Exploring the Suitability of the Textbooks of the Intensive English Program to Students' Language Proficiency at King Khalid University

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Abstract

This study aims to identify the correspondence between the textbooks of the Intensive English Program and students' language proficiency at King Khalid University in Saudi Arabia. In addition, it explores the differences in the level of language proficiency of the students based on the variables of gender and course specialization. A test was constructed to measure the level of language proficiency, and valid responses from 408 male and female students were collected. The results demonstrated the correspondence between the textbooks of the Intensive English Program and students' language proficiency. Moreover, the findings revealed that there were no statistically significant differences attributed to the variables of gender and course specialization. Based on the results, the following recommendations to reinforce the program were provided: conducting placement tests for students to accommodate them in the appropriate levels of language proficiency and prescribing textbooks that are suitable for all language levels from beginners to advanced.

Keywords: English language textbooks, Intensive English Language Program, King Khalid University

I. Introduction:

English is the medium of instruction in most scientific, medical, and engineering programs. Hence, Saudi universities have paid a great deal of attention to English language teaching. This focus on teaching English includes providing first year students with adequate English language skills that can help them pursue their university education in a suitable manner. One of the reasons for this attention is addressing the gap between the school outcomes and the requirements of university education. Though the students have studied English for several years during their various levels of school education, their English language proficiency remains weak and lower than the expected level (Al-sonei, 2005; Qhedh, 2004). In this regard, and despite the views on its definition and types, language proficiency generally refers to the level of language capability of the learner and the degree of mastering the different language skills (Bedore *et al.*, 2012). It can be measured through language proficiency tests, such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and International English Language Testing System (IELTS). In the current study, the proficiency will be measured through a test designed for this purpose.

King Khalid University, similar to the other Saudi universities, offers an intensive English course for freshmen. This program offered for students in their first year aims to enhance their proficiency in the English language. It consists of three courses, namely ENG 011 and ENG 012, offered to the students of the colleges of science, computers, engineering, business administration, and humanities, and ENG 019, which is offered to the students of medical colleges. The English Language Center at the College of Language and Translation is responsible for teaching these courses. Course ENG 011 is taught at the first level to the students in the colleges of science, engineering, computers, business administration, and humanities. This course aims to provide students with language and academic skills that would enable them to pursue their university education where English is the medium of instruction. According to the course description, this course targets students at language levels A1 and A2 according to the classification of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The credit hours for this course are 6 credits, and 85% and 15% of the course is taught on campus and through e-learning, respectively. Students are evaluated through two semester exams and a final exam in addition to a few other activities and assessments.

ENG 012 course is meant to be taught at the second level for the students of the colleges of science, engineering, computers, business administration, and humanities. It aims to provide students with the four language skills, namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing, to help them practice the language in day-to-day life situations. Furthermore, this course targets

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students at language levels A2 and B1 according to the CEFR. The credit hours are 6 hours, and on campus classes constitute 85% of the course while the rest is instructed online. Students are evaluated through two semester exams and a final exam in addition to a few added activities and assessments.

ENG 019 Course is taught to the students of the health science colleges (medicine, pharmacy, dentistry, and applied medical sciences). It aims to provide students with the four language skills as well as the terminology and communication skills related to the medical field. The course description specifies that this course targets students at language levels A2 and B1 according to the CEFR classification. The course consists of 6 credit hours, and 85% of the course work is completed on campus while 15% is offered online. Students are evaluated through two semester exams and a final exam in addition to a few supplementary activities and assessments.

Table I summarizes the courses of the Intensive English Language Program.

Table I: Intensive English Program Courses

Course Name	Target college students	Student level	Prescribed Textbook(s)	Students Expected Language Proficiency Level	Target Language Skill	Specified Units
ENG 011	Science, Engineering, Computer, Business Administration, & Humanities.	Level 1	Unlock Level 1, Listening & speaking	A1 و A2	Listening and Speaking	All
			Unlock Level 2, listening & speaking		Listening and Speaking	1, 2, 3 & 4
			Unlock Level 1- Reading, Writing		Reading and Writing	All
			Unlock Level 2 Reading, Writing		Reading and Writing	1, 2, 3 & 4
ENG 012	Science, Engineering, Computer, Business Administration, & Humanities.	Level 2	Unlock Level 2 Listening, Speaking	B1 & A2	Listening and Speaking	1,2,3 & 4
			Unlock Level 3 Listening, Speaking		Listening and Speaking	All
			Unlock Level 2 Reading, Writing		Reading and Writing	1,2,3 & 4
			Unlock Level 3 Reading, Writing		Reading and Writing	All
ENG 019	Medicine, Pharmacy, Dentistry, and Applied Medical Sciences	Level 1	Unlock Level 2 Listening, Speaking	B1 and A2	Listening and Speaking	All
			Unlock Level 3 Listening, Speaking		Listening and Speaking	Listening and Speaking
			Unlock Level 2 Reading, Writing		Reading and Writing	All
			Unlock Level 3 Reading, Writing		Reading and Writing	All
			English in Medicine		Medical Terminology	All

It is evident from the course description of the Intensive English Language Program that the suitable level of English for each course has been determined according to the CEFR classification. The levels of language proficiency are divided according to this framework into the following

six levels: A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2, where A1 represents the lowest and C2 represents the highest level in language proficiency. The levels of the learners targeted by the Intensive English Language Program (IELP) courses range from A1 to B1. These six levels can be classified into three main levels as follows:

1. Basic level: Two sub-levels constitute this level, namely A1 and A2. In the first level (A1), the learners can use simple sentences and familiar phrases in day-to-day life situations. In the next level (A2), the learners can communicate in better ways in everyday situations.
2. Independent level: Levels B1 and B2 represent this category. In the third level (B1), the learners can produce more complex sentences, either written or spoken, than the previous level. In the fourth level (B2), the learners can produce more in-depth texts and also comprehend both abstract and concrete spoken or written texts. In addition, they possess a good command over speaking and communication skills.
3. Proficient level: This category comprises two sub-levels called C1 and C2. In the fifth level (C1), the learners are able to understand lengthy and complex texts without any difficulty. Additionally, they demonstrate the ability to produce written or spoken texts by relying on a bundle of language structures and vocabulary. The last level (C2) represents the highest level of language proficiency where the learners can voice their opinions and argue their points in a clear and effective manner.

II. Literature Review:

Abdala (2022) evaluated the Unlock textbooks in terms of the communicative proficiency skills and content suitability; however, it is not clear whether he investigated all the Unlock textbooks or merely a sample. The findings of his study revealed that the textbooks are well-designed and provide effective communicative and academic skills although using videos for the warm up stage as an introduction to the lessons is time consuming. The current study will evaluate these textbooks from a different angle, namely their suitability to the language proficiency level of the learners.

The textbooks market offers an extensive number of books, which makes the task of selecting the right textbook difficult for the learners, teachers, and/or educational institutions. Although the majority of these textbooks are commercial, their publishers or authors may label unreal features to their books in terms of the level of language proficiency or even the theory of learning or teaching methodologies that are appropriate for them.

Therefore, some specialists and researchers have attempted to make the process of selecting the appropriate books systematic by evaluating these books first and subsequently selecting the appropriate one out of the available choices. There are several methods of evaluating textbooks, such as the impressionistic, systematic, and checklist evaluation.

The problem of selecting books has attracted a lot of arguments. The supporters find it an essential part of the curricula, which plays a pivotal part in the learning and teaching process for the teachers, students, and the educational institution. Numerous scholars, such as Burden (2007), Cunningsworth (1995), Dali (2019), Guilloteaux (2013), Hutchinson and Torres (1994), Mares (2003), Putra (2017), Romeny and Holsworth (2016), Richards and Renandya (2002), To and Mahboob (2019) believe that the selection of textbooks is an indispensable task in teaching English language.

On the contrary, those who are against the idea of textbooks find it a barrier to the independence of the learners and teachers as it may not match the needs of the learners, weaken their independence in the learning autonomy process, and may limit the teacher's creativity and ability to select educational materials that fit the needs of the students. Some of the textbooks contain similar and repetitive topics. Moreover, they may hinder language learning in natural contexts from everyday life situations (Brumfit, 1980; Crawford, 2002; Johnson, 1995; Nunan, 1989).

Irrespective of the view of those interested in books, as Williams (1983) pointed out, they still play an important role in the learning process, but they cannot be the only materials used in assisting in language teaching and learning. This view is emphasized by Swan (1991) who demonstrated that books will always be in demand.

It is more likely that the reliance on books in teaching languages will continue as they contain a lot of activities to practice the language, have clear-cut objectives, and save the time and effort of the teacher, especially those who lack adequate experience in teaching. Books do not necessarily refer to printed paper; they could also be electronic copies or in other existing multimedia forms.

The approval and selection of the textbooks is a multifaceted process (Romeny & Holsworth,

2016) that is both difficult (Minoo & Nikan, 2012) and exhausting as it requires a lot of time and effort, especially when several choices exist in the market. What makes the matter even more challenging is that most of the available books have a purely commercial purpose; therefore, the publishers or authors of these books may claim inaccurate facts about their books, such as their appropriateness to the level of learners, their suitable teaching methods, or the learning theories on which they are designed as well as their eligibility to the social context of the target learners. Thus, McDonough and Shaw (1993) have warned against blindly following what they called "the blurb" of these books.

It is important to consider the level of language proficiency of the learners when choosing books. Despite the array of views on the term "language proficiency" and what it means, in general, it refers to the level of language ability of the learner and the extent of mastering different language skills (Bedore et al, 2012). Furthermore, Nunan (1995) stressed that the selected books must fit the linguistic level of the students. However, in a program with hundreds of learners with different personality traits and linguistic and cultural backgrounds, it is difficult to find a textbook that addresses all their needs and individual differences. This may affect their achievement (Radencich, 1995). They may also feel frustrated when the level of linguistic complexity in the course offered does not meet their language proficiency.

Textbook evaluation process is considered as one of the most important ways of selecting the appropriate textbooks for the learner and teacher in addition to meeting the objectives of the educational program and institution. The pre-use evaluation phase (McGrath, 2002) is the one in which a decision can be made of its suitability for use in the educational program. Ellis (1997) and Tomlinson (2003) emphasized on a certain type of textbook evaluation, which is called predictive evaluation, through which preliminary decisions can be made regarding the suitability of the textbooks for a certain context and objectives.

Evaluation checklists have emerged since the 1970s, which provide clear guidelines for evaluators (Littlejohn, 1998). The textbook evaluation frameworks that emerged in the 1990s and early 2000s are still leading in textbook evaluation (Byrd, 2001; Cunningsworth, 1995; Eliss, 1997; McDonough & Shaw, 1993; McGrath, 2002; Rubdy, 2003). Recent studies, such as those by Ahmadi Safa and Karampour (2020), Ayu and Inderawati (2019), Demir and Ertas (2014), Dongxing (2020), Mohammadi and Abdi (2014), and Nurhamsih and Syahrial (2018), made use of the evaluation checklists and frameworks developed by the previous authors.

Research problem:

The medium of instruction for the scientific fields, including medical, engineering, and computers, at King Khalid University is English. Therefore, the university must focus on providing students with the necessary language skills that will help them succeed in their studies (Dev & Qiqieh, 2016; Kong *et al*., 2012; Pauline, 2015; Wilson & Komba, 2013).

To meet the above requirement, the university offers the IELP for its first year students to improve their language acquisition skills and help them advance in their further studies. It has approved a number of textbooks for teaching the program's courses. These courses are essential in achieving the objectives of the course and of the language program as a whole. However, the selection of the right English Language Teaching (ELT) coursebooks from the large volume of materials available in the market for English language textbooks makes this selection process challenging, and it requires objectivity as well as high accuracy to choose the most appropriate textbooks that meet the course objectives. (Minoo & Nikan, 2012; Romeny & Holsworth, 2016).

Reflecting on the personal experience of the researcher, as a specialist of ELT and having maintained contact with the students who study these courses in their first year, the difference in their level of language proficiency could be observed; some of them are proficient, and the majority are between the beginner and intermediate levels. Consequently, approving standardized textbooks for all students despite their different language levels may not be suitable and may affect their success due to their lack of understanding of the content (Radencich, 1995), which may cause a feeling of frustration. Nunan (1991) emphasized that no single textbook can address all the needs of the learners in the classroom because their needs are many and different. He adds that the textbook must address the suitable language level. Therefore, this research has drawn on such a point to examine whether the textbooks prescribed in the IELP at King Khalid University address the language levels listed in the course descriptions of the program (A1, A2, B1).

Research questions:

1. Are the prescribed textbooks suitable for the level of proficiency of the students in the IELP at King Khalid University?
2. Do gender differences (male-female) affect the level of proficiency of the students in the IELP at King Khalid University?
3. Do different course specializations (tracks) affect the level of proficiency of the students in the IELP at King Khalid University?

Significance of the study

It is expected that this study will serve as a clear indicator for the English Language Center at the College of Languages and Translation of King Khalid University on the suitability of the current courses to the students' language proficiency level and the degree to which their proficiency is affected by the variables of gender and study discipline. The literature review also contributes to providing guidelines on the criteria that can be relied upon for approving the English language coursebooks to those in the departments and committees responsible for textbook approval and review. Additionally, this study is an endeavor to provide recommendations and suggestions that can contribute to enhancing the English language teaching process.

III. Methods:

Design of the Study:

The study utilized the quantitative research design. Quantitative data were collected by an electronic test sent to all first-year students in the medical, engineering, and computers disciplines during the first semester of the academic year 2021.

Participants:

The study tool was distributed to all the male and female students (about 1800) enrolled in the IELP at King Khalid University during the academic year 2021. They were distributed in the following three disciplines: medical, engineering, and computers. A total of 408 students responded; they were aged between 18 and 20 years. They were all native speakers of Arabic and had been learning English for nine years before they attended the university. For three years, they were in the elementary stage, and for six years, they were at the intermediate and secondary stages. Table II, III, and IV display the details:

Table II. Distribution of research sample according to sex variable

Sex	Number	Percentage
Male	297	72.8
Female	111	27.2
Total	100	

Table III: Distribution of research sample according to specialization

Specialization (Discipline)	Number	Percentage
Computer	106	26.0
Engineering	116	28.4
Medical Sciences	186	45.6
Total	408	100

Table IV: Distribution of sample according to English Course the opted by the student

The English course currently being studied	Number	Percentage
ENG 011	140	26.0
ENG 012	87	28.4
ENG 019	181	45.6
Total	408	100

Instrument:

To measure the level of language proficiency for the study sample, the Cambridge University test was employed. It is a reliable test designed by the Cambridge University and is characterized by its accuracy and ability to distribute students according to the language levels as per the classification of the CEFR. This test consists of 25 items; one point is assigned to each correct item, and based on the number of correct answers, the level of language proficiency is determined according to Table V (Cambridge Assessment English):

Table V. Language proficiency level according to European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)

Scores	Language proficiency level according to European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)
25	C2
23-24	C1
20-22	B2
16-19	B1
10-15	A2
Below 9	A1

The test was electronically designed; the information on the variables related to the research were introduced in its introduction, namely, gender, discipline, and course. It was electronically sent to all the first-year students in the medical, engineering, and computers disciplines during the first semester of the university year 2021 through text messages containing the test link via the university's communication system. The total number of respondents were 408 male and female students.

IV. Results and discussion:

To answer the first question: Are the prescribed textbooks suitable for the level of proficiency of students at the IELP at King Khalid University? Mean averages and standard deviations of the total score for the proficiency test were calculated. Table VI indicates that the average scores of the sample reached almost 13 degrees. This score is categorized within the range of language proficiency level A2 according to the CEFR. It is the target level in all coursebooks for students of the Intensive Program, thereby indicating that they are suitable for the level of language proficiency of the students.

Table VI. Averages of the sample scores in the proficiency test (N=408)

Dimensions	Average	Standard deviation	Minimum score	Maximum score
Out of 25	13.05	5.42	2	25
Out of 100	52.22	21.70	8	100

A more comprehensive way to explore the students' language proficiency level is used. The language proficiency test scores were divided into six levels (according to the CEFR classification) to get the following division, which represents the sample language proficiency level.

Table VII shows that 31% of the research sample were found within the A1 level while 35% and 19% got scores at the A2 and B1 level, respectively. These three levels are the three targeted levels by the textbooks for teaching English to the students of the shared programs (Table I). Therefore, the total of these percentages reached approximately 86% of the research sample. The result confirms the suitability of the prescribed textbooks for the students' language proficiency level. This finding is consistent with the language levels stated in the course descriptions (Table I). The result confirms what some previous studies have stressed, i.e., the necessity of matching the English language teaching textbooks to the students' language proficiency level (Nunan, 1995).

Table VII. Study sample language proficiency (N=408)

Language proficiency level	Score	Number	Percentage
A1	9 and below	128	31.4
A2	10-15	144	35.3
B1	16-19	78	19.1
B2	20-22	36	8.8
C1	23-24	16	3.9
C2	25	6	1.5
Total		408	100

It is clear that the students' language proficiency levels showed that 86% of the sample came under the first three levels of the CEFR. This, in turn, raises a question about the degree of achievement of the objectives of teaching English in public education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Although the students have been studying the language for several years, their language proficiency scores still do not go beyond the third level (B1) of the CEFR (Al-sonei, 2005; Qhedh 2004).

The response to the second question: Do gender differences (male -female) affect the level of proficiency of students at the IELP at King Khalid University?

To answer this question, the *t*-test was used to measure the significant differences between the two independent groups to identify the differences between the research sample individuals in their scores in the language proficiency test according to gender (male-female). The statistics showed that no significant differences can be attributed to gender differences.

As seen in Table VIII, although there are differences between the mean scores of the females and males, these differences are not significant as the *t*-values indicate (1.85), thereby implying that the language proficiency of the sample is not affected by gender. This result can be attributed to the fact that male and female students were subjected to the same volume of language exposure. They studied approximately the same courses during the stages of preparatory and secondary education and had the same number of classes in addition to the similarity of context, which contributed to the close levels of language proficiency of the male and female students. This finding is in congruence with the study of Koosha, Ketabi and Kassaian (2001) while it contradicts the results of a study by McMullen (2014), who found an effect of the gender variable on the level of the students' language proficiency.

Table VIII. T-test for significance differences between the study sample individuals in the language proficiency level test scores according to gender variable (Score out of 100)

Sample sex	Number	Average	Standard deviation	t-value	Significance level	Comments
Male	297	51.00	21.76	1.85	0.065	Not significant
Female	111	55.46	21.28			

The response to the third question: Do different course specializations (tracks) affect the level of proficiency of students at the IELP at King Khalid University?

To answer this question, a one-way analysis of variance (F test) to measure the significant differences between more than two independent groups was utilized to identify the differences between the study sample individuals in their scores in the language proficiency level test attributed to the difference in course specialization (track): (computers, engineering, medical sciences). Table IX shows the results:

Table IX. One-way analysis (F) test for the significant differences between differences between the study sample individuals in the language proficiency level test scores according to gender variable

Source of variation	Sum of squares	Degree of freedom	Squares mean	F-value	Significance level	Comments
Between groups	92.71	2	46.35	1.85	0.207	Not significant
Within groups	11882.11	405	29.34			

Table IX displays that the value of F is not significant, which means that there are no statistically significant differences between the participants in their scores in the language proficiency level test attributed to the difference in the course specialization (track) i.e., computers, engineering, and medical sciences. This finding can be interpreted in a similar way to the interpretation of the result of the previous question where the students were exposed to the same volume of English during the different stages of preparatory and secondary education and the same number of study classes because the study plans are unified by the Ministry of Education. Moreover, the programs for training the English language teachers are the same. Surprisingly, the students of medical sciences were selected according to a high selection

criterion, but the results of the study did not reveal any difference in the level of language proficiency attributed to the variable of medical sciences track. This fact is in contrast to the findings of Alfehaid's study (2018) which suggested that there are differences attributed to the course specialization (track) variable.

V. Conclusion:

The current study investigated the correspondence between the textbooks of the Intensive English Program and students' language proficiency at King Khalid University. It explored the differences in the level of language proficiency of students based on the variables of gender and course specialization. The findings revealed that there were no statistically significant differences attributed to the variables of gender and course specialization. In light of the research findings, the present study recommends the following:

1. Reinforcing the IELP to address the weakness of pre-university education graduates to prepare them well to progress and succeed in university education programs, especially in the specializations where the medium of instruction is English.
2. Conducting placement tests for all freshmen to accommodate them in their respective suitable language levels.
3. Adopting the levels system in teaching the IELP so that the students can be placed in the levels matching their language proficiency levels according to the language proficiency tests. Those whose language proficiency is good can directly join the higher levels and consequently accelerate their completion of the program.
4. Considering the approval of a variety of English language teaching textbooks that match all learners' language levels from beginners to advanced.

Future research is suggested in the following areas:

1. Considering the reconstruction of the IELP and selection of the best methods of introducing it to the learners.
2. Investigating the degree to which the IELP contributes to enhancing the language enrichment of the learners for achieving its objectives.
3. Cross-checking the appropriateness of the criteria and principles followed in selecting the English language textbooks.
4. Conducting a further study to evaluate the previously approved English textbooks for the Intensive Program in terms of achieving the objectives, their relevance to the level of the students, their relevance to the context, the pedagogical as well as learning theories followed, the assessment methods used in them, and the extent to which they consider the learners' independence.

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استكشاف مدى ملاءمة الكتب الدراسية لبرنامج اللغة الإنجليزية المكثف للكفاية اللغوية لدى طلاب جامعة الملك خالد

أحمد عاطف الشهري

الملخص

استهدف هذا البحث التعرف إلى مدى ملاءمة الكتب المقررة في برنامج اللغة الإنجليزية المكثف في جامعة الملك خالد لمستوى الكفاية اللغوية للطلبة. كما استهدف التعرف إلى مدى وجود فروق في مستوى الكفاية اللغوية للطلبة تعود لمتغيري الجنس والمسار (التخصص). ومن أجل ذلك استخدم الباحث اختباراً لقياس مستوى الكفاية اللغوية وتطبيقه على عينة من الطلبة بلغت (408) من الطلاب وطالبات.

أظهرت نتائج البحث ملاءمة الكتب المقررة في برنامج اللغة الإنجليزية المكثف لمستوى الكفاية اللغوية للطلبة. كما بينت نتائج البحث عدم وجود فروق ذات دلالة إحصائية تعود لمتغيري الجنس والمسار (التخصص). وفي ضوء هذه النتائج كانت التوصية بتعزيز ودعم برنامج اللغة الإنجليزية المكثف، وإجراء اختبارات تحديد المستوى للطلبة من أجل تسكينهم في المستويات اللغوية المناسبة لهم، والتنوع في إقرار كتب تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية بما يلائم جميع المستويات اللغوية، بدءا من المستويات الدنيا حتى المستويات المتقدمة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: كتب تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية، برنامج اللغة الإنجليزية المكثف، جامعة الملك خالد.