Learning English in an Arabic context: A study of first-year Libyan university students' challenges in the learning of English

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الملخص

سعت هذه الدراسة إلى تحديد التحديات التي يواجهها طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية (EFL) في تطوير الكفاءة التواصلية في اللغة الإنجليزية للأغراض الأكاديمية في إحدى الجامعات الليبية. لقد تمت دراسة تحديات تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية بشكل أساسي من قبل متعلمي اللغة العرب في بعض الدول العربية. ومع ذلك، لم يتم استكشاف هذا النوع من البحث بشكل كافٍ في ليبيا، ومن هنا جاءت هذه الدراسة لسد هذه الفجوة. استعرض هذا البحث تجارب الطلاب والمحاضرين وانطباعاتهم حول تدريس وتعلم اللغة الإنجليزية الأكاديمية في سياق لغة أجنبية. واعتمد البحث على منهج دراسة الحالة، واستخدم تصميمًا بحثيًا مختلطًا ومتقاربًا. تم جمع البيانات من خلال أساليب نوعية وكمية ضمن نموذج تفسيري. كما اعتمدت الدراسة على ثلاثة أساليب لجمع البيانات: المقابلات شبه المنظمة، ومجموعات النقاش المركزة، والاستبيانات. تشير النتائج إلى أن تحديات تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في ليبيا يمكن تصنيفها إلى أربع فئات: تحديات لغوية، ثقافية، مؤسسية، وبنيوية. فيما يتعلق بالتحديات اللغوية، اتفق معظم المشاركين على أن اللغة العربية واللغة الإنجليزية تختلفان لغويًا إلى حد كبير. أما التحديات الثقافية، فتتمثل في التباين بين الميول الثقافية للطلاب ومتطلبات فك رموز المعاني في اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. وتتمثل التحديات المؤسسية في الوضع العام للتعليم العالي في ليبيا. وأخيرًا، تتعلق التحديات البنيوية بمدى انسجام البرنامج التعليمي ككل. تختتم الدراسة بتقديم مقترحات لتحسين الكفاءة التواصلية في اللغة الهدف في موقع البحث، بالإضافة إلى استكشاف كيفية تمكّن الطلاب من التغلب على تحديات تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية.

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Abstract

This study sought to identify the challenges that EFL students faced in developing English language communicative competence for academic purposes at a Libyan university. The EFL challenges in learning English have been mostly studied by Arab learners in some Arabic countries. Such a line of research has been relatively unexplored in Libya; hence, this study addressed this gap. This research canvassed students' and lecturers' experiences and perceptions in the teaching and learning of academic English in a foreign language context. Within a case study approach, a convergent mixed methods research design was used. Data was collected through qualitative and quantitative methods in an interpretative paradigm. The study employs three data generation methods, a semi-structured interview, focus group discussion, and questionnaires. The findings suggest that this study can be classified into four categories of EFL Libyan learning challenges: linguistic, cultural, institutional, and structural challenges. Linguistic challenges, most participants agreed that Arabic and English are linguistically dissimilar. The cultural challenge manifests as a dissonance between students' cultural predilections and the decoding required for meaning making in English as a foreign language. Institutional challenges are described as the general position of higher education in Libya. Finally, structural challenges were related to the overall teaching program coherence. The study concludes by making suggestions to improve communicative competence in the target language at the research site, and to explore how students can overcome their English learning challenges.

Introduction and Background of the Study

English is the language of international commerce and wider communication today. It has also become the preferred language of higher education in many countries. An interesting development is the growth of non-native speakers of English which have today come to outnumber native speakers of English. This changing demographic is also evident in Libya, the research site of this study. This must be understood in the context of globalization as Libyans seek to advance their linguistic dexterity to access educational and vocational opportunities.

In Libya, Arabic is the mother tongue, and English is studied as a foreign language (EFL) (El-Hawat, 2009; Kalid, 2017). Many challenges are experienced both in the learning of English and the use of English in higher education in Libya. Several studies such as Moghani and Mohamed (2003), Al-Hussein (2014), Azarnoosh (2014), Abuklaish (2014), Hawedi (2015), and Khalid (2017) have found that Libyan students suffer from low levels of English, a factor which serves as a disadvantage when they pursue higher education.

Moreover, the Libyan Higher Education Ministry Review Report, 2003-2016 (2016) also indicated that several areas of poor students' performance and academic difficulties reside in written, oral, and comprehension in English language subjects leading to poor performance and poor results. Therefore, the problem of this study is that Libyan students are confronted by challenges in English language learning, something that hinders their progress when they pursue higher education opportunities. According to Gadour (2006), Libyan students moving from school to university encounter several learning challenges in English learning; also, includes engaging with teaching and learning at university, which is entirely different from the school system.

The determination to adopt English as a foreign language for teaching and learning in Libya has presented several linguistic-related problems in an Arabic-speaking country. It has thus become crucial to investigate reasons for the widely known weak performance of Arabic speakers learning English. This study is concerned with the field of language acquisition. More specifically, this study seeks to explore the challenges that first-year university students face in learning English at a university in Libya and the imperative reasons these challenges impact effective academic performance. Consequently, the focus of this study is on the challenges Libyan, Arabic speakers face in learning English as a foreign language.

The main purpose of this study is to identify the problems existing with lecturers and students by gathering data, evaluating the potential of the problems, providing a set of suggestions to reduce the deficiencies, and describing the prospects of teaching and learning English in a Libyan university. As the research exposes challenges concerning Libya's cultural, social, and national aspects, it can let the educationists determine innovative forms to improve the EFL teaching and learning process. This research used the case study approach to understand a single case and explain the phenomenon of learning English at the selected university. This approach will require an in-depth investigation of all the interlinking or interdependent parts of the emerging patterns.

This study aims to answer the three main research questions underlying the current investigation, which are:

- What are the challenges that EFL students face in learning English at a Libyan university?
- Why do students have these challenges?
- What are EFL lecturers' perceptions of students' challenges in learning English at a Libyan university?

Literature Review

Recently, and with the spread of global English as a basic tool for communication, commerce and worldwide interaction, more interest has been focused on the concerns, issues and needs for English studying (Kassem, 2014). Studies on the EFL and ESL challenges in the learning of English constitute a wide ranging and growing trend in current international research. Previous works on EFL English learning in Arabic countries include Al-Johani (2009), Jdetawy (2011), Alam Khan (2011) and Alrashidi and Phan (2015) state that Arab learners encounter many challenges when they learn English in both speaking and writing. The known issues confronted primarily by Arab learners in Jordan, Sudan, Saudi Arabia and Egypt such as mistakes engaged concerned with articulation, morphology, understanding of the usage of syntax, and spelling, and even most Arab learners have difficulty representing themselves skillfully either when encountered with academic subjects or communicating daily issues (Alam Khan, 2011; Alrashidi & Phan, 2015).

For instance, the learners in Jordan, English learning in their home country, where the Arabic language is their native language. The only chance to learn English is through formal education which is inside the lecture hall where the English lecturers are native Arabic speakers (Kassem, 2014). Another study conducted in Jordan by Al-Jamal and Al-Jamal (2014) showed a low speaking proficiency level among EFL undergraduates and the most pronounced difficulties were communication in L1, lack of time, and large classes. it was also observed that their compositions were littered with grammatical errors. Similar problems were also reported in Sudan, as most students enrolled in English classes usually commit serious syntactic errors in the English composition passages. It was noted that most learners were weak in the following areas: tenses, verb structure, and subject-verb agreement (Alam-Khan, 2011).

In the Saudi Arabia context, the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has experienced significant growth over the years. Currently, the Education Policy in Saudi Arabia requires that all students learn at least one foreign language. This initiative aims to help students connect with various cultures, promote the values of Islam, and contribute positively to society (Alharbi, 2019). As English is the only foreign language offered at public universities in the Kingdom, numerous studies have explored the impact of EFL education and the challenges associated with learning and teaching English as a foreign language (Alam Khan, 2011; Alharbi, 2019; Al-Nafjan, & Alhawsawi, 2022; Almesaar, 2024; Ebrahim & Afzal, 2015; & Jabeen, 2023).

Ebrahim and Afzal (2015) indicated that some issues and challenges must be addressed in EFL teaching in Saudi Arabia. Since Saudis speak their native language at home and during their interaction with their friends, peers, and classmates, there is no opportunity to learn English

through day-to-day interaction (Alam Khan, 2011; Ebrahim & Afzal, 2015). Jabeen (2023), in her study on the teaching of foreign languages in early grades, highlights a lack of professional development opportunities for EFL teachers. This includes insufficient training programs, workshops, and seminars. As a result, these teachers are not receiving adequate exposure to modern teaching methods, advanced technologies, and diverse learning styles. Therefore, due to the rapidly evolving economy of Saudi Arabia, there have been shifts in the teaching and learning of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) within the country. The review encompasses studies that examine the current landscape of the EFL sector in Saudi Arabia, as well as those that explore the challenges faced by EFL education and teachers in the region (Al-Nafjan, & Alhawsawi, 2022). Currently, the people of Saudi Arabia view English as the universal language of modernization, science, and high economic status, making it essential for the job market (Alharbi, 2019).

As can be noted from the discussion above; the EFL challenges in learning English have been mostly studied by Arab learners in Jordan, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. Such a line of research has been relatively unexplored in Libya; hence the focus of this study was directed at Arab-speaking learners of English in Libya. As Khalid (2017) argues the literature on EFL difficulties in learning of English language in developing countries such as Libya is very limited. Moreover, the study aims to explore Libyan learners' challenges in learning English at first-year university and their strategies to overcome these challenges.

Previous works on EFL English learning in Libya such as that of Youssef and Bose (2015) investigated Libyan students' motivation and attitude toward learning English as a foreign language in High School. They suggest that it would be helpful for Libyan teachers to develop their teaching methods to improve their students' English learning ability. This study should also help Libyan teachers to understand their students' motivation and attitude better and to find an appropriate way of teaching English.

Another study conducted by Hamed (2018) investigates the most common types of linguistic errors in the compositions written by forty Libyan students at the pre-intermediate level in the Language Centre at Omar EL-Mukhtar University, EL-Beida, Libya. His findings revealed that substance errors were the highest number of errors, followed by grammatical errors, syntactic errors, and lexical errors. The results also showed that spelling, capitalization, tenses, punctuation, articles, varied words, subject-verb agreement, and prepositions were the most common linguistic errors in the learners' writings. These mistakes could be due to over generalization in the target language, emerging from ignorance of rule restriction and inadequate application of rules, and the effect of their first language (Arabic) negative transfer.

The current study is expected to address a gap in the literature on the Libyan teaching and learning of English at the University entrance level. I support the idea that quality classroom teaching has the most influence on successful outcomes for learners. As noted from the literature above, the EFL challenges in the learning of English have been studied mainly by Arab learners in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Sudan, and Palestine. However, it has been relatively unexplored in Libya; hence this study seeks to address that gap. Therefore, this gap serves as a warrant for this study.

Theoretical Framework

Krashen's (1981) Second Language Acquisition theory is chosen as the theoretical framework for this study as it attempts to respond to the vital theoretical question of how we acquire language. It is considered the most effective and extensively known theory that accounts for second and foreign language acquisition. Schulz (1991) affirms this theory is foremost from the immediate pedagogic extrapolations created in the supposed natural method. Krashen has always been interested in classroom language learning and teaching. The use of Krashen's framework will enable the researcher to explore the challenges that EFL students face in learning and acquiring the English language at Libyan University.

The theory details the important five hypotheses about Second Language Acquisition. First, *the Acquisition-Learning Distinction hypothesis* states that adults have two distinct and independent ways of developing competence in a second language. The first way is language acquisition, a process similar to the way children develop ability in their first language. Another way to develop proficiency in a second language is achieved through language learning.

The second hypothesis is *that the Natural Order Hypothesis* is about acquiring grammatical structures that proceed in a predictable probable order. Third, *the Monitor Hypothesis* suggests that acquisition and learning are used in particular ways. Generally, the acquisition is responsible for our utterance, and our fluency and learning change in the form of our utterance. The fourth hypothesis is that *the Input Hypothesis* attempts to answer the critical question in this theory: how do we acquire language? It says we acquire by "going for meaning" first, and as a result, we acquire structure. Lastly, *the Affective Filter Hypothesis* hypothesis states how affective factors relate to the second language acquisition process.

Language acquisition means picking up a language including implicit learning, informal learning, and natural learning (Krashen, 2009). Hence, to develop competence in a second language is by language learning. Learning entails knowing about a language, such as grammar or language rules and some synonyms, etc. Some second language theorists have assumed that children acquire, while adults can only learn (Krashen, 2009). Therefore, this research looks at the challenges that EFL learners face when they learn and use the English language.

Research Methodology

Research Design

In this approach to the research study, the interpretive paradigm is looked at in terms of human behaviour based on the participants that construct and understand it (Cohen et al., 2011). The researcher considers the interpretative paradigm more applicable and effective in this study because it seeks an actual reality in a specific situation. This approach allows the researcher's focus to be on understanding what is happening in a given context. Moreover, this study uses a convergent mixed-method (qualitative and quantitative) study investigating the challenges EFL students face in learning English at a Libyan University.

Convergent mixed methods collect qualitative and quantitative data, merge the data, compare the results, and explain any differences (Creswell, 2020). A primary purpose of this design is that one data collection form provides strengths to balance the weaknesses of the other method and that a complete understanding of a research problem results from collecting both quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell, 2020). The study further employs the case study approach since it aims to develop an in-depth understanding of students' views on their

challenges in learning English. Christiansen et al. (2010) define a case study as an in-depth study of one individual, a group of individuals or an institution.

Participants

For this study, purposive sampling has been used to make samples of the larger population. Sampling involves making decisions about the people, setting, events, or behaviour to observe (Cohen et al., 2011). This study was conducted mainly at the Faculty of Arts and in the other two faculties (Education and Law), which are a substructure within the College of Humanities. The School of Arts and the two faculties are located at a Libyan university, situated in Zliten city in the north of Libya. It is purposively selected from first-year students between 18 to 19 years old from a total of three faculties at the university.

The researcher sampled six lecturers and twelve students to get their experiences and perceptions of the challenges they face in learning English in Libya. Two lecturers were selected from each of the three faculties resulting in a total of six lectures in all. These lecturers specialise in English language modules and have sufficient experience (more than four years). Four students were selected per faculty, and this resulted in twelve learner participants in all. The researcher tried to balance gender. She selected six female lecturers, except two males, while all twelve students were females from the three faculties. Moreover, the questionnaire was distributed randomly to another 30 students around the university to gain more information.

Data Collection

An interview schedule, questionnaires, and a focus group discussion were employed to collect data from the participants. Therefore, the questionnaire requires personal responses to twenty-six questions on their challenges in learning English. The individual interview was semi-structured. There were twelve interviews because each of the six learners and six lecturers was interviewed separately to find their views and experiences on their challenges in learning English.

They ranged from thirty to forty minutes; these were conducted in an isolated venue in the English department where the possibility of being interrupted was minimal. The conversation was recorded using an audio-recording instrument. Focus group discussion usually produces both qualitative and observational data where analyses can be required. It was two focus groups, one with the six lecturers and the other with the other six students. The main methods of data collection during a focus group discussion include audio and tape recording and note-taking.

Data Analysis

For qualitative data analysis, the constant comparison method of employed to analyse data in this research (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 557). The first step in the analysis process was to initiate the coding of all research data. Charmaz (2006) asserts that coding can be seen as the basis for an analysis that paves the way for a much more intensive study. Coding involves breaking data into concepts and categories and categorising data sections with a short name summarising each section.

The researcher first read and re-read data collected through interviews and questionnaires to code the data and find common responses, which ultimately generate themes

that emerge from the responses given. Thematic analysis is the way of analysing facts and figures according to similarities and differences across a data set. The written transcriptions contained the information received from the interviews and the questionnaires, and the researcher interpreted the verbal and written answers to find out the recommendations, beliefs, opinions, and feelings of all the research participants. An audiotape was used to record the responses and the language challenges in English learning conducted in the faculties. This allowed the researcher to review the transcriptions to ensure accuracy.

For quantitative data analysis, the responses to the questionnaire surveys were manually decreased, coded, and categorised in the Microsoft Excel manuscript according to the predetermined classifications (Sarantakos, 2005). Figures and tables were used, which show how the data was reduced, coded, and presented in a bar chart and the percentage calculation of each item.

Validity and Reliabilities Issues

To ensure validity in this study, first I selected an appropriate methodology for answering the research questions. I used three data creation methods, namely: semi-structured interview, focus group discussion, and questionnaire, to get views of lectures and the learners on their challenges in learning English. It enabled me to understand the observable fact under investigation by approaching it from different angles.

I ensured the authenticity of research results through triangulation. According to Cohen et al., (2011), using various instruments to collect data (triangulation) enhances validity. The second was by employing the member validation techniques to check on findings. Participants in this study were given a chance to confirm the transcribed findings to increase the study's validity. The third way was through common inference descriptors, which involve recording observations in terms that are as concrete as possible, including verbatim accounts of what transpired during the question and answer session.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthy research should utilise suitable research tools to meet the given objectives of the investigation (Sarantakos, 2005; TATIRA, 2018). They suggest several essential elements to a case study design that can be integrated to improve overall study reliability. The reason for utilising this technique was to guarantee that enough detail was provided so that readers could measure the trustworthiness of the work. To achieve this, I ensured that research questions were written, objectives were clearly stated, and meaningful analysis of data.

The case study design was suitable for all the research questions. Purposeful sampling strategies were suitable for the study. Additionally, data were generated and managed systematically. To address credibility in this study, I used an audio recorder, and a field note to record what my participants were discussing during the session. I took the data transcripts back to the participants to double-check the data with the participants for accuracy.

Ethical Issues

This study took ethical considerations into account. This involves getting the participants' permission and gatekeepers, maintaining the dignity and welfare of participants by maintaining anonymity or confidentiality (Cohen et al., 2011). First and foremost, permission

was sought and obtained from the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, and the ethical clearance reference number for the current study is HSSREC/00001455/2020. Also, a permission letter to carry out this research at the university was obtained. This study did not raise any issues regarding the target population as all the participants (lecturers and students) were over 18. No sensitive and personal nature was kept on an individual, and the study did not induce any psychological stress or anxiety.

The participants were provided with complete information about the research objective, and all those included in this research were asked to read and understand the enclosed research information sheets. Lastly, the participant's anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed with the use of pseudonyms (Maree & Van der Westhuizen, 2007). Also, I assured the participants that the information would be protected and that I would protect their identity should I attempt to publish the results of my study.

The Findings of the Study

Qualitative Data Findings

This section presents the results gathered from EFL participants through two types of qualitative data collection: an individual interview and a focus group discussion. Accordingly, the findings will be presented separately in two sections; and every section is divided into another two sections, one for EFL students and the other for EFL lecturers. Each section will provide a brief introduction to the data, a description of the data analysis process, a presentation of the findings and, finally, a summary dissection and conclusion. The first set of data is presented from the individual interview process.

Individual interview qualitative data analysis (semi structure interview)

This section provides the results of twelve interviews between six EFL students and six EFL lecturers. The reason for applying individual interviews in a qualitative study is well approved and acknowledged (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Khalid, 2017). It is known to be an appropriate method for obtaining valuable information that exposes participants' experiences and perceptions.

1. **The challenges that EFL students face in learning English at a Libyan university**
The initial sources of data for this study are six interviews with six EFL students, and the findings are expected to contribute to the response to the main research questions.

▪**Previous challenges related to the school (before entering university)**
Many participants indicated that their poor English language level is one of the issues they face in terms of English language learning during their university studies. They stated that many of the language fundamentals important to their progress in their education program are missing. Students assign their weaknesses in English to many factors.

> *Teaching the English language is supposed to begin in the pre-school at five years old. At this age, the learner will be familiar with the basics of English such as letters and names of living creatures, vegetables and fruit. I mean, topics like these will encourage and assist learners to*

learn any foreign language unlike us, who did not learn English adequately in the first years of our education. **(S1, S4, S5, S6)**

- **Deficiency of English language courses at schools:** Some participants indicated that they had no English preparatory work that much. They did not obtain any English language courses at school, the before university stage.
- **English teachers at high schools:** Some participants stated that the low quality of school education influenced the key issue behind their low English proficiency. The students affirmed that some teachers were not qualified to teach the basic English skills to the students.
- **English language skills and challenges:** Generally, the students indicated that they are weak in all the English skills (writing, speaking, listening, and reading). Consider the following responses:

  The difficulty we mainly face is related to listening and understanding lectures because there are some lecturers whose English is weak, which makes it difficult for them to convey their thoughts properly and has a massive impact on us as students. We face these problems from both local and foreign lecturers. **(S1, S3, S5)**

  - **The effect of the Arabic language on English learning:** Many students indicate that Arabic is an essential language to their studies because most of their modules or subjects are in the Arabic language, which is their mother tongue. It is easier for them to understand English lectures when it is explained in Arabic. Thus, they use coding switching between English and Arabic languages during English lectures.
  - **Practicing and using the English language in daily life:** As mentioned in the literature review chapter, it is not common for people to speak another language in Libya. Thus, the participants indicated that they do not use the English language in their daily lives, in public or even on campus.
  - **The university's responsibility towards its students:** According to the participants, it is clear that they feel that the university is disappointing them in many aspects. Consider the following reply:

    Entering university does not add much to my English learning, it becomes worse than before. The university even does not support us in many aspects, such as I cannot find a relevant book about English learning in the university library... **(S1)**

2. The EFL lecturers' perceptions of students' challenges in learning English at a Libyan university

The sources of data for this study are six individual interviews with six EFL lecturers, and the findings are expected to contribute to the response to the main research questions. From these individual interviews, let us explore the challenges from the lecturers' perspectives.

- **Previous challenges of English learning and its impact on entering higher education:** The most common problem stated by the lecturers is that students' English language knowledge is very limited, thus their preparation for the requirements of higher education is

inadequate. They considered that the students were not qualified for university studies. Some lecturers explained that the students' language weaknesses, were due to their insufficient preparation at school, before entering university, and some lecturers responded as follows:

- **Lecturers' responsibility towards the students' challenges**

Lecturers have a responsibility towards their students, in that they should assist them in overcoming their English learning challenges. It has been shown that the low proficiency of lecturers, and the additional load on them of giving their specialist knowledge to the students in English, can be a significant challenge for these lecturers. Lecturers deal with these challenges in the following ways:

1. **Assessment and Exams Formulate:** One of the instruments to assess students' level in foreign language learning, is exams. In this regard, lecturers indicated that they use some methods to adapt to the students' weak English of level and are designed in a way to limit their answers and essay writing for longer length tests and exams.

2. **Utilizing English and Arabic languages as code-mixing**: Most lecturers present different attitudes towards using the Arabic language in the lecture to explain their subject. One of them indicated that he used Arabic in the lecture to help the students understand the subject matter correctly:

    Even me, who I am a faculty lecturer, often find it hard to explain and reach the meaning in English, and it is easy for me to use my mother tongue. **(L1)**

3. **English language courses at the university:** In addition, the lecturers assert that the university should provide some courses aimed at improving students' level in English:
    There are no English courses at the university to assist EFL students in improving their English level. These courses should be free and during their study time. **(L1, L2, L3, L5)**

4. **Lecturers' proficiency and accent:** Some lecturers expressed their concerns about other lecturers' accents and pronunciations. Some have a different English accent which is very hard to follow, and most of the students complain about this issue:
    Most of the students have complained that they have some issues with some lecturers because their accents are not clear, and they could not figure out what they explained. **(L2, L4)**

Focus Group Discussion, why do students have these challenges

This section provides the second source of data for this study and the findings of twelve focus group interviews between six EFL students and six EFL lecturers interviews. In this case, focus groups are expected to provide valuable data, particularly when participants are allowed extended periods to reflect on their own experiences while other participants speak.

1. Data analysis of students' focus group discussion

This source of data is a focus group discussion for the other six EFL students, and also, the findings are expected to contribute to the response to the main research questions. It is clear from the students' interview responses that they had many challenges that arose

when they moved to higher education, and they mentioned many reasons behind these challenges. Let us explore more challenges of the students' perceptions, and they may be similar or differ from the challenges we explored in the individual interview.

- **Teaching the English language subject as one subject a year:** students assert that in our school the English language is taught as one subject between ten Arabic subjects in schools and only in one class a week, other students have complained that the English subject teaching at school was very simple English and teachers taught them the basic of English language only:
- **Students' feedback:** The students indicated that there is no chance for them to give any feedback for their studies or evaluate their teacher's performance:
  The other challenge for us is that lecturers never ask us for feedback, and even the university never asks. There should be an evaluation model that can be used by students to assess their lecturers' performance and their studies. **(S1, S2, S3)**

2. Data analysis of lecturers' focus group discussion

This is the last source of the qualitative data analysis is a focus group discussion for the six lecturers, and also, these findings are supposed to contribute to the response to the main research questions. From these lecturers' focus group discussions, we may explore new challenges that may differ from the previous challenges that we discovered before from the previous qualitative data analysis. In the following, I demonstrate every challenge that is supported by the discussion of the relevant lecturers:

- **University administration and financial support:** Other issues raised by some lecturers are the way the university works. They indicated that its system makes the educational process more difficult. One of these problems is a lack of money:
  The university's financial office refused the budgets assigned by the government to this institution, as they were claiming needed more money.
  (L1, L2, L3, L5)

- **Consistency in university education:** Despite these challenges facing the lecturers, they describe another issue is the lack of consistency in university education among Libyan universities:
  There is no education stability in this university, the continuous opening and closing of the university. There is a delay in exams, which negatively impacts the students' language learning and lecturers' delivery because they cannot do the teaching correctly, as they have to keep starting and stopping every time. **(L2, L4, L5)**

- **Lectures' training centre:** All lecturers stated that there should be training for themselves to recognize the importance of the teaching method. Also, to make them aware of some teaching issues they encounter, and to avoid these issues.
- **Lack of cooperation with other universities:** Some lecturers asserted that the lack of cooperation between their university and other universities made it hard for them to

expose other universities' experience, as this will develop their teaching abilities, and it will assist the student in learning a foreign language.

- **Political influence and English cancellation**: Because of Libyan foreign policy, that made many decisions related to the teaching English cancellation. This decision has had a negative impact on the student's level of English skills:

  One of the main reasons behind the students' poor English level is the cancellation of the English language; because of the political factors when the language was cancelled from education for a long time. **(L2, L4, L5, L6)**

Quantitative Data Findings

This section presents the quantitative data findings from the open-ended questionnaire to answer the three main research questions of this study. The questionnaires were distributed randomly to the 30 students who responded to the 26 questions about their English learning challenges. The findings are later triangulated and discussed with other research findings.

The data findings' presentation is based on seven themes generated from the data and related to the target research questions. The themes are as follows:

1- English practice and environment.
2- Learning four English language skills.
3- Practicing English language at school before entering university.
4- Using Arabic language as a first language.
5- University responsibility and its support in learning English.

1-English Practice and Environment

Items 1, 5, 8, and 9 of the questionnaires gave the respondents a chance to express their views concerning their English practice's environmental impacts. They indicated that there were not many chances for students to practice English. The participant's level of English is affected by many other factors: cultural and social barriers, lack of free time to spend learning English, or not using English in daily life.
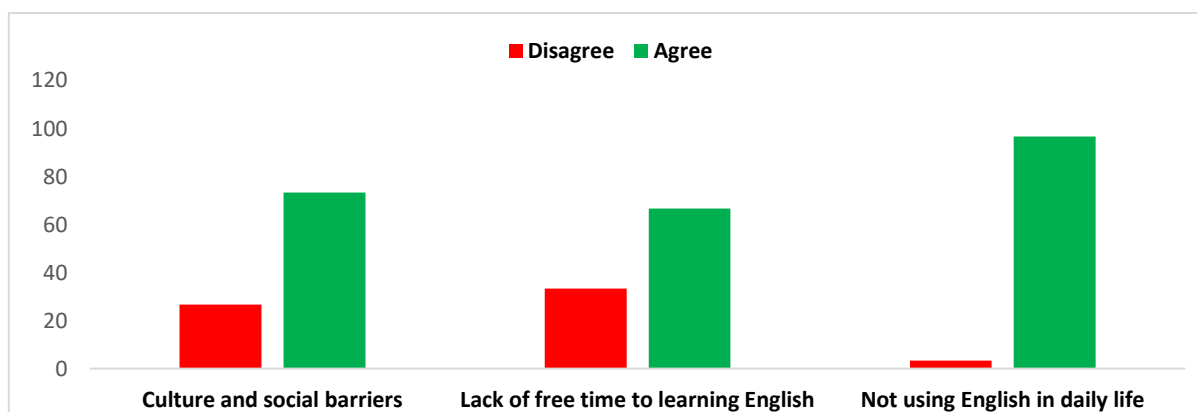

Graph 1. English Practicing and Environment

As shown from the above results, most students do not have time to practice English in the classroom, and English is not used daily. Furthermore, there are no efficient ways to practice English during the day to improve their language skills. Also, there are various social barriers and environmental factors that affect their practicing English in the classroom.

2-Learning Four English Language Skills

In terms of the participants' English language skills, Items 1 and 6 of the questionnaires required the participants to list their challenges with English skills. They were also given a chance to determine and rank some other challenges pertaining to their English skills, such as limited knowledge of pronunciation and spelling, limited vocabulary knowledge, limited grammar knowledge, weakness in the four language skills in general, or other aspects that impact their language in academic performance. The graph below reveals the challenges they mainly encountered:
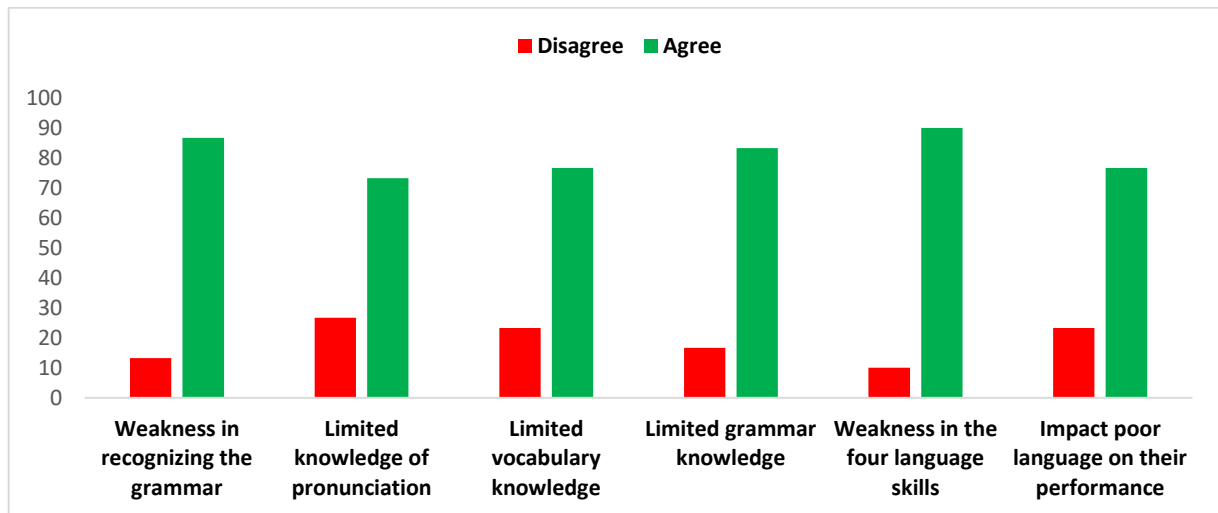

Graph 2. Learning Four English Language Skills

As can be seen from the above findings, the student's English skills are limited. They lack grammar comprehension, little pronunciation knowledge, limited vocabulary knowledge, a lack of basic English skills (reading, listening, writing, and speaking), and a lack of influence on English performance. As a result of the student's English skills level being weak, the problems are mainly related to students' poor writing skills, including spelling and grammar mistakes.

3-Practicing English Language at School before Entering University

Items 1 and 9 of the questionnaires asked the participants for their views about their English learning challenges before entering higher education. The data indicated that they face many challenges towards their English learning at school, such as not having an effective teaching system throughout academic education. Including, a lack of motivating teachers, unsatisfactory teachers' feedback, exams methods and design to tolerate learners' mistakes, and lack of cooperation from the school to assist learners in practicing English. They indicated that their preparation for the requirements of higher education is weak. The graph below reveals the challenges they encountered:
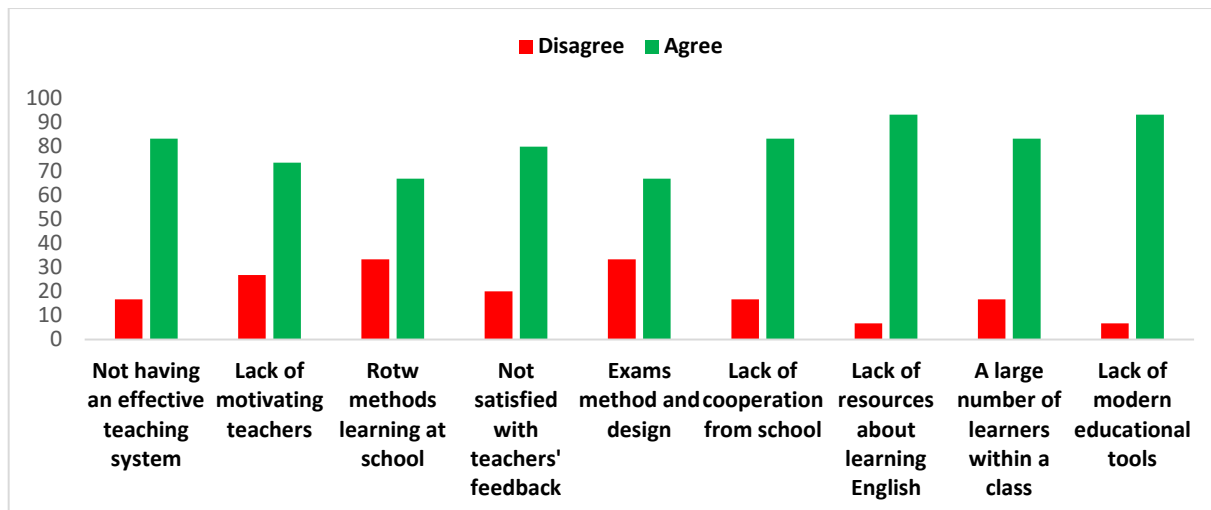
Graph 3. Practicing English Language at School

The participants' responses to the possibility of using English in the school atmosphere showed that students lack an appropriate instructional structure. Including a lack of inspiring teachers, rote methods of learning at school, and frustration with instructor input, and tests. As well as a lack of school collaboration, a lack of resources for learning English, and a high number of learners within a classroom, including a lack of modern educational tools.

4-Using Arabic Language as a First Language

It is expected that many students indicated that Arabic is essential to their studies, given the problems they face using English (Khalid, 2017). Items 1, 2 and 7 of the questionnaires requested the participants present their views about using Arabic with English. The data indicated that they use Arabic language in their daily lives. Using Arabic language and code-mixing, social and cultural influences force speakers to use Arabic. Lecturers are using the Arabic language with English during lectures and transferring the style of Arabic writing.
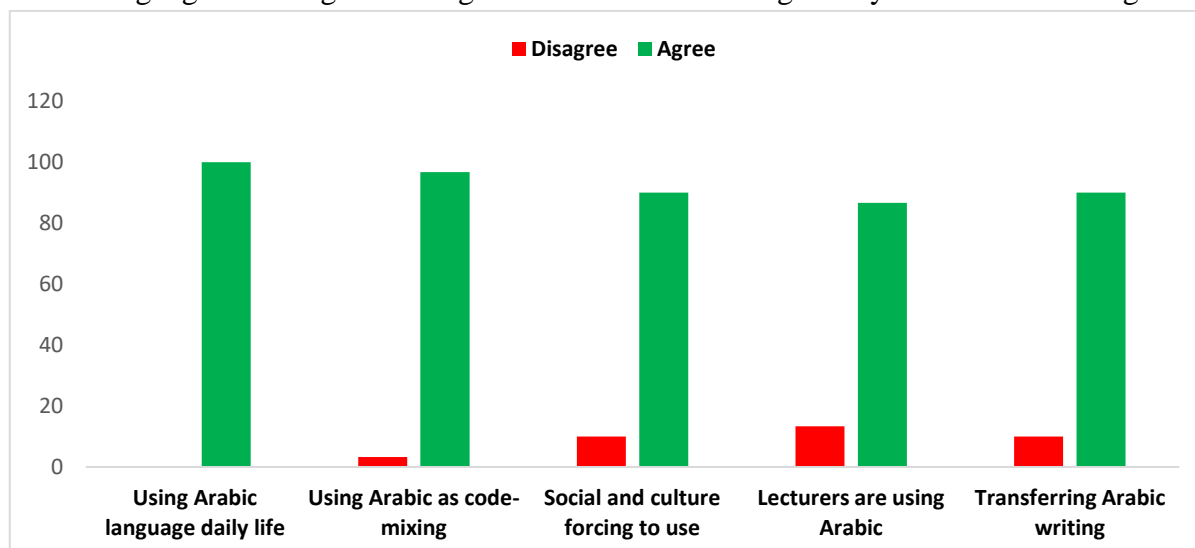

Graph 4. Using Arabic Language as a First Language

As can be seen, all participants recognize that interpreting English with Arabic during English lessons negatively affects them. English language teachers typically intend to concentrate on using English in their classrooms. However, they face a significant challenge:

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the lack of contact between teachers and their learners since they have trouble interpreting what they consider to be a difficult foreign language.

5-University Responsibility and Support in Learning English

It is evident that the participants feel that the university is letting them down in various ways. Items 1, 3, and 4 of the questionnaires asked the participants for their views about these challenges because of the university system, such as lack of motivational support. There is also a lack of resources and lack of continuous exposure to the English language during academic life. Students are not satisfied with exams methods. There is a lack of modern educational tools such as modern computers and accessibility for English language courses at universities.
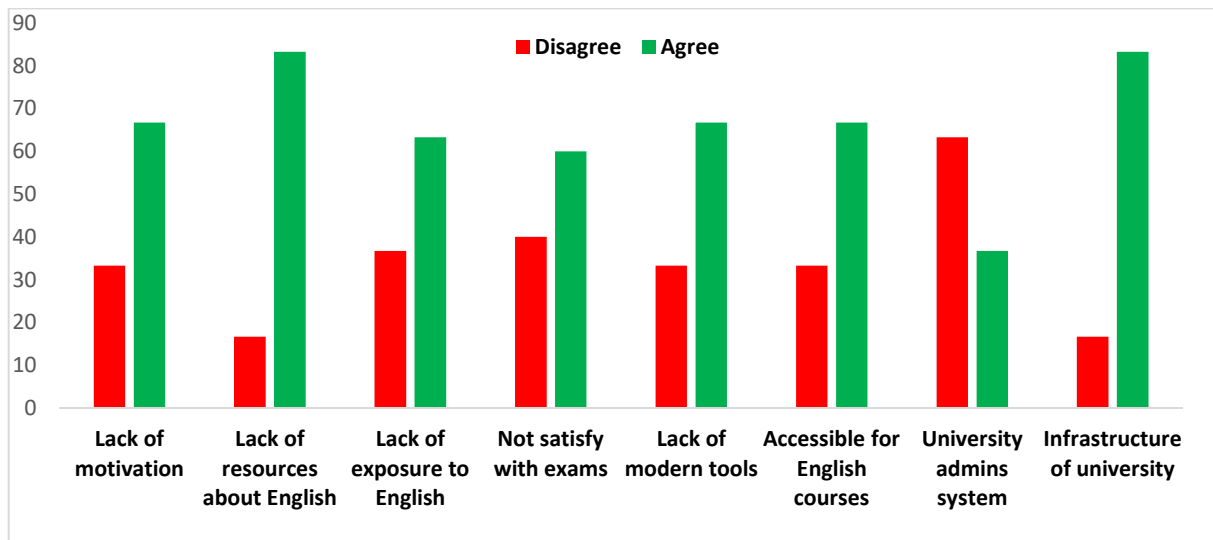
Graph 5. University Responsibility and its Support in Learning English

Educational infrastructure-buildings, classrooms, labs, and equipment are crucial components of schools and universities' academic environments. It is clear that high-quality facilities, among other advantages, encourage improved teaching, increase student grades, and decrease dropout rates. There have been various problems impacting vast numbers of lecturers in diverse educational settings, such as speaking teaching, inspiration, learning distinction, teaching in large classrooms, and discipline.

Discussion

This discussion of findings is from individual interview methods, focus group discussion, and questionnaires on students' and lecturers' experiences and perceptions of their challenges in English language acquisition. The discussion is analysed in three sections according to the three research questions.

Section one: What are the challenges that EFL students face in learning English at a Libyan university?

In the Libyan EFL context, the participants encounter many challenges in learning English at university. These challenges emanate from school based English instruction, which is rudimentary at best. Khalid (2017) indicated that learners do not gain much from their pre-

university learning in terms of English skills. Consequently, it is suggested that the school curricula be revised to enhance the teaching of English. This problem is also manifest in other Arabic speaking countries.

According to Alanazi and Widin (2018), teaching English and learning language skills pose challenges in Saudi Arabia. The EFL learners have a low communicative ability due to many conditions. The participants complained about the lack of motivating teachers to practice English in the class, as they were not satisfied with teachers' feedback. Moreover, Alahmari (2021) indicates in his study that elementary learners of English as EFL rely more on content forms than on functional forms in their English language productions. Consequently, it is understandable that they had difficulties at the university regarding their language skills.

Also, they mentioned in the qualitative and quantitative findings the Arabic language's effect on their English learning. Despite the degree of similarity in some linguistic structures between English and Arabic such as the existence of the relative clauses in the two languages, negative transfer can take place. The major obstruction to second-language acquisition stems from interference emanating from the first language. This is seen in the following:

1. English is in the Latin alphabet and is written (and read) from left to right. Arabic uses Arabic script and is written from right to left.
2. In Arabic, adjectives come after the noun they qualify, whereas in English they come before the noun.
3. There are numerous grammatical constructions that appear in English but do not exist in Arabic. One important aspect is the verb to be. It exists in Arabic but is used less frequently than in English.
4. English has about three times as many vowels sound as Arabic, which makes English vowel sounds problematic for Arabic learners.
5. Also problematic, is that some English sounds do not exist in Arabic. For example, there is no /p/ and /v/ sound in Arabic
6. In addition, English has more consonant clusters than Arabic. As a consequence, this creates problems with pronunciation. For example, Arabic does not have three-segment initial consonant clusters like spr, and skr.

Rajab et al. (2016) indicated that the ignorance of the difference between Arabic and English in terms of linguistic systems makes learning writing and speaking skills more difficult in Libya. This lack of awareness of Arabic and English's different characteristics and features is likely to confuse the EFL Libyan students, leading them to fall back on their L1 to imitate some of its features and structures and employ them in L2 writing, (Aljoundi, 2015; Rajab et al. 2016). Palestinian learners usually change the stylistic features of their first language; Arabic, to the target language; English, as Abu Rass (2015) indicated. For these reasons, Arabic speakers face specific challenges in English learning (Qutob, 2020).

Some students think that when lecturers use Arabic and code-switching, it might help them to understand everything said or explained in the lecture, but this will not improve their English learning significantly. This concurs with Van Wyk and Mostert (2016) who assert that the mother tongue should not be ignored for second language learners to reach adequate

proficiency but should be used judiciously. The participants also indicated that they do not use the English language in their daily life. It is rare to get a chance to speak English, so they rely on themselves to improve their English. Similarly, in Saudi Arabia, Ebrahim and Afzal (2015) indicated that since Saudis speak their native language at home and interact with their friends, peers, and classmates in Arabic, there is no chance to practice English in a day-to-day setting.

Most of the participants considered their experience at university as disappointing. They indicated that the university does not appear to spend any effort to develop and provide the necessary services to improve their English level. In Libya, the university does not provide a language laboratory for students to practice language skills. It does not provide them with useful English resources and references that the students need in a library. It is apparent from the study's qualitative and quantitative findings that acquiring communicative competence in the target language is hampered by the factor enumerated above.

Section two: What are EFL lecturers' perceptions regarding students' challenges in learning English at a Libyan university?

To understand the current social reality, it is essential to explore lecturers' perceptions of their learners in an EFL context (Moloi, 2009). Many lecturers mentioned that students encounter critical problems in their first years in adjusting adequately to the course requirements, which requires them to have good English language competence. Similarly, as the students mentioned earlier, some lecturers claimed that this was due to a history of poor English language preparation emanating from schools. A similar problem presents in Iran where Akbari (2016) found that most students cannot express themselves in English competently after studying English in junior and high school for seven years.

The qualitative and quantitative data findings indicated that there are four significant areas of writing challenges for Libyan students including firstly, they cannot write within a restricted time. Secondly, they cannot compose academic writing using English. Thirdly, they are incapable of employing the grammar rules in writing an essay. Lastly, they are unable to develop a properly structured essay. These shortcomings are linked to late exposure to learning the English language. Lecturers indicated that most students' issues are related to the four main language skills (writing, listening, reading, and speaking). Solak and Bayar (2015) studied English language learning and teaching challenges at a university in Turkey. They suggest that teaching and improving the four language skills should focus on authentic usage rather than grammar teaching.

To develop students' writing ability, lecturers also have to assist students in learning grammar and vocabulary. Muth'im and Latief (2014) found that in Indonesia, English lecturers teaching writing realized that giving feedback should help students overcome their writing problems. It is assumed that the students' feedback from their teachers makes them more focused and concentrated on what is being taught.

The latest methods of employing educational technology and devices to enhance learning should be introduced besides innovative classroom teaching to relieve boredom and stimulate the learners' interest. AlShebeeb and Alshehri (2024) demonstrate that the potential of AI-based platforms can improve language teaching and assist in developing complete

language learning policies that promote effective communication in today's interconnected world.

To conclude this section, most lecturers and students concurred about EFL students' challenges in English learning. It is suggested that training programs must be mandatory for every teacher at all levels of teaching. The language should not be used as a simple course syllabus to educate but as an effective communicative tool with practical value for actual life situations. They indicated that the university does not appear to spend any effort developing and providing the necessary services to improve their English level as there were no English language courses or language centers available for them. Both the lecturers' and the students' views aligned, so this confirms the validity of the research data.

Section three: Why do students have these challenges?

The participants stated many reasons behind the challenges they experienced:

Some students noted a shortage of English language teachers, with some schools lacking any English instructors, resulting in no English instruction whatsoever. When they compared school English with university English, it became apparent that school English acquisition is too simplified and not adequate for students to fulfil the needs of academic discourse at university (Khalid, 2017). Especially, they Acquired the English language at a late stage of their education. However, teaching young learners in foreign languages requires a distinct set of skills (Jabeen, 2023).

The participants complained that teachers were not motivated to practice English in class and were not satisfied with their feedback. This indicates that trained teachers who are experienced, skilled, and qualified are required to motivate English language practice. Jabeen (2023) asserted that a few factors contributing to the gap between EFL teaching policies and their effective implementation include outdated teaching methods, insufficient training for both pre-service and in-service teachers, and limited awareness of contemporary teaching trends and techniques. Therefore, to ensure that English learners become proficient users of the language, EFL teachers need ongoing professional development and training, as well as EFL teaching certification. This will better equip them to handle the daily challenges of teaching English effectively (Jabeen, 2023).

A lack of university infrastructures, such as language laboratories, library services and other complementary equipment specific to English teaching. Uddin (2017) states that most universities have their libraries, but none have English journals, computers, and audio-visual aids. As there is no teaching training centre at the university or the school to develop their teaching methods. Youssef and Bose (2015) suggest that it would be helpful for Libyan lecturers to develop their teaching methods and to improve their English learning ability.

Another reason mentioned in qualitative and quantitative findings is the Arabic language's effect on their English learning. The students' environment impacts their English practice because Arabic is an essential language for use and they do not use English in their daily life, as there is a lack of free time to spend learning the English language. Cultural and social barriers are also evident, social and cultural demands force students to use the Arabic language in their daily lives.

The preservation of Libyan culture will rely heavily on preserving the Arabic language. They think that using foreign textbooks with foreign culture may impact on their cultural and religious beliefs. Almesaar (2024) suggested that foreign language textbooks should be carefully designed to genuinely reflect foreign cultures while also providing a solid foundation of local culture for study. It is evident that English textbooks in Saudi Arabia have been especially careful in addressing the intricacies of foreign cultures.

The cancellation of the English language from education for an extended period because of political conflict was disabling for students. The viewpoints of El- Hawat (2009), Al-Hussein (2014); Abuklaish (2014); and Khalid (2017) about the political decision to stop teaching the English language in all sectors, negatively impacted the educational sector in Libya. The government ought to keep its political affairs distinct from its decisions related to the education sector. It also should consistently advance and incorporate EFL teaching in all educational spheres and levels.

Conclusion

The aim of this case study research project was to investigate and explore the challenges that first-year university students face in learning English in Libya and the reasons these challenges impact effective academic performance. The qualitative and quantitative findings in this study can be classified into four categories of EFL Libyan learning challenges: linguistic challenges, cultural challenges, institutional challenges, and structural challenges (Bradford 2016). Linguistic challenges are those related to language issues confronted by both lecturers and students.

Most participants (lecturers and students) agreed that Arabic and English are linguistically dissimilar. The cultural challenge is described as a mismatch between students' culture's characteristics and expectations and the foreign language, and how students' environment impacts their English practice. Institutional challenges in this study are described as the general position of higher education in Libya, and the problems students encounter when joining this education system. Lastly, structural challenges were related to overall teaching program coherence. They included the lack of fundamental curriculum design standards and poorly clarified policy of English language teaching and learning.

Furthermore, there are some implications for future research, Students, lecturers, parents, and the community should understand the impact of culture on language and, where possible, put aside cultural barriers. One of this study's findings indicated that a cultural challenge is a mismatch between students' cultural characteristics and expectations and the foreign language and how students' environment impacts their English practice. So, we need further research to address this issue. Also, it is needed concerning the specific English language situation in other departments to explore how students can overcome these challenges.

Based on the findings of this small-scale study in Libyan universities, it suggests pertinent aspects for further research; investigation of English language challenges is still new in the Libyan universities' settings. This work may be a starting point for reconsidering and developing the English language curriculum at Libyan schools and universities. It could also create other research opportunities to investigate language use or other areas of English language teaching at

universities. Moreover, to understand and evaluate English language use in the university, there is a need for more investigation of each discipline's language requirements.

From the study findings, the following series of recommendations have arisen: When designing an English language curriculum, lecturers have to consider students' needs. It is recommended that the English language be used in computer science (as an example) as the primary communication tool to perform various activities. The curriculum should be designed specifically for each field, not only the same generic design for all study fields. It should also correspond with what the students learn in their academic and professional areas.

As Libyan students are classified as EFL students, learners do not communicate with native English speakers. Therefore, English language teaching methods should be changed from traditional passive lectures to active group learning to be easily exposed to English language use. The curricula should focus on students' challenges and provide ways to accelerate the acquisition of English language competence by eliminating these challenges.

Furthermore, lecturers should recognize the role of oral language in enhancing students' reading abilities. When students have a strong foundation in listening and speaking, their reading and writing skills tend to advance as well. They need to adopt various strategies that foster these skills. As a result, the university ought to establish a centre for communication skills and a language laboratory to support students in acquiring and learning the language effectively.

The limitations of this research study stem from several reasons, such as, for example, the sample size, time, and language. The major limitation of this research is common to all applications of the mixed methods approach. Regardless of in-depth focus and rich information, it was time-consuming, especially during data analysis. The number of participants was limited by the small number of faculty members as there were only three departments in three faculties that participated in the study. Moreover, it was not easy to collect my data because of the COVID-19 epidemic, as everything was closed, especially during the lockdown. However, during the data collection phase, I tried to obtain all the information needed. The findings may not be generalizable because the study is mainly concerned with three faculties in one Libyan university. Lastly, the researcher could not find relevant studies or resources for this study in Libya because there is limited research on English teaching studies at Libyan universities.

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Disclaimer

I hereby declare that this research paper is based on my PhD thesis, which can be found on the Edgewood Campus at the University of KwaZulu-Natal website.
https://researchspace.ukzn.ac.za/items/0e0210d7-c6d1-42f4-bd3d-1565f011f211
https://hdl.handle.net/10413/22665

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