.html

- McCloskey, M. L; Orr, J; Stack, L; Kleckova, G (2010). Scaffolding Academic Language for English Learners: What, Why, How? 1-6. Retrieved on 28 Nov. 2015 from <http://www.mlmcc.com/docs/2010-03-TESOL-Scaffolding-HO.pdf>
- McCroskey, J. (1977). Oral communication apprehension: A summary of recent theory and research. *Human Communication Research*. 4 (1), 74-96. Retrieved on 25 Nov. 2015 from <http://www.jamescmccroskey.com/publications/074.pdf>
- Messick, S. (1996). Validity and washback in language testing. *Language Testing*, 13, 241.
- Merriam Webster. (2015). Retrieved from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/pioneer>
- Ministry of Higher Education (2011). Retrieved on 29 Nov. 2015 from <http://www.mohe.gov.sa/en/aboutus/Institutions/Pages/Emission-of-the-outer.aspx>
- Ministry of Higher Education (2015). Retrieved on 27 Nov. 2015 from <http://www.mohe.gov.sa/ar/studyaboard/King-Abdulla-hstages/Pages/default.aspx>
- Mourtaga, K. (2004). *Investigating writing problems among Palestinians students studying English as a foreign language* (Doctoral dissertation). Indiana University, USA.
- Mukattash, L. (1981). *Problems in error analysis*. Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics.
- Murray, D., & O'Loughlin, K. (2007). Pathways preparation and selection: A discussion paper. Retrieved on 20 Nov. 2015 from <http://aei.gov.au/AEI/Shop/Products/Publications/Publication623>
- National Research Council (2007). *Taking Science to School: Learning and Teaching Science in Grades k-8*. Washington D.C. Committee on Science Learning.

- National Association for College Admissions Counseling. (2008). *Report of the commission on the use of standardized tests in undergraduate admissions*. Arlington, VA: Author.
- Northern Illinois University, Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center. (2015). Retrieved on 25 Nov. 2015 from http://www.niu.edu/facdev/resources/guide/strategies/instructional_scaffolding_to_improve_learning.pdf
- Novosadova, M., Selen, G., Piskunowicz, A., Mousa, S. H. N., Suoheimo, S., Radinja, T., Reuter, P. (2007). *The impact of non-formal education on young people and society*. Brussels, Belgium: AEGEE-Europe.
- OECD. (2015). Recognition of Non-formal and Informal Learning Retrieved from <http://www.oecd.org/education/skills-beyond-school/recognitionofnon-formalandinformallearning-home.htm>
- Oxford Learner's Dictionary of Academic English (OLDAE). (2014). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Pan, Y., C. (2009). A review of washback and its pedagogic implications. *VNU Journal of Science, foreign languages*, 25, 257-263
- Pawapatcharandom, R. (2007). *An investigation of Thai students' English language problems and their learning strategies in the international program at Mahidol University* (Master's thesis). King Mongkut's Institute of Technology, North Bangkok. Retrieved on 19 Nov. 2015 from <http://www.gits.kmutnb.ac.th/ethesis/data/4880181542.pdf>
- Prince, M. (2004). Does active learning work: A review of the research. *Journal of Engineering Education*, 93(3), 223-232
- Purdue online writing lab. (2015). Writing the personal statement. Retrieved on 27 Nov.

2015 from <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/01/>

Rababah, G. (2003). Communication problems facing Arab learners of English. *Journal of Language and Learning*, 3, 180–197.

Raghunathan, K. (2010). Demystifying the American graduate admissions process. *StudyMode.com*. Retrieved on 23 Nov. 2015 from <http://www.studymode.com/essays/Demystifying-Graduate-Application-Process-45772026.html>

Randazzo, C. (2012). Positioning Résumés and Cover Letters as Reflective Reflexive Process. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 75(4), 377–391.

Rea-Dickins, P., R. Kiely, & G.X. Yu. (2007). Student identity, learning and progression: The affective and academic impact of IELTS on “successful” candidates. *IELTS Research Reports*, 7. Canberra: IELTS Australia and British Council.

Ren, J., Bryan, K., Min, Y., & Wei, Y. (2007). Language preparation and the first year experience: What Administrators and Policy Makers Should Know. *Florida Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*, 1(1), 11-26.

Rizvi, M. A. (2005). Using students’ analysis in teaching public speaking for business. *Profile*, 6, 107-118.

Rodríguez, F. D. (2000). *In search of new insights: A research of first year college students’ beliefs about the English language, their learning experiences, and the pragmatic purposes assigned by them to the language* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Puerto Rico, Puerto Rico.

Rubin, J. (1994). A review of second language listening comprehension research. *The Modern Language Journal*, 78, 199–221.

- Sarason, Y., & Banbury, C. (2004). Active learning facilitated by using a game-show format or who doesn't want to be a millionaire? *Journal of Management Education*, 28, 509–519.
- Savignon, S. J., & Wang, C. (2003). Communicative language teaching in EFL contexts: Learner attitudes and perceptions. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language*, 41 (3), 223-49.
- Sawir, E. (2005). Language difficulties of international students in Australia: The effects of prior learning experience. *International Education Journal*, 6(5), 567-580.
- Schugurensky, D. (2000). The forms of informal learning: Towards a conceptualization of the field. NALL Working Paper #19-2000. Retrieved on 18 Nov. 2015 from <https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/2733/2/19formsofinformal.pdf>
- Seipel, C., & Tunnell, L. (1995). Using a comment sheet to grade accounting writing assignments. *Accounting Educators' Journal*, 7, 159–165.
- Selvadurai, R. (1998). Problems faced by international students in American colleges and universities. *Community Review*, 16, 153-158.
- Sincero, S. M. (2012). *Types of survey questions - Closed-end or open-end?* Retrieved on 27 Nov. 2015 from <https://explorable.com/types-of-survey-questions>
- Smith, E. A., Weyhing, B. Mody, Y. Smith, W. L. (2005). A critical analysis of personal statements submitted by radiology residency applicants. *AcadRadiol*, 12, 1024-1028.
- Songsangkaew, P. (2003). *The language function difficulties experienced by Thai students in real situations in America* (Master's thesis). Faculty of English of Applied Arts, King Mongkut's Institute of Technology, North Bangkok.
- Stewart-Wingfield, S., & Black, G. S. (2005). Active versus passive course designs: The

- impact on student outcomes. *Journal of Education for Business*, 81, 119–125.
- Strow, B., K. & Strow, C. W. (2006). A rent-seeking experiment for the classroom. *Journal of Economic Education*, 37, 323–330.
- Tahaineh, Y. S. (2010). Arab EFL university students' errors in the use of prepositions. *MJAL*, 2 (1), 76-112.
- Taylor, L. (2005). Washback and Impact. *ELT Journal*, 59(2), 154-155.
- Thafer, M. (2005). Communication apprehension among An-Najah National University students. *J. Res. (H. Sc.)*, 19 (2), 627-678. Retrieved on 16 Nov. 2015 from <http://blogs.najah.edu/staff/emp2173/article/Communication-Apprehension-Among-An-Najah-National-/file/122.pdf>
- The European Youth Forum. (2005). Policy paper on recognition of non-formal education: Confirming the real competencies of young people in the knowledge society. Retrieved on 16 Nov. 2015 from http://www.scouteguide.it/politichegiovanili/Documenti/istituzioni_europee/en/EYJ_policy_paper_on_recognition_of_NFE.pdf
- Thompson-Panos, K., & Thomas-Ruzic, M. (1983). The least you should know about Arabic: Implications for the ESL writing instructor. *TESOL Quarterly*, 17, 609-623.
- Thongsongsee, J. (1998). *A study of linguistic and cultural difficulties encountered by Thai graduate students in their use of English when studying overseas* (Unpublished master's thesis). King Mongkut's Institute of Technology, North Bangkok, Thailand.
- Trice, A. G. (2001). *Faculty perceptions of graduate international students: The benefits and challenges*. Paper presented at the 26th Annual Meeting of the Association for the Study of Higher Education. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED457816.pdf>

- Upadhyaya, A. (2013). Active vs. Passive Learning. Retrieved on 20 Nov. 2015 from
<http://blog.edubrite.com/2013/01/24/active-vs-passive-learning/>
- University of Kent (2015). How to write a successful CV. Retrieved on 20 Oct. 2015 from
<https://www.kent.ac.uk/careers/cv.htm>
- University of Miami. (2015). Retrieved on 15 Nov. 2015 from
[http://www.miami.edu/sonhs/index
php/phd/admissions/advice_for_writing_your_resume_for_application/](http://www.miami.edu/sonhs/index.php/phd/admissions/advice_for_writing_your_resume_for_application/)
- University of Toronto (2015). Application steps. Retrieved on 16 Nov. 2015 from
http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/ro/Graduate_Admissions/Application_Steps/Prepare_Your_Application/Supporting_Documentation.html
- University of Toronto (2015). Creating your academic CV for Masters and PhDs. Retrieved on 25 Nov. 2015 from
[http://www.careers.utoronto.ca/progServ/CH01/Creating_your_academic_cv_
handout.pdf](http://www.careers.utoronto.ca/progServ/CH01/Creating_your_academic_cv_handout.pdf)
- University of Toronto. (2015). Application Letters and Résumés. Retrieved on 23 Nov. 2015 from <http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/specific-types-of-writing/application-letters>
- University of Waterloo (2015). Retrieved from <https://uwaterloo.ca/career-action/resources-library/how-guides/further-education/personal-statement-letter-intent>
- Wong, J. K. (2004) Are the learning styles of Asian internationals culturally or contextually based? *International Education Journal*, 4(4), 154-166.
- Yahya, M. (2012). A study of the language difficulties of the English Language Centre (ELC) The Students at the Arab American University Jenin. *Asian Journal of*

Management Sciences and Education,1(1).

Zuriff, G. E. (1997). Accommodations for test anxiety under ADA? *J.Am. Acad. Psychiatry Law*, 25(2), 197-206.

Appendix A: Information Letter and Consent Form for Student Participants for Main Study

Dear Student,

My name is Maha AlZahrani and I am a Master of Arts student in the Language and Literacies Education program in the Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning at OISE/UT. I am writing to ask for your participation in a research project.

Please read the information below. Then, if you want to participate in the research study, please complete and return the consent form (agreement form) attached to this document to me. Thank you very much.

Title of Research Project: "I got accepted" Perceptions of Saudi graduate students in Canada on factors influencing their application experience

Principal Investigator: Maha AlZahrani, MA Candidate, Department of Curriculum, Teaching and Learning, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education.

Purpose of the Study: I intend to study the differences between the students who have been successful in their applications to Canadian universities compared to those who have been unable to have their applications approved. These differences will be examined particularly in relation to the influence of prior English language learning of Saudi students on their rate of acceptance and the role of the two-year intensive English experience which Saudi applicants are required to undertake in Canada prior to their acceptance into a Canadian university which include the impact of the proficiency tests on their gaining admission.

Participants: Saudi Arabian students.

Benefits: You will practice speaking English and express your opinion and experience about your English learning. In addition, you will receive drinks and

snacks such as coffee, juice, and cookies after finishing the activities. Finally, I will give you feedback.

What participants will do: Answering the interview questions as well as providing Maha with the letter of intent and CV.

Participants' Rights

- **To Confidentiality:** I will not use your real name when I analyze and report your information in my study. I will use a fake name when I write down your speech and use it for my research. Only my supervisor, Dr. Enrica Piccardo , can listen to these recordings. I will keep your information on a password protected external hard drive in my home in a locked drawer, and I will erase your data after 5 years.
- **To Ask Questions about the Research:** If you would like to ask questions about this research project, please contact me (Maha Alzahrani) at 647***** or maha.alzahrani@mail.utoronto.ca, or you may speak to me directly. You can also contact my supervisor, Dr. Enrica Piccardo, about questions at 416 -978-0274 or enrica.piccardo@utoronto.ca . The University of Toronto also has an office about ethics if you want more information about your rights as a research participant, or to check the connection my research has with the University of Toronto. You may contact the Office of Research Ethics at 416-946-3273 or ethics.review@utoronto.ca.
- **To Withdraw (Leave) at Any Time:** You may leave the study at any time by contacting me. If you would like me to erase the audio recording and any other information I have about you, please tell me this by contacting me by phone or email, and I will erase everything immediately.

Risks: No potential risks.

Please read and sign the attached consent form if you would like to participate in this study. When my study is complete, you may also ask for a report of my research

results by contacting me. This report will explain which tasks were best for students with different ability levels.

Sincerely,

Maha AlZahrani

OISE/UT

PLEASE KEEP A COPY OF THIS LETTER FOR YOUR RECORDS

I have read Maha Alzahrani's letter about the research project and I understand that my participation will involve the following activities and conditions.

Activities

- Participate in about 45 minutes interview.
- Provide my letter of intent and CV.
- My speaking will be audio recorded.
- Maha may use my information in academic publications and/or presentations. However, my identity will be kept private.

Conditions

- Maha will keep my information private from everyone.
- I will receive a copy of the research report summarizing the findings of the study if I ask Maha for a copy.

- I may withdraw before the study is reported or published at any time with no penalty. However, once the study is reported or published, I may NOT withdraw.

_____ **YES**, I agree to participate in the research

Name: _____

Email: _____

Signature: _____

Date:

_____ **NO**, I do not agree to participate in the research

Name: _____

Date: _____

Signature: _____

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Background Information (prior learning)

1. When did you start learning English?
2. Where did you go to learn English?
 1. -Private school
 2. -Public school
 3. -Extra help received (tutors, additional classes)
3. Do your parents or siblings speak English?
4. Is English ever spoken in the home?
5. Was the instruction during university in English or Arabic?
6. What curriculum was used in your education in Saudi Arabia?
7. How did the curriculum help you to speak at near native level?
8. How would you describe your English teachers' method and focus in teaching?
9. How effective were your English teachers in teaching the language? (Give details and examples.)
10. Were you satisfied with the way English is being taught in Saudi Arabia compared to what you have experienced here in Canada? Explain?
11. How were your grades in English before you come to Canada?
12. How does your prior learning affect your English learning experience in Canada?
13. What types of prior learning in Saudi Arabia do you consider to be more effective in furthering your studies after arriving in Canada?

Moving to Canada

- 1- When and why did you move?
- 2- What was your level of English when you moved? Please give me more details about your level?
- 3- For how long did you study English in ESL programs?
- 4- Have you taken IELTS or TOEFL preparation courses?
- 5- Have you taken any proficiency tests such as TOEFL or IELTS? Before coming or after coming to Canada?
- 6- What types of learning that take place during the mandatory one year of English program in Canada do you consider to be more effective?
- 7- How many university applications have you sent? Did you apply to the same university more than once? If yes how many universities?
- 8- Are you a current graduate student? If yes, was it easy to get acceptance?
- 9- Would you rate your English as improved since you moved to Canada? And could you give a specific example?
- 10- Please tell me about the opportunities you have to practice English today.

Difficulties while Learning English.

1. Did you experience any difficulties learning English?
2. In what context did you experience difficulties?
 - speaking with friends
 - writing university papers
 - reading a book, newspaper/magazine/journal

- watching the news/listening to the radio/ listening to announcements...
 - communicating with native English speakers in person/over the phone
1. Which one of the following: speaking, listening, writing or reading, do you find most difficult? Order these in ascending order of difficulty.
 2. Have you experienced difficulties with finding the right word in English (i.e. vocabulary)?
 3. How would you define a “good sentence” in English? Is it difficult for you to construct a “good” sentence in English

Experiences

1. Do you feel confident when you speak in English?
2. Do you avoid or enjoy speaking English?
3. What steps have you taken to improve your English?
 1. -watching movies
 2. -making friends with native English speakers
 3. -reading or watching news in English
 4. -reading books
4. What measures do you wish you had taken or do you intend to take in order to improve your level of proficiency?

Letter of intent and CV

1. How did you find the process of writing the letter of intent and CV?
 2. Did you write your documents by yourself?
- If yes,
3. What resources did u use?

4. Did you go online and read about your program? Which websites (academic and/or professional) did you consult?

5. Did u get someone to edit after you wrote the initial draft(s)?

If no,

1. Why did you get someone else to write the letter for you?

2. Who wrote it for you ?

3. What information did you provide them- examples, your major, school, personal interests, professional goals?

4. What did the person writing the letter ask you for?

5. How did u communicate with the letter writer/editor? By Skype, phone, email, in person?