

## Investigating successful English learners in Arab medical schools

**Diane Malcolm**

### Introduction

The study outlined in this paper is a survey investigating how Arabic-speaking medical students maintain and improve their English language proficiency once they have completed the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses that are part of their program requirements. Results were obtained from over 60 questionnaires distributed to medical students from 11 different countries. These students were attending a medical students conference in Bahrain. The questionnaire concentrated on how much of their English ability they attributed to formal or informal environments, some beliefs about learning English, how they managed their English learning and which methods they felt to be most successful. Most attributed their English proficiency to out-of-school exposure and practice. The most common reported ways to improve English were watching TV and movies and speaking with native speakers. Most found English an easy language to learn and were able to find ways to practise it on their own. The study concludes by comparing the activities of these learners with those of learners investigated in other studies and gives some suggestions for further research.

For students in the preparatory stage of post-secondary schooling or those already engaged in studying in their area of specialisation, the most common focus of English language training, in both EFL and ESL settings, is English for academic purposes. The primary purpose of such training is to help prepare students with limited English proficiency to deal with the linguistic demands of higher education in their subject area. At the end of the period of training, it is hoped that learners will have developed sufficient skills in academic English to enable them to continue studying independently through the medium of English. In reality, at least in my experience, many learners in this situation feel far from confident with the level of English proficiency attained. However they rarely have further opportunities for formal English instruction. This is particularly true in EFL settings where opportunities to interact with native speakers may be limited and it is assumed that students are restricted in their ability to continue to improve their English proficiency independently. Although there is an ever-growing body of research concerning the beliefs and strategies of learners when they are engaged in language study in institutions, less information has been obtained about the methods learners use to improve or maintain their language proficiency once they complete formal instruction in the language. The present study examines some ways in which individuals, in a mostly Arabic language setting, manage their English learning and practice once they have entered the phase of studying medicine, by the medium of English, as well as some of their beliefs and attitudes about learning English.

### Background

A considerable number of higher academic institutions exist in the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which borders the Arabian Gulf: Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Oman. Virtually all of them have EAP requirements for a large proportion of their student bodies. Much of the training for medical students, especially, will be conducted through the medium of English, so English language courses are a requirement of most regional medical schools. Once these courses are completed, generally in the premedical phase of training, students must grapple, as best they can, with the considerable demands of learning medicine through English. Nonetheless, the majority do eventually succeed in their medical studies, so it may be that the lack of further English training is not a serious impediment, or they may take steps on their own to manage and upgrade their English, without the support of formal instruction. Having spent the better part of two decades teaching English to premedical students, I was curious to discover how they view their own English proficiency. What, if anything, they do on their own to improve their English? How do they manage their language learning once the compulsory language courses are over?

In order to investigate some aspects of their English language maintenance and management, I administered a questionnaire to a group of medical students and recent medical graduates who were attending the First Scientific Conference for GCC Medical Students, held at the Arabian Gulf University in Bahrain, in January 2003. The choice of question areas was largely derived from my own interest, but

there were a number of influences. One of these was a recently completed learner biography of a former student whose detailed description of his struggle to improve his English proficiency in the medical phase of his studies gave me considerable food for thought (Malcolm 2002). In addition, the large body of questionnaire-based and interview-based research about language learners' beliefs and practices formed a background for the study. These include studies of the good language learner (eg: Naiman, Frohlich, Stern and Todesco 1978), out-of-class learning strategies (e.g. Pickard 1996), learners in academic settings (eg: Cotterall 1999) and investigations of the beliefs of specific cultural groups, including East Asian or Chinese learners (eg: Huang and Van Naerssen 1987, Littlewood 1999 and 2000).

The decision to give the questionnaire to the informants was an ad hoc one, due to the availability of subjects on the occasion of the conference. Any results or conclusions to be drawn must therefore be tentative and preliminary and viewed as the product of an opportunity. As Nunan (1992: 145) has cautioned, the construction of a reliable questionnaire is difficult and time-consuming, but sometimes circumstances overcome caution. The questionnaire revealed some of the opinions and activities of a very particular group of mostly Arabic-speaking medical students, and are in no way intended to be generalized to a larger community of language learners.

**Study population**

Approximately 60 conference-attendees completed the questionnaire. Sixty-two questionnaires were returned, but not all sections were filled in on all of them, so only 60 were considered in calculating percentages. A breakdown of student characteristics in terms of gender, nationality and year of study is given in Table 1. The majority of respondents (42%) were Saudi males, followed by Bahraini males and females. The biggest group of students (29%) were in their final year of medical school (Year 6), followed by those in Years 4 and 5 (16% in each). Most of the Bahraini respondents were current students or recent graduates of the Arabian Gulf University, and many of these were conference volunteers. It is also to be expected that the majority would be upper year students, as many of the participants were presenting their own research, something that first or second year students would be less likely to do. Not all respondents were researchers, as many were AGU volunteers or audience members. Only five students identified themselves as Year One students. The remainder were Year Two and above, so no longer taking compulsory English language courses.

	Year 1		Year 2		Year 3		Year 4		Year 5		Year 6		Post-Grad.	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Saudi + 3 YNG* Males [24]	1	1	1				2	2	5		7		1	1
Omani [8]		1	1					1	1		3		1	
Kuwaiti +2YNG Females [7]				1	1		2						1	
Bahraini +1YNG male+ 1YNG unknown gender [14]		2	1	1	3		1		1		2		1	
Qatari [1]											1			
Other** + 1 YNG[6]					1			1	1		2			
Totals [60] Includes 8 YNG	1	4	3	2	5		4	5	7	1	12	1	3	1
* YNG = Year not given														
**Jordan [1], Sudan [3], Sri Lanka [1], Turkey [1]														

**Table 1: Study Population by gender nationality and year of study**

**Areas of the questionnaire**

As my main interest was in the ways these students maintain and improve their English proficiency, about half of the questions related to this area. However, I also felt it was necessary to have an indication of how much of their current English ability they attributed to formal instruction, how important they felt being good at English was for them and how satisfied they were with different aspects of their English proficiency. A five-point Likert scale was used for most sections of the questionnaire, with additional open-ended questions for the last two sections relating to management of English learning. Responses are combined, with responses of five or four considered positive, responses of two or one considered negative and responses of three considered neutral or non-committal. A key was provided for each section but nonetheless, the numbering may have confused some respondents, as will be discussed.

### **Participant English learning background and self-assessment of English ability**

The first group of questions was intended to elicit the degree to which the respondents attributed their present knowledge of English to different kinds of exposure: as a school subject, through studying in English as a medium of instruction and English learned outside of school. Questions about content subjects in English were intended to select the group who had attended English-medium schools, as a number of our students have completed their secondary education in private schools, with varying amounts of exposure to English through their studies. This group can be considered highly proficient users of English, but they still live and work in an Arabic-speaking environment, for the most part, must find ways to maintain their English proficiency.

Of the responses relating to learning English as a school subject, or through content classes, 45% had English as a school subject, while only 29.5% having learned English through content classes. Whether this is an indication that about a third of the group had attended English-medium schools would be impossible to say, as they were not asked this question specifically. Furthermore, respondents were asked to explain *what percentage of the English you know now have you learned in this way*, and it is obviously impossible to fit a percentage into a five-point scale. However, since about the same percentage of respondents also said they had not learned English as a school subject (29%), it may be that this is the same group who attended English-medium high schools. One result is obvious ie: no matter what the school background of the respondents, 70% attributed their English ability to what they had learned outside of formal settings. If the confusion of the question format is disregarded, it seems that English learnt outside of school accounts for most of the English this group had learnt, followed by English as a school subject, then English in content classes.

The next set of questions related to the importance of English for this group. Virtually all of them felt it was very important for their present studies and future career, while over 80% of respondents chose personal reasons (such as communicating with friends) as being important for knowing English. Thus, it is clear that this group that has a strong motivation to be good at English.

### **Self-assessment of present English ability**

The questions in the self-assessment section were intended to indicate how satisfied the participants were with their present English ability in different areas of language skills (the traditional ones of speaking, reading and writing, as well as understanding spoken English). Choices ranged from *completely* to *not at all satisfied*. *Reading English for my studies* was the area most (86%) were very or completely satisfied with, followed by *understanding spoken English* (82%), *writing for my studies* (71%), *writing for other purposes* [email, letters] (62%), *reading for other purposes* [newspaper, magazines, e-mail, novels] (58%) and *speaking in English* (45%). Although less than half were satisfied with their ability to speak, only 12% were dissatisfied, while the same percentage were dissatisfied with their ability to read for other than study purposes. The highest percentage of respondents (15%) was dissatisfied with their ability to write for purposes other than their studies. Overall, however, it seems that this group sees itself as generally satisfied with its ability in English, particularly related to study purposes. This is not surprising, given that a high number of respondents had attended and graduated from English-medium schools and most have already successfully completed several years of medical school.

### **Some beliefs about learning English**

The *beliefs* section of the questionnaire, though potentially the most interesting, is probably the least informative in terms of results. For the questions in this section of the questionnaire I drew partly on a questionnaire devised by Littlewood (1999), intended to test the beliefs of Hong Kong Chinese students of English regarding dependence on authority and collaborative and group activities. I also drew on the Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (Horwitz 1987) and the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (Oxford 1990) among other sources such as Benson and Lor (1996) and Wenden (1987). As a vast number of questions about learner beliefs can be derived from these three sources alone, I tried to concentrate on a few areas of most interest to me (see Table 2):

- the ability to learn independently
- whether the participants thought they needed a teacher
- how they rated English as a language to learn and their own ability as language learners
- whether English required a lot of effort to learn
- whether or not they believed it was necessary to live in an English-speaking country to know English

Beliefs	Agree (5 and 4)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (1 and 2)
▪ I can easily find ways to practice English by myself	54%	31%	15%
▪ I expect a teacher to be responsible for telling me what and how much to study and evaluating what I have learned	47%	30.5%	22%
▪ I consider myself to be a good language learner (ie: I can pick up languages easily)	67%	28%	5.5%
▪ English is an easy language to learn	83%	17%	--
▪ It takes a lot of effort to become good at English	42%	35%	23%
▪ You can't really know English unless you live and/or study in an English-speaking country	52%	13%	31%

Most respondents (83%) agreed that English was an easy language to learn, and two-thirds considered themselves to be good language learners. Over half (54%) stated they could easily find ways to practise English by themselves, while just under half (47%) agreed they expected a *teacher to be responsible for telling me what and how much to study and evaluating how much I have learned*. Fifty-two percent agreed that *you can't really know English unless you live and/or study in an English-speaking country*, but 31% disagreed with this statement. Concerning the effort required to learn English, 42% thought it took a lot of effort to become good at English, while 35% were uncommitted and 23% disagreed. As beliefs of different groups have not been analysed (eg: those who probably went to English-medium schools as contrasted with those who learned English primarily in school settings; upper-year versus lower-year students), it is impossible to make any generalisations about the beliefs, other than that, in this group as a whole, there seems to be a general agreement that English is an easy language to learn. However there is less agreement about the amount of effort required to learn it, or the need to live in an English-speaking country to know English.

**Managing English**

The final section of the questionnaire related to the areas I was most curious about. I wanted to know how the learners continued to manage their English learning when they finished taking the required EAP courses and what ways of improving their English they believed to be the most successful.

First, I asked about the ways they used to improve English in the past and present. Most (82%) were not taking English courses as part of their medical studies but 67% had taken these courses in the past. Most of this group had taken English for two semesters, but the length of courses ranged from one semester to three years. The number of hours per week of English instruction mentioned by this group ranged from four to twenty hours, but most had taken five or six hours. No one was taking English courses outside their medical studies at the time the questionnaire was given but over half (53%) said they had taken an external English course in the past. Of these, the majority had taken English courses at the British Council, while about a third mentioned other private institutes. Only three said they had taken courses abroad (USA), but the question asked specifically if they had taken external courses in their own countries, so it is likely there were probably more in this category.

One possibly very independent learner stated she was *studying in everywhere we will go!* Others mentioned private teachers and one specified: *In small simple institute & Arabic (Sudani) teacher. But I learnt a lot from him. He was good so it depends not in the institute but in the tutor.* The amount of time spent in courses or private tuition ranged between six years and three weeks, but most of those who took British Council courses had taken more than one course. The final section of the *managing English learning* section concerned specific methods used to practise English (see Table 3).

Method used	Always or often	Sometimes	Rarely or never
▪ I improve my English by myself by studying in an independent learning centre (ILC), self-access centre (SAC) or library in my university.	21%	15%	64%
▪ I don't use the ILC, SAC or library now to improve my English, but I have used this method in the past.	31%	30%	39%
▪ I improve my English by practising with my friends. If yes, how do you practise?*	33%	13.5%	54%
▪ I use the internet to improve my English. If yes, how do you use it?*	34.5%	22%	44%
▪ I watch TV/movies in English.	74%	15.5%	10%
▪ I read books, magazines, newspapers (that are not related directly to my studies) to improve my English.	48%	22%	29%

\*Open-ended question with different responses.

**Table 3: How I manage my English learning now**

The majority (64%) did not use an independent learning, self-access centre or library to study English independently but 31% had used this method in the past. About a third (33%) improved their English by practising with their friends, while over half (54%) used this method rarely or never. Those who did practise with their friends cited speaking (including arguing, discussions and preparing presentations) as the most frequent practice method. About the same percentage (33%) stated they used the Internet to practise English, although 44% rarely or never used this method. Chatting and email were the most frequently mentioned methods of practising, followed by reading websites and browsing. One stated: *Don't know how [the internet improves my English] but it does.* Only two mentioned accessing websites specifically designed for English learning or test practice (TOEFL). By far the most common method of improving English was watching TV or movies in English. Seventy-four percent reported doing this every day or several times a week. Finally, almost half of the respondents said they read books, magazines or newspapers that were not related to their studies to improve their English. Another open-ended question asked if they had any other ways of improving their English and what they were. The most frequently mentioned was speaking with friends or foreigners (non-Arabic speakers). Listening to music was mentioned three times, as was *practicing as much as possible*. Using English when travelling abroad, during case presentations or while reading medical books were also noted. Other remarks were *thinking in English* and *memorizing new words from the dictionary and try using them*.

**Most useful methods**

The final, open-ended question asked: *Of all the methods you have used for improving your English, which one(s) do you think were the most useful and why?* Forty-three of the participants responded to this question (see Table 4). Watching TV and/or videos in English was mentioned 12 times, as was practising with native speakers. Seven mentioned staying and studying in an English-speaking country (USA, Canada, Ireland) while six mentioned the Internet, with one stating: *because you should deal with other people just in English, you don't have to help your self by your own language. Also you learn familiar English, which you can't learn it by other method.* Reading was mentioned six times, practising with friends four times, while studying in English was mentioned five times. Other most helpful methods noted were listening to songs, learning in English school and studying with a private teacher, while two students mentioned using an independent learning centre or SAC. Two felt all methods were helpful, but one thought there was no helpful method.

Method	Number of times mentioned
Practising (talking) with native speakers	12
Watching TV/Video/movies	12
Staying and studying in an English-speaking country	7
Internet	6
Reading	6
Studying in English	6
Practising with friends	6

**Table 4: Most useful methods for improving English**

Overall, speaking and practising with friends or native speakers was the most frequently-cited helpful method, because, as one participant stated: *You will be exposed to general talks* [not medical].

### Discussion

The question may be raised as to why we should investigate what successful learners do, when most of our time is taken up dealing with the demands of the less successful ones. The answer that is most usually advanced is that knowledge of the experience of successful learners will enable us to help less successful ones learn how to learn (Naiman, Frohlich, Stern and Todesco 1978: 8). For those of us who wish to promote learner autonomy, this kind of information helps reinforce the notion that extra-curricular language learning activities are a requisite for building language proficiency and that language learning is a lifelong endeavour, not one that begins and ends in the language classroom. Furthermore, it provides some relief for teachers who feel responsible for student successes and failures in language learning, by demonstrating that instruction is only part of a much larger picture of what makes a successful learner. By studying this particular group of Arabic speakers, we can add to knowledge about learning strategies, beliefs and practices. Through comparing different groups we can arrive at a better understanding of what is involved in learning and maintaining language proficiency.

Many previous studies about what learners do to improve their proficiency, particularly those relating to strategies, were conducted with learners enrolled in language courses. One exception is the original *good learner* study (Frohlich, Stern and Todesco 1978) which identified five areas of what were termed *strategies*, each of which had several sub-sections, characterising the approach taken by the learners they interviewed. Two of these seem apparent in the Arab medical students of the present study. The first is the *active task* approach (Naiman Frohlich, Stern and Todesco 1978: 30) ie: being actively involved in language learning through taking courses, travelling and living in the environment where the language is spoken and watching TV. This group supplemented these strategies with Internet browsing. This also corresponds roughly to the category Wenden (1987: 104) termed *use the language*, which also included learning the *natural way* eg: by staying with a family. One medical student enthusiastically reported: *I stayed in a family in Canada. I think if anyone wanna really learn English he advised to stay w/ family in Canada 2 months.*

The medical students as a group were much involved in what Naiman, Frohlich, Stern and Todesco (1978: 32) labelled the strategy of *realisation of language as a means of communication and interaction*. This is characterised by communicating with native speakers and seeking out opportunities to use the language and practise it. The respondents noted *practising English in hospital* and *speaking to foreign staff in hospital* as strategies they consciously employed. One stated: *Talking to native English speakers ... it puts you in a position where you must do your best in order to understand and be understood.*

These beliefs and practices have much in common with the *qualitative* conception of language learning discussed in Benson and Lor (1999). Whereas a quantitative conception of language learning is characterised by the accumulation of a finite number of things to be learned (e.g. grammar rules and vocabulary items etc), in a qualitative conception (Benson and Lor 1999: 467), language learning is viewed as dealing with an unfamiliar environment the learner must make sense of (e.g. through exposure to the language by watching movies, reading the newspaper for interest etc.) Interestingly, although the medical students lived, worked and studied in an EFL environment, some with quite limited interaction with native speakers, many of them seem to have embraced this conception of language learning, unlike

the Hong Kong learners in the Benson and Lor (1999) study, where most associated strongly with the quantitative conception of language learning.

The questionnaire results are not as dependable as they could be due to the many faults in its construction and possible misinterpretation of the questions. As an example, one respondent, who had recently graduated from a New Zealand medical school marked ones and twos in his self-assessment of his satisfaction with his language abilities. As a near-native speaker, it seems likely he simply misread the rating scale. As Cotterall (1999) has pointed out, questionnaire administration is problematic, and the opportunity for misunderstanding high, especially when the questionnaire is not in the language of the participants. Other methods, such as interviews, are probably more enlightening, though time-consuming, and also fraught with their own set of problems. Nonetheless, there are some areas and questions that suggest themselves for further investigation. For example, as watching TV and movies seems to be the preferred helpful activity, it might be fruitful to find out exactly what learners do and how they improve through doing this: Do they have conscious strategies they apply? Do they watch mostly subtitled films (TV programs and videos in the Gulf countries are generally subtitled in Arabic) or do they choose those without subtitles? How has the widespread use of multilingual DVDs helped their language proficiency? Answers to some of these questions could help inform practices in self-access centres that have TV and video viewing among their activities.

Another interesting area for further study is the generally lower rating of satisfaction with speaking ability as compared to other skills. In my experience, Arab students are generally better and more fluent at speaking than other aspects of language ability, yet obviously they do not rate themselves as highly: What do they mean by speaking ability? Why do they rate themselves less satisfied with their speaking skills as compared to others? Do only Arabic speaking learners have this perception? A possible explanation comes from the research on self-assessment in second language testing. Research such as that summarized in Oskarsson (1997) has generally shown a high correlation between self-assessment of language skills and external assessment measures. However in a survey of 11 studies of self-assessment of language learning, Ross (1998: 9) found that the correlation is less strong in the area of speaking skills, and speculates that second language learners may judge their speaking abilities *in the light of their communicative intentions rather than the actual effect of their efforts to convey messages*. Coombe (2002) has also pointed out the difficulty learners in EFL contexts may find in assessing some aspects of speaking ability, such as pronunciation, when there is a lack of native-speaker models to compare themselves to. These may be some of the factors influencing the Arabic-speaking learners of the present study.

### Conclusion

Those of us who are convinced that language learners will benefit from taking on more responsibility for their learning need to provide support for the contention that increasing autonomous practices can result in substantial gains in proficiency. We cannot claim that the learners in this study would not have been highly competent language users even without taking on extra activities. The extra exposure to English provided through their study situation alone probably contributes a lot to their increased proficiency. One respondent said the most helpful method was *My medical college bec[ause] it's the place when I exposed most to the language skills*. Nonetheless, surveys of the activities of successful learners such as the ones in this study may help to lend weight to the argument that learners who are active and create opportunities to expose themselves to and practise the language are likely to continue to experience success.

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#### **About the author**

**Diane Malcolm** is currently Head of the English Language Unit at Arabian Gulf University, Manama, Bahrain. She has instructed premedical students for many years and coordinates self-directed learning activities for premedical English courses.

Email: [diane@agu.edu.bh](mailto:diane@agu.edu.bh)