

9-16-2009

The English Literacy Experiences of Advanced Saudi EFL Professionals in the United States

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THE ENGLISH LITERACY EXPERIENCES
OF ADVANCED SAUDI EFL PROFESSIONALS IN THE UNITED STATES

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

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August 2009

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The present study attempted to understand how the backgrounds and current experiences of a number of Saudi Arabian EFL professionals in graduate school in the United States have influenced their English literacy development. The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain the Saudis' perspective on what helped or hindered them in acquiring and developing English as their second language, both in their home country and in the countries where they pursued advanced degrees in English, as well as how they view the needs of Saudi Arabia's educational system in regard to improving instruction in English as a foreign language.

To achieve this purpose, I interviewed six Saudi graduate students and one Saudi visiting scholar individually, then held a focus group interview with five of the seven participants. All but the visiting scholar were pursuing doctoral and master's degrees in the English

Department of a university in Western Pennsylvania. A review of the transcript interview data revealed the Saudis' stories of learning English at home and abroad; the influence of their religious background/culture and family literacy on their own literacy development; their personal initiative to become proficient in English beyond classroom instruction; their vision and ideas for having a direct role in reforming English instruction in their country; their extraordinary efforts to overcome the difficulties and challenges of becoming proficient in English; and the cultural implications of expanding the use of English in Saudi Arabia's society.

The findings of this study have positive implications for improving the methods of English instruction throughout Saudi Arabia's educational system, especially to prepare students both for studying English in higher education and for functioning in English-speaking environments in many areas of their society, as well as in the global community where English has become the predominant language. However, further studies are recommended to assess the social, economic, cultural, and personal implications of English literacy on Saudi culture and traditions.

DEDICATION

In the Name of Allah, Most Gracious Most Merciful

I dedicate this work to my parents, Mohammed and Asyah, for their support, patience, and prayers. I also dedicate it to my wonderful wife, Sameerah, for her continuous patience, encouragement, and understanding; and to my children, Mohammed, Mariam, Yahya (from whom I was separated during this work) and Omar.

I, with great honor, dedicate this work to His Excellency Dr. Mohammad bin Saad Al-Salem, the former President of Al-Imam Mohammad bin Saud Islamic University, and current member of Alshura Council, who helped make my dream of pursuing graduate studies come true. Without his immense support, I could not have reached this important milestone.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

All praises and thanks are due to Allah, the Almighty, Who gave me the chance to exert sustained efforts to finish this work. Without His Grace and Mercy, this dissertation project would not have been accomplished.

The completion of this project would not have been possible without the assistance of many individuals. First and foremost, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Jeannine M. Fontaine, for her academic guidance, kindness, continuous support, and patience, toward the completion of this project.

I also would like to thank my committee members: Dr. Michael M. Williamson and Dr. Gary J. Dean. I am grateful for the time, comments, and suggestions they offered me throughout the evolution of this project. Additionally, I would like to thank Hazel Hunley for her assistance in editing my work. Her editing has made this dissertation more readable than it would have been otherwise.

No words can express my deep gratitude to His Excellency, Dr. Mohammad bin Saad Al-Salem, the former President of Al-Imam Mohammad bin Saud Islamic University, and current member of Alshura Council, for his enormous support in granting this scholarship to pursue my master's

and doctoral degrees in the United States. I cannot thank him enough for all that he did for me.

Likewise, I am grateful to Al-Imam Mohammad bin Saud Islamic University, College of Languages and Translation, and the Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission to the USA for sponsoring and ensuring the completion of my study and degree.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my parents for their sincere prayers and continuous support. My profound gratitude is extended to my precious wife Sameerah, whose boundless patience and passionate support provided me with confidence throughout the writing of this project. I thank you, Sameerah, for all that you have done, and for all that you are doing. I could not have done it without you. Thank you so much, Sameerah, from the bottom of my heart.

In conclusion, I would like to thank my participants in this study, for their time, their effort, and the information they provided. Without their cooperation and support, this project would not have been possible.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This study evaluated the language and cultural learning and the English literacy experiences of a number of EFL professionals from Saudi Arabia in the United States to learn what factors or influences they believe have shaped their English literacy development. The study examined the narratives of six graduate students (and one visiting scholar) in which they told how they have become what they are, what challenges they have faced as EFL learners or educators, how they have grown personally and academically, and how they have established and pursued their careers as English professionals.

Background for the Study

Saudi EFL students are sent to the United States by their government, their employers, or their families to pursue their dreams of earning advanced degree(s) in different fields. They are expected to return to Saudi Arabia upon completion of their studies to utilize the highly developed educational skills they have acquired to serve the well-being of their families, society, and country. They have a specific career goal to achieve to help them attain a respectable job and a highly successful future.

Recently, the Saudi government established 13 new universities, as well as several new teachers' colleges, girls' colleges, and technical colleges. However, there is still a shortage of qualified individuals who possess the skills necessary for all areas of specialty that the country needs.

Because the educational and training systems in Saudi Arabia are growing, and qualified professionals are very much needed, the Saudi government is continuing to send a large number of Saudis on educational missions abroad, particularly to developed countries. The United States hosts the largest number of Saudi students who have been, and still are, being sent abroad to attend educational institutions to acquire knowledge and skills in disciplines of great and urgent need to Saudi organizations and society.

Rationale for the Study

English has been taught as a foreign language to all students in public schools in Saudi Arabia beginning in the seventh grade (recently in the sixth grade). English is used in many Saudi institutions and professions, such as hospitals, police, aviation, and so on. And English has become more highly valued as it has become the language of a growing global community in which Saudi Arabia is a

participant. Yet there is a shortage of well-qualified English teachers to meet the demand for learning functional or communicative English as the use and popularity of the language grows in Saudi Arabia. To meet this demand, the country's colleges and universities, with the authority of the Ministry of Higher Education, continue to send Saudi students abroad, especially to the United States, to develop their English literacy and to achieve advanced degrees in order to return and teach English as a foreign/second language. Aside from meeting the great number of English teachers needed, it has been recognized that Saudi Arabia needs to improve its system of education in the way that English is taught, from the elementary to the university level, in order to facilitate second language acquisition and to further students' fluency and ability to use the language in communication.

Purpose of the Study

Given that there are many Saudi EFL students studying in the United States who are striving to achieve English literacy, it is vital to examine their cultural and learning experiences, and to understand the impact of their educational and personal experiences on their English literacy development. In the present study, I have tried to understand how the backgrounds and current experiences of a

number of Saudi Arabian EFL professionals in the United States have influenced their English literacy development.

The purpose for the study was to gain the Saudi professionals' perspective on what helped or hindered them in acquiring and developing English as their second language, both in their home country and in the countries where they pursued degrees in English, as well as how they view the needs of Saudi Arabia's educational system in regard to helping students learn and use English.

Research Questions

These research questions guided the study:

1. What kind of background experiences did the Saudi EFL professionals in the United States talk about that led them to develop literacy in their first language, Arabic, and to develop literacy in English as their second language?
 - a. What positive experiences did they say have been the most useful for them?
 - b. What negative experiences did they say have been the most challenging for them? What strategies have they employed to overcome any challenges they reported, and how successful do they feel those strategies were?

2. What experiences, including what might be called 'literacy moments', did the participants describe as having had both inside and outside the classroom, in the course of their learning English? Again, how did they evaluate these experiences positively or negatively, and how did they react to any challenges in their learning?
3. How did they feel that the experiences related to questions 1 and 2 have affected them, either as EFL learners or in their professional lives?
4. What advice did the participants feel they could offer those who are trying to develop their English literacy?

Significance of the Study

Understanding the individual experiences of English professionals from Saudi Arabia could have considerable significance for enhancing or improving the teaching of English in the schools in their home country. First-hand accounts of their literacy experiences as provided in their qualitative interview narratives could offer insight into the methods through which they acquired English, including what was effective and what was not effective in their second language acquisition.

I believe that this study has contributed to several areas of EFL instruction. First, the results of this study's exploration of the English literacy development of Saudi Arabians could add to the knowledge of the English literacy development of EFL learners. Second, this study might be useful for educational policy formation. As the study investigated the experiences of English literacy learning among Saudis within their families, schools, and society, this information could help Saudi policy makers better understand English literacy practices and develop programs responding to their students' needs. Third, this study could also help Saudi policy makers look at parental involvement and other cultural elements to better incorporate Saudi families into the school system. Finally, it could also help Saudi EFL teachers improve their understanding of their students' broader literacy contexts, beyond the improvement of formal schooling.

With this introduction of the study, I would like to share some highlights from my own story of my literacy experiences.

My Personal and Professional Journey

In preparing to interview the seven Saudi EFL professionals in this study, I reflected on my own English literacy development. In doing so, I revisited a literacy

autobiography I had written two years ago for a graduate course, because I would ask my participants to write a similar autobiography as background for my interviews with them.

My motivation to pursue this study was inspired partly by my own personal life history. My interest in English literacy stems from my own childhood and adolescent experiences in my family and public schools as an EFL learner, and it has continued in the context of my experiences with my advanced studies in the United States. In this section, I highlight some episodes from my own story of my language journey in Arabic and English as a way of illustrating the kind of material I have explored in the lives of the other developing English professionals who participated in this study. Some of the sections that follow are introduced by quotes from interviews that I conducted with my family and teachers in preparing this literacy narrative for my graduate course.

My Family Literacy Experiences

"Ghassan was born liking school." - Father

The consensus in my family is that I was born liking school. My father recognized my interest in learning in my early childhood:

[Ghassan] was a very studious child, who as young as five years old demonstrated an interest in books. It all started when he attended a pre-school. The following school year I added a year to his age to enroll him in the public elementary school.

In his statement about sending me to school early, my father went on to say that he believes the religious foundation I received in my family contributed to my positive disposition toward learning:

The fact that we were religious people supported [Ghassan's] academic life. We always went to the mosque. The closeness of our religious practices helped us emotionally and guided our lives whenever we needed advice and support.

My religious practices gave me the first opportunity to learn to read. Before I went to elementary school, I had memorized verses of the *Quran* at home.

My father says I could read the short verses of the *Quran* at six with impeccable diction. My uncles and aunts were students, so their books were available in the house and I availed myself of them. I learned religious teachings by going with my father and uncles to the mosques to pray and listen to Islamic lectures.

In addition, I attended my father's and uncles' weekly meetings with their friends. In these meetings, they memorized and recited verses of the *Quran* and the *Hadith* (sayings of the Prophet); they also read religious stories. I would volunteer to read verses of the *Quran* aloud in front of this audience. My involvement with this religious group was the highlight of my social life as a little boy. On one occasion, I traveled south with my father to the city of Makkah to perform *Omrah*, also called the "Lesser Pilgrimage." There stood the *Kaba* (the holiest site in Islam built thousands of years ago), which we could see from a distance; I wondered how the prophets Ibrabeem and Ismaeel could have built this sacred building; this moving experience spurred me to even greater motivation in my religious learning. I went to Quranic school for more than a year, memorizing and copying verses of the *Quran*.

I was a curious observer of the basic literacy skills my father and uncles modeled through their religious activities. I saw them writing assignments, letters for school or work. I also hated missing school. One time, when I was very sick with a cold, my parents saw that I was worried and wanted to write a letter to the teacher. I did

so, and my father helped me with the grammar to make sure that the final product was impeccable. I was assisted by my father, but I did the writing, and this feat earned me special recognition when I returned to school. The teacher read the letter to the rest of the class and referred to it as a model. I forget his exact words now, but I still experience the validation of self that I felt at that moment when my words somehow surpassed mundane reality. Words had allowed me to escalate to a higher level of existence, of communication with others. I had a voice that made sense to those who heard it, and that made me feel good about myself. I still feel that sensation each time I remember this incident.

My Formal Education

Although I had acquired a certain level of literacy through my family and pre-school before I entered regular school, my formal education began like most children's, in elementary school. I entered school early because of my father's efforts. I went to school from elementary through college in my hometown of Madinah (a city that fosters a religious life).

Elementary School

"Your main responsibility in life is to study. You have no excuse to fail." - Father

The story of my beginnings as a student is an elaborate mixture of external and psychological factors related to the high priority my family placed on education, and the expectation that I was to do well in school. My family's expectations were sometimes quite daunting.

Another motivating factor was my awareness that I could get attention and be special by being a good student, a factor that I connected with a fierce, early desire for independence. As I think of this, my mind transports me to the excitement of my first day at school. My father loves to tell the story of this day, and how I managed to enroll in elementary school before the age of six. I do not remember the details but, as the story goes, I pestered my father so much that he felt he had to take me to the elementary school. After we got there, I did all the talking. My exposition convinced the teacher to take the risk of being admonished by the school manager by registering me in his class, even though I was not of school age.

The problem came shortly after, when my father decided to walk over to the school to deliver a bottle of hot milk for me, as I typically had this milk at home. I remember the moment he walked in and the teacher and the other

students all stopping what they were doing to watch me drink my milk. I did not welcome the attention at that moment because my intent was to demonstrate that I was ready to join the world of older children. I was there to show off my intelligence at a young age, not my bottle, which I could keep hidden at home until after school. I wanted to drink my warm milk, but somehow I knew that school and bottles did not go together. So I informed my family that I would forego my morning bottle after that episode.

Though I hardly recall my early school years, Mr. Ibraheem Al-Mashadi, my second grade teacher, remembers me as a child eager to learn:

Ghassan was always positive, dynamic and enthusiastic. With me, he was especially efficient in spelling. Once I told his father to take him to Riyadh to study there because he had great potential. He was very smart and able to assimilate a great deal of information.

My parents were concerned about my school performance, but my father particularly became involved with my academic life. He used to come to school, even sometimes to my teacher's house, and ask about me. My mother's role was less active than my father's but just as important. Hers

was limited to encouragement. She always dreamed of seeing me earning a good salary at a prestigious job.

Nevertheless, she was satisfied to let her husband take direct responsibility for her sons' literacy and school activities while she occupied herself with the household chores. My father was a busy government worker with a heavy work schedule, but even so, he regularly directed his conversations toward me during his lunches and/or dinners at home, and he found energy and time to keep abreast of my development.

Intermediate School

At Abdurrahman Al-Nasser Intermediate School, where I began to learn English officially, although I had had some brief previous exposure to basic English through my family surroundings, I was thirsty to learn and speak English and felt I had the courage to do so. I wanted to be different from my peers. I wanted to learn English and move into the larger world. It was obvious that whoever spoke English was really respected by our society. My conduct and attendance were classified as "very good." This is a language memory that has survived from that period in intermediate school: my English teacher asked the class to write a few sentences in English about ourselves. He was impressed with my performance and told me I was "good with English." I

remember how he encouraged me and acknowledged my potential and praised me publicly. I felt I was making progress.

Nonetheless, it started to get challenging; I encountered one particularly memorable bump in the road to literacy. On one English final, I scored below the passing grade of 75, a crushing defeat for me, as I dreamed of excelling in English. In fact, I realized later, I had skipped a full page of the exam. I had simply overlooked the whole page. When I was retested, to my enormous relief I got a 94. That event had a lasting effect on my test-taking strategies and on the care I realized I had to use when handling written texts.

Although my father knew I was doing well in all subjects, and particularly in English, he asked Mr. Ahmad Al-Saddawi, a retired English teacher, who was our neighbor, to come to our house three times a week to check and review my English lessons with me.

Secondary (High) School

When I enrolled in Al-Anssar Secondary (High) School, my academic life became quite challenging; my main concern at that point was how to improve my English skills. English was the most important subject for me. This continued for all three years. I also started to spend most of my free time with my cousins who had lived in the United States for

a few years where their fathers had studied, listening to their stories and trying to understand how I could learn English as well as they spoke it. I remember once saying to them, "I have thirst", a direct translation of asking for water in my Saudi Arabic dialect (rather than "I'm thirsty"). They corrected me on points like this, and I always listened with rapt attention to the grammatical concepts they tried to explain in English. My shared time with these cousins then became an important part of my experience with English.

At this stage of my education, I recall another unforgettable support for my learning of English. The English-language channel on television had always been my favorite pastime, but now I came to understand much more of the programming. Again, I was able to exhibit my independence and take pride in my growing English skills, as my brothers and sisters kept asking me what was going on when we were watching the English channel, and my friends and family expressed amazement at how much I was able to learn from watching it.

I wanted to rush into English, recognizing that it opened the door to communication with more people in more places inside society as well as in the world community. I associated English with places of possibility and economic

mobility. I expressed my adolescent dreams of a better job and life through my learning of English. What drew me to English was the possibility it offered for becoming an individual of high status and class. With this mindset, I progressed in learning the English language.

A third and most important influence in high school was my English teacher, Mr. Muneer Audah. During my third year in high school, he was one of the teachers who promoted my foreign language acquisition and planted the inspirational seed for my discovery of writing. He accomplished this through assigning journal writing. Mr. Muneer said one day, "You are going to write at home three times a week by keeping a journal." Since intermediate school, I had been learning basic English skills and was familiar with grammar exercises and vocabulary drills, but I do not recall doing any major writing in English until the last year (specifically the last semester) of secondary school in Mr. Audah's class. I had not had enough confidence to try writing anything in English. However, sometimes, Mr. Audah prompted us with parts of sentences to complete such as:

If I were the manager, I would . . .

The most expensive thing I ever bought was . . .

I could not live without . . .

My favorite time of the evening is . . .

I feel important when . . .

And so on. The entry I wrote about the manager reads:

If I were the manager, I would change the lunch meals. I would try to give the kids better food. Improving sports activities is also important. Today, we do not have opportunities to show our talent in playing football. I would create a sports club. There is too much smoking in the boys' bathroom. I would increase the security guards.

These journal entries are by no means masterpieces. In retrospect, I even think I should have been writing better. Still, the point is that they started my writing journey in English. Through journal writing, I feel that I began the process of appropriating the English language. One of my needs as a foreign language learner was to establish myself in some context, whether linguistic or cultural. I needed words and symbols to become part of me. The journal writings gave me a means to discover the connection between words and myself. They were liberating and challenging. They gave me a forum to express myself and attempt to apply the language I had learned. The journal also provided a safe space to make mistakes.

Mr. Muneer's role was vital. He had high expectations, a clear set of directions, a supportive attitude, and an incremental approach to building my confidence. He understood the social, linguistic, and emotional processes involved in foreign language acquisition.

University in Saudi Arabia

At the English Department of King Abdul Aziz University, my academic advisor said that my writing "needed to be polished." The EFL writing class was supposedly going to expose the good, hidden qualities in my writing and make them shine. My instructor, a trained EFL writing professor, preached and practiced the notion that good writing skills were only developed through consistent practice. He would make us write in every class and would assign daily writing assignments. We started the course by writing a short paragraph and ended it by writing a two-hour essay examination. In the meantime, I had encountered revision, individual conferences, and much that makes up the notion of effective writing.

At the end of the year, I encountered another disappointing obstacle, as I failed the English exam and had to prepare for another year of freshman composition. This second teacher was friendly, but very frank and honest in his responses. When I wrote, "In my life, I have met

very interesting people," he responded, "An empty statement." Not thrilled with one of my concluding sentences, he wrote, "Empty sentences make weak conclusions." Needless to say, it was a rough year, and in my final reflection, I wrote that writing was "a painful struggle to fill the empty sheet with meaningful words." However, in the end, victory was mine, and I was elated at passing the exam this time.

Graduate School in the U.S.

After I graduated from college in Saudi Arabia with a bachelor's degree in English, I taught English as a foreign language in intermediate and high schools in my country for several years. During this time, I tried to apply what I had learned in my own English studies. Nonetheless, I was not satisfied with my work. I wanted to improve my skills as an EFL teacher. Consequently, I looked for an opportunity to further my study in the field of Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). To my good fortune, I was granted a scholarship to earn a master's and doctoral degree in TESOL in the United States. Indiana University of Pennsylvania was one of my top choices.

My encounter with American education as a graduate student in TESOL brought new challenges and experiences. I was often frustrated and angry because the educational

system and the requirements were quite challenging. The different classroom style seemed chaotic at times, because in my home country I was accustomed to the teacher being authoritative and to the students having limited participation in class. It was also hard to follow the fluent, rapid discussions as my professors and peers in graduate school would not slow down their speech; so I was not able to participate fully in the discussions. And research papers now seemed to involve a whole new set of expectations that were alien to me. The goals of my graduate program sometimes did not seem to coincide with my own. Again, many stories come to mind that have made these years memorable and have led me to overcome these challenges. But with persistence, and my strong desire to achieve a high level of competence in English, I pursued my graduate studies in the United States.

Listening to Others' Stories

This recollection of my personal experience and journey made me wonder about the journeys of other Saudi Arabians: their view of themselves, their experiences in learning and developing English literacy, and their feelings about these experiences. Therefore, I decided to conduct this study to examine the factors or influences that have shaped the English literacy development of

several Saudi EFL professionals in the United States (seven graduate students and one visiting scholar). Besides, I expected their stories to be of interest in and of themselves. In addition, I thought they could provide some insights to guide future EFL educators and professionals in offering environments that would be useful in developing English literacy for EFL learners, Saudis in particular.

As EFL learners, we attach different meanings to our learning experiences, both at school and in our lives beyond school. We develop story lines about our successes, failures, and about the factors that have contributed to our personal history in our careers. Each of us has an understanding of the impact that our language and cultural learning experiences have on our current activities and potential. Although our learning experiences may differ, they reflect our notions of opportunity, our relationships to school, and our relationships with family and others beyond school in society.

Overview of the Dissertation

This chapter has provided the background, rationale, purpose of the study, research questions, and significance of the study, along with my professional and personal literacy autobiography. Chapter 2 provides a literature review with further background for the study. Chapter 3

details the methods used for the study. Chapter 4 presents the findings, and Chapter 5 summarizes the results of the study, and provides implications of the study, as well as recommendations for future studies in this area.

CHAPTER 2

A REVIEW OF THE RELEVANT LITERATURE

This chapter provides historical and cultural background on Saudi Arabia, the home country of the study participants; an overview of the Saudi educational system; the status of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Saudi Arabia; definitions and kinds of literacy; parents and second language learning; second language literacy; narrative theory, and narrative learning. The present study adds to the literature on second language acquisition and the teaching of English as a foreign language from the perspective of several Saudi Arabian professionals in this field. By the qualitative nature of the study, it provides an in-depth view of the participants' personal and academic English literacy experiences and development, with potential for expanding the knowledge of the relationship between L1 (Arabic) and L2 (English).

Saudi Arabia's History, Religion, and Language

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is a developed country in the Middle East, and was established in 1902 by King Abdul-Aziz Bin Saud. The religion of Saudi Arabia is Islam and Arabic is the native language. The population, according to a 2003 estimate, is approximately 24.3 million people, with one of the fastest growth rates in the world (Kronmeyer,

1997). Saudi Arabia is a large country, which occupies almost four-fifths of the Arabian Peninsula, with an area of 1,960,582 million square kilometers or 784,233 square miles (Alabdukareem, 2004), which is approximately the size of Western Europe or one-fourth the size of the United States. The economy of Saudi Arabia depends largely on the production and exportation of petroleum. Saudi Arabia produces approximately one-third of the world's total oil and has a third of the world's oil reserves.

The Islamic Religion

The influence of Islam has been the most sustaining element in Saudi Arabia. Islam is claimed to be a "religion based upon knowledge, for it is the ultimate knowledge of the Oneness of God combined with faith and total commitment to Him that saves man" (*Islam & Knowledge*, 1989, p. 20). The Islamic faith's texts and traditions, mainly the *Quran* (the word of God revealed to the Prophet Muhammad) and the *Hadith* (the sayings and deeds of the Prophet), repeatedly advocate the active pursuit of knowledge:

The text of the *Quran* is filled with verses inviting man to use his intellect, to ponder, to think and to know, for the goal of human life is to discover the truth. The *Hadith* literature is also full of references to the importance of

knowledge; such sayings of the Prophet as "Seek knowledge from the cradle to the grave" have echoed throughout the history of Islam and incited Muslims to seek knowledge wherever it might be found. (*Islam & Knowledge*, 1989, p. 20)

With Islam's emphasis on knowledge, there is a corresponding emphasis on the use of knowledge to spread its message throughout the world. Since language is the primary means of human communication, it is believed to be an excellent vehicle for transferring Islamic thought to other cultures. "The study and interpretation of the *Quran* have become a basis for the religious and linguistic sciences" (Al Salloom, 1989, p. 37). In the *Quran*, the diversity of human languages is applauded and respected as a cause for study, and as "an important sign of divine power at work in the organization of the universe, the power of Allah, to create helpmates among mankind and ordain love and mercy between them" (Syed, 1989, p. 548).

Islam does permit the expansion of knowledge at all levels, spiritual and practical, including the study of non-Islamic cultures and languages where its purpose is the furtherance of Islamic objectives. Therefore, Islam advocates the use of what is termed the "language of the people" to spread the message of the Prophet; this

"language of the people" takes the form of whatever language people commonly use to speak, write, or otherwise linguistically communicate (i.e., English). The use of other people's language is desirable because it serves to make Islamic philosophy and tradition accessible to non-Arabic populations that would otherwise be deprived of it (Ouaouicha, 1987; Syeed, 1977; 1989). With this factor and others in mind, it becomes apparent that for cultural reasons, the learning of languages other than Arabic, i.e., English, has become a desirable educational pursuit in Saudi Arabia (Amayreh, 1984; Al-Suyti, 1972; Syeed, 1977; 1989).

The Arabic Language

The Arabic language belongs to the Semitic group of the Hamito-Semitic family of languages. It is the language of the *Quran*, the Muslims' holy book, and the language of worship for all Muslims. The *Quran* is the earliest document of written Arabic. Before Islam, Arabic traditions were transmitted orally from one generation to the next. After the birth of Islam in the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century (or 1,450 years ago according the Higraph calendar of Islam), the Arabic language spread throughout the Middle East and Africa (Shabaz, 1989).

Arabic Script

Arabic script reads from right to left, and its alphabet contains 28 characters. Unlike English, Arabic has no capital letters. There is one form of written expression, Arabic script, so that Saudi children do not learn first to "print" and later to write in cursive as in English. However, Arabic letters have slightly different shapes, depending on whether they are the first letter of a word, or in the middle, or at the end (Holes, Clive, Auty, & Harris, 1995). Arabic script is relatively easy to learn because it is a phonetic script, that is, if you can spell a word, you can probably pronounce it. Conversely, if you can read it, you cannot mispronounce it. This is because there is a direct correspondence between the written letter and the sound it represents (Shabaz, 1989).

Arabic has two different forms: (a) classical Arabic (CA), or modern standard Arabic (MSA), and (b) colloquial Arabic. Classical Arabic (CA), or modern standard Arabic (MSA), known as *alfusha*, 'the pure', is the direct descendent of the Arabic of the *Quran*, and the poetry of the pre-Islamic Arabian Peninsula. Colloquial Arabic is known as *ammiyya*, and is considered a degraded form of the language.

Arabic Diglossia

Arabic language scholars have long been aware of the duality of their language described above, or the *diglossic* situation, although the term *diglossia* was first introduced into Western discourse relatively recently. Ferguson (1959) offered a description of this phenomenon in an article that became a classic in Arabic sociolinguistics:

Diglossia is a relatively stable language situation in which, in addition to the primary dialects of the language (which may include a standard or regional standards), there is a very divergent, highly codified (often grammatically more complex) superimposed variety, the vehicle of a large and respected body of written literature, either of an earlier period or another speech community, which is learned largely by formal education and is used for most written and formal spoken purposes but is not used by any sector of the community for ordinary conversation. (p. 16)

Ferguson describes nine defining features of *diglossic* situations:

- A. the functional differentiation of the two varieties in terms of use.

- B. the prestige that accrues to the high (H) variety.
- C. the role of the high variety in religion and the literary heritage.
- D. the difference in the acquisition of H and L.
- E. the standardization of H.
- F. the stability of diglossia.
- G. the grammatical features of each variety.
- H. the lexical differences between the two varieties.
- I. the problematic relationship between the phonologies of the H and L varieties.

Ferguson (1959) defines two co-existing main varieties of the same language: a high variety (H) and a low variety (L) whose acquisition, functions, and contexts of use seem to be distinctly represented. The former refers to classical Arabic and modern standard Arabic, its modern version, while the latter refers to the colloquial varieties spoken over a wide area.

In Ferguson's view, a *diglossic* situation arises, develops, and disappears under three conditions. It appears when there is a large body of literature, highly valued, in a language closely related to the native variety of the community and which serves a special social function because it reflects some of the fundamental values of the speech community; second, when literacy is limited to a

small elite; third, when the first two conditions are established over a long, suitable period of time during which the two varieties involved become distant from each other. Once established, *diglossia* by its very nature is stable, typically enduring for several centuries. Social changes in the speech community portend the decline, and eventually the demise, of *diglossia*. These changes, in Ferguson's view, include (a) the spread of literacy, (b) the broadening and intensifying of communication between the various regional and social segments of the community, and (c) the rise of popular sentiment in favor of a standard national language as a symbol of autonomy or sovereignty (p. 19).

In speech communities where highly focused linguistic standards have developed, a common belief is that there is one and only one 'correct' way to use the language. Because of this belief, varieties other than those accepted as standard are held to be inferior. One may venture to say that the standard language is *legitimized*, and codes different from it are thought of as a corruption of the standard and as illegitimate codes.

These widely held and deeply entrenched views have permeated the literature on Arabic and are translated, for example, in the terms 'high' and 'low' (Ferguson 1959) in

reference to the two varieties of Arabic. The low variety, or colloquial language, is claimed to be held in low esteem, and it is referred to as *ammiyya*, which literally means 'common' (belonging to the 'people'). Colloquial Arabic has been defined in opposition to classical Arabic and modern standard Arabic, or the high variety. Speakers of Arabic have been reported to "deny the existence of the low variety and claim that they only speak the high variety" (Versteegh 1997, p. 190) because colloquial is nothing but a 'deviant' and 'corrupt' form of *alfusha*.

In the literature on Arabic speech communities, the colloquial form of the language or *ammiyya* has come to be considered as equivalent to the speech of uneducated people. From this perspective, the colloquial is characterized as follows:

The low variety of the language is associated with a low education, since the standard is taught and learnt at school, and hence with illiteracy and poverty, since people with a poor education cannot make a career. The standard language, on the other hand, is associated with a higher education, success in society, and a high socio-economic class. (Versteegh, 1997, p. 195)

In contrast, *alfusha* is associated with dignified, distinguished, prestigious, and lofty speech. It is associated with education, social distance (as opposed to solidarity), authority, power, self-assertiveness, rational thinking, and formality.

It should be noted that the prestige is attributed to *alfusha* because it is the language of divine revelation in the *Quran*, and because Muslims believe the *Quranic* text is divine. This divine text is central to Islamic society and to the Muslims' life. It is the word of Allah, the Almighty, and classical Arabic is the medium in which the message of Islam is embodied and through which it is transmitted from one generation to another. As the *Quran* stresses, it was revealed in the (classical) Arabic language, "Verily we have made it an Arabic *Quran*" (*Quran* 43/3), and certain religious duties (recitation and reading of the *Quran* and prayers) are performed in classical Arabic, regardless of the speaker's variety. The classical variety has come to be identified with its religious value. It is the collective treasure shared by all Muslims.

However, it should be mentioned that the colloquial variety is sometimes used by educated people from a higher socio-economic class as the language of family, home, intimacy, friendship, closeness, and informality. One would

be missing the point if he perceives *al-izdiwijiyya* or duality only in antagonistic terms. Certain social, pragmatic, economic, or symbolic values are attached to each variety of the Arabic language.

The Saudi Educational System

The formal educational system was created in Saudi Arabia in 1925. At that time, education was not available for every learner. Education was limited to male students, and the programs focused on basic literacy, using methods and materials influenced by Islamic rules (Al Salloom, 1995). The education system has been continuously expanded to accommodate the increasing demand for education in connection with the economic boom that has occurred in the country in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. According to official sources, the government of Saudi Arabia now provides free programs, books, and health services covering primary, secondary, and higher levels of education to its citizens (Saudi Arabia Information Resource, 2006), with financial rewards for college and university students to motivate them to carry forward their future development. As professed in government documents, education in Saudi Arabia aims to become more efficient, to meet the religious, economic, and social needs of the country, and to eradicate illiteracy among Saudi adults

(Center of Statistics and Educational Documentation, 1994), as well as "to satisfy the needs of the individual and the society" (Alabdukareem, 2004, p. 38).

To meet these goals, Saudi Arabia has developed an educational system that combines educational theories and Islamic instruction to accomplish the needs of a rapidly developing society. In 1970, the Supreme Committee issued a set of educational policy guidelines, which included 236 articles. This reference document states the fundamentals, roles, aims, and objectives of Saudi education (*Educational Policy*, 1980). The individual articles give a broad line of policy related to society, politics, cultural values, beliefs, and economics. The general rules of the Saudi educational system state:

The educational policy is the broad lines on which rests the educational process in fulfilling the duty of acquainting the individual with his God and religion and adjusting his conduct in accordance with the teaching of religion, in fulfillment of the needs of society and in achievement of the nation's objectives. It covers the various fields and stages of education, the programs and curricula, the means of education, the administrative system, the organs in

charge of education and all other related subjects.

(Educational Policy, 1980, p. 5)

The Ministry of Education oversees and administers the educational system for the whole country and prescribes a standardized curriculum that is used in all Saudi schools. At the age of six, children begin elementary school which includes grades 1 through 6; intermediate school which includes 7th, 8th and 9th grades, and secondary (high) school which goes from 10th to 12th grade. To enter a Saudi university, a student takes a national standardized examination (which recently became local).

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Saudi Arabia

EFL education has become a major component of most of the educational systems around the world because English has become the leading global language in the world. Similarly, EFL has become a major part of education in Saudi Arabia, as English is used in various areas of society. "English has continued to develop and spread around the world to become its most important language. It has become the main language of communication, education, science, and information" (Aljamhoor, 1999, p. 2). The prevalence of English in Saudi Arabia reflects this spread of the language throughout the world.

The status of English in the world's economy, politics, and communication has largely affected its status in the world's educational systems. Therefore, educators around the world have given increasing attention to improving the quality of EFL instruction in their educational systems. It is well known that Saudi Arabia is among the countries that need to develop and improve EFL instruction in their educational systems.

Among the countries where English has a significantly important status as a foreign language is Saudi Arabia. English is the medium of instruction in scientific and medical programs in Saudi academic institutions. English is also the language of communication in many professions such as medicine and aviation. Therefore, the teaching of English has become a major component of the educational system in Saudi Arabia.

Foreign language education became an official part of the Saudi Arabian primary education system when English was introduced to the Saudi Arabian curricula in elementary schools in 1930. A major restructuring of the Saudi Arabian educational system was launched in 1942, which led to moving EFL education from the elementary schools to the newly established intermediate and secondary schools. In 1954, French as a foreign language (FFL) became the second

foreign language to be taught in the Saudi Arabian educational system. However, in 1970, French was discontinued from the curriculum of Saudi Arabian schools after 16 years; English is now the most frequently taught second language in the country.

Private schools are currently licensed in Saudi Arabia by the Ministry of Education to provide optional supplementary classes in English for their pupils. Such supplements include the use of educational resources and extracurricular materials and activities to improve the pupils' EFL learning.

Based on the Saudi Arabian EFL curriculum, English instruction currently starts in the sixth grade in public schools. Private schools are permitted to give their pupils an early start in English with extracurricular EFL instruction, something that distinguishes their pupils.

Definitions and Kinds of Literacy

There are numerous definitions of literacy. Over the years, the definition of literacy has gone through a series of changes. Different factors in addition to a person's ability to read and write (once the criteria for literacy) are now considered when defining literacy. In the past, the concept of literacy was considered largely in contrast to illiteracy, or lack of the ability to read and write within

the context of formal education, e.g., the school setting. Today the concept of literacy has expanded to include a social aspect. The ability to read and write has social implications related not just to the basic skills of reading and writing, but also to the larger goal of becoming literate, fully functioning members of society.

The following definition of literacy from the 1990s reflects this expanded view of literacy, namely to provide a societal view of literacy, compared with an individual view:

In the past, lack of the ability to read and use printed materials was seen primarily as an individual problem, with implications for a person's job opportunities, educational goals, sense of fulfillment, and participation in society. Now, however, it is increasingly viewed as a national problem, with implications that reach far beyond the individual. Concerns about the human costs of limited literacy have, in a sense, been overshadowed by the concerns about the economical and social costs. (National Center for Education Statistics, 1993)

The National Adult Literacy Surveys (NALS) has defined literacy as "Using printed and written information to

function in society, to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential" (Proliteracy Worldwide, 2005). The U.S. Department of Education, the Ford Foundation, and the National Advisory Council on Adult Education have defined functional literacy as "the ability of an individual to use reading skills in everyday situations: reading and comprehending street signs, written directions, labels, job applications, and work oriented information" (Longfield, Savage, & Alamprese, 1985). This definition was first presented by Gray (1956) and was later published by UNESCO as this "official" statement: "A functional literate is a person who has acquired reading and writing knowledge and skills that allow him to participate in all those activities characteristic of his literate culture group" (Kalman, 1999, p. 34). From this definition, it can be concluded that literacy is not considered a set of isolated skills but is a process whose purpose is to use the written language in a socially and culturally meaningful way (Kalman). This literacy process is a social act motivated by the need for effective participation in society.

Sociolinguistic Literacy

The social approach to literacy focuses on the processes by which literacy applies in everyday life. In

"Sociocultural Perspectives of Language and Literacy", Kris Gutiérrez (1989) discusses this sociocultural view of language. His view is based on the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky (1978) who argues that a child's development cannot be understood by a study of just the individual. The external social world in which this individual has developed also has to be examined (Vygotsky, 1986). Gutiérrez (1989) asserts that one of the strengths of sociocultural theory is that it recognizes the relationship between language, society, and learning. He argues that this relationship is important because some education programs tend to neglect the study of language and literacy as sociocultural practices. According to Gutiérrez, from a sociocultural perspective, language development should be understood in relation to its context. This view shows that the linguistic skills that the students possess and bring to the school environment can serve as a resource for learning.

Stubbs, in *Language and Literacy* (1980), discusses other sociolinguistic aspects of literacy. He begins by stating that reading and writing are linguistic activities. His claim implies that the reading of meaningful material needs to be linguistically organized at different levels: phonological (sound structure), morphological (word

structure), syntactic (grammar), and semantic (meaning). But he goes on to emphasize that writing systems are related to spoken language in ways that are not always straightforward. Moreover, in addition to its linguistic features, Stubbs points out that writing systems are part of the cultural, economic, and technological aspects of society; hence, reading and writing are also considered sociolinguistic activities.

Therefore, literacy skills cannot be learned if the learners are isolated from their social contexts. Children learn best in a rich social context where they are affected by the environment and the people around them. From Vygotsky's perspective (1986), young children engage in reading and writing experiences that integrate language and action in a social context. He indicates that children's interaction with others, especially with adults, peers, and other significant people, is essential for learning and development. By seeing other people read, and by trying it out themselves, children become readers, acting as literate people act.

This social-contextual view is relevant to literacy development. Literacy activities practiced at home cannot be separated from literacy experiences in other social contexts. The nature of literacy experiences is that of a

social process embedded in the child's relationship with significant others, such as parents, siblings, and grandparents (De Temple & Beals, 1993; Vygotsky, 1978). These people can be very important sources, serving as models of literate behavior.

Family Literacy

As I pointed out in my personal narrative in Chapter 1, my family was the primary resource for preparing me with the necessary literacy skills to succeed in school and beyond. My father and other family members played fundamental roles in my literacy development, not only in my L1 contexts but in my L2 contexts as well. In this environment, where my access to English was limited, the role of the home was even more vital for my literacy development. Therefore, it is relevant to discuss this area of research known as *family literacy*.

"*Family is the root of a child's early literacy experiences*" (Darling & Lee, 2004, p. 382). Family literacy presumes that literacy is best developed within the context of the family. Family literacy situates literacy learning within the context of the daily lives of participating family members. Children acquire skills, knowledge, and values while taking part in literacy-related activities with their families (Leseman & de Jong, 1998). Families

play a key role in children's literacy development as a great deal of learning occurs within the home (Brooker, 1997; Hiebert & Pearson, 2000).

Leseman and de Jong (1998) claim that language and literacy growth occur within the home environments of children who are provided with literacy opportunities. The home environment is important to a child's developing literacy abilities. Within the home environment, parents meet their child's physical and emotional needs. They provide materials for their child and model the use of literacy. They help their child build literacy by reading aloud to them, and by making sure that their child sees them reading.

The term *family literacy* derives from Denny Taylor's (1983) study of six mainstream American families in reference to "the continuously diffuse use of written language in the ongoing life of the family" (p. 9). Because of the realization that the home and the earliest years of a child's life impact a child's success in school, a growing interest in family-home literacy practices has emerged. Morrow, Paratore, and Tracey (1994), in an attempt to clarify the meaning of this phrase, wrote,

Family literacy encompasses the ways parents, children, and extended family members use literacy at home and in

their community. Sometimes, family literacy occurs naturally during routines of daily living and helps adults and children get things done *family literacy* may be initiated purposefully by a parent or may occur spontaneously as parents and children go about the business of their daily lives. *Family literacy* activities may also reflect the ethnic, racial, or cultural heritage of the families involved. (pp. 7-8)

Individual children come into literacy in unique ways, depending on the quality and quantity of the early language and literacy experiences provided them at home. For young children, the familial environments that provide home literacy practices are the most proximal and influential natural environments for fostering the acquisition of literacy (Evans, Shaw, & Bell, 2000; Hess, Holloway, Price, & Dickinson, 1982). Indeed, recent research syntheses (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998; Whitehurst, Arnold, Angel, Smith, & Fischel, 1994) highlight the importance of the home literacy practices and environment in nurturing and accelerating growth in emergent literacy skills in very young children.

The family literacy environment and home literacy activities represent how families influence their child's

literacy. Home literacy practices include the parental provision of literacy rich environments, reading, coloring, and drawing opportunities, and environmental print such as posters, calendars, or pictures; storybook reading, monitoring of school homework, and watching television (Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba, 1991; Purcell-Gates, 1996; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). By providing young children with meaningful social contexts where they can encounter the usage and meanings of print, and where they can respond to and construct their knowledge of print, these home literacy practices facilitate and promote young children's literacy development.

Studies of family literacy have examined two areas: the way literacy is used within families (Baker, Scher, & Mackler, 1997) and the relationship between literacy use in families and children's academic achievement (Dickinson & Tabors, 1991; Payne, Whitehurst & Angell, 1994).

Snow et. al. (1991) suggest that families are most effective at influencing children's literacy and language achievement when they function directly as 'educating agents'. These researchers suggest the role of the family is as educators, and propose several factors as central to a definition of this family literacy, as delineated here:

1. *The literacy environment at home*: High levels of children's school achievement are related to literacy-rich environments provided at home (Birtto, 2001; Burgess, Hecht, & Lonigan, 2002; Teale, 1986). The parents' own literacy practices, skills and preferences, combined with parental provision of literacy to the child, produce a complex field referred to generally as 'a literacy environment'.
2. *Creating opportunities to learn*: Beyond directly teaching, parents can indirectly facilitate their children's literacy by creating opportunities for learning (Heath, 1983; Parkinson et al., 1982). For instance, they can enrich their children's lives and promote their literacy and language by providing access to other people and activities, fostering their personal interests, acting as role models, and exercising control over their free time.
3. *Parental education*: The parents' own educational backgrounds are important predictors of children's literacy levels and school achievement (Parkinson et al., 1982; Sewell & Shah, 1968). Parents who are more educated may provide their children with more materials and activities that promote literacy, and become more directly involved in their children's

education. The levels of educational attainment of parents have an effect on their children's school achievement because of the ways they think about and behave toward their children (Durkin, 1966; Laosa, 1978).

4. *Parental expectations*: Parental expectations for their children's schooling can be transmitted through demands, support, or encouragement, and can also influence parental behaviors that might affect their children's achievement. In fact, parental expectations are another predictor of children's academic achievement. (Coleman et al., 1966)

Family literacy practices vary in their forms, quantity, and quality as a result of sociocultural contexts and various personal attributes. Hess, Holloway, Price, and Dickson (1984) identify five areas of the home environment that may play a role in children's literacy development, as follows:

1. *Value placed on literacy*. Parents can encourage children's reading by demonstrating their value of reading through reading themselves or engaging children to read.
2. *Press for achievement*. Parents can communicate their expectations for achievement and assist

in their children's reading and learning process and initiatives to stimulate achievement.

3. *Availability and instrumental use of reading materials.* A literacy-rich environment and access to literacy materials such as books are important in literacy development.
4. *Reading with children.* Engaging children in book reading, including reading to them and listening to their reading, develops their literacy skills.
5. *Opportunities for verbal interaction.* The quantity and quality of parent-child conversation contribute to several important aspects of literacy that are important for children's later literacy success, such as vocabulary and oral proficiency.

These five areas have been empirically examined in the field of family literacy research. Saracho (2002) concludes with two key elements of home literacy practices: family members' literacy knowledge and access to a literacy-rich environment. Studies have shown that literacy materials available at home and literacy activities such as book reading at home, trips to libraries, and extended

conversation contribute positively to children's decoding skills (Duncan & Seymour, 2000; Sammons et al., 2000), vocabulary size (Hart & Risely, 2003), comprehension ability (Snow et al., 1991), motivation in reading (Sonnenschein & Munsterman, 2002), and overall reading achievement (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001; Stuart et al., 1998).

Parents' own language and literacy practices and their interaction are significant factors involved in children's literacy learning, which positively influence children's literacy development and reading success later on. However, some research has presented inconsistent results. For example, some studies have found that certain parental practices such as parents' reading behaviors do not relate to children's literacy outcomes (Aarts & Verhoeven, 1999; Pucci & Ulanoff, 1998).

Parents and Second Language Learning

In ESL/EFL contexts, studies have shown that the mismatch between home and school cultures and practices usually makes the transition from home to school extremely challenging for second language learners, and impedes academic achievement (Gee, 2004; Goldenberg, 2004). Heath's (1983) seminal ethnographic work *Ways With Words* was one of the first empirical studies that examined the impact of

different sociocultural groups' home literacy experiences on school learning. The literacy practices of three communities were documented (mainstream townspeople, a White working-class community, and a Black working-class community). Heath found that children from working class communities were more likely to fail at school because they were accustomed to different learning styles and literacy practices. Children whose social language experiences were more associated with school-based literacy were more likely to succeed at school. Heath's findings are supported by other studies (e.g., Han & Ernst-Slavit, 1999; Ruan, 2003; Tsia & Garcia, 2000; Volk & DeAcosta, 2001).

However, differences in parental involvement do not exclusively come from cultural and social differences. There are within group differences, and personal attributes and context play significant roles in the process of parental involvement (August & Shanahan, 2006). Parents' behaviors and their choices of literacy practices with their children reflect their personal beliefs, values, and attitudes. For example, in the case of second language learners, parental beliefs, values, and attitudes towards a particular language greatly affect their children's beliefs, values, and attitudes towards the learning of that language, and indirectly influence their learning outcomes.

Second Language Literacy

Second language literacy is a more complex process than first language literacy because there are more variables when second language learners are engaged in literacy in general. According to Bernhardt (1991), reading is a "complex social and psycholinguistic process that cannot be separated into reading components and language components" (p. 32). Bernhardt identified three factors that contribute to second language literacy: literacy variables, linguistic variables, and world knowledge variables. Within social interaction theory, reading is seen not only as a linguistic and cognitive process, but as a social one as well. Acquiring literacy in a second language is seen as a social activity constructed through the interaction of participants in the classroom and elsewhere. The development of literacy for the second language learner is emphasized as socially defined and produced as classroom events.

Transfer of L1 Literacy to L2 Literacy

Research evidence suggests that first language literacy promotes second language acquisition, and that literacy skills in the native language are likely to transfer to the second language (Rivera, 1988). Krashen (2000) has written on this subject. In an article titled

"Bilingual Education: Ninety Questions, Ninety Answers", he discusses first language literacy and its relationship to second language learning. He points out that, if a child has developed high levels of academic language in his/her native language, it is much easier to develop it in the second language: "Someone who is used to reading academic texts in one language will find it easier to read similar texts in other languages, compared to someone without this experience" (p. 1).

Krashen (2000) believes that when students get a good education in their first language, they get two things: knowledge and literacy. Both the knowledge and the literacy they develop in the first language help their English language development enormously, he believes. The effect is indirect, but powerful. He also asserts that the knowledge one gains using the first language makes what one hears and reads in English much more comprehensible. This results in more language acquisition and more learning in general. According to Krashen, developing literacy in the native language is a shortcut to achieving literacy in English. When a person is literate in one language, it is much easier to develop literacy in another.

Cummins (1999) indicates that many studies have documented a moderately strong correlation between

students' first and second language literacy skills in programs in which they are enabled to develop literacy in both L1 and L2. These findings apply to the relationship among very different languages in addition to languages that are similar (Cummins).

Saad (1990) studied fourth-grade ESL students of Arabic backgrounds to determine the effects of native language development on the students' second language achievement. The students were given an Arabic test to determine the level of their Arabic literacy. Scores from the ITBS (Iowa Test of Basic Skills) were used to determine their achievement in English. Saad's results "have consistently confirmed a significant positive relationship between the achievement of ESL students in English and their degree of fluency in the native language" (p. 82). Saad further concluded that ESL students' "success in math through the medium of instruction in English is partially determined by the fluency and/or proficiency level they possess in the native language" (p. 88). According to Saad's study, students who achieved age-appropriate native language literacy are at an advantage in realizing academic success in L2 over those who did not attain a similar level in the native language.

A 1985 study in Hamtramck, Michigan, titled "Arabic Partial Immersion Program in Hamtramck", Lambert, Taylor, Berlin, and Nowakowski (1985) found that developing Arabic language skills helped students of Arabic backgrounds to keep up with native speakers of English and surpass them on achievement tests. Roberts (1994) cites a study that found that elementary grade Arabic, Spanish, Navajo, and Samoan students learned to read English faster if they were literate in their primary language than if they were not.

Evidence from research conducted with L2 learners in recent years reports that literacy in the native language plays a positive role in the acquisition of oral English and the development of English literacy (Carlo & Skilton-Sylvester, 1994, 1996; Collier & Thomas, 1997; Garcia, 1991; Gillespie 1994; Rivera 1990, 1999a, 1999b). This research shows that reading in the native language aids students' reading acquisition and ability in a second language. Similarly, many other L2 writing studies have found evidence of a positive transfer between L1 and L2 in terms of writing abilities, skills, and processes (Edelsky, 1982; Jones & Tetroe, 1987; Raimes, 1985, 1987; Uzawa, 1996; Zamel, 1983). In a similar vein, some L2 writing scholars (Carson, 1992; Dong, 1999) have found that L1 literacy learning strategies and literacy experiences help

to enhance the acquisition of L2 literacy skills. It may be assumed that students are likely to transfer their L1 literacy abilities and strategies to L2 literacy practices; sometimes their L2 literacy can also be transferred to their L1 literacy. However, this transfer may not occur automatically, but rather only under desirable circumstances.

These research findings relate to the present study, in that I realize I can interpret its results by addressing the participants' experiences with Arabic literacy, as these experiences and the participants' development of their first language literacy are likely to have had some bearing on their experiences in acquiring English literacy.

Literacy Issues of English Language Learners

Roberts (1994) discusses literacy issues that are becoming increasingly important to ESL teachers and educators. As pointed out earlier, developing literacy skills in the first language plays a major academic and social role in formal education. A student's first language may be less developed or not developed to a certain level for various reasons:

- Students may have inadequate or inappropriate exposure to the native language at home because of

insufficient opportunity to interact with adults in linguistically rich environments.

- Parents may not be literate and may not be able to provide access to a print rich environment.
- One or both parents may work and have little time to devote to the kind of informal learning that other children receive before entering school.

Kern (2000) proposes a working definition of literacy that weaves together the linguistic, cognitive, and social aspects that characterize literacy in the context of second language education:

Literacy is the use of socially, historically, and culturally situated practices of creating and interpreting meaning through texts. It entails at least a tacit awareness of the relationships between textual conventions and their contexts of use and, ideally, the ability to reflect critically on those relationships. Because it is purpose-sensitive, literacy is dynamic, not static and variable across and within discourse communities and cultures. It draws on a wide range of cognitive abilities, on knowledge of written and spoken language, on knowledge of genres, and on cultural knowledge. (p. 16)

Kern offers some principles of literacy that apply to language learning or teaching:

1. *Literacy involves interpretation:* The writer interprets events, experiences, ideas, etc., and the reader interprets the writer's interpretation based on his own conception of the world.
2. *Literacy involves collaboration:* Writers write based on the understanding of their audience, and readers contribute their motivation, knowledge, and experience to make the text meaningful.
3. *Literacy involves conventions:* People read and write texts differently based on cultural conventions that advance through use and are adapted for individual purposes.
4. *Literacy involves cultural knowledge:* Attitudes, beliefs, customs, and values guide reading and writing.
5. *Literacy involves problem solving:* Readers and writers have to figure out relationships between words, units of meaning, and real or imagined texts since words are embedded in linguistic and situational contexts.

6. *Literacy involves reflection and self-reflection:*

Readers and writers think about language as it relates to their world and themselves.

7. *Literacy involves language use:* In addition to

lexical and grammatical knowledge, literacy requires understanding about how language is used in verbal and written contexts to generate communication.

Narrative Theory

Narrative theory would play an important role in my analysis of the oral and written literacy stories of the participants in this study. Narrative facilitates knowledge, and knowledge leads to learning. Since the 1970s, a tremendous number of qualitative studies have been done on the use of narrative in higher education. Proponents of narrative agree that it is valuable in education as a bridge from the impersonal to the personal and as a means of privileging students' voices and getting them to "see themselves as learners" (Newkirk, 1997, p. 23). Several studies have examined narrative from its early contested place as a literary convention to its current acceptance as a catalyst for change, as well as for "transformation" in teaching and learning (Gudmundsdottir, 1995, p. 34).

Connelly and Clandinin (1988) assert that "narrative is the study of how human beings make meaning of experience by endlessly telling and retelling stories about themselves that both refigure the past and create purpose in the future" (p. 24). They also state that narrative as a story of life means that we need to move our idea of education beyond the environment of the school. Narratives can inspire us to understand others' stories of personal and professional development.

Narrative and Learning

As a researcher who wished to interpret the experience of others, I saw narrative as the vehicle to re(present) the stories told by my participants in their interviews that would provide the basis for my exploration of my research questions. Proponents of narrative offer that this medium is valuable in education in at least three ways: as a facilitator of communication among people, as a thinking tool, and as a means of promoting self-discovery.

First, narrative is of significance because of its communicative emphasis and its focus on the individual; thus, narrative is universally of value to everyone. In their text, *Narrative in Learning*, McEwan and Egan (1995) help shape our understanding of the linguistic function of narrative. They write, "narrative is a fundamental human

capacity" (p. 82) that provides a natural access to language. Cultures evolve from oral traditions, and today most people maintain some connection to their oral roots. I believe that narrative benefits everyone, especially those whose lives are lived close to oral historical and cultural backgrounds.

Second, narrative is a linguistic tool that provides students access to thinking as they communicate with each other about academic and personal topics (Martin, 1986). It involves using dialogue that again builds upon the communication triangle wherein a speaker advances a message, which once received, elicits a response from a listener. Educators "place a great deal of emphasis on dialogue" (Schank, 1990, p. 9). The exchange of information and knowledge through conversational questioning and answering affords students the opportunity to think and learn more in depth (Barnes, 1992), and narrative often features prominently in these valuable exchanges.

Third, narrative is valuable because it aids students in self-expression and helps them develop self-confidence (Mello, 2001). Storytelling leads to self-discovery and "contributes to self-understanding" (p. 7). In addition, narrative places the students at the center of their learning. Schaafsma (1993) says that "narrative is the most

basic means we have for organizing our experience and making meaning for ourselves" (p. 90).

Furthermore, the use of narrative in education is beneficial in other ways. It helps students access their own culture while they learn to appreciate other cultures. As students share their stories and hear the stories of others, they make a connections between their experiences and the experiences of others (Martin, 1986). In his book *Eating on the Street: Teaching Literacy in a Multicultural Society*, Schaafsma (1993) states that "stories are an avenue for the culture of the community to interact with the culture of the schools" (p. 90). The personal stories told by my study's participants in their interviews were expected to enhance their own understanding of their literacy and social experiences, and the impact those experiences have had on their academic success, as well as to help me to determine similar patterns in their literacy experiences.

In *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, Jerome Bruner (1986) claims that rather than simply giving step-by-step scenarios of their lives, people tend to reconstruct their earlier experiences in order to understand and give meaning to them. They examine what they believe they do and why. In this regard, they draw from their thoughts and formulate

concepts of themselves that lead them to mature thinking and knowledge. To the extent that narrative performs this function, it can be seen as a particularly powerful research tool for a study such as the present one.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN: QUESTIONS, METHODS, AND ETHICS

This chapter describes the research design for the study, the purpose of which was to investigate Saudi EFL professionals' experiences in their English literacy development. The study utilized a qualitative approach, including interviews and a thematic analysis of the data. Individual interviews with seven participants and a focus group interview were the main sources of data, along with the participants' written literacy autobiographies, which provided background for the interviews. The subsequent sections in this chapter cover the following: the research questions, participants, methods of data collection, methods of data analysis, the stance of the researcher, validity, trustworthiness, triangulation, ethical issues, and benefits to the participants.

Research Questions

These research questions guided the study:

1. What kind of background experiences did the Saudi EFL professionals in the United States talk about that led them to develop literacy in their first language, Arabic, and to develop literacy in English as their second language?

- a. What positive experiences did they say have been the most useful for them?
 - b. What negative experiences did they say have been the most challenging for them? What strategies have they employed to overcome any challenges they reported, and how successful do they feel those strategies were?
2. What experiences, including what might be called 'literacy moments', did the participants describe as having had both inside and outside the classroom, in the course of their learning English? Again, how did they evaluate these experiences positively or negatively, and how did they react to any challenges in their learning?
 3. How did they feel that the experiences related to questions 1 and 2 have affected them, either as EFL learners or in their professional lives?
 4. What advice did the participants feel they could offer those who are trying to develop their English literacy?

The Participants

The participants for this study were six male Saudi Arabian EFL graduate students in the TESOL program at a university in Western Pennsylvania in the United States and

one visiting scholar from Saudi Arabia in the same university program. I selected this number of participants based on Ivanic's (1998) *Writing and Identity: The Discoursal Construction of Identity in Academic Writing*, a study that had eight participants. As with my study, Ivanic's was qualitative in design and addressed a range of student experiences related to literacy development. Furthermore, I believed that working with such a relatively small number of participants would allow me to get sufficiently rich data.

I invited Saudi graduate students to participate through the network of the Saudi Student Association at the University. I contacted this association via its website and email, inquiring whether any graduate students would be interested in meeting me and hearing about my study. (See Appendix A.) Once I found those interested and willing to participate in the study, I met with them individually, described the study, and explained their responsibilities as well as mine. I asked them if they could identify other potential participants among students they knew who might be willing to participate. However, only those who expressed interest initially became the participants. My original intention was to include only doctoral students,

but I included one master's student and the visiting Saudi scholar who already had his PhD.

Methods of Data Collection

The following sections present the procedures for my data collection for the study. My data were comprised of the seven participants' written English literacy autobiographies as background, transcripts of two individual interviews with each, and a transcript of a focus group interview with five of the seven participants.

Literacy Autobiographies

Prior to the first interview, I asked the study participants to write a brief literacy autobiography (about 3 to 5 pages) to provide background on their literacy experiences prior to my interviews of them. I provided them with a one-page guide on how to write this autobiography. (See Appendix B.) I asked them to describe their previous literacy experiences within multiple contexts, i.e., they were to compose their literacy narratives by exploring their reading and writing experiences in Arabic and English. These narrative accounts were to emphasize critical moments and events as well as significant and influential persons with respect to their development of Arabic and English literacy. In doing so, I hoped to obtain insight into their literacy experiences and the place of

literacy in their lives. Since they would write these literacy autobiographies during the initial stage of the study, they would help me during the interviews to address and confirm certain themes and patterns of their previous literacy experiences that would be revealed during the interviews.

Interviews

Interviews were the main data collection method that I used in this qualitative study. More specifically, I used the semi-structured interview, a type of interview technique that allows the researcher to conduct a focused inquiry into the participant's experiences while remaining open to exploration of the unexpected or the unusual (McCracken, 1988). The interview is described as a conversation, the art of asking questions and listening (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998).

According to Fontana and Frey (1998), asking questions and getting answers is a much harder task than it may seem. Yet it is still one of the most common and powerful ways to understand our informants. Silverman (2001) concludes, "Interviews offer a rich source of data which provide access to how people account for both their troubles and their good fortune" (p. 114). I conducted semi-structured interviews with the participants, because this type of

interview "has a sequence of themes to be covered, as well as suggested questions; yet at the same time there is an openness to changes of sequences and forms of questions in order to follow up the answers given and the stories told by the subjects" (Steinar, 1996, p. 124). A semi-structured interview typically lasts about an hour (McCracken, 1988).

I interviewed each of the seven participants twice, with the second interview following about two weeks after the first. All of the interviews were audio taped and later transcribed in English. Pseudonyms were used to protect the participants' anonymity and maintain confidentiality. They were given the choice of being interviewed either in Arabic or English, according to their preference. Although all but one were English graduate students (except the visiting scholar), it was anticipated that it would be easier and more comfortable for them to express themselves in Arabic, thus allowing the data to be more valid. It was thought that using their native Arabic could allow them to share as many experiences as possible, or might make them more eager to share those experiences. Conversing in Arabic would also be easier since I, as the interviewer, speak Arabic as my first language. However, the participants chose to speak predominantly in English, reverting to Arabic only when translation of a term or phrase was too difficult. At the

beginning of each interview, I gave a brief explanation of the procedure and reminded the participant about the recording and transcription process of the interview. As for the interview settings, I let the participants choose where to meet, according to their preferences. As it turned out, I conducted all of the interviews in a private study room of the university library.

Individual Interviews

Two rounds of individual interviews were conducted as suggested by Seidman (1998), with each lasting from 60 to 90 minutes. The first interview was an elaboration on the participant's written literacy autobiography and a general conversation about his life history. The second interview focused on the detailed literacy experiences of each participant, guiding the interviewee to reflect on the meaning of those experiences and how they had helped to shape his literacy development in Arabic and English.

Each interview moved from a general conversation to a semi-structured format. Following Seidman's (1998) interviewing strategy, I designed the interview guide to cover the participants' written literacy autobiographies as well as their life histories, their learning experiences, and the meaning of their experiences. (See Appendix C.) The interviews were planned to allow the "respondent to move

back and forth in time to reconstruct the past, interpret the present, and predict the future" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 273). I used this approach so that the participants would feel at ease when sharing their stories with me, rather than having the sense that they are being viewed as a formal case study.

Focus Group Interview

After completing all of the individual interviews, I held a focus group interview as the second and final data collection procedure a week after the individual interviews. According to Patton (2002), focus group interviews typically include 6 to 10 people of similar backgrounds. Focus group interviews usually last 1 to 2 hours, but I planned for 2 hours. This interview session was integral to my study, in that the participants were able to hear comments and stories from each other and expand on their own experiences and ideas.

Watts and Ebbutt (1987) suggest that the focus group interviewer should facilitate an environment for the participants to exchange comprehensive views by being able to speak their minds and respond to others' ideas. This exchange of views allows for a group climate that the participants use "to express views and feelings which if voiced in a person-to-person interview might sound selfish

or intolerant, and would therefore be repressed" (Abrams, 1959, p. 502).

Therefore, the focus interview took place at my apartment. All of the participants were invited to attend the interview, and then to have dinner together, prepared specifically for this event. Five of the seven participants in this study were able to attend. The focus interview enhanced the stories that were shared during the earlier one-on-one interviews. It lasted for two hours as planned and was also audio taped.

Interview Transcriptions

All of the interviews (including the focus interview) were transcribed afterwards either by myself or an assistant. Seidman (1998) tells us that to work "most reliably with the words of participants, the researcher has to transform those spoken words into a written text to study, by preserving the words of the participants, so the researcher has their original data" (p. 97). I did not correct any grammar or structural linguistic forms in the participants' second language when I was transcribing the audio tapes.

Methods of Data Analysis

My role within this study was that of a researcher as an interpreter, because this role allowed me to "recognize

and substantiate new meaning" (Stake, 1995, p. 97). As the researcher in this inquiry, I tried to recognize phenomena and connect them to existing knowledge. Of course, the dimension I planned to operate in was not necessarily objective since, as an English professional and doctoral student myself, I shared similar literacy experiences with the participants. As Goetz and LeCompte (1981) assert,

Ethnographers who infer cultural and behavioral patterns as viewed from the perspective of the group under investigation must use strategies to elicit and analyze subjective data . . . the goal is to reconstruct the categories used by subjects to conceptualize their own experience and worldview. (p. 334)

Goetz and LeCompte also point out that the researcher doing naturalistic research is engaging in an activity that is "inductive, generative, constructive and subjective" (p. 334). Their criteria helped me decide on the importance of analyzing my data via the comparative method. This method can be used as "a means of deriving (grounding) theory, not simply a means of processing data" (p. 339). During this process, I continued to keep in mind the four questions that Hollway and Jefferson (2000) claim are imperative when analyzing any qualitative data:

1. What do I notice?
2. Why do I notice what I notice?
3. How can I interpret what I notice?
4. How can I know that my interpretation is the 'right' one? (p. 55)

Thematic Analysis

My data analysis was also guided by the advice of Rubin and Rubin (2004) regarding the importance of identifying emerging themes in qualitative data. A thematic analysis of the interview transcripts would assist me in answering the original research questions and in enriching the value of the themes that would emerge from the interview data. Therefore, as suggested by Rubin and Rubin, "when I [looked] for underlying meaning and themes, it [was] useful to pick out and analyze stories. Stories are refined versions of events that may have been condensed or altered to make a point indirectly" (p. 251).

Narrative Analysis

Patton (2002) identifies narrative analysis as a method of qualitative analysis that is used in the social sciences; narrative analysis "focuses on stories as a particular form of qualitative inquiry" (p. 198). He places two fundamental questions at the center of narrative analysis:

- What does this narrative or story reveal about the person and world from which it came?
- How can this narrative be interpreted so that it provides an understanding of and illuminates the life and culture that created it? (p. 115)

Patton (2002) also points out that stories shared during the research process may be of utmost importance, because "personal narratives, family stories, and life histories reveal cultural and social patterns through the lenses of individual experiences" (p. 115). Since I employed a thematic analysis of my data, I tried to identify patterns within the stories of the participants to better understand the cultural and social phenomena associated with their English literacy development.

In the following chapter, the data are presented and organized based on the themes and categories that came to light during this analysis which is illustrated by the participants' narratives, including life-changing events, language learning, the professional world, and linguistic challenges. Gubrium and Holstein (1997) note the importance of interpreting the participants' stories, keeping their voices, and keeping the stories as "their own" (p. 28). During the writing process, I was conscious of re-telling the participants' stories. It was imperative to remember

that the stories I retold were theirs, not mine. I only served as the vehicle for conveying my participants' stories, and not as a filter or editor for the experiences they shared with me.

My Stance as the Researcher

My stance as the researcher caused me, from the very beginning, to think deeply about who I am as a researcher and what issues I bring that could possibly affect the focus or the results of this study. Having been a Saudi Arabian EFL learner/teacher who studied in the educational system in Saudi Arabia, as well as in the higher education system in the United States, this study had both personal and professional significance for me. I anticipated that this journey would help me better understand myself and my own literacy experiences as I tried to understand those of my participants. Among the problems I knew I would face while conducting this study, the most difficult would be to step out of my role as a learner and teacher of English as a foreign language and to constantly remind myself that I was to learn from the unfolding stories and experiences of my participants. But I also knew that I needed to maintain a research stance so that I could "explore familiar territories as though they [were] uncharted" (Brause & Mayher, 1991, p. 76). If my participants felt that my

background had already taught me the answers to the questions I was asking them, they might misinterpret my intentions (Spradley, 1979) and find it unnecessary to reveal their feelings and experiences, or they might try to give me what they thought I wanted.

Because I was studying familiar cultural experiences, I had to be careful not to overlook details and situations that could be important in the analysis of my data. Therefore, I approached the data collection process "with the assumption that nothing is trivial, that everything has the potential of being a clue which might unlock a more comprehensive understanding of what is being "studied" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982, p. 28). In other words, my personal and professional experiences had enriched my knowledge base and insights so that I could be sensitive to the various experiences of these participants, but I had to be careful not to assume that their experiences were similar to mine, or that I knew all the answers.

Ely et al. (1991) point out that familiarity with the context of a research project may "enable the researcher to delve deeply into the research without having to do all the preliminary work" (p. 124), but she also warns us against presuming to understand others' value systems and having a sense of their worlds. I had to be aware of my own deep

values, expectations, and biases as they surfaced during the process of exploring my participants' experiences (Ely et al.). I had to acknowledge these feelings and find ways to deal with them in order to understand my own and other people's points of view.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness speaks to the authenticity, credibility, and reliability of the data and begins at the point of entry into the field (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Trustworthiness is an overarching principle of qualitative research, which in its simplest form means that the process and product are conducted, recorded, and reported with great care given to honesty and accuracy. It means that the highest ethical standards must be employed in the collection and analysis of the data. I gave a careful account of how I obtained and analyzed the data. The study's research design and data triangulation (literacy autobiographies, individual and focus group interviews) supported the trustworthiness of my data.

To assure the trustworthiness of my data, I employed the multiple verification procedures recommended by Creswell and Seidman (1998). Before beginning the interviews for the study, I reviewed the questions I planned to ask my participants and answered them myself,

partly through the personal narrative of my own Arabic and English learning experiences that I presented in Chapter 1. This process allowed me to understand what my participants would go through during their interviews. My earlier discussion of my role in this study outlines the experiences I have brought to bear on this study.

Another step was to establish an interview structure for the study that would permit cross checking of the data and my interpretations. Seidman (1998) suggests a three-interview process for the purpose of providing a structure in which time passes and the participants have the opportunity to reflect on their experiences and responses before continuing to explore further into their meaning making. However, I modified Seidman's approach by doing two interviews with each participant and by conducting one focus group interview with five of the seven participants to provide additional depth of information as well as verification of what the individuals had shared in their private interviews.

The timing of the focus group after all the individual interviews had been completed was deliberate and successful. In the group, the participants elaborated on their own experiences as they affirmed one another's (Creswell & Seidman, 1998). As Morgan (1997) explains, "On

the one hand, focus groups cannot really substitute for the kinds of research that are already done well by either individual interviews or participant observation. On the other hand, focus groups provide access to forms of data that are not obtained easily with either of the other two methods" (p. 8).

Triangulation

"Triangulation refers to the use of more than one approach to the investigation of a research question in order to enhance confidence in the ensuing findings" (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004, p. 142). This study employed data triangulation, which entailed gathering data through three sampling strategies in the context of different times and situations. The use of written literacy autobiographies, two one-on-one interviews of each participant, and a focus group interview with five of the participants provided many glimpses into the English literacy experiences of each participant. This data triangulation allowed for establishing factual accuracy and gave a richness and complexity to the study (Kratwohl, 1998; Lewis-Beck et al., 2004).

Ethical Issues and Human Subjects Protection

As a researcher, I was ethically bound to honor the fundamental rights of the individuals who participated in

this study and to respect their privacy. Rossman and Rallis (2003) emphasize the need to “[hold] in confidence what [the participants] share with you” (p. 74). Therefore, I used pseudonyms to protect the participants’ privacy. I also followed the procedures set by the university as outlined by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and gained the informed consent of the participants in the study. My role as a researcher was to explain to the participants my intention for conducting this study and in sharing my findings with them, and to follow the protocols as outlined by the university.

At the beginning of the first interview, I asked the participants to sign an informed consent form and they were given a copy of it. (See Appendix D.) Prior to their signing of this form, I reviewed a brief description of the study, how it would be conducted, and their role in it, along with their rights as participants. I gave each participant an opportunity to ask questions. They were told they could choose to stop participating in the study at any time without any consequences.

Confidentiality was established by assuring the participants that information from them would not be linked to them in any identifying way. The results of the study would appear in my written doctoral dissertation, but the

information they provided would not be used in any way to identify them individually. They were informed that the data would be reported as aggregate in ways that are consistent with IRB guidelines. Data collected (audio tapes) from all participants were to be stored and kept in a secure place in my home office and were to be destroyed one year after the end of the study. The study did not place the participants at any risk or damage their academic standing.

Benefits to the Participants

Although there were no anticipated risks to the participants, there were conceivable benefits from their participation. All three methods of data collection gave them each an opportunity to reflect on their English literacy experiences. First, they had an opportunity for self-reflection while writing their English literacy autobiography. Second, they interacted with a fellow Saudi (myself as interviewer) in their individual interviews, which gave them another opportunity to share their narrative. Third, they had an additional opportunity to interact with fellow Saudi professionals during the focus interviews, to exchange views and reflect each others' experiences. All three methods could have given the participants "food for thought" about their past literacy

experiences and future intentions in their professional careers in the English field. And conceivably, through the focus interviews the participants could have received affirmation of their achievements and shared difficulties in the development of their English literacy, both in Saudi Arabia and in English-speaking countries. Further, they could share the prospects they have for their EFL careers and particular methods of enhancing and improving English instruction in their home country.

CHAPTER 4

THE FINDINGS

In this chapter, I present the findings from the data collected in this qualitative study of Saudi EFL professionals and their personal experiences of gaining English literacy both in Saudi Arabia and abroad. After a brief overview of the study, I include profiles of the participants; an overview of their literacy experiences; the common categories and themes that emerged from the data, and my findings in regard to them.

These were the major categories that I derived from the individual interviews:

- parental influence on the Saudis' education;
- the influence of Quranic school on their learning of Arabic and English;
- the interface between Arabic (L1) and English (L2);
- the value of English to the Saudi students;
- their personal initiative to improve their English;
- their use of popular media and technology to learn English;
- influences on their learning of English and becoming an English teacher;

- the development of their English literacy through exposure to native speakers;
- and the Saudis' ideas and future plans for improving EFL instruction in their country.

These were the major categories from the focus group interview:

- motivation to learn English;
- deterrents to learning English;
- Islamic cultural influence on their English literacy;
- and cultural resistance to learning the English language in Saudi Arabia.

Overview of the Study

This study explored the English literacy experiences of six Saudi EFL graduate students who were studying for either a master's or a doctoral degree in the TESOL program at a university in Western Pennsylvania (in addition to, one visiting scholar from Saudi Arabia at the same university). The findings derive from two main data sources: the transcripts of the two individual interviews with the seven Saudis, as well as the transcript of one focus group interview with five of the seven participants. The literacy autobiographies were used solely for

background information and to help focus the interview questions, whereas the individual interviews and the focus group interview were the primary data sources for understanding the English literacy experiences from the participants' viewpoints.

As a necessary foundation to exploring the participants' English acquisition, the study naturally touched on their literacy experiences in their first language, Arabic, as initially revealed in their autobiographies. All the interviews were in English, and the autobiographies were written in English as well. In both types of interviews, the Saudi students revealed the meanings they attribute to their experiences. As the researcher, I asked the participants to narrate their Arabic and English experiences at home, school, and college, including their early life experiences in their native country of Saudi Arabia. The information they provided ranged from their parents' involvement with their education and language development to their personal attitudes and efforts toward learning English.

After speaking of their early childhood literacy experiences in Arabic, the participants shared their reasons and goals for learning English, describing some of the activities they engaged in during this process. They

also identified people who were role models or supporters for their English studies; in this category, all of the participants spoke of parents (particularly their fathers), other family members, and teachers. Issues associated with communication, culture, and expectations emerged from the data.

Profiles of the Participants

Although I did not conduct case studies of the Saudi professionals and their literacy experiences, I provide a profile of each participant for background to the findings of the study. The six Saudi EFL graduate students (and the visiting scholar) in the study ranged in age from 30 to 45. All but one had completed their undergraduate work in English at universities in Saudi Arabia; one had received his bachelor's degree at an American university. All but one, the visiting scholar who already had a PhD, were pursuing an advanced degree in English as a foreign language in the United States. For my data collection, I relied on two rounds of individual interviews with my participants, backed by information they provided in their written literacy autobiographies before engaging in the interview process, and finally, on a focus group interview with five of the seven participants. My interview questions related to the students' Arabic and English learning

experiences. In this section, I present a profile of each of the participants.

Ali, in his forties, a doctoral student, earned his bachelor of arts degree in English language and translation from King Saud University in Saudi Arabia and his master of arts degree in English with an emphasis on Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) from a university in California. He came to the United States for the first time in the fall of 2001, and at the time of the interview, was about to finish his course work at the university and begin working on his doctoral dissertation. Prior to earning his bachelor's degree in English, he had received a two-year diploma in the health field in Saudi Arabia and had worked for the Saudi Ministry of Health for several years. He also had three years' experience teaching English at the college level in Saudi Arabia.

Khalid, in his thirties, had just been admitted to the doctoral program at the same American university where he had earned a master of arts degree in TESOL. Previously, he had earned a bachelor of arts degree in English language and translation from King Saud University. He came to the United States in the fall of 2006, subsequent to teaching in college in Saudi Arabia. It was not his first time in

the U.S., as he had been born and lived there until the age of four when his father attended an American university.

Fahad, in his thirties, had graduated from an American university with a master of arts degree in English and communications. He earned his bachelor of arts degree in English language and translation from King Faisal University in Saudi Arabia and had taught at the secondary level in his country for only a few months. This was his second semester of doctoral studies after arriving in the U.S. in the fall of 2008.

Waleed, in his thirties, a doctoral student, had just joined the TESOL doctoral program at the time of the study. This was his second semester. He had earned a master of education degree in TESOL in the United Kingdom after completing a bachelor of arts degree in English language and translation from King Abdul-Aziz University in Saudi Arabia. He had begun his doctoral program in the U.S. in the fall of 2008.

Saleh, in his thirties, a master's degree student in TESOL, earned his bachelor of arts degree in English language and translation from Um Al-Qura University in Saudi Arabia. This was his second semester in his master's program, following his arrival in the U.S. in the fall of

2008. He had worked in another American university for one year in an exchange program as an Arabic language teacher.

Hassan, in his forties, an assistant professor in English language and translation in Saudi Arabia, earned his bachelor of arts degree in English language and translation from Um Al-Qura University, and went on to earn his master's and doctorate in English from King Saud University. He had come to the United States as a visiting Fulbright scholar and had about 15 years of teaching experience at the secondary level in Saudi Arabia. He was the only one of the participants who had received all of his degrees in Saudi Arabia.

Salem, a doctoral student, earned his bachelor of arts degree in English and linguistics and his master of arts degree in English with an emphasis on teaching English as a second language, both from American universities. He first came to the United States in 1993, had completed his TESOL doctoral course work, and had begun working on his doctoral dissertation. Prior to earning his bachelor's degree in English at the University of Michigan, he earned a two-year diploma in the Arabic language and had obtained about five years' teaching experience at the college level in Saudi Arabia.

Overview of the Participants' Literacy Experiences

As the participants revealed in their interviews, they had all acquired English as their second language while attending mainly public schools in Saudi Arabia. Although they did not begin to learn English formally as a foreign language until intermediate school, they were exposed to it, if not by a relative who had been abroad and spoken English, at least initially by watching British or American television programs (most often cartoons) at home or at a neighbor's or relative's if their family did not have a television.

They acquired English in Saudi Arabia almost the same way they learned to read and write Arabic in school: by memorizing, copying, and writing dictation. As is usually the case, their first language was the foundation for the acquisition of their second language, English. So it is important to know generally how they acquired Arabic in their formal education, from elementary school to the university level.

The Saudis' preschool literacy experiences varied, depending on the level of education of their parents. Some of their parents had little or no education; a few had a university education; most knew how to read, although one father and one mother were illiterate. The participants

began learning Arabic with one or both parents reading to them at home and/or by their father or another male relative taking them to the mosque to attend Quranic School where they memorized, recited, and sometimes copied verses of the *Quran* with the sheikh. Quranic school was for several their first experience of the written language of Arabic in its classical form, although most of them had heard their parents or other relatives recite or read Quranic verses at home as this seemed to be an important cultural tradition for preserving the sacred *Quran* and the classical Arabic in which it was written. But the Saudis had heard and conversed in colloquial Arabic at home.

In Quranic school, however, they heard classical Arabic, memorized and copied verses from the *Quran*. As the Saudis described it, Quranic school was a disciplined religious training, in which they memorized parts or eventually all of the *Quran*, and learned to recite it aloud in front of others. They spent considerable time copying verses and passages from the *Holy Book*, although they did not necessarily learn the meaning or the content of the texts at that time. They just imitated and replicated them, mostly orally. This practice of hearing and reciting verses from the *Quran* had accustomed these boys to the tedious memorization with which they would learn to read and write

standard Arabic in elementary school. With this early introduction to formal Arabic, those who attended Quranic school were somewhat more advanced than their peers in their familiarity with the Arabic letters, and could read some words.

In elementary school (begun at the age of 6), which includes grades 1 to 6 (there was no kindergarten at the time of the participants' early schooling), the Saudis learned the 28 letters of the Arabic alphabet and words, phrases, and sentences by rote memorization. Except for those who went to Quranic school, it was their first introduction to writing in Arabic, which they did mainly by copying. They learned a great deal by recitation and copying sentences, or by writing or memorizing whole paragraphs in the fourth or fifth grade. They learned to write by imitation, but did no original composition, as they mainly studied basic Arabic grammar.

This rote style of learning both at home, when reciting verses, or while attending Quranic School or the mosque, continued in elementary school, and may have prepared these students for the rote style of learning they would encounter in public school. Most of the participants had developed their oral literacy in classical Arabic by differing degrees by the time they started elementary

school, some being more advanced than others, depending on the practices at home and at their Quranic school. But apparently there was little or no original writing practice in public school, even though they copied letters, words, and passages; they did not learn original composition, that is, to write their own thoughts or ideas. If they wrote anything, it was dictation or on a topic in an exam. Oral literacy seemed to precede and predominate in the development of their early Arabic language literacy.

However, except for watching American cartoons in English on television or hearing an uncle or cousin speak English, these participants had little or no exposure to oral English before they entered intermediate school (grade seven). The Saudis as young boys began to learn English as a foreign language in 7th grade in intermediate school, four days a week for 45-minute periods (English is now introduced in the 6th grade). For most of the participants, intermediate school was their first opportunity to learn English formally, although one Saudi participant, Khalid, who had been born in the U.S., was bilingual.

Basically, the young Saudis had learned English in school the way they had learned Arabic, mainly by memorization and copying. Although they would study English for six years in intermediate and high school, they did not

learn to speak it functionally to any degree. English was taught by Arabic-speaking teachers who had been trained to teach English as a foreign language, but were rarely fluent themselves. Essentially the Saudis learned textbook English through the grammar translation method and had little or no opportunity to practice English in conversational form.

All but one of these students entered a Saudi Arabian university after high school as English majors (Salem received his bachelor's degree in the United States). When they attended the university, they had a much different kind of exposure to English, as their English professors came from a wide range of backgrounds. Some were either from Saudi Arabia or other Arab countries and had studied English; others were from English-speaking countries such as Canada, England, or the United States. In any case, as university students the young Saudis were challenged to understand spoken English and to begin learning to speak it fluently themselves. However, they had various English literacy experiences at the university level where they mostly took courses in English literature, linguistics, or translation.

At this stage, although they continued to study the structure and nature of the English language, they were challenged to read, write, and speak it more competently to

meet the academic requirements at the university level, as English majors. Quite often, they were challenged to perform orally in English courses; for example, Khalid mentioned "freezing in class", being under pressure to be understood by his instructors and to understand them. In fact, he and Hassan had spent time in England to improve their conversational English.

Although they had more opportunity to use English in a communication setting in college, mainly in class, these Saudis claimed that they did not get enough opportunity to use the language orally in their country, except in the classroom. They were also subject to the traditional teacher-centered pedagogy in Saudi Arabian universities. Similarly, the Saudis had different experiences of English literacy as they moved on to graduate studies, either in Saudi Arabia or in an English-speaking country. More advanced studies challenged them in their reading comprehension and ability to write research in English at the graduate level.

At each level of their education, from intermediate to university, the Saudis added to their knowledge of English, but it was not until graduate school, primarily in the United States, where they were "forced" to speak, read, and write English predominantly in the classroom, that they

advanced their English literacy significantly. By that time, most of them had chosen to become English teachers, and some had actually taught English in high school or college in Saudi Arabia before entering a master's or doctoral program in the United States.

As reported in the next section of this chapter on the themes that emerged from the interview transcripts, the Saudi professionals revealed their individual and collective experiences of achieving Arabic and English literacy, including how the two languages influenced each other in their various learning experiences.

Findings From the Data Analysis

The findings in this study were derived from two main sources: the transcripts of the individual interviews with the Saudi professionals, and the transcript of the focus group interview with five of the seven participants. Their written literacy autobiographies, which I collected before conducting the individual interviews, were useful in providing background information regarding their Arabic and English learning experiences. These autobiographies helped me focus and direct the questions during the interviews, referring sometimes to what they had written in them. However, since this information was brief, I asked them for

more elaboration and explanation of certain details during the individual interviews.

The results from the data are therefore divided into two sections. The first presents the results of the individual interviews of the seven Saudi participants; the second reports the results of the focus group interview with the five. Since the autobiographies were always less detailed on any point than the interviews, I did not report the data from these written pieces separately.

Individual Interview Themes

Once I gathered the participants' literacy autobiographies and had interviewed all seven of them twice, I did a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. To process the data, I first reread their autobiographies as background, then I read and reread the transcripts of their interviews. Through this process, I identified the common categories and themes among the stories the participants had told me during their individual interviews as well as during the focus group interview about their Arabic and English literacy experiences. I used thematic and narrative analysis.

The influences on and experiences in their Arabic and English language development that emerged from both the individual and focus group interviews fell into several

categories. Some participants mentioned early childhood experiences and the involvement of their parents. Others discussed their experiences in public school or religious studies. Still others focused on what did or did not happen for them in school or college. Overall, these experiences formed their perceptions of their English learning, especially with regard to how they felt about the challenge of acquiring English literacy in school and college. The following is a discussion of the common themes that emerged from the individual interviews, according to these categories: (a) parental influence on the Saudis' education; (b) Quranic school influence on learning Arabic and English; (c) the interface between Arabic (L1) and English (L2); (d) the value of English to the Saudis; (e) the use of popular media and technology to learn English; and (f) their suggestions for improving English instruction in Saudi schools. I delineate the themes that emerged from the data under these categories in the following sections, and illustrate them from the Saudis' narratives in their interviews.

Category 1 - Parental Influence on the Saudis' Education

All of the participants' fathers exerted a strong influence on their sons' getting an education, with an emphasis on succeeding academically to advance themselves.

Although their mothers were also encouraging, it was primarily the fathers who tried to motivate their sons to become educated. Among all the influences on the participants, the Saudis felt their parents had the strongest influence on their success. They generally wanted to live up to their parents' expectations and succeed as their parents wished. Of course, the path to this success was not always smooth; occasionally, there was friction between the parents' and son's wishes, or the son failed to meet the parents' expectations. But overall, the group was virtually unanimous in identifying their parents as a source of consistent support and inspiration for their studies.

Theme 1: The fathers' value of education for their sons. Ali stressed that his father played a strong role throughout his education and language development, although he had no education ("is illiterate" according to Ali). Ali actually identified this fact as the main reason that his father had supported his education very strongly. According to Ali, his father associated education with personal power and achievement, saying he "knows the value of education for his family." Ali also stated, "I think he sees education as a power. It is not just in economic terms. I think he compares his situation with the way he wants me to

be." It is obvious that Ali's father wanted his son to have a better life through acquiring an education; that is, he wished his son to have the education he was unable to pursue himself, knowing what it would mean for his son's future. Ali said that his father was trying to "fulfill himself through his children" and for his children to be better than he was. Ali suggested that completing his higher education would advance him in life further than his father and give him a better personal and economic status.

Ali said his father encouraged him to go to the university, but he initially dropped out mainly because he had no guidance for entering or functioning in college. But at first he was afraid to tell his father that he had left the university; a couple of years later Ali went back to college after learning better English at the Institute of Public Administration and working in a health care environment where English was spoke predominantly. When Ali got his bachelor's degree, his father attended his graduation in 1998, proud that his son was the top student. Afterwards, Ali went on to the U.S. to get his master's degree in TESOL. When he thought of going back to the U.S. for his PhD, his father encouraged him to do so, and not to miss the opportunity. Thus, in spite of his troubled start in the university, which he had first attended at his

father's insistence, Ali ultimately relied on his father's advice above all other counsel.

Salem also spoke of his parents' influence on his education as they had little education themselves. His mother was illiterate, though late in life, she attended night school to learn to read the *Quran*. His father could barely read and write, and had only finished elementary school. Although his parents did not read to him, his father especially encouraged him to get an education. Salem said, "Although my father had a very limited education, he always emphasized the importance of education. He used vivid Arabic proverbs to emphasize the value of education." Salem also quoted his father as saying, "The more educated you are, the more opportunities you get and the more windows you could use and see in your life." Salem's father also recognized the "power" of education: "Nothing could help you except your level of education. Your degree is your weapon for fighting in life for getting a better job and communicating with people. It is the most powerful weapon you can use in life."

Salem claimed that his father was the most important person in his life, adding that because his dad did not have the level of education he desired for himself, he probably wanted "to compensate" by having his son be well

educated. "I think he wanted me to fill the gap that he suffered from." This was another case where a Saudi father had the stronger influence on their son's education as the strong value of education prevailed. It was also another case in which the father's unrealized dream seem to have had a positive influence on the son to acquire a higher education.

Theme 2: Fathers as role models and early teachers.

Saleh indicated that neither of his parents were educated, but both could read the *Quran* and write. Nevertheless, Saleh received much support from both parents for getting an education. However, he spoke more about his father, to whom he was quite attached. He claimed to have learned from his father how to deal with personal situations without getting angry. He said that he had inherited "silence" from his father, that is, not to disagree with people all the time. He related these early lessons on personal character to his ability to persevere in his studies later on.

Saleh did not raise the theme of compensating for the education that his parents lacked. Still, he emphasized their encouragement and support in spite of having a limited education themselves. But he explained that his father had the stronger influence: "My parents received some formal education. They know how to read and write. My

father supported me in all educational stages, and when I joined the university." Saleh's father was very proud when his son earned his bachelor's degree, as his brothers had not continued in school. Saleh said, "It was something that made him proud." Basically, Saleh indicated that his father guided him towards education, although he only had an elementary school education himself.

Hassan said that his father was educated, holding a bachelor's degree in Arabic language, and was a teacher of Arabic. His mother was a housewife but had a primary education. But his father, who was a teacher, read to him when he was a child, giving him simple stories to read, and instructing him actively in reading; he would ask his son to summarize the main theme of the stories they had shared or have him read aloud. Hassan grew up in a print-rich environment, as his father had a library at home, modeled reading, and used no technology. Hassan also recalled that his father brought home books for them to read, and encouraged him to read simple short stories. Hassan quoted his father as saying, "When you read these books, your language will be better, you will write good sentences, you can express yourself, and when you talk to people you can talk clearly." Hassan continued, "He always taught me the benefits of reading and insisted on that."

While in elementary school, Hassan's family moved to Dubai (UAE) where his father taught Arabic for several years. There, Hassan was introduced to English two years earlier than he would have been in Saudi Arabia, and there was more emphasis on English instruction in the schools during his years in Dubai. Hassan indicated that his father had played a vital role in his education and language development.

Fahad described his father as "tough", expecting his son to work hard and focus on his studies. Fahad said that his father taught him to "behave as a man" before age 10, and told him, "Make your mind older than your age." Fahad credited his parents with having the greatest influence on his Arabic literacy as they read the *Holy Quran* to him. Both parents encouraged him in education, which motivated him to take advanced degrees. Reading was, he said, "a family inheritance." His family had a library at home with all kinds of books, and Fahad said his father read a great deal.

Khalid said that his father was educated in the U.S., and was actively involved in his son's learning of English, as he taught him the language at home before the age of 4, making him bilingual. Khalid's father had a direct influence on him because he was a teacher and read a great

deal. His father also read to him, talked about books, modeled reading, and actively instructed Khalid when he read to him. Nevertheless, Khalid notes that he learned most of his oral Arabic from his mother, who taught him Quranic verses early on.

Khalid spent his first four years in the United States; he was born there in 1979 while his father was enrolled in a bachelor's degree program in fine arts at California State University. As Khalid stated, "Both of my parents have encouraged me to be highly educated. My mother saw my father as an ideal man and wanted me to be like him." Not only did Khalid's father encourage him to get an education, because he was himself educated, but his mother wanted her son to emulate his father. From what Khalid said, although he was close to both of his parents, his father played more of a direct role in his early education, probably because he was a teacher. "He used to ask me to concentrate and focus on my studies and work hard. When I was a child, he used to teach me and follow me, especially in elementary school. He used to ask me if I had something for homework. He was following me, making sure I was progressing in my studies."

Nonetheless, Khalid said he did not meet his father's expectations for grades in intermediate school. In the

focus interview, Khalid said that one reason he did poorly in English in intermediate school was because the teachers were not of very high quality. After disappointing his parents with poor grades, he purposely did better in high school on his own initiative and because his interest in speaking English was renewed, especially when his competence in the language was recognized by other students.

Waleed indicated that his parents were educated and encouraged him to read, providing him with books. He said he read a great deal, as his father did not allow a television in the house. There was a library at home. His father was multilingual and read different languages. Waleed had attended Quranic school and was partly self-educated from all his early reading. He imitated his parents' recitation of Quranic verses as a young child, without knowing what they meant.

Waleed said that his parents' role in his education and language development was crucial. "I was fortunate to have parents who were educated and very dedicated to literacy activities. I have gained exposure to literacy from my parents." Waleed recalled that his parents told him stories and made him read as a child; they exposed him to books and educational aids from early childhood. He

reported that members of his family were EFL teachers and that some of them worked for the Aramco Company. "I was fortunate to have very well educated family members and parents who pushed and encouraged me to acquire English basics even prior to school age."

Waleed seems to have been encouraged to read and learn when he was very young, even to learn some basics before he went to school. He expressed gratitude for this strong encouragement, and seemed to appreciate the fact that both of his parents were educated, as apparently were other family members.

Category 2 - Quranic School Influences on Learning Arabic and English

Four of the study participants had attended Quranic school before entering elementary school and spoke of its strong influence. Again, it was mainly their fathers who took them or sent them to Quranic school.

Theme 1: Grounding in classical Arabic language and discipline. Quranic school for young Saudi boys when the participants were growing up was one of their first introductions to classical Arabic, although for several the *Quran* had been recited or read at home by their parents or other relatives. These youngsters had even begun to memorize some of the verses from hearing them. Four of the

participants attended Quranic school, where they were taught to memorize and recite the *Holy Quran*. Essentially, Quranic school is a highly disciplined religious education for Saudi boys; it is usually attached to a mosque.

Quranic school was a strong, positive experience for most of the participants who attended this institution, in that it grounded them strongly in classical Arabic and served as a disciplinary means for their early learning, preparing them for the rote memorization they would encounter in elementary and intermediate school. Not only did they memorize the *Quran* itself, or many of its verses, they also memorized short segments from the Prophet's sayings. For these youngsters, the *Quran* was their first introduction to classical Arabic, whereas at home they were accustomed to a colloquial version of their language. The *Quran* may have been the first opportunity for several of these Saudis to see Arabic script. Of course, as was true of particular participants, their experience of Quranic school was intimately linked with their early family experience.

Saleh's father insisted he go to the mosque instead of kindergarten because he thought it would be good for his son to learn the "eloquent language" of the *Quran*. Saleh believes that memorizing verses from the *Quran* as a child

helped him develop his capacity for learning. As a consequence, he said he was more advanced than his peers at recognizing Arabic words in elementary school. He was taught Arabic first through the *Quran*; he went to the mosque for religious activities and to memorize the *Quran*.

In his public school experience, Saleh noted that dictation was an emphasis. He did not do well at dictation; however, he was good at memorization, and he valued this skill which had been stressed in his Quranic school. He believes that memorization and the emphasis on accuracy in reciting the Quranic verses were important, as he put it, "because Arabic is a difficult language." He believes that going to Quranic school helped him learn to read. He was a fluent reader of Arabic and claimed that being able to read his first language well helped his pronunciation of it. This precision and skill may have paid off in his becoming exceptionally fluent in English.

Saleh talked about how he used to go to the mosque with his father and grandfather to pray the five daily prayers and the weekly Friday prayer. Especially during the holy month of Ramadan (the Muslims' month of fasting), he recalled that they used to go to the mosque every night to pray the *Taraweeh* (special night prayer). Saleh said, "I studied there for one year. During that year, I was exposed

to the basics of the [Arabic] language." In his own terms, Saleh said, "I think attending the Quranic school contributed a lot to my performance later at elementary school. I was faster than my peers in recognizing and understanding the words, and participating in class."

Theme 2: Cultural preservation of native Arabic and its influence on learning English. On a somewhat negative note, this strong Islamic tradition may have perpetuated and reinforced a conservative approach to education in Saudi Arabia. It is possible that the emphasis on the importance of classical Arabic may have been a hindrance to learning English for some students. As Waleed said, "Our education system has been affected deeply by the Islamic conservative interpretation; therefore the notion of introducing English in the school is greatly neglected." As he suggested, the rigorous, and perhaps rigid, training in Quranic school in classical Arabic may have hampered the introduction and acceptance of English in Saudi communities. On the other hand, some of the participants expressed a positive value in being strong in their Arabic language, which enabled them to learn English grammar at a later stage.

Waleed was taken to Quranic school by his father and rewarded for passing the exams. When he was 16 years old,

Waleed had himself memorized almost the whole *Quran*. The Quranic school was where he learned to read and write Arabic. He considered himself lucky to have learned classical Arabic in Quranic school. Furthermore, he appreciated the *Quran* as a learning tool, calling it "the miracle of the *Quran*."

Waleed described his experience of enrolling in Quranic school by saying, "Before school age, I used to go to the Quranic school. My father used to take me there to start reading and memorizing the holy *Quran*. My experience was both unique and powerful." He continued, "I was fortunate to have parents who had memorized the *Holy Quran*, and I was fortunate to live in the holy city of Makkah. While in Quranic school, I was able to memorize some verses, sutras, and chapters of the *Holy Quran*. I memorized them by heart, took the test, passed, and was rewarded for passing it." Not only was memorization of parts of the *Quran* rigorous religious training, its achievement was a source of pride for Waleed.

Sometimes young Saudi boys developed an advanced skill in Arabic as had Waleed, who was once punished by a teacher because he was accused of plagiarizing an Arabic text because his Arabic was so exceptional. Waleed had a rich learning experience both in Quranic school and through

exposure to the life of Makkah with all the pilgrims who poured into town on certain religious occasions. His parents accommodated people of different languages and cultures in their home, which contributed to Waleed's multilingualism before he went to public school.

On the other hand, Waleed mentioned that many Saudis have been conservative and not wanted their sons to be English teachers, wanting to preserve the classical Arabic language. His own father, who was very religious, preferred that he pursue Arabic studies at the university instead of English. Even so, Waleed became an English major.

Theme 3: Memorization and development of literacy.

Memorization and recitation of Islamic texts seem to have been very important at home and at Quranic school, as the participants spoke of their fathers, uncles, grandfathers, even their mothers memorizing verses from the *Quran*, classical Arabic poetry, etc., and reciting them aloud. Therefore, there was not only the influence of books and stories in Arabic print introduced by their parents, but the reciting of classical Arabic was prominent in most of the Saudis' homes. Family members would recite verses of the *Quran* and other religious texts aloud when the Saudis were young boys, and they later heard the *Quran* being read or recited in the mosque. Four of the participants had gone

to Quranic school before they entered public elementary school, so they had gained a certain level of Arabic literacy before first grade.

The frequency and extent of this disciplined practice in Quranic school may have had a strong influence on the Saudis, or it may have made their Arabic so strong as to make learning a second language difficult for some of them, especially a much differently structured language such as English.

Khalid, who did not attend Quranic school, said, "I remember one of the students told our *Quran* interpretation course teacher that being focused only on Arabic and the *Quran* makes us fail in English courses because they are two separate languages and cultures." However, one of Khalid's teachers said that although Arabic can be the most difficult and highly complex language with its system, "if I train you to swim in an ocean, you will definitely be able to swim in a three meters deep swimming pool," implying he could learn English. This made Khalid focus on Arabic but not deviate from learning English because he was taking English every day starting with intermediate school.

By the time he was 14 years old, Hassan had finished reading the whole *Quran* with the sheikh. He stated, "Before going to elementary school, my father sent me to the

Quranic school in the mosque to read the holy *Quran* with the sheikh. As you know, as Muslims we have always honored, practiced, and engaged in religious activities like going to the mosque for praying and learning." Hassan added, "By going to the mosque, I learned discipline. It was the place of learning and reading the *Holy Quran*. It positively affected my performance later on at school."

For the same reason, Fahad said, his father took him to the Quranic school during the month of Ramadan, to read, revise, and memorize verses, sutras, and chapters from the *Quran* and encouraged him to compete with the other students. More importantly, Fahad's sheikh set up competitions where the boys read the *Quran* in front of each other. Not only was Fahad learning these language skills for himself, but how to compete with other students, at his father's and the sheikh's bidding. Whereas the other study participants mainly mentioned their fathers and/or grandfathers enforcing this religious training, Fahad's mother also taught him his prayers. Even so, it was primarily the fathers who took responsibility for their sons' religious training, according to their stories, and helped give them this foundation that would be important to their regular school learning.

Nevertheless, the value of attending the Quranic school was not acclaimed by all the participants. In fact, three explicitly said they did not participate in Quranic school, Khalid, Salem, and Ali. Further, Ali said that it was only during the month of Ramadan that he went to the mosque, and then just for prayers. Ali explained that going to the mosque during the month of fasting was in response to his father's command and promise of reward for performing the prayers in the mosque. Ali was given 50 riyals at the end of Ramadan as a reward.

Ali stated, "I went to the Quranic school twice or three times. Then, something happened between my cousin, who accompanied me, and the sheikh. Afterwards, with the recurrence of the same incident, my cousin and I ended up out of the Quranic school." Ali went on to say, "You know as children, we were not innocent. I think we did it [caused the trouble] to exaggerate and to be out of the school. I think we wanted to spend the time playing instead of reading, writing, or memorizing the *Quran*."

Salem also mentioned that he did not attend Quranic school or go to the mosque as many times as he should have. He explained, "I was not very religious, but I always respected the religious people. I used to go to the mosque but not in a consistent way."

The practice of memorization stressed in the Quranic school had advantages and disadvantages in the Saudis' education, as it ultimately helped them to learn grammar, vocabulary, and other elements of the language itself. But learning by rote in Arabic, and later in English, also made it difficult for them to learn to write, that is to compose from their own ideas. They memorized rules of grammar but received no direct instruction for writing; rather they imitated or copied others' writing.

Khalid found that he read each word in Arabic, "his eyes cutting the text into words", as he expressed it. He explained that you need to memorize everything in Arabic, but not in English. He had been expecting to memorize everything he read in English, but later at university was taught by a friend to skim and scan text. He was also told by a professor that he did not have to memorize everything, just understand and discuss theory.

As to the advantages of memorization, many of the Saudis relied on it to pass exams in the university or accomplish other linguistic tasks, such as memorizing the pronunciation of English. Waleed relied on his memory as his "weapon" to pass exams at the university. Memorization may have helped them transfer skills from one language to another.

Category 3 - Interface Between Arabic (L1) and English (L2)

Some of the participants indicated that their ease or struggle with acquiring Arabic also influenced their ability to learn English. Most of them did not start to formally learn English until 7th grade in intermediate school, and then again, their early English learning involved memorization of letters, words, copying and imitating sentences—generally the activities favored in the grammar translation method. Some found that a stronger foundation in Arabic helped them learn English grammar, but occasionally one found that his English development inhibited or affected his development in Arabic.

Theme 1: The effect of learning Arabic and learning English on each other. All the participants had to deal with diglossia, especially those who had attended Quranic school, where they learned classical Arabic, but spoke colloquial Arabic at home and in their community. Ali apparently struggled with knowing more than one variety of Arabic, what he called "triglossia" (classical as in the *Quran*; modern standard as used in institutions; and colloquial used at home). His colloquial language seemed to interfere the most with his learning of classical Arabic in school, he claimed. "Having more than one variety of Arabic is the most important factor that affects my literacy."

This may have been partly due to the fact that his parents were illiterate and did not read or recite the *Quran* at home as other participants' families did. Other participants had learned considerable classical Arabic orally from their families' reading or reciting the *Quran* at home and/or at Quranic school, which Ali had not.

Ali had very little positive memory of elementary school, only of the teachers punishing the students. He did not do well in intermediate school, even though his classes were conducted in Arabic. He said he was ashamed of his English grades in 9th grade, a subject he failed. A private tutor helped him and showed him that English was not that hard, he said; but this tutor mostly taught him grammar, which he liked. In 10th and 11th grades, he had a teacher whose methods grounded him in Arabic grammar, which positively influenced his learning of English.

In high school, Ali was still affected by the domination of his oral (colloquial) language; he struggled to learn to read and write in a practical Arabic class. At this stage, he improved his language. He liked Arabic and said his English competence was reasonable, but he also struggled to write Arabic because of his colloquial language, a struggle that continued till the end of high school, he said. Ali explained that he felt he had enhanced

his first language of Arabic by analyzing his second, English.

As an undergraduate, Khalid took translation courses, becoming aware of the differences between his first and second languages by comparing and contrasting their features. Thus, he said he improved in both languages. But he was also told by a professor that his English writing style was much like his Arabic writing style, which he analyzed and tried to correct. He had been connecting words in English the way they are connected in Arabic, as he had studied Arabic literature and humanities in high school.

Fahad said a great deal about how learning English as a foreign language and becoming bilingual had developed his mental ability and given him a "cognitive tendency to learn new things." He found that studying English helped improve his awareness and appreciation of his own language. He believed that learning English had stretched his mental ability because English has different grammar, idioms, and expressions than Arabic.

Saleh's ability to read Arabic was quite advanced for his age in elementary school; he could use expressions and vocabulary from the *Quran*. His Arabic literacy was much stronger than his English when he went to the university. But he said that, because he used high-quality literacy

texts, his English competence became "quite high" and he developed his English to a high degree through the competence he had in his first language. But by the time he graduated from the university, through the study of English linguistics and literature, his English literacy had become stronger than his Arabic, he said. Despite his strong Arabic skills early on, he was not able to use Arabic well in an academic setting because, for instance, grammar was separate from composition, whereas English texts gave instructions for using grammar in writing, he explained.

A number of the Saudi participants noted how different these two languages are. Saleh said that Arabic is a difficult language to learn. Others mentioned how reading the letters and words in Arabic is so different from reading the unconnected words in English. The main thing that Saleh found was that English is pronounced differently from the way it is written; Arabic quite the opposite. Saleh said he personally found learning English easier than learning Arabic. He attributes this to his excelling in Arabic.

Learning English presented challenges to Waleed, however, because he was somewhat multilingual when he started public school, having lived in Makkah and interacted with pilgrims of many languages from different

countries. He had also acquired part of his grandparents' African tribal language. So he was often challenged with the intonation of English when he was learning it. As Waleed explained, when the acquisition of L1 is interrupted by input from L2, the speaker can acquire the two languages but below the monolingual standard. His challenge was compounded by learning parts of multiple languages.

Although knowledge of the first language usually affects second language acquisition, Salem reported the opposite, that his English proficiency adversely affected his Arabic writing, as he was using an "English way of writing." Thus, his English competence affected his Arabic expression. Moreover, he believes the more highly advanced one is in L2, the more it affects L1. Salem had done his undergraduate work in the U.S., and obviously had learned to speak English to survive.

Category 4 - The Value of English to the Saudis

The participants expressed multiple reasons for learning English: for their own personal benefit and to enhance the role of their nation in the international community. They all agreed that English is becoming the predominant international language and the language to learn; it is used at many levels of their own society: in hospitals, university, the police force. English teachers

are in great demand to meet the growing need for Saudis to know and practice English. It has become more than textbook English or grammar; it has become an active and prominent language in many areas of their society.

Theme 1: Status and prestige associated with English.

Most of the participants spoke of the prestige that comes with knowing English. They had admired or respected relatives or teachers who had studied in an English-speaking country, especially those who were fluent or competent in the language. They knew that it opened doors for many people in the job market, helped develop international relationships, and kept people informed of world events.

A few of the participants appreciated the English language just as a language, and wanted to learn it and to speak it well. Fahad had found learning English to be an adventure beginning in intermediate school. Khalid said it made travel easier; he made friendships around the world with persons in English-speaking countries via the Internet. He also called English the "magic stick" because he knew how important it was.

However, there were occasions when there was a certain cultural backlash toward English, as when relatives or friends criticized these Saudis for abandoning their own

culture and language. Khalid reported being ridiculed by his uncle who knew little English and who told him "to stick to your language; your language is your culture." Khalid suggested that using English around other Saudis who did not understand it may have been perceived as showing off. When asked if he had developed the same literacy skills in Arabic as in English, he said no, but found that his English skills were being transferred to his Arabic. Being skilled in both languages was important to him as he was training to be an interpreter and translator.

As a young child just returned from the United States, Khalid had been ostracized and excluded from play by his cousins for speaking English, so from then on he had avoided using the language and began to lose it until intermediate school when it was a required subject. Realizing this, he made a concerted effort in school to regain his English, especially after he proved himself in English class by helping his classmates win a competition with his knowledge of the language. Later his cousins' parents wanted their sons to be as competent in English as Khalid.

Theme 2: English as opening doors to other cultures and job opportunities. Fahad reported that learning other languages, especially English, opened the door to other

cultures for him, and helped him appreciate people from other countries. He said he appreciated other cultural traditions and customs by learning English. He also believes that learning English is "the best thing we can do to improve our lives. Knowing English impresses people and gives a person a big jump in their career. A lot of workplaces demand English." Fahad looked up to his uncle who had received an engineering degree from Arizona State and had a good job at Aramco. "He is financially good and has a good status because he studied in America and speaks good English. I would like to be like him." Fahad felt that learning a foreign language enhanced his mental development and encouraged risk-taking. He actually spoke of competing with himself to speak fluently when someone did not understand his English.

Saleh wanted to know another language and wanted to prove he could learn it; he liked English from the beginning in intermediate school, and had a natural attraction to it. One participant found that learning English can open doors; he earned a PhD and acquired a position in Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Education. Reading modern books also has helped him remain fluent in English, he said. Additionally, a person can command more respect for knowing English, he claimed.

Salem said, "I wanted to learn English just for English." He indicated he really liked English and that was why he majored in it. Salem also sees English as the international language, calling it the "globalization language." He said that in Saudi Arabia, "having a PhD in English is different than having a PhD in any other field."

Category 5 - Personal Initiatives to Improve English

Quite often in their acquisition of English, and especially to meet the requirements of their studies of English in the undergraduate and graduate levels of the university, these students took special measures beyond what was required of them to learn or improve their English. Self-determined and self-motivated, they took much responsibility for their own learning, especially when the task was difficult. When instructors or courses were not sufficient in helping them to read, write, or speak English, they taught themselves, or increased what their teachers or professors did. Often they had to compensate or overcompensate for what they did not receive, or how a teacher or course did not meet their needs.

Theme 1: Self-study and self-learning. Ali found reading English to be difficult because the Arabic writing system is so different from English. When he was studying phonology at his university, he ordered books on the

subject in Arabic, read them, then read the English version in order to understand the material. Once he understood it in Arabic, he could read and understand it in English. "I got the background in Arabic, then I learned the subject in English." Also, when he got to graduate school, he found he had no phonological literacy, so he audited an Arabic phonology course, as he was struggling through an advanced English phonology course. So again, learning the material in Arabic first helped him survive phonology class.

Khalid purposely used popular culture and the media to develop his English, beginning in high school. Using the Internet, he developed an international community of friends from Canada, the United States, and Australia to gain fluency in English. Being initially isolated socially as a child because he knew English and was viewed as being an American, he developed a strong need to be with people. He also indicated that he wanted to gain a more accurate and much fuller sense of what English is as a language system. He felt less isolated socially by networking electronically with English-speaking people throughout the world. Khalid also expressed an interest in being part of the global world by majoring in English, the international language. He spoke of expanding his horizons, which he obviously did.

Theme 2: Improving English through studies abroad and individual study. Fahad was quite challenged in the Intensive English Program (IEP) at Bloomington, Indiana, for six months before entering graduate school in the United States. His TOEFL scores were not adequate for admission to a number of universities; he was not understood because of his accent. Though at times discouraged, Fahad overcame his difficulties with the language in several ways. He asked teachers for the pronunciation of particular words; listened to CDs, DVDs, and television. When he was unable to even write a one- or two-page paper, he overcame his writing difficulties by following steps for writing that he found in a TOEFL text. He also went to a Kaplan center in the U.S. for two months. Altogether, he was in America for academic preparation and his master's program for 16 months. Both reading and writing for his master's studies were difficult for Fahad, who completed a self-study course on how to write research papers. Ultimately, he did well in his master's program, graduating with distinction so that he went directly for his PhD. To this point, he had studied English for 12 years.

Saleh found studying English in the university to be quite different, as he was learning different skills in

different courses, not as one in high school. However, he said he did well when he found himself "suddenly in a new English learning environment." Saleh showed a great deal of personal initiative in several ways throughout his university studies. Initially, he decided that if he was to succeed, he would have to work hard outside of class. "It was personal initiative. Nobody told me about it. I did my best and worked at it."

For his second language acquisition course, Saleh recalled having once worked for eight hours with a course text and his electronic dictionary to prepare for class. He expected to be fluent by his second year of university, and it was a turning point when he decided he had to "expand himself", meaning to learn more on his own. Also, he taught himself to write paragraphs and found time to improve himself in speaking and reading English, but not in writing which he found "a little bit boring", that is, more of a duty or need to communicate ideas. But he was not given writing instruction in the lower grades or taught how to write academically in the university in Saudi Arabia, and so he found writing for graduate school in the U.S. much different and quite challenging. Actually he learned to write for graduate level work at Ohio State University at Cleveland. Saleh modeled professional articles in his TESOL

program at Cleveland (in a visitor exchange program where he taught Arabic) to write assignments, which helped him communicate in an academic setting and made his writing more authentic, he said.

Theme 3: Personal efforts to improve English fluency.

Saleh achieved a high degree of fluency in English no doubt from recording and listening to his own voice, and watching himself speak in a mirror to see how the sounds were produced. He liked phonology, which he said unconsciously taught him how to speak English, though he worked hard to eliminate his Arabic accent. In the first year of his high school, the teacher had the students record their voices in English, which he continued to do in the university. "I do believe that is what improved my fluency in reading." He also felt it helped to read in front of the class. Saleh also learned writing from teaching it to undergraduates at the writing center at Ohio State, and then substitute taught English 101 and 102, which also helped him develop his academic writing. In fact, he admits to being a better writer in English than in Arabic, although he reads fluently in Arabic. In elementary school, he only memorized or imitated his native language, since the students did not write original compositions. But by his second year at the university, he figured out that he need not memorize

paragraphs in order to write them in English, but to write his own thoughts. He wrote his own way in essay exams, rather than memorize material to repeat in the exams.

Saleh also used his own initiative to meet the challenge of a phonology course. He read the material both before and after class to understand the information, especially theoretical concepts. Even after he graduated with his bachelor's degree from the university and was teaching, he said he had a passion for reading and read novels to keep his English fresh and not to lose his vocabulary. He understands that if you do not use a language, you lose it. He even continued to read phonology on his own.

Theme 4: Using other resources to learn English.

Sometimes the participants took the initiative to consult other professors for advice when they encountered difficulties with a particular university teacher. When Waleed was being criticized by his phonology professor in college for not getting his pronunciation right because the British professor spoke too fast, he sought the advice of an African professor who told him that there were various pronunciations of English and to just listen to the pronunciations on tape and transcribe them as they were in

writing, then memorize them for the exams. This worked for Waleed and he was grateful.

More often the Saudis took it upon themselves to find a way to increase their knowledge and improve their English when their professors or the education system failed them. When Waleed graduated from college, he had a degree in English language and literature, but he had no preparation whatsoever to teach in high school. His university had given him no practice teaching, and the Ministry of Education had given him no training or professional development. Therefore, he had to fall back on the audio-lingual method his intermediate and secondary teacher had used in his English classes. However, Waleed was motivated to do more on his own to learn better teaching methods. He used critical reflection in a personal journal to assess and figure out his teaching approach as he taught. Then after teaching for three years, he went to the University of Exeter in England for his master's to improve his English and learn how to teach, he said. He gained knowledge in methodology and pedagogy, especially student-centered learning, but did not necessarily improve his English accent.

In college Hassan went to a Pakistani teacher and asked for extra work on writing. At the time, he wanted to

be a journalist and needed to be a good writer. The teacher corrected his drafts and had him present articles from newspapers and magazines in class. After he got his bachelor's degree in English, he continued to read and study on his own.

Salem was highly motivated to learn English after the Iraqi invasion of neighboring Kuwait because the American army had liberated Kuwait. He thought that reading was an important channel to learn about the American culture, although he had previously been exposed to the American media starting in high school. Salem also spoke about using one of the IEP books to improve his reading comprehension; he used it after class to practice reading faster.

The extraordinary means the Saudi students used to practice and acquire English illustrates their dedication to learning the language and preparing for their profession in EFL. For most of them, learning English was a struggle, especially to use oral English naturally in a communicative setting. Their use of self-study, self-listening, and self-improvement enabled them to achieve second language acquisition to varying degrees, but at least to a relatively high level of fluency.

Category 6 - The Use of Popular Media and Technology to Learn English

The Saudis used numerous kinds of technology and media to learn and improve their English. These included English-language television and movies, the computer and the Internet, and audio taping.

Theme 1: Television and early English literacy. Not surprisingly, the Saudi students learned some of their English from programs on American and British television channels, and through other electronic and print media, starting with American cartoons. When they started learning English years ago, much less English was being spoken in their country. They may have only encountered the English of a relative or visitor from the U.S. before beginning their formal English instruction in 7th grade. On a day-to-day basis, they primarily heard Arabic, and usually the colloquial form.

Hassan said he tried to imitate words he heard on television or in American movies. He said he preferred the language of cartoons, as he understood the English in them better than in the dialogue in the cowboy movies. He had also watched the very popular American children's television show *Sesame Street*.

Salem had also watched children's television at home and used the media extensively to learn about American culture. He used computer technology, though more to improve his handwriting than anything; he used a computer typing tutorial to speed up his writing, he said.

Saleh also spoke about watching cartoons in English, which generated his enthusiasm for the language and his strong desire to speak it. "I just hoped at that time that I could understand the way they speak. This made me love the language." He also mentioned listening to the radio more in college.

If their home did not have a television when they were children, the Saudis would go to a neighbor's or grandparents', as in the case of Waleed who watched English videos at his grandmother's. He commented on having an Islamic environment at home, a Western environment at his grandmother's. Only Ali did not mention watching television; but in school he was encouraged to read newspapers, which constituted his view of written media.

Theme 2: The use of computer technology and the Internet. Khalid suggested that watching American cartoons on television also contributed to his English literacy. But his use of computer technology and the Internet really helped him to develop his English literacy. He exchanged

email or joined chat groups with English speakers from other countries. However, his young friends in secondary school rejected his indulgence in American culture, warning him that he would lose his Saudi identity. This had the opposite effect of what his friends intended: Khalid worked even harder to learn English and take in American culture to prove that being open to another culture cannot destroy one's own cultural identity. Khalid started to learn composition while using a computer program on English grammar.

Theme 3: The use of audio tape recoding. In order to become more fluent in English, sometimes the Saudis continued to use different kinds of media after their high school or college teachers had introduced them to it. While in high school, Hassan's English teacher had the students listen to tapes of English news broadcasts and write one themselves. They spent several hours listening to tapes, trying to imitate English speakers. Saleh continued to record and listen to his own voice while in college, as he had done in high school, making a concerted effort to learn the correct pronunciation of English and get rid of his accent, which he did.

Listening to English through all these media gave the Saudis more exposure to spoken English, at least before

they entered college. When they studied in America, they were perhaps even more frequently exposed to a variety of media, though with so much reading and writing in graduate school, they likely had little time to watch television.

Category 7 - Influences for Becoming an English Teacher

The Saudis in this study had several influences on their decision to major in English in college and to become English professionals: an influential teacher, the basic desire to learn and master English as a foreign language, and knowing teachers and relatives who knew and used English.

Theme 1: English teachers as models. Khalid reported two things that increased his desire to be an English major: (a) the range of courses in high school and (b) his English teacher who had them present in class in high school. This teacher was friendly and connected learning to life, used a topical approach, and encouraged communicative competence. Initially, Khalid was afraid to tell this most admired teacher that he wanted to be an English major, but when he did, his teacher said he would have recommended him for it.

For Fahad, it was a "tough" Syrian English teacher in high school who got him to like English because he taught with interest and explained everything in grammar. Fahad

tried to imitate this teacher who spoke English all the time. But it was a very interactive and enthusiastic Sudanese English professor at King Faisal University, who had received his PhD in America, that inspired Fahad to do the same. He went on for his master's degree at Valparaiso University in Indiana before entering a doctoral program. Fahad said he chose to study in America so that he could get the accent and pronunciation of his English right.

Theme 2: Desire to learn English. Saleh saw learning English as a challenge: "I would say the reason I found English interesting was that I wanted to learn another language. It was new to me. People used to say it was difficult and I wanted to prove the opposite to them." Further, he said that he had loved English since he first had contact with it in intermediate school. He had a kind English teacher in intermediate school, which was why he said he loved English and did well in it, though he said his brothers did not. Saleh seemed to have a natural ability and attraction for English, and had excelled in Arabic as well.

Waleed was motivated to learn English at age 10 because he had trouble understanding an English-speaking pilgrim boy who needed help to get medicine, so he started teaching himself English before he entered intermediate

school. Waleed's uncle spoke an Americanized English and worked for Aramco. Waleed also had a Saudi English teacher who taught him literature and took him to the library to read books.

Theme 3: Relatives and others who spoke English. Salem was attracted by the English of his cousin who had studied in the U.S. for five years. Therefore, he was curious to go to America and attended South Carolina University for IEP before going to the University of Michigan for his bachelor's degree, and on to Colorado State for his master's. In secondary school, he admired his English teacher but did not decide to major in it until after he witnessed American soldiers liberating Kuwait from the Iraqi invasion. He wanted to know what motivated Americans do this, and more about their culture.

Category 8 - Exposure to Native English Speakers

Although the Saudis started studying English in intermediate school, their English skills remain limited because they learned the language initially from teachers who were not native speakers and who spoke Arabic most of the time. It was generally not until college that they were exposed to English as spoken or taught by professors who had studied English abroad, or by native English-speaking teachers.

Theme 1: Being exposed to native speakers of English.

Ali's hospital training at the Saudi Institute of Public Administration (IPA) was the first time that he was in a functional English-speaking environment, as English is the language used in the health care field in Saudi Arabia. He was a trainee at a hospital for three months where he learned "English in a context." He found that being taught English by native speakers was strange after having been taught English for 6 or 7 years by Arabic-speaking teachers. At the IPA, he was taught by Americans "to get the pure language and the authentic pronunciation." This was a challenge at first, especially in writing, since all he knew was grammar. However, he enjoyed being taught by native speakers, as he discovered that "language was not just grammar." But to sit in a class where the instruction was all in English was new to him, and then to do his training in the hospital where only English was used by the staff significantly improved his English. It enabled him to return to the university and major in English and attain his degree in it—with honors.

Theme 2: Exposure to English in college. The negative side of this experience, according to Ali, was that he came to believe that "your competence is nothing" but that you "would gain what you lack." There were also the challenges

of being understood by and understanding the English-speaking instructor. Additionally, at the IPA, he was also learning a specific kind of English: medical terminology. But Ali did not enjoy the writing as this was a skill he had not learned in Arabic in the first place. He especially had difficulty translating the oral form of Arabic into writing, which was similarly difficult for him in English.

Ali noted, "Reading is not part of our literacy." He indicated that studying at the IPA contributed to both his Arabic and English literacy. Attending the IPA was a very positive experience for Ali, in that it gave him the English competency he needed for attending the university, where, on his graduation, he was declared by the Dean to be one of their top students and had the honor of meeting the Prince of his region. Ali blamed his earlier lack of development in English on the teachers (professors) who had been educated abroad but still could not teach them to speak and write English.

Khalid found that learning English at King Saud University was entirely different than in high school, as they had native English-speaking teachers from Canada and Scotland, who got them to communicate orally. In fact, he commented that, in his opinion, English can be taught more effectively by native speakers. "College English classes

were so different from the past 12 years", he remarked. But Khalid said that having native-English-speaking teachers could be a disadvantage to students if they did not speak English well, because they did not speak Arabic. He reported that only 15 out of 55 who started an English major when he did at his university, finished the program. His five-week stay in England one summer had helped his English development significantly, he reported.

Fahad went to America to study for his master's with the express purpose of improving his English pronunciation and accent. He did not have enough experience speaking English in college in Saudi Arabia. Because of his limitations in spoken English, he had a hard time making friends in America so that he could learn to speak English, especially in social situations. He found that Americans wanted to talk business rather than just socialize. He tried going to a Christian church with an American teacher for a couple of months, but this did not prove to be a valuable for improving his English, especially since his religion of Islam was so different, he explained.

While most of the Saudi participants went to America or England to study in order to improve and develop their English, Saleh was already fluent in the language when he arrived in the U.S. for the first time in 2004. He noted

that people who met him for the first time found him fluent and his accent American. The immigration officials could not believe it was his first time in America, he noted.

Waleed spent a year at the University of Exeter, England, in an English-speaking environment to get his master's degree and improve his English. Hassan took off a semester during his university studies to attend Christ Church College in Canterbury, England, for three months to become more fluent in the language. He was very impressed with the discipline of the Japanese students there and tried to imitate them. He said he had excellent Saudi English professors in the university who spoke like native English speakers, being very fluent. Most had received their degrees from America. Hassan had perhaps less direct experience with native English speakers because he had received all three of his university degrees in Saudi Arabia.

Category 9 - Improving EFL Instruction in Saudi Arabia

These EFL professionals will return to Saudi Arabia after they finish their degrees in the U.S. to resume positions with the Ministry of Higher Education in their colleges and universities, or in the Ministry of Education itself. The Saudi government has supported their education through their institution's scholarships, and they are

obligated to return and teach, or hold other positions within the Ministry of Higher Education. Moreover, they are eager to do so, as they have experienced the limitations in their country's education system themselves and wish to improve this situation by encouraging the further development and modernization of the Saudi educational system.

Theme 1: Suggestions for improving English teaching methods in Saudi Arabia. When asked about this, the participants offered a number of suggestions. In fact, some of the participants are interested in changing the English teaching methods in their home country. Many offered specific suggestions and had a vision of their involvement in this reform process.

In terms of pedagogy, a number of the Saudis spoke of specific ways they would help their own English students in colleges and universities, especially to compensate for the gaps they felt they had experienced in their own learning and education. They showed a tendency to use student-centered learning, as suggested by Saleh, and to move away from rote memorization, drills, prescriptive writing, and to involve their students in more communicative use of English. Most spoke of bringing Saudi Arabia's education around to a student-centered pedagogy rather than the

strict, traditional teacher-centered system, or a balance of both as suggested by Saleh.

On his return to Saudi Arabia, after earning his bachelor's degree, Salem wanted to improve his students' English learning experience over his own; however, he was discouraged when he was given a ready-made English syllabus and told to stick to it. Only this prescribed teaching method was sanctioned, and the principal, department head, and supervisor checked his preparation book to see that he was following the curriculum.

Partly because of this experience, Salem aspires to become Minister of Education in order to change the teaching practices. He believes that there must be confidence in the teachers, from the elementary to the high school level. "Otherwise we are not going to move even one step ahead." The Saudis wish to develop English language instruction to make learning the language better and easier than it was for themselves. They would find and promote ways to enable students to read and write English in a functional communication setting, not just through book learning or exams; to be able to use the language in daily life, especially in their occupations or interactions with other English-speaking persons.

Theme 2: Encourage the use of computer technology in English instruction. As a first step, the Saudis realized the need for more English teachers in Saudi Arabia as the country uses English in many areas of society, and as part of the global community. Not only did they want to encourage a more student-centered classroom pedagogy, but they also felt that using computer technology could enhance second language acquisition. Salem would like to see English taught in computer labs because of the shortage of English teachers, and as a way to provide contact with the English-speaking world via the Internet.

Both Hassan and Khalid also encouraged the use of technology in the teaching of English as a foreign language. Khalid suggested forming an electronic learning community among teachers to develop and learn new pedagogies. Waleed would like to see online teacher training and certification.

Salem's dream is to see English taught in computer labs, which would enable students to access the ESL environment in the U.S. or England. Since Saudi Arabia has few teachers who are native English speakers, he claims that the only way students can practice their spoken English is through the Internet, conversing with native

speakers, reading American newspapers, or watching CNN or American movies, for example.

Especially, the Saudis want to encourage more meaningful ways to learn English, especially more oral communication in the classroom, as suggested by Khalid. Also, Hassan would like to see English instruction become more than using drills and repetition. Since English is becoming the global language, Saudi Arabia needs to meet this challenge, as Waleed sees it. He recognizes Saudi Arabia's struggle to create a learning environment for English in the new millennium after being under the conservative influence of Islam. He sees the need to be "in the race with globalization and change", but stated quite directly, "we still are way behind." Waleed also wants Saudi Arabia to customize its education locally rather than import other countries' educational systems.

Fahad said he wants to make his country proud when he returns and aspires to be a university professor in Saudi Arabia. He would advocate for communication courses, not just linguistics and literature, especially business and international communication. He believes that students graduating in English from universities in Saudi Arabia should know the language well enough not to have to enter intensive English in the U.S. before starting master's

studies at American universities. He encourages the use of media, including computer technology, in intermediate and secondary schools for learning English. Hassan said he was thinking about teaching at a university, leaving the Ministry of Education, because it would give him more opportunity; he would have more freedom to do research and projects, whereas the Ministry is bureaucratic, he explained. He foresees providing workshops for beginners, integrating language learning with daily life, motivating students to learn the culture/language of others, and giving more reading and writing.

Focus Group Interview Themes

Several themes and ideas that the Saudi professionals had shared in their individual interviews reappeared in the focus group interview, but a few other themes emerged, or cast a different light on what they had talked about before. Additionally, the Saudis reinforced each others' experiences, and occasionally challenged each others' views. There was no interview protocol or guidelines for the focus group interview, only a few open-ended questions, and the Saudis generated considerable discussion among themselves. The following are the themes that emerged from this discussion.

Category 1 - Motivation to Learn English

A strong theme that emerged from the focus interview with five of the seven Saudi participants (Waleed, Saleh, Salem, Hassan, and Khalid) was the impact of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation on their learning of English.

Theme 1: Intrinsic motivation to learn English. Both of Waleed's parents and his intermediate and high school English teacher urged him to learn English because he liked the language, not to avoid punishment, to get a reward, or to pass an exam. Further, he said that his native-speaking English teachers at King Abdul Aziz University also "reinforced this kind of intrinsic motivation in me." He cited three things as the major influences on his English literacy development.

It was also intrinsic motivation that led Saleh to his "intensive self-study" especially in composition when he was at Ohio State University at Cleveland, teaching the Arabic language, English 101 and 102, and working with EFL students at the university writing center. However, he said he first felt this "intrinsic motivation" (his phrase) as early as in intermediate school in Saudi Arabia when he felt he "belonged in English", and decided then to become an English language professional. He spoke of pushing himself in his English studies throughout his schooling.

While he said he was indebted to his English teachers and others, no one in particular influenced him to become an English professional. Waleed said he was very impressed with Saleh's "unique and powerful" literacy development experience.

Theme 2: Extrinsic motivation to learn English. Salem spoke of two extrinsic motivational factors for his learning of English that were different from what had motivated his colleagues to major in English. He again reported being highly motivated to learn English because of the role the American army had played in liberating Kuwait in 1990. He was highly drawn to learn the Americans' language and culture, especially to understand what had caused them to come to Kuwait's defense. But he had another extrinsic motivational factor to learn English, as he was required to be an English major when he was given a Ministry of Education scholarship in 1999 to study at the University of Michigan in the U.S. But he said that this requirement of the scholarship reinforced his original motivation to learn English because of the American intervention in Kuwait, which led to his becoming an English professional. But when asked, he said no specific teacher had influenced him to become an English major. His

relatives were a secondary factor, he said, in his becoming an English professional.

Hassan said he admired Saleh's English. Hassan also had a strong extrinsic motivation to learn English because he had wanted to become a pilot, and to do so he was required to know English. When he failed to qualify for the air force academy, he turned to the study of English as a major (somewhat against his father's wishes) in college because he had been a "distinguished student" in English beginning in intermediate school, especially as he had started learning the language earlier than his Saudi peers. English was introduced in elementary school in Dubai where he had lived for three years during his father's teaching stint. But Hassan found English difficult in college (and was even told by an English professor to leave the department). Still, he was highly motivated to improve his English; he even took off a semester and went to England to learn the language better. He returned and finished his degree in English at Um Al-Qura University. A professor in his college taught him research writing and assured Hassan he could get master's and doctoral degrees in English, which he did, both in Saudi Arabia. Hassan cited three factors that led to his three English degrees: (a) motivation; (b) ambition; and (c) a chance for a better

job, preferably at a university where he could do research. He also admitted to some "panic" in motivating himself to learn, but added that he was also motivated by others.

Khalid's motivation to take English seriously resulted from his failure to speak adequate English at a hospital (where the staff spoke mainly English) to communicate his mother's needs to a doctor. He realized that although he had been born in the United States and had learned English there as a young child and in intermediate school, he was not competent in oral English because he had purposely abandoned speaking in English on his return to Saudi Arabia. As a child, he had rejected his English because his cousins had made fun of it and identified him as an American, excluding him from their play. But the hospital incident caused him embarrassment and shame among his relatives who thought he knew English, which strongly motivated him to learn better English from then on. He had realized that English literacy was more than putting words and phrases together, especially after a summer visit to England. He realized the importance of English and began to learn it again in earnest.

Khalid attributed his motivation to learn, teach, and promote English to his parents' support, the importance of English to Saudi society, and the importance of promoting

and teaching English in general. Khalid was motivated to become an English professional in large measure given the fact that he said he was passionate about the language and wanted to "utilize every single moment in [his] life to develop [him] self in that subject." Again, he stated emphatically, "English is a weapon" and indicated that a person with a degree in TESOL would more likely get a job in a bank than a person with a degree in computer science.

When the focus group interview turned to a discussion of the influence of Quranic school and the Islamic religion, Salem suggested another strong motivation for some Saudis to learn English. He stated, "Saudis who come from Islamic schools and learn English may be better than other people because they are motivated to learn the second language so that they can serve the religion and convey their messages through the English language which motivates them very highly." He was not speaking of himself, however, as he had not gone to Quranic school and did not attend the mosque frequently. Salem asserted that "religious people see English as a vehicle to deliver the religion and to expand the Islamic religion."

Salem spoke of being impressed by how fluent some Saudi speakers of English are; some of his colleagues had "control of the second language (English) in an

unbelievable way." He explained that many Saudi PhD holders come from a very religious background. "Their Islamic religion motivated them to really acquire English so that they can serve the Islamic religion through their mastery of the English language."

Category 2 - Deterrents to Learning English

Although the Saudis in this study were highly motivated, either by someone or something else, or by themselves, to pursue and deepen their study of English, they also met with discouragement both at home and abroad, which often made their personal struggle to become fluent and competent in the language more difficult.

Theme 1: Poor teaching methods in the Saudi schools.

As early as intermediate school, Khalid was discouraged from learning English, he said, because of the poor teaching methods in the Saudi schools. In college, these Saudis were often rebuked and highly criticized for their faulty pronunciation of English, often being expected to imitate a native speaker's voice on a tape. Khalid mentioned Waleed's university professor's criticism of his pronunciation of English in his phonology class and being forced to imitate native speakers. Waleed rebelled at his British professor's insistence on imitating native speakers on audiotapes, because another person had told him there

are many variations in spoken English: "I never bothered so much trying to imitate the native speakers."

Theme 2: Discouragement from teachers and professors at home and abroad. Khalid said, "We have always received discouragement; no one encourages us." He said that in undergraduate school, professors would mock them and ask why they were there, why they were not going to a sports college. Hassan agreed, saying he had similar experiences at the master's and PhD level.

Khalid spoke of being insulted in front of his colleagues in class, and being apologized to in private by professors but not in public. He said he faced challenges that were not academic: "It was a kind of military academia." He also suggested that older Saudi professors had the "very traditional idea that the more you put students under pressure, whatever that pressure is, the more productive the student." Saleh also mentioned the old premise that to frustrate someone was good. Waleed suggested that especially older Saudi Arabian teachers had the same traditional view, that the teacher was the "figure of authority, whatever he says is unquestionable, that the professor is superior."

Khalid also spoke of collaborating with peers to learn, because his university professors were product

oriented and the students feared failing out of the program. The students needed to collaborate in order to survive and not be eliminated from the English program when their professors were especially challenging. And so they did.

Hassan also spoke of teachers who were negative, saying one friend quit the English department because a professor did not like him, made fun of him; he spoke of a Syrian professor in graduate school in Saudi Arabia who put students down for mispronunciation. Hassan himself had been told by a professor to leave the English department because he did not belong there.

These were personal incidents; nonetheless, they point to some of the challenges that the Saudis had fitting into academic settings and conforming to the English they were expected to learn, both in their country and abroad.

Category 3 - Islamic Cultural Influence on English Literacy

One of the strongest discussions that ensued in the focus interview was on the cultural relationship of Islam and the Arabic language to the presence and use of English in Saudi Arabia. Again the participants talked about the influence of Quranic school on their learning of English.

Theme 1: Attending Quranic school and the mosque. As in their individual interviews, the Saudi professionals

revealed again in the focus group interview, that their religious training and practice of Islam, whether formal as in attending Quranic school or informal as in attending the mosque and learning verses of the *Quran* at home, had had a powerful influence on their Arabic and English literacy. Waleed, who attended Quranic school, again spoke about memorizing Quranic verses at an early age; "decoding the calligraphy", that is, the classical Arabic script the *Quran* is written in, as a preliminary experience to learning his Arabic letters and words in elementary school. He found this to be "complementary in terms of acquiring the language" as this cognitive ability transferred to their learning in public school. Saleh, who had also attended Quranic school, agreed that this decoding and the accelerated skills they learned motivated him to learn language. Quranic school was his first contact with the written Arabic language, though he admits it was "only fair" in helping his language acquisition. He noted that he was fast at learning English and pushed himself.

Theme 2: Better preparation at Quranic school. Again in talking about second language acquisition, Salem said that he found that Saudis who came from Islamic schools learned English better because they are motivated to learn it to serve their religion. He said further that even if

they are not in direct contact with native speakers, they know English skills and speak fluently. He described his fellow Saudis' "control of the English language" as "unbelievable."

Category 4 - Cultural Resistance to the English Language

Despite the Saudis' strong motivation to succeed in learning and using English, they did not have the unanimous support of their family or community in their homeland. This was a controversial topic in the focus interview.

Theme 1: The influence of conservative Islamic tradition. Especially Waleed raised the issue of the influence of conservative Islamic tradition, asking the others if it facilitated or hindered English literacy performance in general. He suggested that the curriculum played a major role in terms of hindering their literacy performance in English because "they say English is not the right language from a religious perspective like non-Muslims and disbelievers." Waleed explained that he was not encouraged to learn foreign languages because of his father's Islamic conservatism, even though his father was educated and spoke English well. Waleed's conservative parents discouraged his learning of other languages because, he said, "the language carries the culture." He

felt his parents were resistant because they felt that "kids would be brainwashed by other languages."

Waleed viewed the resistance to English in Saudi Arabia as having internal and external causes; internal in the parents' resistance to English, external in the limited accessibility to educational resources that expose them to English. He held the opinion that the local community does not facilitate the promotion of English; "the curriculum itself is a factor of resistance in terms of topics." Part of "this kind of resistance", he believes, is that teaching is exam oriented and teacher dominated, that students learn English just to pass the exam, and have no place in which to practice speaking the language. Salem agreed and said that because he is an English major, "people accuse me of showing off", which made him stop using his English. Since English is prestigious, he explained, "people think you are showing off and that you are better than they are."

Theme 2: Differing views on the effects of English on Islamic culture. Hassan and Waleed repeatedly disagreed about the effect of Islamic culture on the learning of English. Hassan does not think their culture stops people from learning English; Waleed believes it does. They also disagreed on the necessity of imitating native speakers to learn English. Waleed especially saw this imitation as

creating a cultural identity problem. Hassan agreed with Waleed's professor that to be able to pronounce English correctly, they must imitate native speakers perfectly. Hassan insisted that they need to speak like native speakers or they would be made fun of as Arabic speakers of English. Again, Waleed disagreed.

Waleed believes that the majority of parents resist the learning of English and that English literacy performance in Saudi Arabia mirrors that resistance. He added that the parents do not provide an environment for learning English. Hassan remembered that his father was discouraged from reading books, being told that it was a waste of time. Hassan suggested that this was because of the local community and poverty level, something with which Waleed agreed. Although not encouraged by the community to learn English, Hassan was encouraged by his father to learn the language when he was in intermediate school, which Waleed said was an exceptional situation. Apparently, learning was respected in Hassan's community where people went to institutes in the afternoon to learn.

Waleed commented that people now learn English for economic reasons, for employment; to have prestige, but are not motivated internally to learn the way their parents were. Waleed mentioned that professors in his college

complain about the effects of exposing students to English, as it makes the popular culture of other countries accessible and affects the way young Saudi students dress and behave. He therefore seems to think that retaining an Arabic pronunciation in English will help Saudis retain their cultural identity. Hassan defined English fluency as having no discernible accent, accurate pronunciation, and good grammar, something he seemed to value highly.

Waleed reiterated that "language carries culture" and that teachers have "to educate the kids about the culture and the consequences of English-speaking cultures" as with this exposure, "they start facing identity problems." Waleed was also interested in discussing the acquisition of English as a second language from a social constructivist perspective, not just a linguistic perspective.

Apparently the Islamic religious tradition had a strong, positive influence on the literacy of a number of the Saudi professionals, whereas one or two others could see it as having a limiting effect on using and adopting the English language for certain purposes in Saudi Arabia. There may, however, be a strong desire in Saudi Arabia to preserve the "sacred" language of the *Quran* while whole segments of society function in English, as in institutions and certain professions. The personal religious experiences

of the Saudis may have had a bearing on their attitude towards the influence of English literacy on Islamic culture and religion; just as Waleed said, "language carries culture." Certain parental or community resistance to the influx and influence of English may come from concern about the cultural influences that may come with the language, and the ongoing need for Saudi families to preserve the culture embedded in the language of the *Quran*, which may be partly why they teach their children Quranic verses very young.

Throughout the individual and focus group interviews, the Saudi professionals revealed much about the several stages of their acquisition of the English language and their personal journeys of English literacy. Most common among them was their determination to succeed both in their personal and academic lives for their own futures, and above all, to make a contribution to the learning and teaching of English in schools and colleges on their return to Saudi Arabia.

The Participants' Literacy Moments

In the course of my interviews with the Saudis during this study, I asked them who or what influenced their study of English within or outside the classroom, or in other words to tell about a 'literacy moment', that is, when they

realized that English would be their major course of study and likely their profession, or what motivated them to improve their English. More often than not, these literacy moments came as a result of an incident, an encounter with English speakers, and in some cases, by the strong influence of a teacher or an event in their schooling. In some cases, the literacy moment was an affirmation of their ability in the language or a way that they could develop better English proficiency.

Ali, who had struggled to overcome his colloquial language and did not have a strong background in family literacy since his parents were technically "illiterate", was challenged by university studies to the extent that he quit the university and went to the IPA for two years. As a consequence, he developed his English and study skills enough to return to the university and excel as an English major. At the IPA, he had to function in an English-speaking environment most of the time and had native-speaking English teachers in his courses, because the medical system in Saudi Arabia operates in English. His literacy moment was to discover how much more readily he could learn English through being in this environment, as his opportunities to use and practice English in his previous schooling had been limited. This experience

enabled him to finish his degree in English when he returned to the university.

Khalid realized that he was losing the English he had learned as a small child when he had lived in the U.S. by the time he started formal English classes in intermediate school in Saudi Arabia. Two literacy moments renewed his interest in learning English: (a) he was recognized by his teacher and classmates in intermediate school for the knowledge he had of English; and (b) he was embarrassed because his oral English was not adequate to communicate with the medical staff at the hospital where his mother was treated, and further embarrassed because his relatives thought he knew English better and could communicate with the staff. In addition, Khalid discovered during a visit to England during college that learning the English language was more than putting words together. These moments served to renew his interest in the language to the point that as an EFL student and professional he expressed the desire to spend most of his time developing his English.

Fahad was inspired by an English professor to aim for a PhD in English, although he struggled to develop his English in an IEP enough to enter graduate school in the U.S. (he barely passed the TOEFL), where he was still challenged by the language. Even so, early on, Fahad had

realized that learning English increased his mental ability, and he found learning it to be an adventure in intermediate school.

Saleh also developed a keen interest in English in intermediate school, saying he felt "he belonged in English." On his first visit to the U.S., during an exchange program at Cleveland State University, he took advantage of the opportunity to improve his English skills, especially his writing, and even taught beginning English courses to fill in for an instructor. He became quite fluent in English, learning to speak it without an identifiable Arabic accent. But he did not credit any particular teacher as being an influence on his becoming an English major. A fellow Saudi, during the focus group interview, was impressed with Saleh's high proficiency in English and appreciated his "unique and powerful" experiences in the language.

Waleed early on in his life saw the need to know English because when he was only 10, he realized how difficult it was to help a young English-speaking pilgrim boy staying at his house in Makkah to communicate his need for medicine. Despite having learned a little of several languages through his interaction with people from several cultures, Waleed could barely understand the boy's English.

Waleed's multilingualism challenged him to learn English, which he later did well, and was encouraged by his intermediate and high school teacher to study English, which he did. He had a breakthrough in a phonology class in which he was highly criticized for his "mispronunciation" of English, as he refused to give up, consulting another professor for advice, which enabled him to pass the exams and helped him realize there were variations in English pronunciations. When he became an English teacher, he was frustrated by not having had teacher training, so he took it upon himself to keep a reflective journal. One of his literacy moments was in realizing that he needed to teach himself how to teach. Later, he helped train teachers and develop curriculum because these literacy moments had challenged him to learn pedagogy on his own before he went to graduate school.

Hassan had turned to the study of English after he could not realize his dream of becoming a pilot; he had excelled in the language as a young student and did not want to go into Arabic studies as urged by his father. He had begun learning English in 5th grade in Dubai, well before his fellow Saudis, who only began to learn English in 7th grade. As an undergraduate he was impressed by the English of Saudi professors who had studied EFL in Michigan

and wanted to emulate their English. As a result of their instruction, Hassan was put in an advanced level of English when he took a semester off to study in England, and throughout his advanced EFL studies was highly self-motivated to achieve a high level of proficiency in English.

Salem was impressed by a cousin who had studied in the U.S. for five years and attracted to his English, and because of his curiosity about America, and his desire to learn English, he decided to attend an IEP program in South Carolina. Later, he was also strongly motivated to learn English because of the Americans' defense of Kuwait in the Iraqi invasion.

CHAPTER 5

RESULTS, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND LIMITATIONS

This chapter presents the results, implications, recommendations for future research, and the limitations of this study of six Saudi Arabian EFL graduate students (and one visiting scholar) and their various experiences of acquiring literacy in English as a second language, reflecting on their early literacy experiences in their first language of Arabic. In this chapter, I will first summarize the results related to the study's guiding research questions. I will then discuss additional themes that emerged from my findings.

Results Related to the Research Questions

The main purpose for the study was to gain the Saudi EFL professionals' perspective on what helped or hindered them in acquiring and developing English as their second language, both in their home country and in countries where they pursued studies in English. I also hoped to learn how the participants viewed the needs of Saudi Arabia's educational system in regard to helping students learn and use English. To facilitate this purpose, I utilized a qualitative approach, including individual interviews and a focus group interview that followed. The objective of this

qualitative research was to evaluate the language and cultural learning and English literacy experiences of seven advanced EFL professionals from Saudi Arabia in the United States in order to learn what factors, influences, and experiences they believe have shaped their English literacy development, and to draw implications for improving the methods of English language instruction in Saudi Arabia.

The Participants' Arabic Literacy Experiences

This section addresses the first research question in this study: *What kind of background experiences did the Saudi EFL professionals in the United States talk about that led them to develop literacy in their first language, and to develop literacy in English as their second language?* (a) *What positive experiences did they say had been the most useful for them?* (b) *What negative experiences did they say had been the most challenging for them? And what strategies did they employ to overcome any challenges they reported, and how successful did they feel those strategies were?*

It is well known in the field of the teaching of English as a foreign language (TEFL) and second language acquisition, that acquiring literacy in L1 (in this case Arabic) contributes to achieving literacy in L2 (English). The Saudi Arabian professionals interviewed for this study

acquired a certain level of basic literacy in their native Arabic in elementary school before starting to acquire English as their second language; most were introduced to English as a formal subject in 7th grade in intermediate school in their country, except for Khalid who was an early bilingual, having been born in the U.S. Most of the study participants had been exposed to the classical Arabic they would learn in school by first hearing it read or recited from the *Quran* at home, by one or both parents and/or other relatives, or by memorizing and copying verses of the Holy *Quran* themselves at Quranic school before they entered public school at age six. Although the Saudis spoke colloquial Arabic at home growing up, most were at least somewhat acquainted with classical language forms through their religious practices, in which the reading and memorization of the *Quran* is a central practice, as preservation of its ancient classical Arabic is highly important in their culture. Waleed, had actually memorized all 30 chapters of the *Quran* by the age of 16.

The parents' level of education varied considerably: Ali had illiterate parents, and Salem's parents had a very limited education, while other parents were educated at levels varying from primary to college level. Regardless of these differences, all of the Saudis as young boys were

encouraged to get an education, especially by their fathers, and in some instances by their mothers. However, it was usually the father who had the stronger influence on their sons' education. The fathers who were literate or educated read to their sons, provided them books, and urged them to get an education; most sent their sons to Quranic school or took them to the mosque where they began to learn Arabic.

All of the participants agreed that their families had exerted the strongest influence on their getting an education, even on continuing their education to complete advanced degrees. To some extent, the parents also encouraged the participants to become English professionals, even though most of the parents did not speak English themselves. There was one clear exception: Hassan's very religious father preferred that his son major in Arabic studies rather than in English, because of concern about the possible encroachment of Western culture on Saudi Arabia. These parents all recognized and emphasized the value of an education; those who were educated appreciated the experiences because of their own learning, while those who had little or no education themselves seemed especially to want their sons to compensate for what they had missed in their own lives.

A second, closely related background experience that the study participants felt gave strong support to their early childhood literacy was their experience at Quranic school, and memorization of the *Quran* at an early age. There was some mention that the heavy emphasis on learning the *Quran* and the complexity of Arabic might be seen as working against their learning of English, but most of the Saudis interviewed felt that their school performance had been enhanced by attending Quranic school.

This early exposure and development of their Arabic language and literacy at home and at the mosque gave a number of the Saudis some advantage, especially those who had attended Quranic school, as they had already begun to learn their letters and words, and recognized them in Arabic script, by the time they got to first grade; they were especially better at writing dictation in school. And some of them were already accustomed to the basic method of instruction they would have in public school, that is, rote memorization, which they had experienced in the strict, often rigid, discipline of the Quranic school. Throughout the course of their early education, they learned Arabic mainly by rigid methods such as drills, copying, and memorizing words and basic grammar, with little or no

opportunity to develop their reading or any kind of original writing.

This early emphasis on memorization had advantages and disadvantages for the Saudis; it impeded their learning to write original compositions, yet it ultimately enabled them to memorize for qualifying and university exams, and to learn correct English pronunciation and vocabulary. Although other aspects of language learning are emphasized in current pedagogical thought, it cannot be denied that memorization plays a part in some basic aspects of language learning.

The participants expressed diverse views on the relationship between their early Arabic literacy and their eventual learning of English. As previously note, some felt that through memorization they were able to transfer some of their literacy skills from L1 to L2. But Khalid cited having the problem of transferring his Arabic writing style of connecting words to his writing style in English. Others talked about the relationship of Arabic to English: Khalid found that learning English was easier than learning Arabic. Yet Salem felt that learning English negatively affected his Arabic.

Most, however, had acquired enough Arabic literacy to facilitate their learning of English by the time they began

their formal study of it in 7th grade. The prevailing rote methods of teaching English may have actually enhanced this effect as throughout intermediate and high school, they learned textbook English by the grammar translation method, with little or no opportunity to speak or use the language conversationally. Prior to studying English in intermediate school, most of the Saudis had been exposed to spoken English, often through a relative who had lived and studied in the U.S., but mainly through American or British television, especially cartoons and other children's programs. Khalid was bilingual, having been born in the U.S., although he had begun to lose his English before studying it formally in intermediate school in Saudi Arabia. The Saudis' intermediate and high school English teachers spoke mainly Arabic, and some of these teachers' English fluency was rather limited, despite their having studied English as a foreign language at a university at home or abroad for their teacher training.

Because of their traditional and rather limited instruction in English, even in the upper grades, making the transition to studying English as a major in college was difficult for most of the Saudis in this study, even though they had been motivated by a teacher or a positive experience in public school to continue their English

studies in college. In fact, Ali had to drop out of university for a few years until he developed more proficient English in a Saudi training institute, which enabled him in the end to earn an English degree with high honors when he returned to his university. In college in Saudi Arabia these students had more exposure to oral English because their instructors had more competence in the language than their intermediate or high school teachers, as some were native speakers and used mostly English in class. This required considerable adjustment on the part of the Saudis. Since some of their college English teachers were from England, Scotland, or Canada, they heard different accents, and ultimately, most of the Saudis in the study said they tried to eliminate their Arab accent.

Overall, the Saudis' early Arabic family and public school experiences contributed to their literacy in their native language, which in turn helped them develop their second language. However, their college English studies were often not enough because they felt ill prepared to teach English in Saudi schools later, or were unsatisfied with the level and fluency of their English by the time they graduated from a Saudi university. Therefore, several began to practice and perfect their oral English in college on their own, and a few studied in an England for a brief

time during college or between semesters, all with the intent of going on to graduate school to study English. Eventually all but Hassan attended graduate school in an English-speaking country, mainly the United States, where they took advanced degrees toward becoming EFL professionals.

In response to research question 1a (what positive experiences had been useful to them), the participants cited family and school experiences as sources of support. As to negative or challenging experiences (question 1b), they spoke of their transition to later English studies at the university, where more fluency, writing ability, and a wider range of skills in English were expected.

Finally, addressing their negative experiences (question 1b), the participants explained the numerous strategies they used to overcome the challenges and often extreme difficulties they had with learning English, whether it was to compensate for the limitations of English instruction in their Arabic schools or to deal with specific obstacles or difficulties they encountered with particular courses or teachers in higher education in Saudi Arabia and the U.S. For example, Ali spoke of leaving his university for some time to improve his command of English, and Fahad spoke of changing to a different institution to

help support his motivation to learn English. Several spoke of getting poor grades in English in their home country, one even failing English in ninth grade and getting a private tutor to learn English grammar. Fahad mentioned failing the TOEFL several times but pursuing it until he barely passed and got into graduate school.

They all talked about the rigid and rote methods of learning English in intermediate and high school in their country, even about experiencing corporal punishment, as well as being unprepared for English studies both in undergraduate and graduate school. The specific strategies they used to deal with and compensate for many of these negative or limited English literacy experiences are presented in more detail in the following section.

The Challenges of Learning English at Home and Abroad

This section discusses the second research question in this study: *What experiences, including what might be called 'literacy moments', did the participants describe as having had both inside and outside the classroom, in the course of their learning English? Again, how did they evaluate these experiences positively or negatively, and how did they react to any challenges in their learning?*

Even though learning English well was a challenge for most of the participants in this study, especially in their

youth, they took on this challenge for any number of reasons. They all knew the value of learning English for the world they lived in: English had become the global language; standard English was used in a number of professions and institutions in their country—in aviation, hospitals, academia, police, and government agencies. There was a prestige to knowing English. They spoke of 'literacy moments' such as admiring a cousin or an uncle who had returned from the United States speaking English well, and having received a good job with a reputable company. The Saudis felt that their families and other relatives would admire their English competence and consider them educated if they knew the language. Further, knowing English would open up job opportunities for them; many English teachers are still needed in Saudi Arabia.

A few of the Saudis were studying English simply because they liked the language itself, wanting "to learn English just for English." Khalid said he wished to devote all his time to learning English better because he had a passion for the language. They had all evidently come to respect and like the English language, regardless of their struggle to learn and speak it proficiently enough and the limitations of fully developing their English in the classroom. Several had spoken of coming to this awareness

of their commitment to learning English at some point in the development of their English literacy; for some it was a 'literacy moment' when they realized that they wanted to dedicate themselves more purposefully and fully to learning English in order to teach it in their country.

Most of the Saudis were also attracted to the English language, and especially to American culture, through television and other electronic media such as the Internet. They knew that to advance themselves as EFL learners they needed to reach a high level of English mastery, and learn the language well to attend graduate school in the United States. They exerted much effort to do so, working hard on passing the TOEFL, attending intensive English programs in the U.S., and going to great lengths on their own to improve their English and become more fluent during undergraduate and graduate school. What they did not learn in the classroom, they often taught themselves, or at least sharpened the linguistic skills they were learning in their university English courses.

In short, they worked extremely hard to compensate for their difficulties in classroom settings, especially in the U.S. Saleh distinctly recalled his decision to work hard outside the classroom in order to compensate for what he was not receiving in the classroom toward becoming

proficient in English. For example, he reported spending up to 8 hours with his electronic dictionary preparing for a single class. Such were the concerted efforts of these students to achieve the level of English literacy they desired.

For some, their initiative to learn English began in high school or earlier, and was supplemented by popular culture; for most, their self-instruction to supplement their formal instruction continued throughout their student careers at the university level, where they seldom got enough opportunity to speak the language. For the most part, using tape recorders, audio tapes, the Internet, etc., to refine and perfect their oral English on their own consumed much of their time beyond their coursework in English. By mid-life, at the time of their interviews for this study, the seven Saudis had studied English for almost two decades, beginning at home in Saudi Arabia (except for the student born in the States). But they gave the impression that it was mainly by their own persistence and the strategy of self-instruction that they had become fluent and competent in English, especially because they had encountered so many obstacles to learning the language in schools and universities.

From their first formal instruction in English class in intermediate school in Saudi Arabia to their advanced studies in English in a doctoral program in the United States, the Saudis had met, and often overcome, challenges along the way: not enough instruction in composition, not enough practice speaking English, not enough attention to their personal linguistic needs. But predominantly, they had to compensate for the deficits in their own educational system in their home country, where English was formally taught, but not spoken or used to any extent in school. But they also had to adjust to the educational system in the U.S. or other English-speaking countries where they continued their advanced English studies.

Despite their limitations in English, a few teachers in intermediate or secondary school influenced, if not inspired, the Saudis to learn the language and to major in it in college. Some gave these examples as their literacy moments. Khalid had so admired his high school English teacher, he was afraid to admit to him that he wanted to study English; but when he did, the teacher had already foreseen his potential to do so. Fahad was so impressed by his enthusiastic and interactive Sudanese English professor at his university, who had earned a PhD in the U.S. that he wanted to do the same. Salem was motivated to study English

by an intermediate teacher, and Waleed was inspired by a teacher who taught much literature and took the students to the school library.

Among the linguistic challenges for the Saudis was the striking difference between Arabic and English, especially as English is not pronounced the way it is written, unlike Arabic, and the connections between letters varies between the two languages, with English having clear separations between words, while Arabic is distinguished between different letter types within a word as to whether a given letter will be connected to the one that follows it. A particularly difficult hurdle for the participants, however, was the challenge to speak English when they had limited opportunities to do so in Saudi schools. Although they heard English being spoken in their university classes in Saudi Arabia, Arabic was still the language of daily life, so there was not enough opportunity to practice their oral English. This is why some listened to audio recordings or taped their own speech to practice their spoken English, trying to rid themselves of their Arabic accent.

Of special challenge was making the transition from studying or working in Saudi Arabia to an English-speaking environment in graduate school, mainly in the United States. Although by then they each had a bachelor's degree

in English, most of their studies had dealt with the structure of the language and translation, with limited oral usage or application. In American graduate schools, they were exceptionally challenged by the amount and difficulty of the reading in English, and the academic style of writing research, for which they had little experience or preparation at home, as well as the informal pedagogy in the U.S.

They had done little or no original writing in Saudi schools at all levels. Saleh had taught himself to write while on an exchange program at a university in Cleveland by using instructions in a TOEFL text and had used professional published articles to model his own research papers. Ali had read Arabic phonology texts to be able to understand his phonology texts in English in graduate school.

Being "suddenly in a new English environment", as Saleh said, was also challenging because of more than the demands of writing and reading in graduate school. The classroom environment was especially different; the teacher was not the authority or the supplier of knowledge as in Saudi Arabia; students were expected to participate in discussion and give their opinions, something new for the Saudis. Not being fluent enough in English would make this

more difficult, if not frustrating, for some of them. One example given by Waleed was that his pronunciation was strongly criticized by a British professor at a Saudi university, whereupon Waleed consulted another professor who assured him there were variations in the pronunciation of English, and advised him how to memorize to pass the exam. Such criticism, though apparently demeaning, was not entirely discouraging, as Waleed used his own initiative to pursue the course, even after the professor suggested he did not belong in his class.

Among the many means the Saudis used in their determination to improve their competence and fluency in English on their own was technology, from recording devices to practice their speech, to the Internet to "converse" with others in English-speaking countries, to television and other popular media that enhanced their oral English. This practice originated with their television watching as children, but continued with self-taught typing and composition on the computer, the use of CDs, DVDs, and audio tapes of spoken English. Khalid had formed friendships all over the globe through the Internet, and Hassan believed strongly in using computer technology to help students learn English.

Yet, despite their exposure to the media, they found that the "standard English" they heard in American universities was quite different than what they had heard and practiced to a limited extent in Saudi universities. Especially, the American dialect or informal speech was so "foreign", although they knew the benefits of being immersed in English in the U.S. and forced to function in their second language. At the same time, they had to meet the challenge of not being understood in the U.S. because of their Arabic accents. Except for Saleh, who spoke English without a noticeable accent, the others struggled to eliminate their accents. So there were positive and negative advantages to pursuing their advanced degrees in an English-speaking country. Most beneficial of all for improving their English was to be with primarily native-speaking instructors and classmates.

The Effects of the Saudis' Literacy Experiences

This section addresses research question three: *How did they feel that their experiences related to research questions 1 and 2 had affected them, either as EFL learners or in their professional lives?*

Throughout their education, the Saudi students in this study had both positive and negative experiences during the development of their English literacy, both in their homes

and in their classrooms, and in their home country and abroad. One teacher or experience may have precipitated their decision to become an English major; or deciding to pursue English as a career may have been a gradual realization that this was their chosen life course. Despite many negative experiences that could have discouraged these students from pursuing degrees and careers in EFL, these experiences seemed to urge the Saudis to become proficient in English, and especially to help their own students do the same, and more easily than it had been for themselves. So numerous negative experiences motivated the Saudis, rather than caused them to give up when their English studies were very difficult.

For some of the Saudis, learning English came fairly easily, whereas others had to fail in it before they could succeed. For some, the decision to become an English major and pursue a career in English was natural and easy; for yet others, English became their chosen field after struggling to learn the language in public school or having tried something else. Saleh became engaged in "intensive self-study" at Ohio State, but he claimed he had "belonged to English" since intermediate school. Waleed who had aspired to become a pilot and studied English to qualify, failed the physical requirements for pilot training, and so

chose to study English for his career. For some, the limitations in the Saudi educational system with its prescribed methods of teaching English as a foreign language could have discouraged or prevented them from having an interest in learning and studying English as a major, leading to a career in the field. They often experienced poor English teaching methods and poorly qualified teachers in Saudi public schools. These challenges to developing competence in the language and fluency could have deterred any one of them from pursuing English as a major or profession.

Although the Saudis were motivated by both positive and negative events to pursue the study of English, more often than not, they turned negative incidents or conditions toward positive directions, as they seemed to have a very strong determination to achieve their literacy goals, especially in graduate school. Waleed found college to be difficult, even though he had succeeded in English in public school. After he was told to leave the English Department at his university, he went to England to learn better English, returned and graduated from his university with a degree in English. Another professor encouraged him to get his master's and doctoral degrees, which he subsequently did.

Often the very teachers or college professors whom the Saudis expected encouragement from, gave them the opposite, both in Saudi Arabia and in the United States. Khalid spoke of often receiving discouragement from college professors, some of whom questioned why the Saudis were in the English Department and not in a sports college. Others spoke of having met the same attitude even in graduate school, mainly in the U.S. Nonetheless, these Saudi graduate students took full responsibility for their learning, augmenting their coursework when their teachers would not or could not give them the kind of help they needed to perfect their English and develop their writing and speaking skills. These students benefited from both positive and negative literacy experiences that contributed to their motivation to achieve their educational goals.

Additional Themes

One issue regarding the effect of English on Saudi culture and society arose in the focus group interview, although it was not specifically generated by the research questions in this study. Concerns related to this issue are addressed in this section.

Cultural Concerns About English

One of the issues that some of the Saudis raised in this study involved the influence that English and its

growing predominance in the world and their country might have on their society and culture. Although they were well acquainted with the many advantages of learning and being fluent in English for themselves and their country, some expressed concern about the possible effects that widespread use of English could have on their culture, since culture is so bound up with language. Some of them viewed the access to English-speaking cultures through technology and the media as being of some threat to the Saudi Arabian cultural identity. Others disagreed that knowing English and experiencing other cultures would change the Saudis' identity or negatively influence their culture.

Khalid, who had immersed himself in English and other cultures, felt strongly that the Saudis could retain their own language and culture despite exposure to others. Some spoke, however, of the resistance to learning English, especially among their parents and an older generation that wants to preserve classical Arabic because it is the language of the *Quran* and other sacred texts. This was the conservative view, which raised another question about English: whether or not this conservative Islamic religious presence in Saudi society was helping or hindering students' learning of English in Saudi schools. Two trends

seemed to be exerting pressure culturally: the resistance in Saudi Arabia to learning English because of its effects on religious and cultural tradition; and the desire to promote English because it would give more people access to Islam globally. The stronger the religious faith in some of the Saudi families and communities, the stronger the resistance to English, it seemed.

The Saudis recognized the fact that the English proficiency of many advanced English professionals could serve Islam, although they did not necessarily include themselves in this category.

Helping English Language Learners

The participants in this study were not directly asked what advice they would give those who are trying to develop their English literacy as stated in the last research question (*What advice did the participants feel they could offer those who are trying to develop their English literacy?*); thus, it is possible only to speculate indirectly on what they felt about this issue. Fortunately, they expressed considerable interest in how they as teachers, and the Saudi educational system in general, could better facilitate the learning of English at all levels. So they did offer indirect answers to this question. Their responses in the individual interviews, in

which they gave many specific suggestions for reform of EFL teaching in Saudi Arabia, are briefly summarized here.

Most of all, the Saudis wanted to make the learning of English easier for students in their country, both by improving their own teaching techniques in their classrooms and by advocating reform of the standardized government EFL curriculum and the educational system as a whole. Some of them were attracted to the use of a student-centered pedagogy similar to what they experienced in Western societies; this would mean changing the traditional role of the teacher as the authority and the learner as a passive receiver of knowledge, as still currently practiced in Saudi Arabia. They talked about applying computer technology and media resources to the teaching of English, as for some, these tools had been significant in their own learning of the language. Especially strong was their belief that students need many more opportunities and activities to speak and practice English, and to learn to write original work, rather than copying and imitating the writing of others. Waleed urged his country to develop its own educational system based on its own needs rather than imitating other countries' systems. Fahad felt that English needs to be taught for the purpose of its practical application in business and communications.

Those Saudis who had already taught English in high schools or colleges in their country spoke about how they had tried to be more helpful and humane to their students, having suffered so much discouragement and sometimes ill treatment from teachers even in their own country. However, in order to introduce more effective methodologies for teaching EFL in Saudi Arabia, they believe it is important to encourage broad-based changes in the national curriculum, which is still taught mainly through such traditional methods such as rote memorization to pass exams. These EFL professionals looked forward to being part of this curriculum development and educational reform on their return to their home country after earning their advanced English degrees in the U.S.

Implications of the Study

The findings from this study have implications in many areas, including political, cultural and social, educational, economic, and technological.

Political Issues

The participants in this study recognize that English is an essential foreign language in education in Saudi Arabia because it has become the global language, and for the country to participate in the world's political and economic affairs, it is necessary for its citizens to be

able to communicate in what has become the dominant language. At the same time, they recognize that the Saudi government and its people need to retain their national identity while integrating English into the curriculum, many areas of society, and commerce and industry.

Social and Cultural Issues

As for cultural and social implications, the Saudis in this study spoke a great deal about the tension between maintaining Saudi Arabia's ancient and traditional culture through the preservation of its language and traditions, particularly the classical Arabic of the *Holy Quran* and religious practices. Since the participants in this study have adapted to living in a Western-style society, it is important to note the serious and central importance most of them attach to their religious life, and to be aware of the extent to which they were exposed to their first language literacy through religious practices and the study of the *Quran*. It is important that educators keep this in mind while promoting the use and proficiency of standard English for many practical purposes, and at the same time acknowledge the rapid social and cultural changes that have occurred in Saudi Arabia.

English is not a culturally neutral language, as scholars such as Anna Wierzbicka (2006) have emphasized in

studies spanning two decades now. As Waleed put it, "the language carries the culture", that is, English carries with it the cultures and traditions of the countries where it developed and where it is used as the main means of communication; these cultural values and traditions are often quite different from Saudi cultural values and customs. The Saudis reported that a number of their Saudi professors were concerned about the influence of American culture on young people in the universities, many of whom were changing their appearance and behaviors as a result of being exposed to the popular culture of English-speaking countries.

Within the families and communities that the Saudis had come from, there had been some resistance to learning English or allowing its incursion, as it was feared that the presence of English could diminish the "eloquent" classical Arabic language, which is contained in the *Quran*, and the standard Arabic that is used throughout many areas of society. Unsure of how this language would change peoples' cultural identity, some of the Saudis' parents had resisted learning and using English themselves, and did not always accept their sons' decision to study the language and go on to teach it. Even some of the Saudis themselves were cautious on this point; two of them expressed some

concern about losing their Arabic identity by becoming too immersed in English and English-speaking countries' cultures. Especially of concern here was the degree to which they and their families were exposed to popular culture, the Internet, and other media that transmitted Western culture to Saudi Arabia. Some were even reluctant to get rid of their Arab accent in their English, as it helped them preserve their native identity.

Educational Issues

The findings from this study have significant implications for the teaching of English as a foreign language in schools in Saudi Arabia. There was consensus among the seven Saudi participants in the study that the country's educational system needs to adapt better and newer methodologies for the teaching of English as a foreign language. They felt it important to enable students to more easily learn English and use the language in a functional setting, rather than learn textbook English through the traditional grammar translation method, mainly for the national college-entrance exam or as required by a certain profession.

Most of the participants in this study painted a rather negative picture of their Saudi Arabian education, describing it as being something of a tedious process of

memorization, drills, and copying, both in learning Arabic and English. The Saudis offered many suggestions for their education system, from curriculum planning and development to the use of computer technology for English instruction and professional development, and networking with English speakers internationally through technology to learn and improve their conversational English.

The participants spoke with a sense of immediacy about changing EFL instruction, based on their negative experiences in public school and colleges and universities. Several had already implemented certain innovative pedagogies into their own teaching, although they were still limited by the standardized curriculum prescribed by the Ministry of Education for English teaching. Their contribution to the development of effective methods and procedures for EFL is a high priority among these Saudis, as all are committed and expected by their institutions and government, to return to their country to apply what they have learned in their advanced studies in English at universities.

Most of the Saudi professionals were as dedicated to helping bring about this kind of reform in education as they were to learning and developing their own English literacy. Above all, they wanted to make learning English

easier and more enjoyable for young Saudi students so that they would not have some of the extreme difficulties and challenges that they had had as students throughout their language education, such as being demeaned by professors, or questioned for their presence in certain university classes. They spoke of being unprepared by traditional forms of education when they were required to read and write extensively, particularly in graduate school in the U.S. The participants spoke about the weaknesses in the Saudi English curriculum in regard to methods for teaching reading, speaking, listening, and writing. One of the recent changes the Saudis affirmed was the initiation of English instruction in Saudi elementary school, rather than beginning in intermediate school, as was the policy when they were young boys.

Economic Issues

Economically, the findings of this study point to the fact that a functional knowledge of English opens the doors to professions and positions in society and for the promotion of Saudi businesses and industries among other countries. Most of the Saudis' parents viewed their sons higher education, even in English, as a valuable means of improving themselves financially. In fact, English competence has been regarded as one of the most decisive

factors for promotions and the attainment of important positions in the business field in their country.

Just as technology has been used for many purposes in Saudi society, it may have advantages for students in learning English, and for the professional development of EFL teachers. The participants had taken advantage of certain kinds of technology to learn English, from childhood through graduate school; these sources ranged from television to networking internationally with English speakers through Internet technology. Some believed that providing access to English-speaking news and cultural programming could give Saudi students more opportunity to learn to speak and understand English, and ultimately could help them become fluent in the language.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings from this study suggest that there is considerable potential for further research on the literacy experiences of Saudi Arabians and other second language students engaged in advanced studies.

Given the small number of the sample in this study (seven Saudi professionals) and their particular characteristics—although this practice was consistent with the qualitative approach—I propose a future study with a larger sample.

Second, although the Saudis in this research were highly motivated to learn the English language and acquire a high degree of proficiency, they experienced many difficulties both in their home country and abroad. The question arises as to what would have happened if these students had quit their studies of English because of such difficulties and chosen not to be proficient in spoken and written English? A study is needed to document the wider economic, social, and psychological consequences for Saudi English learners who have not been able to achieve a high proficiency in the English language or to complete university degrees involving the study or use of English.

A third area of study might be to compare the English learning experiences of Saudis and students from other Middle Eastern countries. Fourth, this study has captured the Saudis' voices regarding their English learning experiences. This study was intended to focus solely on the Saudis' experiences from the learners' perceptions. However, follow-up studies might include family members' and the teachers' (i.e., professors') voices that could supplement the students' voices and provide a broader look at the overall picture of the Saudis' English literacy experiences.

Lastly, further studies could also investigate the importance of the English language and literacy to the lives of Saudis. What impact does the English language and literacy have on the social, economic, and personal aspects of their lives? On a broader level, what social or cultural realities have come about in the society that represent concerns over the influx of Anglo or Western cultural values? How could these be examined, and their impact on Saudi culture evaluated?

Of course, the set of basic questions that inspired this study still remain, namely, the desire to learn more about how individuals develop literacy in a second language, given their social and cultural context with its assumptions and practices around their first language. Nonetheless, I hope that this study has made a contribution towards deepening our understanding of how a number of Saudis have experienced English language and literacy. I hope that the topics suggested for future research might stimulate others to contribute to developing this meaningful area of research.

Limitations of the Study

The scope and content of this study of the literacy experiences of seven Saudi Arabian English language

professionals must be read in the context of the study's specific, limited context.

First, this study was limited to one geographical location at a state university in Western Pennsylvania, and did not take into account the experiences of Saudi graduate students in other universities throughout the United States or other English-speaking countries. Second, because the study was limited to seven Saudi participants, the findings cannot be generalized to other Saudi Arabian graduate students, nor to the whole population of Saudi graduate students either in the U.S. or other countries.

Third, as the researcher, I conducted the interviews in English. Although the participants chose to be interviewed in English, rather than in their native Arabic, the fact that their responses to the interview questions were in English may have affected their responses to some extent. In some instances, the Saudis had to revert to Arabic when they were unable to translate their responses adequately into English.

Among other limitations was gender; since all the participants in the present study were male, the results of this study cannot shed light on the important area of Saudi women's developing English literacy, in the context of family and society.

As a last general note, I emphasize that, because this was a qualitative study, the findings are not intended for generalization to a larger population. The results reported were quite specific to the unique literacy experiences of the seven Saudi participants in one American university.

Final Reflections

I was honored to join these Saudi Arabian scholars in my search for answers to questions important to our society and culture, and to share our literacy journeys. I hope that, within this study, their voices have been heard. Because I was a fellow Saudi Arabian and myself a graduate student, I was a member of the "in-group" in this study and enjoyed good relationships with the participants. Although I expected to be welcomed by the participants and viewed as an insider, I also expected their stories to be quite different from my own. I thought I might struggle looking for themes within their stories. I expected some would have abandoned their real stories while others would hold to them without wavering. Such expectations were not fulfilled, for the most part. The participants held to the kinds of family values and traditional concepts that have guided my own literacy development.

Each participant was truly unique. Each had a story to tell. My goal was to give each man a voice. Through

dedicating myself to this goal, I joined the participants as I realized our stories were similar. Through sharing their stories and comparing their journeys, many of these men have become friends with me and with each other. Most of the participants have asked to read the results of this study, and while interviewing, several asked to continue our talks. Therefore, my interest and work in this area has not ended with the completion of this study. It has merely begun.

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APPENDIX A

Email Recruitment Letter to Saudi Graduate Students

To: Saudi Student Association
Subject: Invitation to participate in a research study

Greetings Saudi Graduate Student,
My name is Ghassan Osailan. I am a doctoral candidate in the Composition and TESOL Program at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Currently, I am recruiting participants for my dissertation research project. I am looking for Saudi EFL graduate students, preferably enrolled in a PhD program in English and/or TESOL at one the university.

Let me give you a brief background of my study. The purpose of my dissertation study, entitled *The English Literacy Experiences of Advanced Saudi EFL Professionals in the United States*, is to evaluate the language and cultural learning and English literacy experiences of advanced Saudi EFL professionals in the United States to learn what factors or influences they feel have shaped their English literacy development. The study examines the narratives Saudi EFL professionals tell about how they have become what they are, what challenges they have faced as EFL learners or educators, how they have grown, and how they have established and pursued their careers.

If you are willing and interested to participate in this study, please email me with your contact information and I will explain the study in more detail via your own email. Then we can meet according to your preference of time and place to consider participating.

Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to decide whether or not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time. However, your participation is crucial to the success of the study and is greatly appreciated.

Thank you so much,
Ghassan Osailan
Doctoral Candidate
Graduate Studies in Composition & TESOL
Indiana University of Pennsylvania
G.M.Osailan@iup.edu
Mobile: 724 467 9111

APPENDIX B

Guide to Writing a Literacy Autobiography

(Telling the story of how you became who you are today.)

Literacy is defined broadly as the ability to understand and make meaning through language. In this context, language can be taken to mean any symbol system used for communication within groups. It is not unusual to feel you have no literacy stories worth telling, when in fact, you are thoroughly literate in Arabic and English. On the other hand, you may have very interesting stories to tell about your struggles with literacy.

I would like you to write a literacy autobiography reflecting on your experiences as a person. How did you learn to write? How did you learn to read? How do you feel about school and learning? How did this evolve? What family member(s), teacher(s) and/or events helped shape you into the person you are today?

Ideally, I would like you to write about 3-4 pages but you are free to write more, or less. Although you may choose to focus on home and school literacy (e.g., learning to read and write), you are encouraged to think of literacy broadly and to imagine yourself as capable of multiple literacies.

Based upon the elements of your life literacy experiences that you feel define you, I would like you to write a description of yourself. Think about the literacy experiences that you feel have made you the person you are today. While writing your literacy autobiography, I would like you to reflect on what contributed to your own language development: family members, home, school or teachers, family history, availability of reading materials, access to technology, resources in your public or private schools, writing opportunities, and whatever you believe had a significant impact on your language development. Moreover, I would like you to reflect on the impact of your cultural, economic, political, and social environment on your English literacy development.

The following are only some questions that may help you while writing your literacy autobiography.

1. What are your earliest memories of reading/writing in Arabic both before you started school and after you were in school?

2. What specific books, if any, do you recall that you read in your home and school?
3. What specific Arabic words do you remember learning?
4. What pleasures or problems do you associate with early memories of reading/writing in Arabic?
5. How did your reading/writing habits change, if any, when you went to school and over the years?
6. Are there any social/cultural/religious activities associated with reading/writing that you recall?
7. What kind of reading/writing materials did you have available to you in your home and your schools?
8. Is there a specific family member(s) or teacher(s) who stands out in your memory as someone who had an impact on you? Why?
9. How do you use writing today? What reading do you do, and in what language?

Please apply all the above with English as well.

These questions were adopted from Deborah Brown's (1999) "Promoting Reflective Thinking: Preservice Teachers' Literacy Autobiographies as a Common Text" in *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 42(5), 402-410.

APPENDIX C

Interview Protocol

The set of questions presented here is inclusive of all topics that may come up in the interviews. For any given interviewee, I will choose questions that seem most appropriate. When a participant has given a brief answer on any given topic, I will use follow-up questions that address that topic in more depth; otherwise, I may move on to other issues in the interview.

The two interviews will be about your life literacy experiences with Arabic and mainly with the English language. People make sense of their own linguistic experiences in a variety of ways. The goal of these interviews is to better understand how you live through your Arabic/ English language experiences. Therefore, these interviews allow you to describe who you were as a language learner and who you are as English language professional.

Interview One

Part One: Childhood Scenes and Family Story

Childhood Scenes

How would you describe yourself as a child? Tell me a bit about your childhood: your family, other important people you knew, etc.

As a child, were you encouraged to try new things, or did you feel held back? Can you elaborate on your experiences here?

What was your happiest memory from childhood?

What were some of your struggles as a child?

What kinds of activities or play did you enjoy as a child?

What did you enjoy doing? What activities did you engage in? Did you attend religious services as a child? What was that like for you? Was religion important to you as a child?

As a child, what pleasures or problems do you associate with early memories of reading/writing? Were there any

social/cultural/religious activities associated with reading/writing that you recall?

What words do you remember learning? What kind of reading/writing materials did you have available to you?

What (religious) books do you recall reading?

What would you say was the most significant event in your life up to age 12? How do you think this event affected you? Do you think it has any relationship to your life today, or to your view of yourself?

What childhood or teenage friendships were most important to you? What pressures did you feel as a teenager, and where did they come from?

Family Story

How would you describe your parents? What characteristics do you remember most about your family? What feelings come up when you recall your parents?

What do you like most about your parents? What do you like least?

In what ways did they spend time with you? Did you have family outings or vacations, and what were these like?

What values do you think you have inherited from your family? Describe a specific incident in your family that communicates something about your family and family values. What significant impact has it had on you?

What other people in your life do you think you have learned most from, or what people have most influenced you or your values?

What is the background of your parents?

What family or cultural celebrations, traditions, or rituals were important in your life?

Was your family different from other families in your neighborhood?

What beliefs or ideals do you think your parents tried to teach you?

Was religion important in your family? How would you describe the religious atmosphere in your home? How much of a factor in your life do you feel your background has been, and in what ways?

Do your parents (or one of them) speak English? If any, what level? Did they encourage you to learn English? How? What impact has this had on your English learning experiences? Do any of your elder brothers, sisters or other family members speak English? What level? Did they encourage you to learn English? How?

What impact has this had on your English learning experiences?

Have you ever traveled to or lived in a country where its people speak English as their native language (e.g., the USA or UK)? How long? What impact this has had on your English learning experiences?

Were you encouraged to read and write in English at home? Have you ever been praised by your family for being able to read and write in English?

Part Two: English Language Learning and Professional Experiences

What do you remember most about your elementary, intermediate, and secondary school?

What are your best and/or worst memories of school?

What organizations or activities were you involved with in school?

Did you have a favorite teacher in elementary, intermediate, and secondary school?

How did they influence you?

What books do you remember reading in elementary, intermediate, and secondary school?

How did your tastes in reading change over these years? Can you say more about what you enjoyed reading, and why?

What accomplishments are you most proud of in elementary, intermediate, and secondary school?

What do you remember most about college? Can you describe your academic English learning experience in college?

What were your classes, teachers, and learning experiences like? What courses have you taken?

What were the activities in these courses? How did you feel about them?

Was learning or using English easy or hard for you at this later stage?

What aspects of learning English did you enjoy? Why?

What aspects of learning English did you dislike? Why?

How did your reading/writing habits change over the years?

What experiences do you feel helped you learn English or shaped your attitudes toward using the language?

Tell me a story about a teacher who had a significant effect on your English learning experience in college.

Positive Experience(s) in English Language Learning

Positive experience would be a moment or episode in which you experienced extremely positive emotions like joy, excitement, great happiness, uplifting about English language learning.

Tell me exactly what happened

When and where it happened

Who was involved?

What you did.

What you were thinking and feeling in the event.

What impact has this experience had on you as an EFL learner?

What impact has this experience had on your becoming an EFL professional?

Negative Experience(s) in English Language Learning

Thinking back over your life, try to remember a specific experience in which you felt extreme negative emotions about English. You should consider this experience to represent one of the negative experiences in your English language learning.

What happened?

When and where did it happen?

Who was involved?

What did you do?

What were you thinking and feeling in the event?

What impact has this experience had on you as an EFL learner?

What impact has this experience had on your becoming an EFL professional?

Interview Two

Part One: Turning Point for Becoming an EFL Professional

In looking back on one's life, it is often possible to identify certain key 'turning points' episodes through which a person undergoes substantial change. I am interested in a turning point in the understanding of your English language learning. Please identify a particular episode in your life that you now see as a turning point for becoming an EFL professional.

What happened?

When did you first develop an interest in becoming an English professional?

Was there any particular event or person that most contributed to your decision?

What transitions or turning points did you experience as a child, a teenager and an adult?

How have these experiences shaped your career as an EFL professional/teacher?

Part Two: Experiences of Studying and Living in the U.S.

I would like you to recall several major events that stand out in your life's literacy experiences as an international student, a non-native English speaker or a foreigner in the United States.

Motivation for Coming to the U.S.

I would like you to describe your initial motivation and story in coming to the U.S.

Why did you decide to come to the U.S.?

Was there any particular event or person that most contributed to your decision in coming to the U.S.?

Positive Experience(s) of Studying and Living in the U.S.

I would like you to describe a positive experience in your studying and/or living in the U.S.

Tell me exactly what happened.

When and where it happened.

Who was involved?

What you did. What you were thinking and feeling in the event?

What impact this experience has had on you.

What this experience says about who you are/were as a Saudi EFL professional in the context of the U.S.

Negative Experience(s) of Studying and Living in the U.S.

I would like you to describe a negative experience in your studying and/or living in the U.S. Looking back over your

literacy experiences and interactions with your professors, classmates, and others.

Describe one of the greatest life challenge(s) that you have faced in the U.S.

Part Three: Self-Description and Future Career

Self-Description

If you were to tell someone who you really are, how would you describe yourself?

What did you learn about yourself during these years?

Is the way you see yourself now different from the way you saw yourself in the past?

What led to the changes?

How important do you feel your English education has been to your success both in work and/or in your social life?

Future Career

I would like you to consider the future.

Describe what you would like to happen in the future concerning your career, including what goals and dreams you might accomplish or realize in the future.

How do you see yourself changing or improving the language learning experiences of your students in the future?

What advice would you give to new Saudi EFL learners?

Is there anything you would like to share with me that we have not discussed?

This interview protocol was adopted from McAdams's (1993) *Eight Key Events for Interviewing a Person's Life* and from R. Atkinson's (1998) *The Life Story Interview*. Qualitative Research Methods Series 44. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

APPENDIX D

Human Subjects Informed Consent Form

Dear Saudi Graduate Student:

I would like to invite you to participate in my dissertation study through the Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP). The following is provided, so you may make an informed decision about your participation. The purpose of my dissertation study, entitled *The English Literacy Experiences of Advanced Saudi EFL Professionals in the United States*, is to evaluate the language and cultural learning and English literacy experiences of advanced Saudi EFL professionals in the United States to learn what factors or influences they feel have shaped their English literacy development.

If you agree to participate in my study, you will be asked to write a literacy autobiography (about 3-4 pages) describing your previous and current literacy experiences. A one-page guideline about writing a literacy autobiography will be provided. Then you will be interviewed twice (1 to 2-hour individual interview each time). Afterwards, you will be participating in a 1 to 2-hour focus group interview. You may find the interviews enjoyable and learn more about yourself and your literacy experiences as well as others' experiences.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. You are free to decide whether or not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time. If, at any point in the process, you wish to discontinue your participation in the study, you may do so by contacting me or my dissertation director. Upon your request to withdraw, all information you provided, will be destroyed. If you choose to participate, all the information will be held in strict confidence. There is no known risk involved in participating in this study.

There will be no monetary compensation for your participation in the study. However, your participation is crucial to the success of the study. The study findings may guide future EFL educators and professionals in providing environments that are useful in developing English literacy for EFL learners. Future Saudi EFL educators may benefit from the learning experiences provided by these

professionals to implement best practices for English literacy. Upon request, you will be provided with the study's findings. If you have any further questions, please do not hesitate to ask.

Thank you so much for your participation.

Researcher:
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This project has been approved by the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (Phone: 724-357-2223).

Voluntary Consent Form:

I have fully read and understand the information in this consent form. I agree to voluntarily participate in this study. I understand that my responses are completely confidential and that I have the right to withdraw at any time. I have received an unsigned copy of this Informed Consent Form for my personal records.

Name (PLEASE PRINT):

Signature:

Date: _____

Phone number where you can be reached:

Email: _____

I certify that I have explained to the above individual the purpose and nature of the study, have answered any questions raised, and have witnessed the above signature.

Researcher's Signature:

Date: _____