

SAUDI STUDENTS AND IEP TEACHERS: CONVERGING AND DIVERGING
PERSPECTIVES

BY

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THESIS

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Abstract

This research investigates the perspectives of teachers and Saudi students in an Intensive English Program (IEP) on the necessary skills for international students' success in American university classes, the IEP's effectiveness in developing those skills, and on the role of high-stakes English-language proficiency tests such as the TOEFL and IELTS. The research used a group interview format with some elements of focus group methodology.

This project was undertaken to add to the somewhat underdeveloped literature on Saudi students in US IEPs, where they represent significant proportions of enrolled students. It was thought that research comparing and contrasting teacher and student views would serve as a valuable tool to develop teacher and researcher understanding of these students. In addition, this research aims to shed light on what teacher and students believe that international students need to succeed in American university classes and in so doing provide teachers and programs with information on student perspectives on decisions that are typically made at the program level without student input.

The interviews demonstrated that teachers saw significant differences in their students based on their gender, with positive stereotypes associated with female students and negative stereotypes with male students. Students, however, hardly oriented to gender at all. In addition, the teachers identified many study skills, classroom expectations, and pragmatic skills as important to success in American university classes, but these were almost entirely absent from the student interviews. Finally, both teachers and students agreed on the importance of personal responsibility on the part of the students although the teachers seemed to see a certain lack of personal responsibility among Saudi students (particularly male students).

These findings present a significant challenge to the professional identities of IEP teachers. As experts in intercultural education and communication, they should be accustomed to dealing with students from very different cultural backgrounds and in understanding those differences. However, the level of problematic views that this research has revealed should serve as a reminder to teachers that they must always be wary of forming stereotypical views of students, since those views can quickly color or even pre-determine, in a way, interactions with future students. Further reflection and communication are necessary to combat these concerns.

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Chapter 1: Purpose

The genesis of this research lies in the large increase in the number of Saudi students in intensive English programs (IEPs) in the United States. When I began teaching English as a second language (ESL) in the US, Saudi student numbers had increased and many programs were still dealing with the ramifications of this new and rather different group of students. Discussion of these new students and the challenges they presented to teaching was quite common in both of the IEPs where I taught, and I became aware that there was considerable interest on the part of the teachers in learning more about these students.

When I traveled to the TESOL International Convention in Dallas, Texas in 2013, I found that this interest was common to IEPs all over the country. Teachers had a great deal of questions, which was reflected in the profusion of sessions at that convention relating to Saudi students and their particular backgrounds and characteristics. However, my impression following the convention was that there were far more questions than answers, and when I left the convention, I was thinking how I could perhaps help to answer some of those questions.

On returning to school and mentioning this to my colleagues, a number of them encouraged me to go forward with a research project on Saudi students. In some ways, I found myself better equipped than most teachers. I had studied Arabic for several years, which often helped me to forge a connection with my Saudi students. I believe that I also had the advantage of being relatively close in age to many of the students, such that they might feel more comfortable discussing their experiences with me, rather than with an older researcher who would clearly not be a peer. Finally, I found that since my career in ESL, such as it was at the time, had largely coincided with the Saudi “wave,” it was all I had ever known in IEP teaching,

which gave me a different perspective from more experienced IEP teachers, who had experience with students from countries other than Saudi Arabia being in the majority in IEPs.

Although my research project went through a number of iterations in the design phase, I ultimately settled on investigating students' views on a number of different areas: what skills are necessary for international students in American universities, how well the IEP was preparing them for American university courses, and how they felt about high-stakes English language proficiency tests. I focused on these areas because I believed that they would give insight into what the students valued educationally and what they saw as important for their future in American universities. In order to provide more depth to this research and provide some context for students' responses, I also decided to add the perspectives of IEP teachers as well. The final iteration of the research questions guiding this research project are as follows.

Research Questions

- ▶ What skills do Saudi IEP students and IEP teachers see as necessary for international students' success in American university courses?
- ▶ How do Saudi IEP students and IEP teachers evaluate the IEP in terms of preparing its students for success in American university courses?
- ▶ How do Saudi students and IEP teachers view the capability of major English tests like the TOEFL and the IELTS to evaluate the skills that are necessary (for success) in American university courses?

Chapter 2: Methods

Research Design

This research was carried out in a group interview format, drawing on some of the principles of focus group research. While the interview groups were originally envisaged as focus groups, it appears that, drawing on the work of Parker and Tritter (2006), they are better termed group interviews. For Parker and Tritter, “in group interviews the interviewer seeks answers, in focus groups the facilitator seeks group interaction.” (p. 31). Since I primarily sought answers to my questions *through* group interaction, I believe that, using this framework, this study might be more aptly termed a “group interview.” This is lent further credence by the existence of a set list of questions for the interview – since the interview was not over until the last question was finished, interviewees’ answering the questions took precedence over group interaction.

The choice to engage in qualitative research was, of course, a deliberate one. While analysis of quantitative data is rather clearer to execute, I believe that the numbers gleaned from quantitative studies can be misleading and overly simplistic. There is always a deeper truth hiding beneath the numbers, and this is precisely what I sought to investigate within my interviews. Also, given that Shaw (2009) points out how the viewpoints of Saudi students regarding their studies in the United States are relatively scarce in the literature (p. 2), I believe that the best way to give voice to these students was to let them speak in their own words.

The interviews were originally planned to each involve three to four interviewees. I chose these target numbers so that interviewees would feel less compelled to continually participate than they would if only two interviewees were present, while the upper limit of four was to ensure that all were able to express themselves in the limited timeframe of the interviews.

However, while the interviews were indeed set up to have this number of participants, problems of availability and attendance caused all interviews to instead involve two or three interviewees.

Although the presence of a set list of questions probably classifies these interactions as group interviews, some elements of focus group research were nevertheless employed. The most important of these elements was that of moderator control. Since, as Agar and MacDonald (1995) write, "...questions can highlight the authority of the moderator and place [participants] in a performing and evaluative mode," (p. 81), I endeavored to let the participants talk as freely as possible once a question had been asked. For example, I quickly became aware that my eye gaze could and did determine who had the floor and, wishing this not to be the case, I often averted my gaze whenever interviewees were jockeying for the floor. Thus, the ideal of the interviews would be that I would ask a question and the interviewees would discuss it without having recourse to me. I did of course ask some follow-up questions, but attempted to not unduly obstruct the ongoing interaction. In so doing, I was endeavoring to strike the balance that Agar and MacDonald discuss: "too much moderator control prevents the group interaction that is the goal; too little control, and the topics might never be discussed" (p. 78).

I chose an oral mode of gathering data rather than a written mode because I believed that it would provide me with more and richer data. In favor of this perspective, Dörnyei (cited in Dheram & Rani, 2008) argues that "the questionnaire is not an appropriate tool for qualitative and exploratory research, and that it has to be used in combination with other procedures for relevant data" (p. 2). Dheram and Rani also add that some participants' cultures may make them uncomfortable with descriptive or analytical writing as a form of communication, instead preferring oral communication for this purpose (p. 3). Since this is typically the case for Saudi students (Algren and Matson, 2005, p. 1), an oral format seemed to be the most promising. Being

able to discuss the questions with a peer or peers permits participants to “modify, clarify, and most importantly think through the talk and negotiate for conceptual clarity, with the researcher’s support” (Dheram and Rani, p. 6). Believing that this was the key to obtaining richer data, I therefore opted for an oral mode of data collection.

This research is not ethnographic, nor does it seek or pretend to be. While it does aim to achieve a certain level of understanding from the view of the participants, it lacks many of the important defining characteristics of ethnography. For instance, it is neither as systematic nor as comprehensive as true ethnography must be (Hymes, 1982, p. 22). It also does not focus on “naturally occurring, ongoing settings” (Watson-Gegeo, 1988, p. 576) as ethnography does. Finally, the “intensive, detailed observation” which is a “[hallmark] of ethnographic method” (Watson-Gegeo, 1988, p. 583) does not exist in this research. As I lacked training as an ethnographer and the necessary permissions to engage in this sort of study, this study is not and cannot be construed as ethnographic.

All of my interviews were conducted in English. Although conducting the interviews in Arabic would have undoubtedly given the students considerably more freedom to express their ideas, I did not find it feasible to attempt to use Arabic in the interviews. My own Arabic was likely not up to the task, and translation would have been both costly and time-consuming. I do believe that research such as my own conducted in Arabic would be of great value, but that task will have to fall to a researcher who is fluent in both English and Arabic. As a concession to the students’ not speaking their native language in the interviews, they all had paper provided during the interviews to write anything in Arabic that they felt they could not communicate clearly or effectively in English. However, none of them availed themselves of this opportunity.

I had two separate groups of interviewees: students and teachers. While the original conception of the research focused initially on the students, it eventually expanded to include teachers as well since I believed that the points where student and teacher opinions converged and diverged could be of great interest. In essence, the purpose was to obtain perspectives from both sides of the teaching/learning environment in order to achieve a greater understanding of what is happening within the IEP.

Recruitment

All of the students who were recruited for this research were Saudi citizens born in Saudi Arabia. All of them were current students in the IEP at the time the research was conducted. Some were in the US to eventually study for an undergraduate degree, and some planned to study for a graduate degree. The IEP had no data on whether students were prospective undergraduate or graduate students and I decided that screening the students for this in advance was too invasive, as it would have required additional intrusion into classes. Undergraduate- and graduate-level students were mixed in the interviews, as separating them proved to be logistically impossible. While I endeavored to separate students who were current classmates wherever possible, my efforts only met with partial success. It was also possible that some students in interviews had been classmates in previous semesters.

The IEP where my research was conducted separates students into levels from 100 through 600, with 100 being the lowest and 600 being the highest. I recruited students exclusively from the 400, 500, and 600 level classes (high intermediate through advanced) so that they would be able to adequately and somewhat comfortably express themselves in English in the interviews. In practice, however, all of the students who participated in the interviews were from the 400 and 500 levels. This was partially due to the fact that I was asked to initially only

recruit in a certain number of classes, which were almost all 400- and 500-level. In addition to the level restriction, I also asked that all students who participated in the research have studied for at least one semester in the IEP in order to ensure that they would be somewhat familiar with the program and its policies.

Recruitment was carried out by visiting classes, making an announcement, and then asking for students to provide their names and e-mail addresses so that I could contact them. After that, I worked with the IEP Academic Coordinator to determine when the students did not have class and sorted them into groups and set interview times for each group. In order to make the interviews as comfortable as possible for the students, I separated them by gender. I decided to do this because Saudi students in Saudi Arabia are separated by gender – with very few exceptions, there are only all boys' or all girls' schools. Thus, in the interest of creating a comfortable environment in which for the students to engage in free discussion, all student interview groups were either exclusively male or exclusively female. Once the groups had been established, I then e-mailed them the prospective schedule. However, a few interviews had to be rescheduled or postponed due to unforeseen circumstances. All in all, a total of fourteen students participated in the interviews in five different groups. Six were female and eight were male. Of these students, three were planning to pursue an undergraduate degree and eleven were planning to pursue a graduate degree.

There were many fewer stipulations on the teachers who were recruited for the interviews. In fact, the only requirement was that they had taught for at least six semesters in the program. Similar to the students, this was so that they would be familiar with the IEP and its policies. The higher number was intended to exclude teaching assistants (TAs) from eligibility, since, as teachers in training (the IEP where this research was carried out has a longstanding commitment

to teacher training and employs a significant number of TAs), they were and are not yet full-fledged TESL professionals. The teachers were initially contacted by e-mail. Interviews were then also scheduled via e-mail. Although some personal interactions within the program office did occur, I attempted to keep them to a minimum since I did not want teachers to feel unduly pressured to participate in the interviews, as this would be a breach of research ethics.

Importantly, teachers recruited were not restricted based on the levels that they were teaching or had taught. Since at the time the research was conducted, a limited number of teachers were actively teaching in the 400, 500, and 600 levels, restricting teacher participation could have shrunk the pool of potential participants to dangerously low levels from the very beginning. This, combined with the fact that many teachers teach and have taught in many different levels in the program, led me to decide not to exclude teachers who mostly taught lower levels from participation. As it happened, all teachers who participated had experience in teaching at least some upper-level class or classes. All in all, a total of nine teachers (in four groups) participated in the interviews: six women and three men.

It is, of course, very important to consider the recruitment and selection process and the effects that it is likely to have on the results of the research. As Parker and Tritter (2006) point out, “recruitment of group participants is not something which should be carried out simply on an ad hoc or random basis,” (p. 27), going on to charge that in many focus group studies provide insufficient information on their recruitment and selection process (p. 28). For this reason, I have detailed the recruitment and sampling process to the best of my abilities – no prospective interviewee who met the criteria of the study was turned away, although some ended up not participating due to scheduling and logistical problems. I am furthermore aware of the potential for my recruitment and selection process to have affected the results such that they may not be

representative of all Saudi students studying in the United States or of all IEP teachers in the country. Nevertheless, I believe that the steps that I took were the best possible options available to me.

Interviews

All of the interviews were conducted in various rooms in the IEP facility: classrooms, conference rooms, and offices. This was to give students a somewhat familiar and easy-to-access location. It also facilitated setup of the interview rooms. The interviews varied in length from 35-70 minutes, with an average of about 45 minutes. I had originally planned on the interviews lasting around 60 minutes, but as with so many other aspects of the research design, the interview lengths were in practice often an effect of the combined schedules of the researcher and the interviewees. There was a total of one interview per group; although follow-up sessions are typical of focus group methodology (Parker & Tritter, 2006, pp. 29-30), time constraints on the part of both the researcher and participants did not allow for them to be conducted.

Each of the interviews was recorded so that they could be reviewed at a later date. The first interview was recorded both via video and audio. All subsequent interviews were recorded only in audio format due to the superior audio quality delivered by the digital voice recorders available to me. I also endeavored to take the best notes I could during each interview; this also had the mostly unintended effect of attracting my eye gaze as previously discussed, allowing students more space for freer discussion.

Data Analysis

The data analysis section was executed in a manner consistent with qualitative research methodology. After reviewing the notes and transcripts from the interviews, I isolated the common and important themes from the student and teacher groups. I then compared the two

groups against one another in terms of what topics were discussed during the interviews, what was said while addressing these topics, and perhaps more importantly, what was not said. These points of convergence and divergence form the foundation of the research. I have provided analysis of convergence and divergence in three areas: between student groups, between teacher groups, and between students and teachers.

There are also a number of areas which struck me as a researcher as particularly important despite not being a subject of intra- or inter-group convergence or divergence. While the issues that I identify as important are not arrived at via a particular method, I nonetheless believe that they can be of great use to teachers who work with Saudi students on a regular basis. The same, of course, can be true of insights gleaned from the teachers. These issues are taken up in the Discussion section, rather than the Analysis section.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

The research on international students, their experiences in host countries, and all the factors which influence these experiences is extensive, and a detailed overview of such literature is far beyond the scope of this literature review. Instead, this section discusses relevant literature in a number of areas, moving from general to specific, beginning with research on international students in general, and then proceeding to literature regarding Arab students, then to research on Saudi students specifically, and then finally to recent literature on Saudi students studying in the United States. While this is by no means an exhaustive review of the literature in any of these areas, it should provide a foundation for the research which follows it.

Literature on International Students

This section focuses on two main areas within the vast literature on international students: their relationships to standardized assessments of English and the interplay between students' and teachers' perspectives on what constitutes effective (language) teaching. While there are a host of other areas of interest within the literature, particularly in the area of adjustment problems and challenges that international students face while studying abroad, these two areas are most relevant to the research that will follow.

Tests

One important subject regarding international students studying abroad is that of English language proficiency tests. These are extremely high-stakes tests which many universities use to determine whether or not prospective students' English language abilities are sufficient to the task of studying in the university. Many, from students to instructors to laypeople, seem to have accepted the "myth" of the test as all-powerful in evaluating student language proficiency (Li, Fox, & Almarza, 2007, p. 16). Students specifically appear to have great faith in these tests to

assess their language abilities. Li, Fox, & Almarza describe the following state of affairs: the tests give students the belief that they are capable users of the English language, but they are then bewildered by what they encounter upon arriving in their host country, which often bears little resemblance to the English they studied and practiced in their home countries (p. 16).

Despite the apparent flaws within English language proficiency tests, some have nevertheless attempted to use these tests to forecast international students' academic achievement. Stoyhoff (1997), for example, found that there was a positive relationship between TOEFL scores and international students' academic achievement, but the correlation was modest (p. 57). Yet it is unclear whether this is an effect of language proficiency or if it could rather be attributed to better student test-taking skills, which could then carry over into their academic careers. This concern, in addition to others raised by Alderson, Krahnke, & Stansfield (as cited in Stoyhoff, 1997) seems to indicate that there are limits to the predictive value of English language proficiency tests such as the TOEFL (p. 56). Thus, the use of these tests for purposes other than evaluating language ability is somewhat problematic.

Teachers and Students in English as a Second Language (ESL)

Within ESL instruction, some research, particularly Johnson (2005), discusses mismatches between student and teacher expectations in ESL classrooms. Johnson describes how students often bring specific expectations of what constitutes good language pedagogy with them when they study ESL, which, if unrecognized by teachers, can result in dissatisfaction on the students' part and a less-than-ideal learning environment (p. 1). However, teachers, many or most of whom have undergone formal educational training, often tend to disregard student preferences, or even the existence of such preferences, in favor of what they believe or have learned to be most pedagogically effective. Teachers' assuming that by virtue of having been

trained in how to teach, they will always make better pedagogical decisions than students is what Vollmer (2000) describes as “ideological assumptions, [which] are invisible to [the teachers] and become naturalized to the extent that they appear to be no more than ‘common sense’” (p. 53). In order to solve this problem, Johnson (2005) suggests that although students typically lack formal training in language pedagogy, they know what ways of learning are effective for them. He then goes on to argue that teachers should not ignore students’ opinions or preferences regarding teaching when making pedagogical decisions and that students need not be swept up, willing or not, into the teacher’s preferred method of teaching (p. 11). In other words, ESL teachers need to be very careful with what assumptions they make in their classrooms, since decisions that are incompatible with student views on effective pedagogy can ultimately result in dissatisfaction and a suboptimal learning environment. In many cases, students know more, at least instinctively, about teaching than teachers think that they do, and they can often be helpful partners in designing effective lessons and materials.

Literature on Arab Students and the Arabic Language

A certain amount of research exists to describe or attempt to describe the characteristics and special situations of Arab students, the experience of Arabic-speaking students learning English, and the effects of Arabic on the acquisition of English. Algren and Matson (2006) write in favor of this sort of research, arguing that there are a number of cultural and educational differences that make Arab students distinct from students from other cultural backgrounds, particularly in light of populations which were previously dominant in IEPs in the United States (p. 1). Algren and Matson’s research focuses primarily on comparing Arab students’ attitudes to the descriptors used by Margaret Nydell in her book *Understanding Arabs*. They found that the students they interviewed to a large degree held opinions consistent with those cultural traits that

Nydell discusses, especially relating to the importance of personal relationships and a less stringent interpretation of rules (p. 8).

However, there are some respects in which Arab students do not appear to be very different from any of their peers from other places around the world. In their study on Arab EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students, Ghaith and Diab (2008) found that the most important determinant of success was students' sociability, which was related to their feeling comfortable in class (p. 278). Thus, in this respect, Arab students do not necessarily appear to be significantly different from students of other backgrounds.

Other research in this area focuses primarily on the problems and challenges in the teaching of English, particularly in the Gulf region. Syed (2003) lists a litany of problems with English teaching in the region, from student problems such as disinterested students, lack of reading skills, a dependence on memorization, and reliance on high-stakes examinations to administrative problems such as old-fashioned teaching approaches and class designs, a lack of administrative support, and a lack of qualified educators (p. 337). While these criticisms might not be out of place in many EFL settings around the world, they represent serious challenges to TEFL in the Gulf (of which Saudi Arabia is traditionally considered a part).

The literature cites a number of more specific problems with students and teachers as well. Ghaith and Diab (2008) write that students in the Gulf are for the most part not ready to study, much less succeed, in universities where instruction is entirely in English (p. 278). While this does present problems for students who are planning to go abroad to pursue higher education in an English-medium university, it should be recognized that this only accounts for a fraction of Gulf students. Discussing teachers, Syed (2003) is also critical of the reliance on expatriate TEFL professionals in the region, citing their ignorance of local languages, cultures, and norms

(p. 339), which results in a certain distance between students and instructors. Furthermore, the specific cultural traits that distance Arab students from Western culture which Algren and Matson (2006) discuss (p. 9) further complicate the situation, since expatriate teachers will often be in a situation where they “don’t know what they don’t know.” Another negative effect of the (over)use of expatriate teachers is, as Syed (2003) argues, that that they are not invested in the system and therefore have little interest in helping to change or improve the educational system in which they work (p. 399). Thus, the combination of expatriate teachers and cultural distance between students and teachers creates serious challenges for English language education in the Gulf, contributing to students’ being less than ideally prepared for education in English-medium universities.

Arab students learning English, whether in the Gulf, elsewhere in the Arab world, or anywhere else in the world face a number of particular challenges in learning English as a result of speaking Arabic as their native language. Their situation is complicated by the diglossic situation which exists in Arabic, with clear register differences between the formal register (Modern Standard Arabic) and the colloquial register. Colloquial registers vary a great deal regionally and many are neither written nor read (Alejandro, 2003, p. 9), which causes problems for L1 Arabic students. Thompson-Panos and Thomas-Ruzic (1983), addressing ESL writing instructors, list the problems of Arabic speakers as “orthography, spelling, vocabulary, sentence grammar, style, and rhetorical organization (p. 621). While many of these problems are not uncommon among the general population of English learners, they indicate that Arabic speakers must confront a vast array of challenges when learning English.

Literature on Saudi Students in Saudi Arabia

The following section includes literature which discusses English teaching, students, and related topics in modern Saudi Arabia. It should be noted that the majority of this literature details problems and challenges within Saudi Arabia. Thus, the tone may seem somewhat negative, but this is largely an effect of the focus of the literature under review.

Numerous authors (Al Haq & Smadi, 1996; Elyas, 2008; Elyas & Picard, 2010; Al-Rawi, 2012) testify to the importance of the English language in Saudi Arabia, particularly for job qualifications and social prestige. Al Haq and Smadi (1996), for example, write that applicants in Saudi Arabia with good English skills are given preference and are more likely to be promoted (p. 311). English, then, is no mere window dressing or resume adornment, but a necessity to get ahead in a highly competitive labor market. An interesting effect of this is detailed by Al-Rawi (2012), who discusses the emergence of a particularly “Saudi English” (p. 34). This adaptation of English to local conditions is, if nothing else, a sign of the entrenched status and importance of English in Saudi culture and society.

However, the prestigious status of English in Saudi Arabia does not mean that all Saudis look favorably on English and its significance in Saudi culture and society. Indeed, as Al Haq and Smadi (1996) discuss, there is concern among some Saudis that the use of English necessarily will lead to Westernization, lessening of national pride, and a fall in religious devotion and identity (p. 308). Elyas (2008) concurs, outlining some views that the “teaching of English...serves as a tool for linguistic imperialism, cultural alienation, and in the case of Muslim countries a de-Islamization of a targeted nation” (p. 36). These views illustrate clear worries on the part of some Saudis regarding the political nature of the teaching of English and concern about the capacity of English to diminish the individual and collective Saudi-ness of the

country. These grievances seem to be somewhat sharpened in the area of religion, where many perceive new educational policies involving more English language instruction to the detriment of religious instruction to be an attack on the Islamic basis of the country (Elyas, 2008, p. 36). In addition to these concerns, the pedagogical norms and culture which accompany the large numbers of expatriate teachers in TEFL in Saudi Arabia also are a source of some anxiety. The fear among some is that the wholesale importation of Western pedagogical methods will upset the local population, diminish the importance of Saudi English teachers, and result in cultural subservience (Elyas & Picard, 2010, p. 143). Thus, not only the subject but also the way in which it is taught have become points of controversy in Saudi Arabia.

However, these worries seem to perhaps be the province more of teachers and academics, rather than of learners of English themselves, as the research indicates that students themselves do not share these concerns. In a study by Al Haq and Smadi (1996), the majority of Saudi students surveyed did not see English necessarily leading to Westernization – instead, for them, English was only a tool to advance themselves and their country (p. 311). Nor, according to the students, does English entail any kind of attraction or affection for English-speaking countries (Al Haq & Smadi, 1996, p. 314). Thus, while there are clearly serious concerns in certain sectors of Saudi society regarding English and how it is taught, students who are studying English themselves do not perceive it to be a threat to their identities or to national identity.

While some in Saudi Arabia are unhappy with the perceived importation of Western teaching practices, the literature takes the opposite view, criticizing entrenched teaching methods in Saudi Arabia. Elyas and Picard (2010) write that the dominant teaching models involve students playing a relatively passive role, responsible for receiving the information that their teacher, seen as an authority on the subject, gives them (pp. 137-138). Perhaps unsurprisingly,

this leads to the predominance of rote memorization in the Saudi education system (Hofer, 2009, p. 32; Shaw, 2009, p. 9). These characterizations place teaching practices in Saudi Arabia in conflict with those that generally prevail in the West, which typically involve a greater focus on active learning and (at least a purported concentration on) the development of critical thinking and analytical skills. Elyas and Picard also argue that English teachers in Saudi Arabia largely reflect the tradition of religious instruction in the country and are given a role not unlike that of the imam (p. 141). In other words, English teaching still reflects the way that religious education has been carried out for centuries, and even though they are very different subjects, the pedagogy has remained quite similar.

However, some of the literature is not quite so critical. Hendrickson (2012) notes that in Saudi postsecondary education, the stated goals of the national education system are not unlike those in any Western system, including critical thinking, problem solving, and independent learning (p. 11). While these reflect stated expectations rather than facts on the ground, it does call the World Bank study cited by Elyas and Picard into question, at least to a certain extent. Syed (2003) argues that one reason for many of the challenges within the Saudi education system is the rapid economic development of the country, resulting in inadequate time for consideration of educational policy at all levels (p. 338). This would certainly account for the persistence of more traditional teaching methods in Saudi Arabia. The lack of time for reflection on educational policy has led Elyas and Picard to criticize the wholesale deployment of Western, and largely American, teaching practices and standards, which are often incompatible with the local (i.e. Saudi) students' needs (p. 137). Just how educators can meet the needs of learners, however, is not addressed in the literature. Elyas and Picard imply that significant change in the system appears unlikely as long as traditional instructional practices persist and teacher training

continues to focus on the subject being taught rather than on teaching itself (p. 142). So while the picture is perhaps not as bleak as it at first appears, the prospects for meaningful change do not appear to be very promising at the present moment.

With all the criticism that the literature levels at the Saudi education system, it is perhaps no surprise that some believe that the system is not adequately educating students for their futures. Bosbait and Wilson (2005) make this very claim, writing that the Saudi education system appears to be failing to prepare students for future employment (p. 534). This seems to be the case both within the domestic Saudi economy as well as in the more competitive global job market (Elyas & Picard, 2010, p. 141). Consequently, as Shaw (2009) notes, many Saudis studying in the US believe that a degree from the US is of more value than a degree from Saudi Arabia (pp. 164-165). This would appear to indicate that students themselves are “voting with their feet” (and thereby testifying to their lack of faith in the Saudi education system) by opting to pursue higher education abroad.

At the same time, the Saudi economy is facing a problem which would at first seem in opposition to that of unqualified graduates, namely the lower labor force participation of Saudi women. According to Ba-Isa (cited in Bosbait & Wilson), the problem is that the majority of educated Saudi women never actually participate in the workforce even though more women obtain university degrees than men (p. 535). For the Saudi state, this represents both a lack of concrete return on investment as well as a potential barrier to employment for otherwise qualified citizens. So on one hand, while academics and industry allege that the Saudi educational system is not fulfilling its role in preparing its graduates for employment, the majority of those who graduate with a university degree will likely never hold a job and contribute to the economy.

Literature on Saudi Students in the United States

Saudi students studying abroad in the US are, of course, not a new phenomenon. A number of dissertations were written on this subject, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s, all of them by Saudi nationals. Many are quantitatively-based and investigate particular areas of the language learning or study abroad experience. However, the quantitative nature of these studies is somewhat incompatible with the qualitative orientation of the study at hand.

This section is therefore based heavily on two doctoral dissertations on Saudi students, both published in 2009. The first, written by Donna Shaw at Oregon State University, focuses on strategies for success among Saudi students studying in the United States. The second, by V. Jean Hofer at the University of Missouri-St. Louis, focuses on problems which Saudi students studying in the United States experience. These dissertations are a valuable contribution to research on this topic since they are recent and therefore deal with the current “wave” of Saudi students studying abroad in the United States.

And a “wave” it has been indeed. The past decade or so has seen massive increases in the number of Saudi students studying in the US, quintupling (Hendrickson, 2010, p. 1) or sextupling (Open Doors, 2010, cited in Razek & Coyner, 2013, p. 103) between 2005 and 2010. This has largely been the effect of a large scholarship campaign on the part of the Saudi government. For many intensive English programs, the result has been a large and rather sudden shift in student populations. This has proved to be a challenge for IEPs, since many of them had adapted to serve students whose cultural and educational backgrounds had given them extensive instruction in reading and writing (Algren and Matson, 2006, p. 1). However, with the arrival of large numbers of Saudi students, the programs found themselves in a difficult situation, since Arab students typically struggle with reading and writing (Algren and Matson, 2006, p. 1). Thus,

the programs suddenly had to deal with a massive quantity of new Saudi students (Shaw, 2009, p. 1) who fit a very different cultural profile than the students that the program had been accustomed to servicing before. This is reflected in Shaw's comments about the underrepresentation of Saudi students in research on international students and students studying English in the United States (Shaw, 2009, p. 2).

There are a number of significant gaps between education and culture in Saudi Arabia and the United States. Shaw (2012) lists a number of these differences that can appear in university education, writing that:

[Saudi students] reported that American classroom practices and culture – which include active classrooms, pair work, group work, frequent quizzes and exams, required attendance, constant homework, and self-directed learning – were different and challenging in their new environment.” (p. 3).

This prevailing model of American university educational culture, which diverges significantly from the educational culture of Saudi Arabia, represents a significant challenge for Saudi students studying in the United States. Another potential obstacle is gender. Shaw (2009) writes that Saudi students in the United States are very unused to teachers of the opposite gender, since male and female students are separated in the Saudi education system (p. 67). Gender mixing, which is largely taken for granted in the American education system, thus can present cultural challenges for Saudi students in the United States. In addition, while there are often many support services available on American university campuses, Hofer (2009) finds that Saudi students typically do not understand them because there are no comparable services or offices in Saudi Arabia. So even the resources which universities provide for students to help them succeed

can be less effective than desired if the students do not have a clear idea of what they are or how they work.

Razek and Coyner (2013) frame the issue in a slightly different way. Instead of looking at the issue only in terms of educational differences, they examine Saudi students in the United States through the lens of cultural orientations. While they describe Saudi Arabia as a “collectivistic” society with strict regulations and affinity for traditional practices (Prokop, cited in Razek & Coyner, 2013, p. 105), they describe the United States as possessing a culture that is highly individualistic. This creates the potential for difficulties for these students, since, according to Caldwell-Harris and Aycicegi, the non-alignment of cultural values can cause problems for students (cited in Razek & Coyner, 2013, p. 107). In other words, a student from a collectivistic culture studying in a highly individualistic culture may well encounter challenges due to mismatches between their cultural values and the host country’s cultural values. Thus, Razek and Coyner suggest that it is perhaps due to Saudi students’ collectivistic adherence to tradition that Saudi students often do not take part in social life on American university campuses, listing religion, gender, and dietary restrictions as possible factors (p. 112). It should be noted, though, that these reasons may just as easily be based on American (mis)perceptions of Saudis as they are on the students themselves. However, Razek and Coyner also argue that the mismatch in cultural orientations can be positive for students as well, since students of a collectivistic culture are likely to have a greater sense of solidarity among themselves, creating a social support network for any group member in need of help (p. 110). So although a lack of alignment of cultural values certainly has the potential to present challenges to students, the effects of this non-alignment are certainly not all negative.

Hofer's dissertation (2009) largely focuses on "issues serving as barriers" to Saudi students studying in the US. While her study concentrated on problems, she found that in general, students had a positive view of their experience studying abroad in the United States (p. 222). However, she listed a number of problematic areas which emerged from students' taking the Michigan International Student Problem Inventory (MISPI), which is a survey intended to find what issues are serving as areas of concern for international students. In Hofer's use of the MISPI, the "living-dining" category, which is related to housing and dining, was the most problematic for Saudi students (p. 222). She also found in the qualitative comment section of her study that students identified "immigration, airport, and visa issues and [desiring] friendships with domestic students" (p. 222) as potential problem areas. However, even within the individual questions in the categories of the MISPI, it is difficult to ascertain the particular problems which students are facing. Nonetheless, Hofer did, out of all the issues which students identified, summarize them in one term: homesickness (p. 187). Although this is helpful to know, given the experience of studying abroad, it is not very surprising and encompasses a rather broad range of issues which international students are already known to face.

As discussed previously, the English language itself can also present significant challenges to Saudi students in the United States. Hofer (2009) writes that Saudi students come to the United States with limited or no English language abilities, contributing to frustration during their first few semesters (p. 32). While in some cases it is true that students arrive with relatively little English, this is an overgeneralization. The fact that students arriving with low English can be frustrated, is, of course, indisputable. To the chagrin of many ESL teachers, Shaw's research (2009) found that for many Saudis, English is a challenge in another way: an obstacle that they must overcome in order to get into a university to study in their desired field (p.

9). This has created concerns on the part of teachers, who worry that students may be entering university classes with insufficient English language preparation. Nonetheless, it is clear that English is one of the main barriers to student success in American universities.

In contrast to Hofer, Shaw focuses her research (a dissertation from 2009 and an article published from her dissertation in 2012) on success strategies among Saudi students, citing a lack of Saudi voices on the study abroad experience in the United States (Shaw, 2012, p. 2). With the focus squarely on the students themselves, she asked them their opinions on what defined success and successful students. On the whole, the students she interviewed defined a successful student as one who is “smart, goal-oriented, motivated, hard working and focused, and is someone who can manage time well” (Shaw, 2012, p. 6). Interestingly, when discussing study skills with the students, she noted that they tended to “[separate] and [stress] time management, planning, and goal setting from study skills” (p. 6), marking an important distinction between these students and the general definition of “study skills” in American educational culture. This could perhaps reflect cultural differences as to what exactly constitutes study skills. Regardless, the students seem to have a clear idea of what constitutes a successful student. Shaw herself, drawing from the interviews, identified “resilience and intercultural competence” (Shaw, 2009, p. 69) as the commonalities of successful Saudi students. Although her opinion appears to diverge somewhat from the students’, the students themselves also later indicated the importance of intercultural competence to them when asked about success strategies (p. 217).

Students identified a number of other success strategies. They include “time management, planning, and goal setting; study skills; study groups; campus resources; and persistence and hard work” (p. 180). Later in the interviews, when asking students if they shared these success

strategies with their peers, the answer was an unqualified “yes” (p. 196). She describes the students as very willing to aid others in their quest for academic success (Shaw, 2012, p. 8), although there were some limits to this generosity. The one caveat, she wrote, was that this aid was contingent on the recipient using the advice they were given and continuing to work diligently (p. 9). Thus, it appears that the support groups described by Razek and Coyner are alive and well. Indeed, Shaw’s research seems to indicate that they are not only alive and well, but ubiquitous as well, at least among the community of Saudi students in the United States.

Chapter 4: Analysis

Themes from Student Interviews

This section presents the most important themes which emerged from the interviews. “Most important” themes are determined by whether more than one group specifically oriented to that topic or idea in the process of the interview. These analysis sections are organized by theme, and the order of themes largely remains constant throughout. It is important to note that this section only presents the results of the interviews with no intervening commentary; discussion of and commentary on the significance and potential implications of this data is left for the following (Discussion) section.

Student goals for learning English. There was a great deal of agreement between student groups on their goals for learning English. All five groups said that they needed English in order to be able to study for their degrees of choice in American universities. However, one additional goal of interest which was mentioned in four out of five groups was the prominence of English as an international language. Students in these groups discussed the usefulness of the language outside of English-speaking countries, seeing the utility of the language as more than just a necessary tool for university study. As one group put it, “English is the first language in the world, we all use it, and we need it everywhere.” This is in line with the instrumental view of English that Al Haq and Smadi (1996) discuss (p. 311). Thus, for many of the students, learning English serves a purpose beyond simply being able to study in their chosen field.

Necessary skills for success in American university classes. Student groups also formed strong consensus on a number of skills that they identified as necessary for international students, and especially for Saudi students, to succeed in American university classes. All five groups discussed in one way or another the importance of writing for their

futures in US college courses. In addition, there was four-group consensus on three other skill areas: reading, speaking, and American culture. It is somewhat difficult to ascertain what the students meant by “American culture,” since their comments in this area were not very specific. For example, as one student said, “In order to get succeed in American university, you have to learn first...the American social community here and then learn the English as well.” A student in a different group put it in different, but similarly general terms, saying “you should be aware about the cultural thing.” Thus, what students perceive as “American culture” is not entirely clear. In addition, there was lesser, two-group agreement on the importance of four other skills: communicating with Americans, pronunciation, reading speed, and vocabulary. There were also many other skills that were discussed by groups individually but not repeated by any other group.

Influences on student thoughts on necessary skills. Another interview question asked students where their views on necessary skills for American university classes had come from. In response to this question, there was two-group consensus on four different sources: personal experience, IEP classes, the Internet, and tests such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). Students also seemed to regard both classes and tests as providing ongoing feedback on their language learning process, showing them areas in which they needed to improve.

Particular skills. Another theme that was related to necessary skills also surfaced: student discussions of particular subject areas. Many different subject areas were discussed, but there was relatively little consensus between groups. Two-group agreement was achieved on two different skills which the groups previously identified as necessary: reading and writing. In the area of reading, these groups discussed the vocabulary-intensive nature of reading in relation to its difficulty. In the area of writing, two groups said that the writing skills required in American

academic writing were completely different from those required for writing in Saudi Arabia. It may be of note that the two groups which gave this opinion were the two female groups. One additional skill which featured not because of agreement, but rather because of disagreement, was pronunciation. One group asserted that pronunciation courses were a necessity due to the difficulty of using only self-monitoring to improve pronunciation, with a student explaining that “A lot of people don’t understand me because my pronunciation is wrong. And this [pronunciation] not come with just studying in the book.” Another group, though, advanced the idea that mimicking Americans would be sufficient. However, this latter group had its own internal debate over the utility of pronunciation, with the sides largely being determined by what level students had entered the IEP at. Those who had begun at lower levels were more skeptical of the utility of pronunciation courses, while the student who had begun at the 500 level (and thus had never had a mandatory course involving pronunciation) advocated more for the utility of pronunciation instruction, as illustrated in this brief exchange:

“I mean here [pronunciation is] just enough for 100, 200, 300.”

“But I didn’t start at 100. I started from 500.”

While these are relatively small numbers of students and groups, it nevertheless seems to reflect a fair amount of disagreement on pronunciation and somewhat weak agreement on reading and writing.

What students are learning in the IEP. A later interview question asked students what they were learning about in their IEP classes. Four-group consensus was achieved in two areas: writing paragraphs and essays and identifying main ideas and details in lectures. There is likely a strong effect from the students’ classes on their answers to these questions, as the 500-level students spend twelve of their twenty hours of class per week in courses devoted to academic

listening and speaking and academic reading and writing. Thus, the students may have been orienting to what they were doing or had recently been doing in their classes. The fact that students mentioned listening to lectures is also of interest, since it was not identified as a necessary skill by more than one group, whereas writing was acknowledged by all groups. This does not necessarily mean that the students did not believe that academic listening was important; however, there is nothing in the data to directly explain its absence in the list of necessary skills. Two other skills were discussed in this area: reading (mentioned by three groups) and pronunciation (mentioned by two groups). The inclusion of reading likely could reflect the importance given to it in necessary skills. As for pronunciation, the two groups that discussed it as a skill that they were learning were also the two groups that had identified it as a necessary skill. The most likely explanation is that each group had a student enrolled in the advanced pronunciation class (which is an elective for students at the 500 and 600 levels). However, it could also simply reflect greater interest in or salience of the pronunciation skill for these two groups.

Grading the IEP. Another interview question asked participants to rate the IEP in preparing its students for American university classes on a scale of 1-100. This question is unique in that it is analyzed on an individual basis rather than on a group basis, since each student gave an answer. (However, one participating student is excluded from this analysis since the format of his answer made it impossible to include in analysis of the program as a whole). Although they were not required to give an answer, students seemed to feel compelled to do so. It should also be acknowledged that other group members' ratings may have had some sort of "framing" effect on the scores that subsequent group members assigned to the IEP. This is lent credence by some individuals changing their initial ratings after having discussed the issue.

However, this sort of discussion and negotiation was one reason why the research design that was used was chosen.

The average score assigned to the program from the thirteen students whose answers could be averaged was 81.35 out of 100. Some students preferred to give their answers in ranges, and although most of these ranges differed by five points (for example, 80-85), one student used a 20-point range. For averaging purposes, the middle of the range was taken as that student's rating of the program. Ratings and ranges extended from a low of 60 to a high of 90.

Positive comments on the IEP. Discussion on grading the program, as well as another interview question on whether or not the program was adequately preparing them for American university classes (with an accompanying follow-up asking how it could do better) led to considerable participant contributions on the positive and negative aspects of the program. Although there was roughly a 2:1 ratio of negative comments to positive ones, the strongest consensus within the entire program feedback theme, positive or negative, was positive: four out of five groups said that the IEP was helpful or doing a good job. Grades and subsequent negative feedback should therefore be seen in this light – while students of course have opinions on what the program could do differently or better, it appears that they are satisfied with the program, at least in a general sense. Indeed, some students' general views could perhaps be extended further, since, as one student put it, "I think it was helpful because I took bachelor's degree in English in my country and it was like four years, a long time to study English, but in three months [at the IEP] I have learned a lot [more than] than in four years in my country..."

Other positive feedback from the student groups included three-group agreement on two areas and two-group agreement on one area. There was three-group consensus that the IEP's Conversation Partner program was a good and helpful aspect of the program. Three groups also

discussed their satisfaction with the writing instruction in the program, whether with a specific writing course or the writing area in general. This third mention of writing seems to cement its significance and value to the student interview participants. The two-group positive feedback was on homework – they said that having homework was good because it made them work. It may be noteworthy that the two groups that discussed the value of homework were both made up of male students.

Neutral comments on the IEP. Two groups made an observation that was neither positive nor negative. They remarked on the significant difference between the 400 and 500 levels in the program, noting that the 500-level was considerably more difficult and rigorous than the 400-level, at least in some courses. This issue is likely particularly salient to the students who participated in this research because all of them were from the 400 or 500 levels.

Negative comments on the IEP. While, as previously mentioned, there was a significant amount of negative feedback, there was surprisingly little agreement between the groups. (Although the term “negative” is used here, it also encompasses feedback which would also be described as “constructive” rather than strictly “negative”). The maximum consensus in negative feedback was two groups, and four issues served as points of agreement, covering a broad range of aspects of the IEP. The first issue was that there were not significant differences between the lower levels, with one student volunteering that “...in 200, 100, it was like review...” Another issue the students mentioned was having to repeat a level. (If students’ teachers, in end-of-semester evaluations, do not feel that the students meet the proficiency benchmarks for that level, the students do not advance in level.) Two groups charged that having to repeat a level either was or would be boring or unhelpful. In other words, they challenged the necessity and the wisdom of requiring students to do so. The third area that students took issue with was

pronunciation instruction, with two groups contending that pull-out pronunciation classes at the lower levels were no more helpful than pronunciation instruction at the 300-level, where it was combined with the listening-speaking course. The fourth and final issue that students identified was in the area of speaking, where they indicated a desire for more of a grammar focus. (It should be noted that within the IEP, all students at levels 100-400 take a mandatory pull-out grammar course, so a focus on grammar tends to be reduced in other courses for this reason.)

Personal responsibility. Regardless of student views on the program itself, there was little ambiguity in one particular trait that the students isolated as crucial for success in the IEP: personal responsibility. Four groups discussed the importance of students' taking responsibility for their own learning by asserting that learning largely depends on the students. In addition, three groups (a subset of the previous four) asserted that the IEP gave students a certain amount or percentage of learning and that the remainder was up to them. All three groups cited percentages of some kind in this consensus, with the students responsible for between 50% and 70% of learning. One group claimed that this figure had a basis in research. A student from a different group described his sense of responsibility thus: "I can't say there is something that I need to learn because the [program] draw the line of the path and we should walk. They don't just hold our hands, but they draw the path. This is the 30% they give us and you should complete the rest." Regardless of the percentages that groups cited, both of these inter-group agreements represent a strong, recurring theme among the students. Although the second acknowledges the importance of instruction from the IEP, personal effort is still foregrounded. It should be noted that the three groups that claimed that certain percentages of learning were up to either the IEP or the students were the three male groups.

Characteristics of Saudi learners. During the course of the interviews, the student participants raised many topics relating to education and culture in the United States and in Saudi Arabia. Although there were no direct pre-planned interview questions relating to these topics, they naturally arose in all five group interviews. In the end, they fell into a few different categories, separated by whether they pertained to Saudis and Saudi culture or to the United States and American culture.

There were a few points of agreement between groups on characteristics of Saudi learners. Three out of the five groups acknowledged writing as problematic for Saudi learners of English. This could perhaps account for why writing was given such attention in other areas of the interviews. One student invoked test scores to bolster his contention that writing was a major problem for Saudi students: “The problem is writing. I mean, as you can see, all my friend Saudi, they get like 6 and 6.5 on speaking, but writing they get the lowest grade, so I think from my own perspective, the writing is the most difficult part for Saudi.” In addition, two groups asserted that pronunciation was not a problem for Saudi learners. However, given the apparent (if small) controversy on the utility of pronunciation instruction, the lesson to be taken from this consensus is somewhat unclear.

Saudi culture and education. There were a number of points of consensus among the groups in the area of Saudi culture and education. One important sub-area within this area was reading. Three groups discussed how reading is not a hobby for most people in Saudi Arabia, often making a connection between this lack of reading as a hobby and a lack of interest and/or skill in the area for most Saudi students. Two groups also attested to reading not being important in Saudi culture. It would seem that these two points are perhaps related, and might contribute to the high incidence of reading being given importance in other areas and discussions during the

interviews. One student provided a stark illustration of the situation, saying, "...reading is not something we are used to do. In my culture, in my country, we're not used to read books, like I doubt that there's one percentage of Saudis who read one book a year. So reading isn't something we really enjoy or really have interests about."

In discussions of Saudi culture and education, writing surfaced once again. The same two groups made three separate observations on the status of writing in Saudi Arabia. They asserted, as they likewise did with reading, that it [writing] was not important in Saudi culture. In addition, they reported that they had little to no experience in writing paragraphs or essays in high school. As one student put it, "Yeah, for example, in high school, I didn't use to write essays in Arabic. ... If you ask me to write an essay in Arabic, I think it would be a big challenge for me." Those who had studied for a bachelor's degree (one in each group) also reported that they did very little writing in their college courses. Since the same groups were making these assertions, one should perhaps be cautious in over-interpreting their significance, but nevertheless, these areas were clearly of considerable interest to these two groups. It is noteworthy that both of these groups were male.

The final area of Saudi culture and education where there was consensus between groups was in the area of gender. Two groups stated that within the Saudi education system, men and women are separated into different, single-gender schools, confirming Shaw's (2009) assertion of the same fact (p. 67). This marks a significant cultural difference between Saudi and American education, since in the American educational system, single-gender classrooms are the exception rather than the rule.

Students' experiences and interactions with US education and culture. When discussing the differences between American education and culture and Saudi education and

culture, students' experiences with mixed-gender classroom formed the basis for a few areas of agreement between groups. Two groups reported being initially uncomfortable in mixed-gender classrooms, since this state of affairs rarely exists in Saudi Arabia. The same two groups also reported that they became more accustomed to being in classes with students of the opposite gender with the passage of time. One of the groups was male and the other female, meaning that this this discomfort is not an issue that is unique only to male or female Saudi students. One female student described her experience in the following way: "Actually for me, [being in classes with men for the first time] was uncomfortable because I wasn't deal with male very much. At first I was shocked to deal with male, and after that I get used to them." There was a similar exchange between two male students in another group:

"This made some difficulty for us the first time I came here and my teacher ask me to work with a girl or a women."

"Especially a Saudi woman."

However, it should also be noted that one male student did comment that he was still uncomfortable working with Saudi women.

Two other areas provided two-group agreement on the issue of American education and culture vs. Saudi education and culture. Two groups observed that there are large differences between American and Saudi culture. While they did not specify any particular areas of culture, this observation is not entirely surprising. In addition, two groups reported that their identities as Saudis and Muslims prevented them from partaking in some social activities. In sum, all four of the points of agreement on these issues share a common theme: Saudi cultural traits that were made salient to the students and affected them in some way as a result of being placed in an environment (e.g. the United States) where those traits were no longer the norm.

Expectations of American university and academic culture. Within the interviews there was some limited discussion of students' expectations of what American university classes and academic culture would be like. The limited nature of this discussion is not surprising, since it was not directly asked as an interview question. The only group consensus in this area was between two groups, and it was that they were unsure of what to expect from American university classes. One student described it in the following way:

First of all, I haven't been in a US university before, so I'm wondering like do we have to like, to do presentations a lot, do we have to speak a lot, because we're unsure whether it is or not, because if that's not necessary, then the most important skills are reading and writing because we're going to do some papers, some essay, but if we not going to like talk to the professor or discuss, then the speaking part is not as important as the other parts. So I'm not sure if like the American system of universities requires students to participate and interact and speaks and discuss, so I think it depends. Since we haven't been in the...

Since none of the students who participated in interviews had been a student in an American university, this does not come as a surprise.

High-stakes English-language proficiency tests. Another interview question solicited students' opinions on high-stakes English language proficiency exams such as the TOEFL and IELTS, which are often used as gatekeeper tests for university admissions. Given the importance of these tests in the students' lives, they had a great deal to say on this theme, with more agreement on it between groups than on any other theme. Students' views reflected a range of opinions on the tests from frustrated rejection to lukewarm acceptance. Within this subsection, it

should be borne in mind that there was sometimes a significant difference between group members' opinions on this topic.

All three of the male groups oriented to the issue of writing and speaking topics on the TOEFL and IELTS (hereafter "the Tests"). They charged that the variability of topics between tests (particularly in different iterations of the same test, i.e. different versions of the TOEFL) imbued the testing process with a strong element of luck. If they got a "good topic," which they tended to define as one which they had background knowledge of, they would get a good score. A "bad topic," or a topic about which they knew little or nothing, by contrast, would of course doom their score. As one student described it,

...if you got lucky and have a topic that you are familiar with, have written about, or something like that, you gonna have high, gonna have highest score you can get. And, but sometimes they, they, if you, uh, topic, or you have to write about what you have no idea, even in your own language, sometimes about, like, about guns or about museums, and, so, I think sometimes no judge.

Thus, these three groups saw almost a sense of predestination lurking in the high-stakes tests which they had to take on a regular basis.

These groups expressed other views that further illustrated skepticism of the Tests' fairness and utility. Two out of these three groups also asserted that success on the Tests was largely contingent on mastery of a certain set of "strategies." In other words, they believed that there are specific methods that one can follow in order to do well on the Tests and their preparation for the Tests would largely involve practicing these strategies. One student encapsulated this view by saying, "I think IELTS and TOEFL it's not show that, how you are good in English. Just if you want to get the high score you should know the strategy and the tips."

In addition, a different combination of two male groups complained about the seeming variability of test score results. This was exemplified by one student describing how he had taken the IELTS three times over the period of a few semesters and his speaking score had progressively decreased from 6.5 to 6.0 to 5.5. For some in the groups, this was evidence that the scoring of the tests, and thus their reliability as assessment tools, was suspect. Thus, belief in the existence of a set of strategies and a lack of faith in the Tests' scoring, combined with student views on the seeming capriciousness of topics, seemed to contribute to a conception of the Tests as highly arbitrary in their assessment of English language proficiency.

Students' attitudes toward the effectiveness of the Tests in evaluating their preparedness for university classes were somewhat ambiguous. On one hand, four groups said that the Tests did not adequately assess their preparedness. However, it should be recognized that individual members of groups sometimes disagreed with each other on this issue. This helps to contextualize and make sense of the next consensus: three groups, including two of the four just mentioned, believed that the Tests do not always (as opposed to simply do not) assess their preparedness for university classes. More than anything, these two points of agreement indicate, paradoxically, the lack of agreement among the students in assessing the Tests' effectiveness in their stated missions.

The issue of the Tests' use of timed tasks also came in for criticism from some student groups. Three groups believed that if they were given more time, they would be able to score better on the Tests. While they are undoubtedly correct, this obviously circumvents the Tests' purpose in using timed tasks. Two out of these three groups also charged that using timed tasks on the Tests was unrealistic, since they believed that timed tasks would not be a major feature of American university courses.

In spite of this barrage of criticism, two groups did agree on one positive attribute of the Tests. They commented that taking the Tests was a useful barometer of their English and the skill areas that they needed to focus on and continue to improve. In the words of one student, "...the exams that we are taking, the IELTS, the TOEFL, when you see your score, you can see your weakness ... That what we did last year was we have taken TOEFL to measure our skills and see where we are." So although the students were mostly critical of the Tests, some of the students saw value in the feedback that they received from concrete, numerical scores in the various skill areas.

University admissions policies. The final interview question asked students about university admissions policies and how they should function with regard to English language proficiency requirements. On this issue, four groups suggested that universities could use an oral interview either in addition to or in place of the Tests. This seems to reflect more trust in the ability of a human interviewer to discern an applicant's English proficiency relative to university requirements than in the ability of a test to do so.

There were three other areas where two-group consensus was achieved on the question of university admissions. Two groups were in favor of the use of a field-specific test of English proficiency, with the argument that language abilities within one's field of study were more important than their general language abilities or the ability to deal with topics in a wide range of fields. Two groups also suggested that universities could use some kind of diagnostic test, although how this test would differ from the Tests is somewhat unclear. Finally, two groups acknowledged the necessity of keeping the Tests as the major gatekeepers for English language proficiency. They seemed to accept that although the Tests were imperfect, they were still the

most efficient or best way to ensure that students' English language abilities would be sufficient to the task of studying in an American university.

Themes from Teacher Interviews

Generally speaking, the teachers said more in their interviews than the students, providing more answers and commentary than the students despite there being only four groups of teachers as opposed to five groups of students. (This also explains why the quotations of teachers which will follow are generally longer than the student quotations.) However, they also agreed on far fewer themes than the students. Both of these broad characteristics of the teacher interviews are likely attributable to the teachers' being native speakers or highly proficient non-native speakers – they were able to articulate more points in the same amount of time and achieve greater nuance in doing so. It should also be noted that students were asked a few questions which teachers were not asked (namely, those about student goals and about who or what had influenced students' thoughts on what skills are important).

Necessary skills for success in American university classes. In the area of necessary skills for international students (especially Saudis) to succeed in American university classes, the teachers that were interviewed mentioned a number of skills typically associated with learning a language. There was unanimous consent among all four groups that students would need to be capable writers in order to succeed in university courses. Illustrating this, one of the teachers commented that, "...so much of what you have to do in college courses is, you know, write papers or the discussion forums posts, or other kinds of written products like e-mails, like to professors." In addition, three out of the four teacher groups said that reading was also an important skill for students to have. In support of this view, a teacher discussed how "...reading skills are fundamental to being able to do well in your studies because there's so much set

reading that's required for the students have to respond to in class or to respond to in writing, the research papers, the books. I think without strong reading skills, students might struggle in university. Or will struggle." Additionally, two groups spoke to the importance of academic presentation skills for students seeking to study in American universities.

In many other areas, teachers' answers were both specific and diverse, showing little overlap. Yet upon further analysis some stronger trends emerged when some more specific skills were combined with other, related skills. Since these areas are representative of subjects which teachers discussed at length, they could not be omitted from this analysis.

When viewed in this way, three other important necessary skills emerged from the teacher interviews. The first, garnering unanimous agreement from the teachers, was the need for students to have a good grasp of English language pragmatics. This area encompassed nine different skills that were raised in the interviews, although only one of them, expressing opinions, garnered any agreement between the groups, with that skill being discussed in two interviews.

One representative comment involved an exchange between two teachers:

"I can imagine in an American classroom, a university classroom, you know, it could be, you know, an adjustment for them to figure out how to interact appropriately."

"But that also could be a challenge if students are expected to work in groups and know how to work cooperatively and the cultural dynamics of working, you know, in a small group."

The second important grouped skill that teachers focused on was general classroom expectations in the American university setting, with three teacher groups raising this subject. This area covered ten different topics, with two of them garnering agreement from two groups (the remaining eight were only discussed once): punctuality and "general classroom expectations"

(those being the teachers' words). This particular area seems to show teachers orienting to the possibility of differences existing between the academic culture in the United States and in students' home countries.

The final grouped theme which teachers raised was that of study skills. This area comprised seven different individual skills and was discussed in two of the four groups. However, they only agreed on one of them: time management.

What students are learning in the IEP. When asked what skills students were learning in the IEP, teachers responded with a wide array of responses but achieved relatively little consensus. In fact, the maximum consensus achieved in this area was only two groups, although this occurred on six different topics. Interestingly, only one of them related to a specific "skill area" as typically thought of in IEPs, where it typically refers to "core" subject areas such as reading, writing, listening, speaking, grammar, and pronunciation. Out of these possibilities, however, only two teacher groups highlighted one of these skills, and it was writing. The fact that it was the only subject area to achieve any consensus is noteworthy.

One area raised by teachers in this area resists easy classification due to its ambiguity. Two teacher groups discussed that students were learning "culture." Given the framework used to analyze teachers' views on necessary skills, this term is problematic, since it could potentially refer to either American academic culture, which would place it into the category of "classroom expectations," or it could refer more to sociocultural skills (i.e. pragmatics), which would place it into the "pragmatics" category. Nevertheless, the fact that this particular, ambiguous term was utilized in two separate teacher groups means it is worthy of mention.

There was only one study skill which achieved consensus among teachers on skills students were learning in the IEP. This skill, remarked on by two teacher groups, was students'

taking responsibility for their own learning. Giving voice to this view, one teacher commented that, "...one of the underlying ideas is they learn to take more responsibility for their learning...the idea that, you know, you need to, there are strategies for learning and you need to try to use them, and it's not just the teacher filling your head." Teachers evidently saw this as an area where students could improve, since they perhaps would not have mentioned it otherwise.

The pragmatics category provided the two final areas of agreement on skills that students were learning. Remarkable in two out of four teacher groups, they were how to work with other students and how to interact with teachers. The pragmatic focus of these comments is clear – while it is assumed that international students in an American university would be able to engage with each other, with native speaker peers, and with teachers in conversation in English, whether they can do so in a pragmatically appropriate way cannot be assumed.

Grading the IEP. When asked to give a grade to evaluate the program's effectiveness in preparing students for American university classes, teachers were initially somewhat hesitant to do so. However, after overcoming their initial misgivings, they were all able to settle on a score. One factor that slightly complicated the tabulation of an average score was that even though teachers were asked to respond on a scale from 1 to 100, some gave answers in letter grades. The average teacher score was approximately 88.38 out of 100, with a low score of 75 and a high score of 95. Thus, the teachers' evaluations were positive overall, although some did remark that they believed that the program could do more or better.

Positive comments on the IEP. Given these positive evaluations, it is somewhat surprising that teachers achieved relatively little consensus in the area of positive assessments of the IEP. In fact, only one topic was agreed upon, and only by two groups: that the program's classes were at least somewhat similar to American university classes. As one teacher put it,

“...we’re a good transition. Because on the one hand we’re a little bit more forgiving than maybe the American setting is, however, we still hold to a lot of the principles – academic principles, that like, well obviously plagiarism, and, you know, taking responsibility for your work, etc. etc.” Although the teacher groups discussed a number of other positive attributes of the program, the fact that teachers were not directly asked to list what the program did well (although one could make the argument that they may have been asked to do so indirectly) is one possible explanation for the lack of agreement among groups.

Neutral comments on the IEP. Two comments regarding the IEP itself that were neither positive nor negative emerged from the interviews, both discussed in two groups. First, two groups expressed that they hoped that the program was helping students to eventually achieve their goals. This sentiment does, however, seem to indicate some doubt on the part of the teachers as to whether this was indeed the case. The second neutral area was the observation from two groups that the lower levels of the IEP are not intended to be academic, while the upper levels are. In the words of one teacher, “We’ve got six levels, and so we’re not preparing level 100 for college. Or level 200 for college. We’re not preparing level 300 for college. We’re preparing level 100 for 200.” These comments were important in the interpretation of teacher grades of the IEP, since one group mentioned that the program could only be graded in terms of its work with upper level students due to the wording of the question.

Negative comments on the IEP. Teachers also made a number of negative comments on the program, although again in this area there was very little consensus between groups. One reason for this lack of consensus was the fact that individual teachers’ views in this area were often strongly colored by their own specializations, research interests, and teaching experience. While this would be true no matter the research design, it seemed to be particularly true for

teachers who coordinated various subject areas across the program's classes. Ultimately, then, the only point of agreement between groups was two groups' suggesting that the IEP could try to include more cultural topics within the curriculum, although as before, what precisely is meant by "cultural" here is unclear. Nevertheless, this reflects an interest on the part of the teachers to provide students with better cultural knowledge to complement the language skills and subjects that they were studying.

During the teacher discussions, a few groups discussed the fact that evaluating the program objectively was difficult, alluding to possibility or even inevitability of their own perceptions coloring their own evaluations of the program. Thus, two groups suggested that it would be helpful to solicit feedback from former IEP students who were studying or had studied in American universities. Only with this information, they said, could the program evaluate itself with a certain measure of confidence. This consensus was illustrated in an exchange between two teachers:

"I'd want information from the students themselves responding to what they think and look at, you know, are they meeting their goals.

Yeah. That would be good feedback to get, wouldn't it? Say what, what did you need more of at the [IEP], what was a shock, and what could you have done more of – what helped and what did you want."

Personal responsibility. One other issue related to the program and to teaching itself arose. Two groups discussed at some length the importance of personal responsibility among the students. They worried that although they could give students tools that they could use in order to succeed, it was ultimately the students' task to utilize these tools themselves. As one teacher put it, "...students have to meet teachers halfway, don't they? And you have to step up and say,

‘Right, you’ve given me some skills, I’m going to try these.’” This seems to show concern both for teachers’ professions and for the students themselves – the teachers are somewhat anxious for their efforts not to be in vain and also hopeful that the students will take the initiative to be able to succeed on their own.

Characteristics of Saudi learners. The teachers spent a great deal of time discussing Saudi learners and their particular characteristics; this general theme generated far more consensus than any other among the teachers. The topics that emerged in this area broadly relate to two themes: students’ academic skills and gender issues. It is certainly noteworthy, although not altogether surprising, that the vast majority of comments that teachers made relating to the topic of characteristics of Saudi learners were negative.

The teacher interview groups discussed several different English language subject areas as they related to Saudi learners. First, they identified a number of English language subject areas as problematic for Saudi learners. Two groups commented that both reading and writing seemed to be areas in which Saudi students had difficulty. This is in line with Matson and Algren’s (2006) claim that these areas are challenging for Saudi learners (p.1). However, three teacher groups also highlighted an area where they saw Saudi students as particularly strong: speaking. When considered together, these comments illustrate a view of learners who appear to be much more comfortable with an oral mode of language rather than a written one.

Saudi students’ study skills were another subject of some discussion among the teachers. Two groups commented that these skills were problematic for students, particularly noting that they needed to learn to be more efficient. Two groups went even further, charging that Saudi students simply did not know how to study. A lengthy exchange between two teachers makes this assertion clear:

“I think Asians are just used to studying...used to the hard work. Because of the culture they have there where they need to study to get into a decent university.

And so when they come over here, they're

They're used to studying.

They're used to it. They're used to studying. They understand that that's what they need to do, and I don't think the Saudi culture is oriented that way.

Especially the male, I have to say the male Saudi culture.

The male Saudis. It's kinda different.

And it's not just the Asians, I notice. Even, there are students from other cultures, like Kazakhs,

Oh, Kazakhs, yeah.

They study. And then, let's say the South American and Latin American students, they also study. I think Saudis are the only group that really doesn't quite understand, doesn't grasp the concept of studying.

Yeah.

Males.

...

I'm thinking there must, they [the male Saudi students] probably haven't had a model for what studying looks like.”

These observations seem to mirror the findings of Bosbait and Wilson (2005), which raise concerns on the preparedness of Saudi students (p. 534). Finally, two groups asserted that the students had little realization of the importance of studying outside of the classroom. One teacher's anecdote illustrates this view:

...I asked them yesterday how many of them open their books at home and study from their books. And there were three out of fifteen that open their books at home. So we talked about how to study and what studying is and we have five hours a week in class, we worked out we have 112 hours a week of free time. So if we have five hours of grammar, is that enough when you have this many hours, but they didn't seem to realize that they could open their books and study for themselves. I'm sure they do realize, but they just didn't think it was, if the teacher gives them something, they do it, if he doesn't give them something, they don't do anything.

Taken as a whole, these viewpoints reflect a rather dim view on the part of the teachers of Saudi students' study skills.

In addition, the teachers discussed student problems in both of the other major areas they had identified as necessary skills: pragmatics and general classroom expectations. Within the domain of pragmatics, there was unanimous agreement among the groups that this was a problematic area for Saudi students. However, as before, there was little agreement on which topics specifically were problematic for the students. Yet one exchange between teachers provides a picture of one area that one teacher group identified as problematic:

There tends to be more overlapping speech, I think, from the Saudi students, and that's sometimes perceived as interruption and rudeness. So I know in terms of volume – like how vociferously you express your opinion, so I think that's something that our Saudis can work on, and it's hard for them to see that in our classes because they're not with Americans.

Yeah. Nobody gets offended.

Yeah, nobody gets offended, right. Or if they do, they're quiet and nobody knows.

And even just the vocab or the phrases you use. Or the connotations that certain words have. Again, that doesn't get picked up in an ESL classroom because

Nobody knows.

Nobody knows, other than the person, the teacher

Other than the teacher, and then they don't believe the teacher always.

Another opinion from the same teacher group provides further evidence (at least in the teachers' minds) of inappropriate student behavior:

I think one thing Saudis will have problems with culturally here is the whole idea of personal contact. I know that's something that bothers, I don't want to say bothers, but that [an IEP staff member] notices and [an IEP teacher] noticed, that if they don't like their [level] placement, they'll come and then they'll talk to you then and you say no, and then they come and they talk to you again, and you say no, and they come and talk to you again. I mean, this idea that you can, squeaky wheel gets the grease to infinity, you know, exponentially. Because of that's the way it works culturally there. And I think culturally here you'd just get people totally irritated and, you know, you'd have a bad, the person could ruin their standing in the department or get a reputation of being a pain in the neck, which is not a reputation that you want to have.

Regardless of the lack of agreement on issues, however, the singling out of pragmatics as a problem is significant since all four groups had also previously identified pragmatic competence as a necessary skill for student success.

Saudi students' understanding of general classroom expectations was called into question by three teacher groups. Just like teacher concerns over pragmatics, teachers also identified this area as important and as one in which students were lacking. However, in another parallel with pragmatic competence, there was relatively little agreement within the category of "general classroom expectations" on what particular skills Saudi students might be lacking. The only significant area where this issue generated agreement among the teachers was quite specific: two groups charged that male Saudi students would often jump right into discussions and answer questions even if they were wrong or unprepared. The teachers found this not to be in keeping with typical classroom culture in the United States and thus labeled it as problematic.

The other major area which teachers addressed in characterizing Saudi learners, as previewed by the previous point of agreement, was gender. The observation which provides a framework for the remaining teacher comments on gender comes from three groups: that there are significant differences in the quality of Saudi female students and Saudi male students. The nature of these comments are made clear in the following exchange:

"For sure, there's a difference between my women Saudis and my men, my male ones."

"Overall. But I find the women are as diligent as the Asians."

However, in all three of these groups, there was acknowledgment that these generalizations did not apply to all Saudi male or female students, but even with this caveat, the teachers stood by their assertions.

The pattern of teacher responses regarding gender difference among Saudi students, as indicated by the previous example, was relatively clear-cut. Three teacher groups observed that Saudi females were generally good students, while two characterized Saudi male students, and

particularly young Saudi male students, as lacking in motivation. As one exchange between teachers put it,

“The women are much better students.

...

But that’s true here [in the United States] too. That’s true here too.

Yeah, the women seem to be more serious, they

They have a lot more to prove.”

The language that teachers used in these descriptions was relatively stark – there was little softening of these claims of a large difference in quality between the genders. Two groups endeavored to provide an explanation for this phenomenon, commenting that Saudi female students were generally better than the men because they “had more to prove.” In both groups, teachers alluded to or outright mentioned the social place of women in Saudi society and their limited opportunities for participation in the Saudi workforce as a cause for this phenomenon. Thus, for some teachers, Saudi women’s relatively better academic quality was a result of Saudi culture and education.

Saudi culture and education. Teachers’ comments in the area of their views and understandings of Saudi culture and education shed more light on the gender differences that they described when characterizing Saudi students. Two groups said that female students and former female students had informed them that in the Saudi education system, which, as previously mentioned, segregates male and female students, there was a considerable difference in expectations and teaching between the men’s and women’s schools, as illustrated by one teacher:

...they say, it seems, when they, in school, the rules and expectations and standards are also different between men and women. They say usually women's schools or girls' schools, they have much more stringent standards. Basically, female students are much better, in a way, better trained. They know what study means, they will study and then in order to succeed, but male students take it a lot more laxly. ... Somehow, they make it through, they get to, they graduate without having had to really work hard for it. They don't really have to read, they don't really have to study a lot – they can pass. That's what was related to me.

A different combination of two groups explained that the schools for female students were more rigorous, since it was understood that women would have to fight harder than the men to get ahead in Saudi society or get a job. This view is illustrated by a teacher from another group, who was citing a conversation with a Saudi-American woman:

“... there was a Saudi-American woman [at a conference] who talked about the Saudi female experience in the US. So afterwards, we were talking and we thought maybe could explain why there's this gender difference that's emerging, and so we wrote to her to ask and she wrote back that – her explanation for it was just the classroom experience is so different for Saudi men and women. So they're separated, right? The female teachers in the female student classroom can be much more demanding of the women, yeah, just more demanding for them, and she called it...the teachers know that these women are going to have to work harder for everything that they get in the future, in their future, so they wanted to, this is their way of helping them, training them for fighting for that. And she said, then it's the opposite in the male classroom, because everything goes to the men.

Men get to make the decisions, men get the money, and there's a sense of entitlement there that doesn't exist in the female classroom."

The men, by contrast, two groups alleged, were largely possessed of a sense of entitlement, both while they were in school and after graduation. For the teachers, this sense of entitlement explained a great deal of why Saudi male students seemed to be of lower quality than the female students, since they were more likely to secure work in Saudi Arabia by virtue of their gender.

Comparing Saudi students to other students. The teachers also engaged in a certain amount of comparing Saudi students to other student groups present in the IEP. (The second-largest group of students in the IEP, after the Saudis, was the Koreans, who had, before the arrival of large numbers of Saudis, made up the majority of the program's students.) Two teacher groups commented that, generally speaking, Saudi students seemed to lack the work ethic that many Asian students had. This is made clear in a previously cited example:

I think Asians are just used to studying...used to the hard work. Because of the culture they have there where they need to study to get into a decent university.

And so when they come over here, they're

They're used to studying.

They're used to it. They're used to studying. They understand that that's what they need to do, and I don't think the Saudi culture is oriented that way.

Especially the male, I have to say the male Saudi culture.

The male Saudis. It's kinda different.

And it's not just the Asians, I notice. Even, there are students from other cultures, like Kazakhs,

Oh, Kazakhs, yeah.

They study. And the, let's say the South American and Latin American students, they also study. I think Saudis are the only group that really doesn't quite understand, doesn't grasp the concept of studying.

Yeah.

Males.

From the teachers' perspective, this lack of study skills and work ethic was a serious issue, particularly given the previously mentioned concern over students using the "tools" that teachers gave them. It is also representative of the comments that teachers made when comparing Saudi students to students from other countries – the strongest trend among them was that they were almost uniformly negative.

Changing standards in the IEP. One new area which arose in the teacher interviews was that of changing academic standards in the IEP. Two groups asserted that they felt that the program's rigor was being eroded by the presence of large numbers of Saudi students. One teacher commented that "I think the Saudis have completely changed the IEP culture and not necessarily in a positive way." An exchange from another group seems to confirm this view:

"I'm sliding. I'm being worn down."

"The longer I do this, the more I'm impressed by mediocrity."

"And sadly, I feel like that's kind of, the Saudis are presenting that challenge."

Clearly, teachers' concerns over Saudi students' academic skills are not limited to the students themselves, but also to the implications of these issues for the program itself.

Expectations of American university and academic culture. On the subject of the American university environment and culture, teachers again had a great deal to say but agreed

on little. There was consensus between all four groups on one issue, however: concern that the university environment would at least sometimes lack tolerance of students' pragmatic and language mistakes. Although no specific areas served as points of agreement, there was clear agreement that professors in the university environment might not be as understanding with students' errors as IEP teachers are. However, one representative comment illustrates the contour of these comments: "The professors won't stand for [inappropriate classroom behavior, i.e. aggressive participation] either, will they? They wouldn't take the gentle approach that we would and see it as a learning opportunity, they would just not accept it." The only other point of agreement in this area was from two groups commenting that students would have to do a great deal of writing in their classes. They also indicated that this writing would be spread out over a number of different areas and not solely limited to essays and papers, but would rather extend to online discussions and e-mails.

High-stakes English-language proficiency tests. When discussing the Tests (the TOEFL and the IELTS), the teachers' attitudes could be characterized as somewhat ambivalent. There was a great deal of low-level agreement between groups on this topic, with somewhat lukewarm acceptance of the Tests being the general sentiment between the groups. In addition, the teachers found the wording of the question that they were asked somewhat problematic. The question asked whether the Tests adequately assessed student English language preparedness in order to succeed in university classes. However, some teachers felt that the question was incomplete since there was no reference to important pragmatic and sociocultural skills, while other groups took issue with the word "preparedness": "No, I think they just test their proficiency, I don't think it's anything about preparation."

This problematization led to two direct responses to the question on the teachers' parts. Two groups asserted that the Tests did not adequately assess students' English language preparedness for university classes, while a different combination of groups commented that the Tests could be used as a good tool for predicting students' abilities to cope with the tasks that they would face in the university, but stopped short of any stronger endorsement. Two groups also tried to put the Tests in a larger context, remarking that a test is only capable of doing so much and that for what the Tests purport to do, they do it relatively well. One teacher illustrated this viewpoint clearly by commenting that, "I mean, they do as well as a standardized language test with limited time and resources can." Generally, the teachers seemed to believe that the scope of the Tests was simply too narrow to do all that might be desired of them.

However, some comments in the teacher groups sought to defend the Tests' foundations, focusing specifically on the TOEFL. Two groups commented that the TOEFL is heavily based on research and that the research behind the test is very well-developed. So for these teachers, the makers of the test have engaged in enough research to ensure the reliability of the Tests that they are willing to trust their results.

Regarding the differences between the TOEFL and the IELTS, two groups reported that at least among Saudi students, there seems to be a difference. The teachers said that Saudi students generally perceive the IELTS to be the easier of the two and therefore prefer it to the TOEFL. Whether this difference actually exists or not is another matter, but this reported perception among students is worthy of note.

The remaining points of agreement among teachers regarding the Tests were mostly critical. Two groups charged that the tasks that the Tests require are somewhat unrealistic and

not closely related enough to the skills that students will actually need to use in university classes.

One teacher gave voice to this viewpoint:

They do ongoing research you know, about testing, procedures, difficulty levels, and they do a lot of continuous research to make sure it is as effective as possible. But you know, the listenings – they get a 6 minute lecture. And, you know, they get several 6 minute lectures. But then when they come to college, they don't hear 6 minute lectures, you know? And they have to write a 30 minute and a 20 minute essay. That's, you know, that's 300 words. Really, is there ever a time when they're, you know, they're asked to write only 300 words for an essay in the university?

This again reflects the teacher concern about the scope of the Tests not being wide enough. Two groups of teachers also expressed concerns about excessive student focus on the Tests, commenting that students seemed to think that they only needed to pass the Tests and then their English proficiency would be guaranteed to be sufficient for study in American universities. It would appear, then, that the necessity for students to pass the Tests can often distract them from their IEP classes.

University admissions policies. When asked about university admissions processes, teachers largely appeared to be in favor of maintaining the status quo. Although the possibility of conducting interviews with applicants was raised, two groups commented that these interviews would be simply too labor-intensive, and therefore too expensive, for practice or widespread use, particularly in a large university such as that in which the interviews were conducted. Largely for this reason, two groups believed that, according to one of the teachers, “because of the various constraints on the admissions process: time, space, and money, [the Tests were] the most

economical way to solve this problem.” So although teachers saw possibilities for change in the admissions process, they also seemed to be in favor of continuing the status quo in the absence of better options.

Comparing and Contrasting Themes from the Student and Teacher Interviews

This final section of the analysis focuses on a side-by-side comparison of the findings between the student and teacher groups. Rather than exhaustively comparing each point of agreement between students and teacher, this analysis instead focuses on themes that achieved a large degree of consensus among them in either the teacher or student groups. It also focuses on points of agreement that share some similar qualities even if they generated relatively less agreement. These comparisons are supplemented where appropriate with some details from interviews that, although not points of agreement, are still pertinent to the analysis. The result, it is hoped, will provide insight into the perspectives of both groups of participants.

Necessary skills for success in American university classes. In the area of necessary skills, both students and teachers agreed on the importance of both reading and writing. This agreement was quite strong, with most groups contributing these ideas at some point in their discussions. Regardless of where the students discovered this difference in academic cultures, they seem to have internalized the importance of these two skills within the American university system.

The subject area of speaking provides an interesting contrast between students’ and teachers’ views. While a number of student groups identified speaking in particular as a necessary skill, that broad area was not a point of agreement for the teachers. This provides a number of interesting insights.

For the students, speaking seemed to be largely a matter of communication. Their identification of “speaking” as a skill rather than more specific components of speaking would seem to indicate this. This may simply reflect students’ understanding of this skill – they perceive it more as a whole than as a sum of a number of different parts, as the teachers seem to perceive it. In addition, some low-level agreement that students wanted more grammar feedback on their speaking would seem to reinforce the view that speaking is, for the students, essentially the same as communication. Thus, students seek simply to be able to express themselves clearly and accurately in English.

The fact that teachers did not mention speaking could be attributed to a number of factors. The most important is that they may believe that speaking is a relatively less important skill within American universities, as they discussed in a few of the teacher interviews. Instead, they tended to believe in the importance of reading and writing. In addition, the teachers identified Saudi students in particular as good at speaking, and therefore may see speaking as relatively less important for the students, since that area is already a strength. Finally, teachers seem to be less concerned about speaking for communication than they are about speaking as a collection or union of speech acts. Particularly at the upper levels, where both groups acknowledged the increasingly academic focus of the program, the teachers placed greater focus on the necessity for students to be aware of and conform to American cultural and academic norms. Since speaking in the university environment involves a number of these skills, teachers’ focus on them is perhaps unsurprising. All of these factors, then, would combine to make speaking for communication somewhat less important in the teachers’ eyes.

Within the realm of necessary skills, students focused largely on subject areas such as reading, speaking, and writing. Although some topics other than subject areas did surface, they

were few in number and generally did not create high levels of consensus. A number of these skills were also identified as important by the teachers, but the teachers also discussed a number of skills which were not discussed within the student interviews.

The main difference regarding necessary skills was the teachers' focus on three areas: pragmatics, study skills, and classroom expectations. There are a number of potential explanations for this. First, the teachers' status as either native speakers or highly proficient non-native speakers likely makes them much more sensitive to and aware of these skills, since they themselves are a part of American university culture. In addition, all of the teachers have extensive experience in teaching ESL and an educational background in both linguistics and pedagogy. Thus, their awareness of non-native speakers' shortcomings in these areas has been further raised; they not only can identify when international students violate sociocultural norms, but they are frequently if not always able to articulate why this happens. Furthermore, they have an understanding of how to present these issues to students. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, these issues may well be largely invisible to the students. Since many of the students at the IEP (and certainly the Saudi students) come from educational and cultural backgrounds different from those of the United States, they lack awareness of the local educational and cultural norms and will likely remain unaware of the differences between their own norms and American norms until their attention is drawn to them or they encounter some kind of serious problem. Regardless of which of these reasons is most important, however, it is likely that they all play a factor in these three issues being more salient for teachers than for students.

Teachers' focus on these issues also seems to imply that the teachers find students lacking in these areas in some way. However, it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which these

doubts apply to Saudi students, since the question asked about international students in general but Saudi students in particular. Thus, these concerns may not be specific to Saudi students, but to international students in general. Yet some of the anecdotes that teachers told, as well as teachers' identification of study skills as a weak area for some Saudi students, seem to indicate that teachers, if asked, would identify these as problem areas for Saudi students as opposed to international students in general.

However, it is important to note that the students themselves to a certain extent do recognize some of these differences in pragmatics and cultural norms. Although it was not a point of agreement, at least one of the student groups discussed having learned about strategies for agreeing and disagreeing in their listening and speaking class. This is a topic which falls squarely into the realm of pragmatics, and the students not only discussed how they believed it was important, but also discussed it in terms of how these strategies were different from how they would accomplish the same task in Arabic in Saudi Arabia. Thus, it would seem that there is at least some limited awareness and understanding of the importance of pragmatics from the student perspective.

In addition, the students' identification of "culture" as a necessary skill provides a potential catch-all term that could be construed to include issues such as pragmatics and classroom expectations. From the interviews, however, it is impossible to know precisely what students meant by this term. Yet one could perhaps assert that this simply reflects students' still-developing understanding of the educational and cultural environment that they find themselves in, which is a normal state of affairs for international students. Indeed, it provides an important component of IEP education: students not only need assistance in developing their language

abilities, but also in deepening their understanding of the American university environment, its particular (and perhaps peculiar) cultural qualities, and its expectations.

What students are learning in the IEP. When discussing what they were learning in the IEP, the students only focused on subject areas within their English language education. This continues the trend from the previous (necessary skills) section, where subject areas were also a primary focus for the students. The teachers, on the other hand, agreed at rather lower levels than the students and focused considerably less on subject areas. There are two potential explanations for this. The first is that the teachers might have considered subject areas such as writing and listening to be self-evident – of course, if students are enrolled in an academic reading and writing course, they are probably learning at least something about reading and writing. Thus, for them, it may well have seemed redundant to say that students were learning writing in their writing class or pronunciation in their pronunciation class. However, another potential explanation is teacher specialties and experience. A number of teachers who were interviewed were subject area leaders (i.e. coordinators for writing, listening and speaking, pronunciation, etc.) for the IEP and consequently much more focused on some areas than others. In addition, others preferred to teach certain subject areas over others. These different focuses likely caused different issues to be salient for different teachers. This would simultaneously account for the low levels of agreement and less focus on particular subject areas. It is likely, however, that both of these factors played a role in shaping teachers' views on what students were learning at the time of the interviews.

Grading the IEP. When grading the IEP, there was a notable difference between students' and teachers' grades: the average teacher grade was 88.38, compared to 81.35 for the students. However, why this was the case is not entirely clear from the data. The general theme

of the teacher conversations on this subject was “We do well, but we might be able to do some things better,” while the students generally voiced satisfaction with the program, although they did have a number of negative comments (yet it should be noted that the teachers did as well). Further inquiry would be necessary to fully explore the discrepancy between the grades.

Positive comments on the IEP. In the area of comments on the IEP, an important similarity was the aforementioned general contentment with the program among both students and teachers. The majority of the student groups reported that the program was helpful, and although the general spirit of the teacher interviews was the same, the teachers were more circumspect, perhaps because they felt that they were not in a position to answer the question, perhaps due to conflict of interest. However, a few teacher groups did mention that they hoped that the program was helping. This seems to lend some credence to the theory that they are at least somewhat positive about how the program is faring in educating its students.

The students also mentioned that they believed that the IEP’s Conversation Partners program was helpful for developing their linguistic and cultural knowledge. This area was largely absent from the teacher discussions. This is somewhat unsurprising, since the teachers are for the most part disconnected from the Conversation Partners program. The students, however, if they participate in the program, meet with their partners at least weekly, so this program forms a part of their weekly routine. Thus, since the Conversation Partners program is on the whole much more salient for the students than for the teachers, it is unsurprising that students would mention it whereas the teachers would not.

Neutral and negative comments on the IEP. Within the area of comments on the program, there is also an interesting disconnect between the teachers and students on the purpose of the lower level classes within the IEP. The teachers briefly discussed that the purpose of the

lower levels is not academic preparation, but instead, general English language education. This contrasts with some student complaints that the lower levels were “just review” and not as helpful as some of the upper-level, more academically focused classes. These diverging views seem to indicate clashing expectations on what the lower level classes should consist of. The students, most of whom are under pressure to pass a proficiency test and gain admission to a university program sooner rather than later, want more academic preparation earlier, but the teachers believe that academic study cannot properly begin at lower levels and that it must wait until the upper levels. While this problem reflects a natural conflict, given the differing goals of teachers and students, it is one where better dialogue or communication between the two could perhaps bridge the gap.

Personal responsibility. In the area of personal responsibility, teachers seemed to expect that their views would diverge with those of the students. Generally, the teachers believed that their job was to give students the tools that they needed to succeed, but that it was the students’ responsibility to use them. These statements imply that at least on some occasions, the students do not follow through on their end of the bargain. In other words, the teachers seem somewhat skeptical of students’ sense of responsibility toward their education.

However, nearly the exact same message on personal responsibility came from the students. Although the students framed this issue in a slightly different way, namely that the program “gave them” a certain amount [of learning/material] and the rest was their responsibility, this mirrors the teachers’ views very closely. So, interestingly, in this area, the teachers seemed to expect that student views would diverge from theirs, but at least in the interviews, they did not.

There are two potential explanations for this disconnect. The first is that the teachers may have a tendency to focus more on the negative exemplars of personal responsibility among

students rather than the positive exemplars. It is not unreasonable to think that those students who do not meet teachers' expectations leave more of an impression than those who do. Yet there is another potential reason. One could perhaps argue that the students are at least verbally committed to this notion of personal responsibility, but do not always follow through on it. However, as this is the case in education in general, this conclusion is hardly original. It could, however, be more interestingly framed as a difference in what personal responsibility means in a cultural sense. Some teacher groups did allege that some of the Saudi students "[did] not know how to study," so perhaps the teachers perceived a difference because the students were doing what they believed was expected of them, but the IEP teachers' expectations, grounded in their own shared understanding of American academic culture, were more demanding than those of the students. Yet, if this is possible, then the reverse may also be true. The teachers may simply have an overly grandiose interpretation of what their students can or should do in order to be good learners. Perhaps their expectations as teachers are different from what they would do as students. Regardless of why it exists, however, the important theme in this discussion is the fact that the students and teachers voiced very similar opinions on the theme of personal responsibility, which should be encouraging for both groups.

Characteristics of Saudi learners. When discussing the characteristics of Saudi learners, both the students and teachers focused on some of the same themes which they identified as problematic, particularly writing. It is also interesting to note that both groups focused either mostly or entirely on problems that students had rather than on any of their positive attributes. This may well be because weaknesses are often easier to notice than strengths and therefore became more salient in the interviews.

While both groups concentrated largely on problematic characteristics of Saudi learners, the teachers' list of points of agreement on this issue was far longer than that of the students. This may be because the students had more difficulty describing themselves, either due to the fact that they regard their characteristics as normal or unremarkable or due to the fact that describing oneself can be difficult since there is little room for objectivity. This relates to another reason why teachers may have listed more negative characteristics: they have other points of comparison. Since the teachers who were interviewed are experienced and have had students from many different countries, any shortcomings that Saudi students present are likely to be more obvious to them than to the students, who have spent the majority of their lives in the company of other Saudis. Whatever the reason or reasons may be, the teachers' longer list of negative characteristics of Saudi learners was a noticeable difference between the two interview groups.

In their longer list, the teachers put considerable focus on issues of pragmatics, classroom expectations, and study skills. The fact that teachers had previously discussed these areas as necessary skills is worthy of note – not only do the teachers see them as important skills for the students to have, but they believe that these areas also represent challenges for Saudi students. This may provide some evidence that teachers were discussing Saudi students in particular when they were asked about necessary skills for international students to succeed in university classes.

Further evidence that teachers were indeed focusing at least somewhat on Saudi students comes from the comparisons that teachers made between Saudi students and other student populations in the IEP. The only significant agreement in this area among the teacher groups was that Asian (sometimes specifically Korean) students had a better work ethic and were more used to heavy workloads than Saudi students, ostensibly due to better study skills. However, since the

teachers identified study skills as a necessary area for international students at the beginning of the interviews but do not think that they are, on the whole, a problem for Korean students or [East] Asian students more generally, it would appear that the teachers were bearing Saudi students in mind when thinking about and discussing what skills were necessary for international students to succeed in American university classes.

This combined teacher focus on pragmatics, classroom expectations, and study skills as both necessary skills and problems for Saudi students seems to lend further credence to the idea that these areas are not highly visible to Saudi students. Since the students did not identify these as necessary skills or important problems for them, they may well simply be unaware of them or see them as marginally important. The program may need to place additional focus in the future on helping students to become more aware of them importance of these areas for their future success in American university classes.

One major issue on the topic of the characteristics of Saudi learners that teachers oriented to but the students did not was the role of gender in the classroom. The teachers discussed at length the differences that they perceived between male and female Saudi students, commenting that the female students generally tended to be of rather higher quality than the males. There were no parallel comments of any kind from the students. Since this was a topic that generated significant agreement among the teachers, this silence on the part of the students is striking.

One could endeavor to explain this gap in a number of ways. The first possible explanation is that this subject is either uncomfortable or taboo for the students. Given the segregated nature of the education system in Saudi Arabia and the fact that the IEP was the first place where Saudi male and female students were together in classes, students may have realized only on coming to the United States that there were significant differences between the male and

female education systems in Saudi Arabia and consequently that there are significant differences between the students in these systems. The cultural dynamics of the country may also make discussion of the issue problematic for students – since it is inappropriate for a man to talk about many of his female relatives (Algren & Matson, 2005, p. 5), it may also be inappropriate for him to discuss Saudi women as a whole. It is also possible that the difference between male and female Saudi students is either invisible or not highly visible to the students. While it seems unlikely, perhaps the effect of being in classes with the opposite gender for the first time makes it difficult to see the differences between the genders that the teachers perceive. More inquiry would be necessary to analyze exactly why there is such a conspicuous silence from the students on this issue.

Saudi culture and education. In the area of Saudi culture and education, there was a similar gap between students' and teachers' views regarding gender. While in this instance, the students did briefly discuss the fact that the men's and women's educational systems in Saudi Arabia are segregated, this was the extent of their comments. The teachers, however, sought in this fact an explanation for the differences that they perceived between male and female Saudi students within the IEP. This is not surprising, since once they had established that there was (at least in their view) a difference between male and female students, it is natural that they would seek reasons as to why this might be the case. In addition, two teacher groups cited anecdotes from Saudi women who seemed to be the source of teachers' beliefs. The anecdotes both told of how the women's educational system is more rigorous than the men's, since the women will have to fight harder and be more prepared and qualified in order to get ahead in or even get into the Saudi workforce. The students, however, said nothing of the sort for reasons which have already been speculated about.

There was also an interesting difference between teachers and students on the subject area focuses of the Saudi education system. While both groups commented on how different values are attached to listening and speaking and reading and writing in the Saudi education system, they framed the issue differently. The students presented the issue as a lack of importance attributed to reading and writing whereas the teachers described it as a prevalence of listening and speaking. This difference, however, may or may not be significant. What appears to have happened, however, is that both groups oriented to the more important set of skills in each cultural environment: reading and writing in the United States and listening and speaking in Saudi Arabia.

Comparing Saudi students to other students. One theme which has been previously mentioned but not discussed more in-depth is that of making comparisons between Saudi students and students from other cultural backgrounds. An interesting similarity in this area is that both the students and the teachers made these kinds of comparisons, and both used the same groups as the foil for the Saudis: Koreans (although both groups sometimes also simply used the more generic term “Asians” instead). For the students, this is likely because the Koreans are the second-largest student population in the IEP after the Saudis, although they are outnumbered by the Saudis by a ratio of between 4:1 and 5:1. For the teachers, this comparison is likely due to the fact that Koreans were the dominant group in the IEP before the Saudis, and therefore many of the teachers were accustomed to teaching Korean students. While the student comparisons tended to be somewhat neutral, the teachers’ comparisons tended to put the Saudis in a rather unflattering light. The general tenor of the teacher discussions would suggest that this is because the teachers seemed to hold the average Korean student in higher regard than the average Saudi student. However, this was only implied within the teacher interviews, never stated directly.

Expectations of American university and academic culture. On the subject of American university environment and culture, there was one area of low-level but interesting agreement between students and teachers. Both groups expressed some uncertainty as to what students might actually experience within the university environment. For the students, this was because they had no firsthand experience with American universities and therefore had to rely on secondhand information from friends, families, or other sources, or on their own undergraduate experience in Saudi Arabia if they already had a bachelor's degree. While the teachers themselves almost uniformly had both undergraduate and graduate experience in American universities, their experience was largely in education, the liberal arts, and social sciences, and consequently quite different from that of the students, who were mostly focused on science, engineering, business, and technology. Some teacher groups recognized and commented on this issue, but the most important and broader theme was that there was some unsureness between both groups regarding students' future experiences in American university classes.

In addition, some teacher groups expressed concern over professors' not tolerating issues related to students' incomplete knowledge of language, pragmatics, or classroom expectations as a result of their status as non-native speaker international students. These views were also tinged with teachers' uncertainty about what students would actually face in university courses. They seem to reflect teachers' professional concerns about how well the IEP is preparing students for university classes and if students will be able to function in the environments that they are being sent into. One student group did also allude to this as a potential issue, but there was no inter-group agreement on it. However, there is clearly some concern about the lack of understanding of international student issues outside of teaching environments where teachers are specialists in dealing with international students.

High-stakes English-language proficiency tests. Regarding the Tests, one area where students placed a certain amount of emphasis was on the topics. Three groups asserted that the topics on individual iterations of the Tests played an important role in determining their results. There was no corresponding commentary from the teachers in this area, however. There are two possible reasons for this. First, the students are the ones actually taking the tests, and except for the teachers who teach the IEP's TOEFL preparation class, the teachers are unlikely to be very familiar with the Tests and the topics they include. Thus, the topics are a much more salient issue for the students. Second, the teachers may find the topics to be less problematic than the students due to their understanding of the constraints of test design. Since the teachers themselves all have experience in designing assessments, they may be somewhat more sympathetic toward topics on the Tests that are seen as "general" in American culture, but that Saudi students might perceive as outside their specialty. This is likely due to the tradition of liberal arts education in the United States, of which the teachers are a part, but which may have no parallel in Saudi Arabia. Perhaps, then, the teachers do not see in the topics the element of luck that students do, which would account for teachers' saying nothing about the Tests' topics.

Both groups, however, oriented to certain aspects of the Tests that they found unrealistic. For the students, the problem was timing. A number of groups discussed the fact that university classes were unlikely to require many, if any, timed tasks in class. Proceeding from this viewpoint, the students believed that having timed tasks on the Tests was an unfair assessment, since they would never, or only rarely, face such conditions in American university classes. For the teachers, the tasks themselves were the problematic part of the tests. Teachers did not agree on which tasks were unrealistic – some focused on the writing section, while others focused more on the listening or speaking sections, but regardless, the teachers' concern was that the

tasks did not sufficiently mirror tasks which students would face in university classes. So for diverging reasons, both the students and teachers found certain aspects of the Tests unrealistic and therefore questionable in terms of their abilities to assess students' English language preparedness for American university classes.

Despite these concerns, however, the final assessment from both the students and teachers was low-level, somewhat lukewarm support for the Tests. Although there were parts or aspects of the Tests that they disliked, there was some recognition of the Tests' ability to evaluate English proficiency, at least in a limited fashion. Some student groups still saw the Tests as valuable sources of feedback, while some teacher groups saw them as a useful way to keep students motivated in learning English. So although their reasons differed, in the end there was a general sense of the Tests being acceptable, if less than ideal.

University admissions policies. On the theme of university admissions, the students and teachers largely agreed. Both groups discussed the possibility of interviewing prospective students as a supplement to or replacement for the Tests, with the students doing so somewhat more hopefully than the teachers. For both groups, however, it appears that this potential alternative was seen as a way to compensate for the less desirable aspects of the Tests, as were just described. What is difficult to discern, though, is how seriously these were put forward as real choices for university admissions offices as opposed to brainstormed ideas that might be quickly discarded. Nevertheless, the agreement between students and teachers on this subject is worthy of note.

However, the students and teachers also ultimately agreed, although in a somewhat limited fashion, that universities would have to continue to use the Tests to assess prospective students' English proficiency in their admissions processes. The teachers believed that this was

the case because universities had neither the time nor the resources to carry out such a large-scale interview process, particularly at a large research institution such as the university where this research was conducted. The students, for their part, did not form a consensus on precisely why the Tests would have to stay, merely that universities would have to continue using them. This agreement is noteworthy since despite the many concerns that the student and teacher groups listed both individually and together about the Tests, they acknowledged the reality of the situation which university admissions offices face and the continued necessity of using the Tests. Although their consensus might be termed as seeing the Tests as the “least bad option,” it is a consensus nonetheless.

Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings

This section focuses largely on interpretation of the findings detailed in the previous section. There is a particular concentration on the implications for the IEP where the research was conducted.

The majority of points discussed in this section concern the disconnects between the student and teacher interviews. It is important that these gaps be bridged in some way. This is important for current students at the IEP as well as future students, whether they are from Saudi Arabia or elsewhere. For the IEP, it is important from a professional standpoint, given that the program is an organization that must embrace all cultures, though this mission is not always easily accomplished.

Areas of Discussion Not Included in the Analysis

Due to the research design used in this study, which required at least two groups to orient to a topic in order for it to be analyzed, a fair amount of interesting discussion and comments had to be left out of the analysis due to a lack of agreement among the groups. Nevertheless, a number of issues that did not generate inter-group agreement merit mention at the very least, since the incidental raising of topics was one of the main reasons why a group interview format was chosen. This subsection briefly presents a number of these topics.

A number of the most interesting discussions in the student interviews came as a result of intra-group disagreements. Many of them, although not couched in technical terms, reflect some of the difficulties and pedagogical questions and debates that are common in teaching ESL. For example, one group spent a few minutes discussing the validity or non-validity of scores on the Tests, with one student arguing that one's score could fall into a range, rather than be pinpointed with one number from one iteration of the test. The same group also commented on the difficulty

of grammar instruction, noting that expecting to make immediate gains in grammar proficiency from taking grammar classes was unreasonable and that grammar needs time to develop. Other groups spent time discussing when the ideal time for introducing particular classes (especially reading and pronunciation) would be. These issues, many of which would not be out of place as discussion topics in a course on ESL pedagogy or methodology, demonstrate considerable depth of student thought on their education in English. They should serve as reminders for teachers that instead of assuming that students are largely ignorant of issues in ESL pedagogy, students can provide valuable insight and feedback on teaching and teaching methodology and can even serve as partners in improving their experience in learning ESL (Johnson, 2005, p. 11).

One tendency of teachers that did not merit more than a mention in the analysis section was the apparent reliance of teachers on anecdotes to illustrate a number of their points. Nearly all the teacher groups used an anecdote or alluded to examples when discussing student behavior which they found inappropriate. These examples ranged from students leaving class to answer a phone call to a student participating in a class discussion on a book that he had not read. In many ways, these anecdotes helped to illustrate a theme which surfaced in a few different places in teacher interviews: the general idea that “they [the students] don’t believe us.” In other words, the teachers were somewhat frustrated with the apparent lack of student buy-in as to the importance of the subject being taught or the importance of classroom rules and expectations, as well as with student actions that they saw as inappropriate. Anecdotes were their way of giving form to these frustrations.

A number of teacher groups also spent some time ruminating on what they could do in order to better help students within the IEP. Since this area itself generated no agreement, it could not be included in the analysis, but the overall sentiment is certainly noteworthy. However,

the reflection and self-reflection that was made evident by these comments makes it clear that there is ongoing thought within the program as to how it can better serve its students.

Issues Regarding Students

One interesting question that emerges from the interviews is why the issue of gender, which was so prevalent in teacher interviews, was largely absent from the students' comments. Other than mentioning that schools are segregated by gender in Saudi Arabia and that students were initially uncomfortable with mixed-gender classrooms in the US, gender did not play an important role in the student interviews. There are three potential explanations for this. The first is that these gender differences, due to constraints imposed by Saudi culture, are taboo in some way for students to discuss. This could perhaps be answered with further inquiry to Saudi students or to those who are very familiar with Saudi culture. The second potential explanation is that the differences which the teachers described between male and female Saudi students are simply not salient to the students – either they do not see them or they do not regard them as notable. While this does not seem likely if the teachers' assessments of stark differences between male and female students are indeed true, it is nevertheless a possibility. The third explanation is that this topic simply did not come up in student interviews and that, if asked, students would give an opinion. In other words, the conversations in the five student interview groups may not have proceeded in a way that was conducive to producing student discussion of this issue. It is of course possible that any combination of these explanations could come together in order to give a comprehensive, clear answer as to why gender was discussed so little in the student groups.

Issues Regarding Teachers

A major issue that emerges from the interviews is the profusion of negative views that the teachers held toward Saudi students, and particularly toward male students. These views were

expressed in a number of the teacher interviews and discussed at length. In a few teacher interviews, they even surface at several different times throughout the interview. Since teacher perceptions of students or groups of students can have a significant subconscious effect on how teachers treat their students (Vollmer, 2000, p. 53), this subject clearly merits some discussion.

An important question that needs to be asked in connection with these negative views is this: Are these views consistent with teachers' experiences, or do they over-represent examples of behavior which teachers find unacceptable? In other words, is it possible that teachers are more likely to remember negative exemplars of behavior rather than positive exemplars? Do negative experiences make more of an impact than positive ones? While the answers to these questions are psychological, rather than pedagogical in nature, and therefore beyond the scope of this research, they must necessarily be considered when searching for the causes and implications of teachers' views on their students.

In analyzing the teachers' negative views on the characteristics of Saudi students, it is difficult to avoid finding many of the teachers' comments to be quite judgmental. While on one hand, it is very difficult, or nearly impossible, to avoid forming perceptions of students in any way, these perceptions are very dangerous since they can easily color impressions of current and future students, even if a teacher has not had adequate time to get to know his/her students. Once a stereotype is formed, it takes very little evidence to confirm that stereotype in new people, which then further entrenches it. While a number of the teacher groups carefully attached the caveat "not all male students are like this" or "not all female students are like that," they nevertheless afterward often engaged in a fair amount of stereotyping.

The Saudi students in question represent a new "wave" of students coming into the IEP. As such, they are a group that the IEP teachers are (or were, until recently) largely unfamiliar

with. This means that there is an ongoing two-way process of acculturation – the students becoming accustomed to the teachers and the teachers to the students. The teachers are professionals who should be well-versed in intercultural communication and experienced in dealing with the particulars of other cultures, but the persistence of strong negative stereotypes against the dominant cultural group within the IEP several years after they first arrived should serve as a red flag for these professional qualities. Although one cannot reasonably expect perfect tolerance of all cultural behaviors and backgrounds, the magnitude of teachers' negative views regarding these students is worrisome.

The teachers also showed a remarkable sensitivity to gender issues related to Saudi students. This sensitivity was particularly pointed among the female IEP teachers who were interviewed. Nearly all of them were quite critical of Saudi male students and highly skeptical of their motivation and preparedness to succeed either in IEP classes or in American university classes. The female students, on the other hand, were generally held up as models (“as diligent as the Asians,” as one teacher put it), ostensibly due to their superior preparation in the education system in Saudi Arabia. While the male teachers interviewed did not disagree with these viewpoints, they were often rather less stark in their characterizations of male and female students. This raises the possibility that the female teachers are in a way reacting as a result of biases toward Saudis and Saudi society when they create their constructs of male and female Saudi students when viewed generally.

These negative views are particularly important to bear in mind due to the generally negative portrayal of both Arabs and Muslims in the media. If international educators who should be highly familiar and proficient in cultural relativism harbor generally negative views of some of the students who fit these profiles, then who can one reasonably expect to understand

them and present them as they are, and not as some stereotype might have them be? The implications are far-reaching, extending perhaps as far as Americans' willingness to welcome and include foreigners and immigrants into the country. If IEP teachers are limited in their capacity to do so, then it would be difficult to expect a welcoming attitude on the part of ordinary citizens.

In the interview, the teachers appeared to have similar points of comparison for the Saudi students: either "Asian" students in general, or Korean students specifically. While comparison may well be a natural human habit, engaging in it may well be another step in reducing students to stereotypes which they cannot escape from. Since Saudi and Korean students are quite different culturally, socially, and educationally, it is perhaps not surprising that one might try to compare them, but on the other hand, one could also say that they are so different that the comparison would largely be one of "apples and oranges." Ultimately, engaging in these sorts of activities creates false dichotomies since neither Koreans nor Saudis can by any means be considered a monolithic bloc. Teachers, then, must continually beware of how they perceive students and perceive groups of students as a whole.

Issues Regarding Disconnects Between Student and Teacher Perspectives

An important difference that became evident between the students and the teachers was the teachers' identification of study skills, classroom expectations, and pragmatics as necessary skills for international students studying in American universities. However, the interviews seem to indicate that these issues are not highly visible to the students. For this reason, the IEP should consider ways in which it can make these issues more salient to students. In other words, more consciousness-raising is necessary. This responsibility must necessarily fall on the teachers since the students are unlikely to perceive these differences. Without intervention from teachers,

students will remain unaware of these issues until they cause problems. One factor which may make addressing these challenges somewhat easier is the fact that teachers only need to overcome students' lack of knowledge, rather than resistance. Clearly, instruction in this area is having some effect, as one student group did spend some time discussing pragmatic differences in agreeing and disagreeing between the United States and Saudi Arabia, so the teachers should be able to use the ways in which that subject is taught as a model for further engaging students in analyzing themselves and their language abilities in these three areas.

A good example of an area where these modifications would need to be applied is in the area of speaking. While the students seem to conceive of speaking largely as a simple matter of communication, involving grammar and vocabulary to convey a message, the teachers seem to conceive of it more as the sum of a number of different speech acts. However, since few of the student groups referenced these speech acts, it would appear that the students may need additional help in understanding the important role that speech acts, such as agreeing and disagreeing, play in oral communication. While technical terminology is of course not necessary, students would benefit from greater understanding of important differences between speech acts in their native language and speech acts in English.

The noticeably higher grades which teachers gave to the IEP in evaluating it deserve some discussion. However, analyzing this point is complicated somewhat by the fact that both the teacher and student groups gave qualitative feedback indicating general satisfaction with the program. One potential explanation is that the teachers have a better understanding of the constraints which the program is operating under and therefore give the program better marks as a result of general approval of how the IEP deals with those constraints. The students, as the "customers," may conceive of the program and its purpose somewhat differently from the

teachers and thus evaluate it somewhat more harshly when their expectations are not met. (There is, of course, the very obvious explanation that teachers are likely to evaluate themselves favorably, but that may be so obvious as to not merit mentioning.)

Another area where student and teacher perceptions need to be better unified is in their understandings of the IEP's lower levels and their purpose. While the teachers see the lower levels simply as preparation for the academic English that begins at the 400 and 500 levels, the students find this "general English" orientation to be insufficiently academic for their purposes. A number of student groups requested the integration of various classes or skills (such as academic vocabulary or TOEFL preparation) at lower levels. However, both students and teachers were in agreement on one point: the program does indeed have an increasingly academic focus as students ascend in level.

In order to address this disconnect, two options are possible. The first option is for the IEP to more clearly communicate to students the general orientation of the lower levels. While this may not be popular with the students, it would at least help to prevent students from forming expectations of the lower level classes that the IEP might see as unreasonable. This communication could perhaps include rationales of why the inclusion of more academic material at lower levels is difficult or undesirable. The second option is for the IEP to make some changes in response to student dissatisfaction in this area. These changes could be relatively small and non-disruptive for the existing curriculum, for example, organizing a few small workshops for lower level students on basic skills for the Tests or incorporating more vocabulary instruction into existing classes. However, larger changes could also be possible, such as beginning writing instruction at an earlier level. Regardless of the option chosen, however, it is apparent that this point of discord between students and teachers needs to be addressed.

The area of personal responsibility provided one topic where students and teachers largely agreed. Comments from all groups showed a considerable degree of uniformity, repeating the theme that the teachers and/or program could only do so much and that a large amount of the responsibility for learning lay with the students. However, that agreement would seem to come as a surprise to the teachers, a number of whom called students' sense of personal responsibility into question. One could explain this disconnect in a few different ways. First, the teachers and students may have different definitions of what constitutes personal responsibility. If the teachers have higher expectations than the students, then the apparent discord is fairly easily explained away. However, it is also possible that teachers have mostly taken to heart the negative examples of students and that their view of Saudi students in general has dimmed as a result. If this is indeed the case, then the bad exemplars of personal responsibility have managed to occupy the forefront of teachers' minds, obscuring those whose dedication meets or exceeds teachers' explanations. The final possible explanation is that students claim that personal responsibility is important for themselves and for students in general, but do not follow through. If this is the case, they may have clear ideas of what their responsibilities as students are and what they need to do in order to succeed, but are, for whatever reason, unable or unwilling to do so. Determining the reason for this phenomenon is will likely require further research.

Issues Regarding the Program

One area where the IEP can improve, particularly in the eyes of the teachers, is to engage in a more systematic way in follow-up questions or interviews with former IEP students. This would give the program more accurate data on the situations and challenges that international students face in American university classes and help to guide the program in modifying its curricula to reflect students' feedback. Some teacher groups cited the need for this sort of

information in their interviews, commenting that it would help them to be able to better and more objectively evaluate the program, so clearly, teachers are aware of the potential gains that could result from this project.

However, collecting systematic feedback is not without its potential pitfalls. Those that exist are largely beyond the program's control. The quality of feedback that the IEP can obtain is very dependent on student responses, and it might prove difficult to contact students after the end of their time studying at the IEP. Then, even if they can be contacted, only a certain percentage of students are likely to respond. The issue is further complicated by the fact that the responses may not come from a representative sample of IEP students. It is most likely that two groups of students will respond: those who are motivated and those who are dissatisfied with the program in some way. This could easily skew the data and provide misleading conclusions for the IEP. However, one student, in a presentation of the partial findings of this research, dismissed such criticisms. Her opinion was that the bad students were not the ones that mattered, and that the program should only focus on those who were willing to put in the necessary effort. If her advice is to be heeded, then, perhaps collecting more systematic feedback could prove useful to the program rather than a fool's errand.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and Limitations

This section will outline the most important findings of this research, drawn largely from the comparison section of the research analysis. Accompanying these findings will be a discussion of their implications, especially focusing on important considerations for the IEP where the research took place. Finally, some limitations of the research will be detailed.

Conclusions from the Research

As has been briefly discussed in previous sections, the areas of American classroom expectations, pragmatics, and study skills represent blind spots for the students. Given that they vary cross-culturally, it is no surprise that these skills are a challenge. Thus, ESL teachers and the IEP in particular will need to engage in further reflection on these topics. One possible course of action would be to assemble a list of skills in each of these areas which students will need in American university classes. The program can then assess whether current curricula adequately address these issues, and if not, make changes to better align IEP course content with these skills which teachers have identified as important.

An area of disagreement between students and teachers was the purpose of lower level classes in the IEP. While some student groups indicated interest in more academic content at these levels, teachers maintained that the 100, 200, and 300 levels were not academic in nature. Therefore, there needs to be clearer communication between the program and students on the purpose of these classes. The IEP could potentially label these classes as “pre-academic” in order to allay student concerns, but additional dialogue may be necessary to explain why the academic content that the students want cannot be delivered in these levels.

One area of agreement that might come as a surprise to teachers is that of personal responsibility. Student and teacher comments and opinions on this subject fit together almost

seamlessly, with both groups emphasizing final responsibility in the hands of the students. For this reason, teachers may need to reassess their views about the students in the area of personal responsibility, since their attitudes toward students' responsibility were rather negative, in general. Increased dialogue between students and teachers on the limitations of teachers' abilities to help students and the importance of students' taking the initiative may help both sides to better understand one another.

The area of greatest concern is that of teacher views of Saudi students. Many of the generalizations which teachers made can be very dangerous in ESL, since biases can develop subconsciously from these generalizations. Thus, this research should serve as a warning and reminder to ESL professionals that stereotyping students as a result of negative experiences is a constant danger and that they must be ever-vigilant against the intrusion of these nascent stereotypes into their perspective of students and student groups. Awareness of the existence of generalizations of student groups can help teachers to combat the negative effects of these problems. With particular regard to Saudi students, teachers should bear in mind that students need to be viewed as separate from their home contexts. They are certainly not responsible for policies in Saudi Arabia which teachers may find distasteful, and although the students may be shaped by them, they are still individual learners and should be regarded as such.

Related to the discussion of teacher views on Saudi students are concerns about slipping academic standards in the IEP. These perspectives need to be re-evaluated in the light of the particular effects of the Saudi wave, rather than simply in light of the students. Previous to the arrival of large numbers of Saudi students, those who studied in the IEP typically would not stay for an extended period of time. However, considerable numbers of Saudi students have spent one or two years in the IEP, beginning from the lowest levels. These longer-term students may have,

by virtue of their longer stays, exposed some flaws in the program and its practices in promoting students to higher levels because long-duration students were comparatively rare in the past. Thus, as one teacher group discussed, the problems of the perceived “wearing down” of standards may be a product of inconsistent instruction and promotion processes in the IEP rather than a product of the recent wave of Saudi students. In addition, further reflection is necessary on how the program or other programs have reacted in the past when major shifts in student populations have occurred. Could it be, rather than the Saudi students causing a deterioration of program standards, that these concerns are more “normal” or “usual” issues that teachers face in the changing of majority populations in IEPs, but they simply do not remember them because these shifts are comparatively rare and a significant amount of time has elapsed since the student population shifted so dramatically?

Finally, teachers would be well served by being more aware of student views on the Tests. There was significant agreement among student groups on luck, strategies, and scoring as problematic aspects of the TOEFL and IELTS. The luck (in topics) dimension may be particularly helpful for teachers in explaining why students are so avid to take the Tests as many times as they can: significant numbers of Saudi students appear to believe that what is preventing them from obtaining their desired Test score is not their proficiency, but their misfortune of not having encountered a favorable constellation of speaking and writing topics. Furthermore, the topic of strategies may be an area where teachers can engage students. If the students do indeed believe that passing the Tests is more contingent on particular test-taking strategies than on proficiency, then this may represent an opportunity for teachers to establish connections between the Tests and what goes on in IEP classes. In other words, it gives teachers the opportunity to engage students in course material in meaningful ways if parallels can be successfully drawn

between achievement on course tasks and on the Tests. Thus, an understanding of student perspectives on the Tests may help teachers to address a regular complaint: that students disengage from courses in order to prepare or take the Tests.

Limitations

The limitations of this research can be broadly categorized into three sections: sampling and samples, research design and execution, and analysis. While these concerns may place some minor limits on the extent to which this study can help teachers to understand Saudi students as a whole, the methods used still yielded usable and helpful themes. Thus, the themes of this research can and should be used to inform current and future ESL pedagogy, particularly concerning Saudi students.

In the area of sampling and samples, some limitations appeared. The first and most obvious is that of numbers and participation. Although a higher number of participants and a larger number of interviewees per group would have been desirable, scheduling constraints made this impossible. More participants would have been preferable, and larger groups would have facilitated discussion better than dyads, where participants may have felt undue pressure to speak. In addition, the sampling does not perfectly reflect the Saudi population at the IEP; rather, it consisted of those who volunteered for the study. While this is typical in the area of research, it is important to acknowledge that the non-randomness of the sample may have an effect on the findings (Parker & Tritter, 2006, p. 27). Indeed, the sample being likely to over-represent motivated students may deliver conclusions that are different from those that might have been obtained from a “general” Saudi ESL population. Finally, the intermixing of undergraduate and graduate students may represent a less-than-ideal configuration of groups, but separating them

proved impossible. A study which separates them could potentially find quite different perspectives between undergraduate and graduate students.

In the area of research design and execution, a number of limitations are also present. First, in line with focus group methodology, the use of follow-up interviews would have been desirable (Parker & Tritter, 2006, pp. 29-30), but was not possible, again due to schedule constraints. In addition, the interviews varied in duration, with some interviews being almost twice as long as others. Yet again, this was a result of scheduling conflicts. Next, within the interviews, participants conflated some topics in a way that may have affected the overall findings. Both students and teachers often flipped back and forth in discussing upper and lower level classes and the students in those classes. Also, teachers sometimes discussed international students in general rather than Saudi students in particular, so some of their comments could not be used due to the potential lack of applicability to the study.

The final area of limitations is in the analysis. In the research design chosen, agreement of some kind between two groups in an area or on an issue was necessary for it to be regarded as relevant for inclusion in the Analysis section. However, this may have caused the omission of other topics of interest which were only raised in one group. In an attempt to rectify this situation, several of these one-group topics are taken up in the Discussion section. Another limitation was the necessity to count themes by groups rather than by individuals. While counting by individuals would certainly have yielded clearer findings, not all participants in all groups spoke on every issue. Thus, their individual agreement or disagreement could not be assumed. For these reasons, groups had to serve as the basis of comparison, rather than individuals. Finally, in the process of analysis, utterances and exchanges were often divided up in order to fit into the categories of identified themes. However, this could lead to misconstruing of intended meanings

by taking statements out of context. While great efforts were made to avoid this, it must be acknowledged as a possibility.

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