Challenges Faced by Saudi English Language Learners in the UK: An Action Research Approach to Enhancing Intercultural Communication

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ABSTRACT:

This study aimed to investigate the challenges faced by Saudi English language learners in the UK and provide a solution for these challenges. The researchers used Nunan's (1992) seven-step action research cycle and a mixed methods approach, including surveys and semi-structured interviews, to gather data from 84 Saudi students. The preliminary interviews and surveys showed that these students experienced fears and negative intercultural experiences, which negatively impacted their confidence in their second language acquisition. An intervention workshop was then conducted to help these students overcome these obstacles, and follow-up interviews revealed that the workshop had a positive effect on the students' self-confidence and acculturation. The study highlights the importance of cultural awareness for second language learners in a host culture, both socially and academically.

Keywords: Acculturation Culture, Cultural Competency, Intercultural Awareness, Intervention, Intercultural Communication

التحديات التي تواجه متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية السعوديين في المملكة المتحدة:
بحث إجرائي لتعزيز التواصل البين ثقافي

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ملخص: هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى استقصاء التحديات التي يواجهها متعلمو اللغة الإنجليزية السعوديون في المملكة المتحدة وتقديم حل لهذه التحديات، وقد اعتمد البحث على نموذج البحث الإجرائي المكون من سبع خطوات لنونان (Nunan, 1992) والمنهج الكمكيفي، وقد اعتمد البحث على الاستطلاعات والمقابلات شبه المقيدة لجمع البيانات من عينة بلغت ٨٤ طالبًا سعوديًا من الذين يدرسون بالمملكة المتحدة، ولقد أظهرت نتائج المقابلات والدراسات الاستقصائية الأولية أن هؤلاء الطلاب قد عانوا من مخاوف وتجارب سلبية بين الثقافات، مما أثر سلبًا على ثقتهم في اكتسابهم للغة الثانية، ثم تدخلت الدراسة بورشة عمل تدخلية لمساعدة هؤلاء الطلاب على التغلب على هذه العقبات، وكشفت مقابلات المتابعة أن الورشة كان لها تأثير إيجابي على ثقة الطلاب بأنفسهم وتثاقفهم، وسلطت الدراسة الضوء على أهمية الوعي الثقافي لمتعلمي اللغة الثانية في ثقافة أجنبية، اجتماعيًا وأكاديميًا.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التثقف، الكفاءة الثقافية، الوعي البين ثقافي، التدخل، التواصل البين ثقافي.

Introduction

'O mankind! Lo! We have created you from male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another. Lo! The noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is the best in conduct. Lo! Allah is Knower, Aware. (13)' Chapter (49) sūrat l- ḥujurāt

This translated quote from the Quran verse demonstrates the way in which positive and effective communication between different cultures and nations for me is personally rooted in my Islamic beliefs. As a result of this, I firmly believe that giving appreciation and respect for others is of paramount importance, rather than merely encouraging tolerance. This belief encouraged me to communicate with other nationalities when I came to the UK, however I nevertheless encountered a number of communication challenges when speaking to other individuals within the multinational English as a Foreign Language (EFL) class that I was attending as a student. This period of adjustment in the UK was difficult for myself and other Saudi friends and colleagues, however this gave me the inspiration for this research study. These difficulties may have been attributable to my previous EFL teaching experience within Saudi Arabia, which had given me knowledge of the English language but was severely lacking in cultural knowledge. Recognising and having experienced this deficiency, I sought an intervention that may be able to combat this situation for the many other students in the same position.

Fung et al. (2012) outline a model whereby each person practices and behaves with respect and appropriateness to individuals from all cultures, languages and ethnic backgrounds. This is linked with Lambert's (1972) claim that a learner must be positive and competent when they embrace the characteristics of behaviour of the target language cultural group, which is required if they are to achieve full proficiency in a second language.

Deardorff (2006) explains that intercultural competence comprises intercultural awareness and skills, supplemented by internal reflection and external effective communication. This view is supported by the Council of Europe, which goes further by suggesting that any definition of intercultural competence should include respect for the beliefs and values of different cultures, while recognising that these may never replace the existing values and beliefs of individuals (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Paulston, 1992). This internal conflict may ultimately lead to a sense of 'culture shock' (Schumann, 1978). This thesis therefore aims to investigate whether assisting Saudi learners in improving their intercultural

competency assists them in attaining more advanced language skills, as well as sophisticated literacy competencies in their second language learning. The main purpose of this study is, through investigation of the issues faced by Saudi English language learners in the UK context, to provide a possible solution for the identified problems faced by this group, and to then evaluate the effectiveness of this solution by implementing Nunan's (1992) seven-step action research cycle.

According to Lustig and Koester (2010), the basis of a culture is its provision of a frame of reference for its members. The members of a given culture therefore tend to have, at least to some degree, shared identities, values and understandings of the nature of the world and the ways in which it operates, as well as how society should run and how relationships should form. Culture can also be explained as being an anthropological concept, providing the foundation for a symbolic world of meanings, beliefs, values, and traditions that are often represented in language, art, religion and myths (Hoskins and Sallah, 2011). Triandis and Albert (1987) argue that culture can be both tangible and intangible. The tangible aspects are generally described as objective culture, such as fine arts and cultural goods (Hoskins and Sallah, 2011), whereas the intangible aspects, otherwise known as the subjective culture, resemble the anthropological concept of meanings, beliefs, values and traditions that are embedded in a culture (ibid.).

Giddens' theory of structuration (1984) proposes that agency, defined as the individual's reflexive activities that are consistently created and sustained, is a semiotic activity and a social construction. This definition is closely linked to the notion of 'habitus', which refers to "A system of dispositions to be and to do, a potentiality, a desire to be which, in a certain way, seeks to create the conditions most favourable to what it is"(Bourdieu, 2000, p.150). Therefore communication should be understood within the social context of the understandings of what has been communicated. The habitus features are further described as "the absence of any major upheaval the conditions of its formation are also the condition of its realisation" (Bourdieu, 2000, p.150).

Habitus, therefore, defines the nature of a person as a social subject who is deeply embedded in their habits of behaviour, feelings and thought. The commitment of the social relations is set within the context of the current and past (Peim and Hodkinson, 2007). Accordingly, Saudi learners will typically bring an understanding of social relations with them based on their past experiences and perceptions. This research examines whether teaching-learning relationships could be better facilitated by the development of more congruent intercultural

understanding in the learning environment.

Many authors, such as Wang (2011), have acknowledged that language and culture are intertwined, and that learning a foreign language may lead to immersion into the culture in which the target language is embedded. Peterson and Coltrane (2003) argue that students will only be able to comprehensively master a language once they have mastered its specific cultural contexts. Accordingly, I propose that increasing the cultural competency of Saudi English language learners would resolve some of the possible communication issues within second language learning. In fact, a number of theorists (e.g. Byram, 1997; Byram and Fleming, 1998; Valdes, 1995) claim that it is not viable to teach a language devoid of cultural context, as one of the objectives of foreign language teaching is to encourage positive attitudes with respect to the particular language under study and its speakers.

Although this may be true, it is also the case that intercultural experiences may not be viewed positively but rather as a negative experience that erodes an individual's home culture. Malcolm (2013) identifies this fear as acting as a barrier within Gulf Arab learners. My personal experience suggests that many Arab educators teaching English in Arab countries display a lack of positive attitude to English culture. This may be due to Saudi Arabia being considered as a mainly conservative country which is religiously based and culturally constructed on Islamic beliefs. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia has a largely homogenous culture with a strong family heritage (Al Alhareth, Al Alhareth and Al Dighrir, 2015) which can result in change being perceived as a threat. Although Saudi culture may be described as homogeneous there will almost always be differences between individuals, as the country is made up of different regions bordering different countries and there are personal differences between individuals. The different views held about English language use and learning was described by Mahboob and Elyas (2014) as a tension between reformers and those that want to maintain traditional practices. In addition resistance to learning English may also be partially attributable to the relatively recent development of English as a foreign language being introduced in Saudi Arabia's national curricula.

Education in all societies is affected by culture and Saudi Arabia is no exception (Sywelem, Al-Harbi and Fathema, 2012). The Saudi culture is also profoundly influenced by the Islamic religion, which is important in this context because of the clear differences in the roles of religion in teaching and the daily lives of Saudi learners (Al-Seghayer, 2007; Alkahtani, Dawson and Lock, 2013). Many examples of the common teaching pedagogy in Saudi Arabia could be

described as outdated, with teachers tending to utilise more explicit methods rather than implicit ones, and to teach skills separately with a focus on accuracy rather than fluency (Al-Seghayer, 2007). It has been argued that the reason that Saudi teachers take such a dominant role may be due to the culture of responsibility for the class being taken (Al- Seghayer, 2013). The English language class is predominantly situated within an Islamic context that has minimal integration of other cultures, typically reducing opportunities for each learner to develop cultural awareness and develop macro skills (ibid.). Both my previous professional experience and the literature confirm that the teaching style is predominantly teacher centred, with the teacher delivering lectures that are then learnt by the students (ibid.). The use of teacher-centred traditional pedagogy often results in less fluent and accurate Saudi users of English (Ahmad, 2014). This kind of teacher-centred approach results in the teacher speaking more than the students, exacerbated by lower levels of interaction (Fareh, 2010, p.3602). This may indicate a fundamental difference between the academic culture and expectations of the students.

The importance of social interaction of Saudi students in the UK with the host community is considered a means to improve cultural communication between two peoples of widely differing origins. According to Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory, social interaction is essential for the effective acquisition of a language. Applying the Vygotsky explanation about the connection between culture and second language learning, it is possible to describe the Saudi educational system of English language teaching without any cultural references as external, because those involved in the system are not seeking to become part of the inner group. Consequently, this would suggest that the value of the learner's engagement in the social and linguistic environment is an essential resource for the language learner (Mitchell and Myles, 2004, p.193).

Language learning is affected by numerous aspects of the social context. An example of this can be seen in Schumann's acculturation model (1978), which identifies four psychological factors that define the process of adaptation to a new culture: language shock; culture shock; integrative or instrumental motivation; ego permeability. Spolsky (1989) suggests that formal and informal learning opportunities are derived from the social context of the language learner. Formal learning opportunities are those that occur due to the educational provision offered by a given society, while informal learning opportunities are those derived from social interactions in the community.

Chen and Starosta (2000) claim that the development of intercultural

communication competence will be hindered without awareness of and sensitivity to intercultural communication. Cultural sensitivity concentrates mainly on emotional abilities, although higher levels of cultural sensitivity have been linked with greater intercultural communication competence (ibid.). The present study seeks to determine the levels of cultural awareness and sensitivity of Saudi students, thus providing an indication of the increase in intercultural competence that would be required to improve learning English as a second language.

The teaching of English, in Saudi Arabia, formally began in approximately 1925 with a view to ensuring that Saudis would be able to communicate with other inter-national English speakers (Al-Ahaydib, 1986, pp.1-2). The current scholarship programme has a historical link to the establishment of the first scholarship programme by King Abdul-Aziz, during his reign from 1927 to 1953, which initially sent Saudi students to study in Cairo and Lebanon (Ahmed, 2015; Pavan, 2015; Ministry of Higher Education, 2016). This programme has been continually reformed and extended by progressive Kings who have followed. The greatest extension took place during the reign of King Abdullah, which broadened the provision to include students from different areas of study not only specific subjects (Taylor and Albasri, 2014). The King Abdullah Scholarship Program, which began in 2005, has become the largest Saudi scholarship programme ever (ibid.) with approximately 6,000 scholarships in 2006 (Zeigler, 2012) rising to 140,000 in 2012 (Alfawaz, Hilai and Alghanam, 2014). These statistics demonstrate an exponential increase in the numbers of female students who are studying abroad (MoE, 2014) (See table 4. Appendix 3).

The large scholarship programme legacy of King Abdullah is currently under reform by King Salman. This reformation includes the combination of employment with scholarship, clearly demonstrating the beginning of a different focus to the policy. It is important to note that this current research commenced in 2011, a number of political and educational changes have occurred since its inception. These changes include the death of King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz, on 23rd of January 2015. King Abdullah was a reformer of the scholarship programme, and sought to widen access to all Saudi citizens with a desire to complete their degrees. King Salman has subsequently extended this reform, with new provisions including comprehensive restructuring of the Higher Education Ministry and Education Ministry into a single ministry under a new minister. Within a few months, the recent change of leader has already led to major restructuring, even raising questions regarding the future continuation of the scholarship programme or the types of changes that might occur (Hilal, Scott and Maadad, 2015). The provider of

the King Abdullah Scholarship Program, the Higher Education Ministry, was created relatively recently in 1975, when it was named the Ministry of Education (Alqahtani, 2014). The responsibilities of the Ministry for Higher Education include advancing the development of higher education institutions. However, the possible implications of the decision to form this ministry by joining two departments are still unclear (ibid.).

These changes have resulted in the context of this research constantly evolving, meaning that the implementation has necessarily had to adapt to developments in the current situation. The support for the students remains high and the scholarship provided, through the Higher Education Ministry, still enables Saudi nationals to have the opportunity and means to study in universities outside Saudi Arabia, the courses include undergraduate, postgraduate, doctorate and medical fellowships (Alqahtani, 2014). In addition academic scholarships are also provided by the private sector.

The Saudi government seeks to educate their own nationals in order to create a skilled workforce that is able to meet the needs of industry and the educational sector, ultimately seeking to replace the skilled expatriate workers currently employed in Saudi Arabia (Ahmad, 2015). The support given to both postgraduate and undergraduate students includes a monthly allowance, as well as paying tuition fees, seminar and conference costs, travel costs, medical insurance, and access to an arrival advisory team and other support from the Saudi cultural bureau. The scholarship programme for learning English is limited to two years.

The widening of access to the King Abdullah Scholarship Program has had a number of far reaching consequences. These are complex and not fully understood because of the large numbers of Saudi students arriving over a relatively short space of time. Cross cultural contact has increased as a result of these changes and so the current research seeks to enable the large numbers of students to more effectively adjust to studying in the UK by increasing their cultural competence.

From my personal experience, as a Saudi learner of English as a second language, my interactions with English language learner peers from Saudi Arabia and from a set of pilot studies, I have noted that while a considerable emphasis is placed on the linguistic capabilities of students newly arrived in the UK, little or no support is given to cultural adaptation. The pilot studies included in-depth discussions with fellow students and personal observations and interviews, which were conducted by the researcher. In addition, there seems to be less focus placed on the 'cultural competences' of students once they formally enter the British higher educational system.

Several studies have been conducted on the subject of the effect that intercultural competence can have on second language learners (e.g. Peterson and Coltrane, 2003; Sinicrope, Norris and Watanabe, 2007; Vickers, 2008, Georgiou, 2010; Zaid, 2011). However, these studies provide little or no insight into the specific socio-cultural challenges faced by Saudi students studying English in the UK. Furthermore, while certain studies such as that of Al-Qahtani (2011) have explored the cultural competence of postgraduate Saudi students, the focus of these studies has been on the academic language needs of postgraduate Saudi students and the problems they encounter in British academic culture. However, these are not necessarily illustrative of the kinds of problems faced by undergraduate Saudi students, nor do they examine the effect of decreased cultural competence or the effects that possible interventions may have on resolving these issues. These studies also may lack cultural competence in terms of students' awareness of the cultural contexts and social and behavioural norms, beliefs and values of the culture belonging to the new language that is being learnt.

Research has also been conducted in the USA, in order to explore the issues relating to intercultural communication between Saudi Arabian and American businessmen (Adelman and Lusting, 1981). Adelman and Lusting's study concluded that both groups have major difficulties in arranging ideas in intercultural communication, suggesting that further strategies are required to address these difficulties. Their study provides a degree of insight into the kinds of intercultural communication issues that arise during interactions between Saudi users of English and native English speakers. However, the study is relatively old and is in need of being updated. Furthermore, the participants in the study were mature people with more life experiences than the majority of undergraduate and postgraduate students. Finally, the Adelman and Lusting study focused on examining the interactions in a business context, whereas the present study seeks to provide a better understanding of the difficulties faced by the growing number of Saudi students entering the British higher education system.

Al-Hazmi and Nyland (2010) investigated the experience of individuals emerging from the gender segregated education environment of Saudi Arabia and entering Australian institutions, which are not segregated. Although this study observed Saudi students, the main focus was on the ways in which gender integration affected their learning and cultural identity, rather than exploring how cultural competence increased over a longer period (two years) and the effects that this could have on learning, which is the aim of the current study.

The previously discussed research studies suggest that some action should be

taken to address the lack of intercultural competence among students. The primary investigations undertaken in the current study discovered that only minimal support is provided for Saudi students upon leaving Saudi Arabia to study abroad. As this support takes the form of one-day training or orientation days, its impact seems to be limited. From my personal experience of the Saudi educational institution and research into the extant literature on intercultural competence, the working hypothesis of this study is that this minimal preparation is insufficient and does not meet the learning needs of Saudi students. Through a literature review, supplemented by personal experience, an overview of both the Saudi and British higher education systems, and the use of action research involving interviews and questionnaires, this research seeks to address the question of how to close the apparent knowledge gap that exists with regards to the intercultural communication and cultural competence needs of some Saudi students entering the British higher education system. Therefore this research seeks to contribute to the change in practice of preparation that Saudi English language learners receive when coming to study in the UK.

This research will present a case to the Saudi Ministry of Education recommending that intercultural communication be taught in university preparatory classes in Saudi Arabia. In addition, according to Al Hazmi and Nyland (2010) the higher education institutions in host countries (such as the UK) should implement specific introductory courses to support the growing number of Saudi students studying in their universities, partly as a result of the increased availability of King Abdullah scholarships since 2005. This research contributes to the knowledge of how such an intervention could be implemented. Furthermore, this research contributes to the recent theoretical knowledge of the intercultural issues faced by recently arrived English language students and how these issues could be dealt with on a practical level.

Research Questions

This research examines the impact that intercultural communication can have on the Saudi learners of English as a second language who are studying at UK universities. Particular attention is given to the adaptation of the students to the learning environment within higher education classrooms in the UK, as this involves them studying alongside peers of different nationalities, which may be a novel experience for many Saudi learners.

It is proposed that making improvements to the intercultural competency of Saudi learners might assist them in attaining more advanced cultural competence

and intercultural communication in their target language, in this case English. This can be achieved by raising the awareness that learners might have regarding less obvious levels of discourse patterns, socio-linguistic uses of language, and cultural presupposition within cross-cultural communications. This is supplemented by an attempt to discover possible solutions to common problems faced by students, through the use of a workshop attended by the Saudi learners of English as a second language in UK higher education.

The decision was made to focus upon the particular experiences of Saudi English language learners, as I have a personal experience of the difficulties as an English language student before commencing my Master's degree. As a consequence of these experiences, I witnessed the negative impact that cultural issues can have on students, even forcing some to abandon their studies. My cultural awareness and personal experiences as a Saudi researcher have been instrumental in the design and implementation of this methodology.

With this in mind, the lack of research into the intercultural problems faced by Saudi Arabian English language learners in the UK and the possible solutions has revealed a need for further research within this area to fill the gap of knowledge.

The main questions explored in this research are:

– How have issues related to cultural differences impacted the progress of Saudi students in UK higher education?

– Were the students effectively prepared by their institutions or by the Saudi government to deal with cultural diversity in the UK?

– Have the students had any negative cultural experiences in the UK.? If so, how have they dealt with those situations and how their intercultural experiences may have influenced their own cultural identity, and how strongly do they feel about this change?

– Have students employed different approaches to deal with cultural differences in order to achieve intercultural competence?

Research Objectives and Methodological Outline

The aim of this study is to determine the perceptions that Saudi learners have of cultural competence, and how this understanding may be improved through the use of workshops as a means of intervention. Action research was chosen as the main mode of investigation for this study, as it is a powerful reflective tool that enables the collection of varied data from real life practices. This tool enables

analysis of the data in order to reach decisions regarding the development of future practices in the light of actual practice. A model was developed through the adaptation of Nunan's (1992, p.19) seven-step action research cycle.

Methodology of the Research

This research used a mixed methods approach for gathering data in order to enhance interpretability (Robson, 2002) and improve reliability. These factors are further enhanced by the use of quantifiable methods with qualitative questionnaires. The mixed methods approach involves both qualitative and quantitative research tools, along the lines suggested as 'triangulation' (Neuman, 2011). The different yet complementary methodological approaches were used to observe the same underlying phenomenon, namely the intercultural difficulties faced by Saudi learners in UK higher education. It was intended that the two complementary sets of data would reveal student needs and effectively contribute to the design of effective interventions.

After an extensive literature research, preliminary data were collected to assess the issues faced by the participating Saudi English language learners in the UK. The design of the preliminary research questionnaire was based on the design proposed by Mason (2002). This design involves providing participants with Arabic and English hard copies of written questionnaires in order to investigate their level of adaptation. The answers to these questions were examined in an attempt to identify the problematic issues to learning. This was followed by an intervention stage in the form of a workshop that sought to overcome these barriers and to thereby improve the learning ability of the students.

Using multiple perspectives to examine the same phenomena enables effective social exploration (Neuman, 2011). Triangulation is commonly "used for the 'convergence' of results and 'corroboration' of the research findings" (Bryman, 2006, p.105). Therefore, this study examines the cultural experiences of Saudi learners through both quantitative and qualitative means. While the measurements are different, the two methods were integrated to reveal the underlying trends underpinning the difficulties faced by the Saudi learners. The findings arising from this mixed methods approach were then utilised in the design of the workshop activity. Neuman (2011, p.168) stresses that the "personal openness and integrity by the individual researcher are central to a qualitative study". During the interviews, my own experience as a Saudi learner of English in British higher education helped to minimise possible barriers in communication between researcher and informants. Explaining the purpose of the current research was therefore conducted with careful

consideration of the need to limit any possible changes in the behaviour of participants (Hirsh, 2010). Tong, Sainsbury and Craig (2007) explain that an interviewer should be open and that they should declare their own possible influence upon the interview, in order to ensure that the results are as transparent as possible. This can also serve to ensure that the informants are communicating in as natural a manner as possible (ibid.), rather than affecting, for the purpose of the research interview, a persona or a set of attitudes that differ from their usual behaviour. The learners in this context have English as a second language. However, this may not be the only barrier, as most people talk more easily than they write (Gillham, 2007).

The questions used in the interviews were connected to the theoretical issues that had been identified in the relationship between culture and language learning. Interviews can provide opportunities for the learner and the interviewer to check answers, as well as to develop a more nuanced exchange of information. However, creating closeness to the subject can introduce bias, so this study reinforced data neutrality through the use of a quantitative survey questionnaire. This survey method provided a way to counteract biases arising from my own experience as a Saudi learner of English. The use of statistics will reduce the degree of personal interpretation and therefore lessens the effects of personal bias.

Mason (2002, p.4) stresses the need to understand the underlying logic of the research being attempted, as well as the different forms of analysis required for each method. The use of a survey that produces quantifiable data, which is then used to inform the qualitative in-depth interviews, is described as 'exploratory sequential', which is the approach that has been applied in this study (Guest, 2013). The two methods, within this research, act to mutually inform each other, and the research has different stages which lead to each other sequentially.

Consent and Ethical Considerations

The research was funded by the Saudi government, with the intention that the study be beneficial for Saudi higher education students in the UK. Furthermore, the Saudi Embassy provided support in this investigation.

The participants were recruited through a variety of means, but at no stage has the research been instigated by the Saudi government. Therefore, no possible coercion has been exerted over the learners. A detailed information sheet about the research project was produced in both Arabic and English, which was then provided to the students at the beginning of their participation in the research. All of the participants were adults, who provided explicit written consent for their

participation in the research. The consent form was also translated into Arabic, as some of the first year students may not have had sufficiently strong reading skills in English to ensure their understanding and thus their informed consent. All of the participants were informed that they could withdraw at any stage.

Confidentiality was maintained at all times during this research. Pseudonyms were used for all participants in interviews as identifiers on all data collection instruments and on transcripts. A list of linked pseudonyms and real names was kept confidential.

No apparent physical or psychological harm to the participants was perceived during their participation in the investigation. However, students might have felt uncomfortable while travelling to take part in the research, especially the females. As Saudi women do not travel alone in their country, they often feel intimidated while travelling alone during their first year abroad, during the period of adaptation to a new environment and situation. The participants might also have felt uncomfortable about sharing some personal information or views because of their 'disclosure issues'. I conducted the interviews with the participants where they felt comfortable, such as a place of residence or the university or school they attend or at a coffee shop, or via Skype.

Validity and Reliability

Validity "refers to the correctness and appropriateness of the interpretations", while reliability serves to "score consistency across administrations of one's instrument" (Paltridge and Phakiti, 2010, p.12). The definitions of validity and reliability arose from the concerns of positivist researchers, who were concerned with the need to identify constant relationships between two variables. However, this approach might be of limited use when dealing with human subjects, where the search for objective 'truth' becomes problematic (Robson, 2002). This research is experimental in nature, in that the Saudi learners attended a workshop in an attempt to improve their cultural competence with the goal of being better able to communicate in UK higher education learning environments. A combination of an empirical approach with a constructivist approach was used, which could be described as a 'critical realist' approach (Robson, 2002; p.43). This makes the management of the validity and reliability important, but with acknowledgement that these factors might always remain contingent.

Outcome validity could be described as the most important as it is the extent that the intervention resolves the issues that the Saudi students face (Herr and Anderson, 2014, p.55). The evaluation of the intervention. In addition, process

validity will have been strengthened by the use of mixed methods, allowing the use of different perspectives. Furthermore, the use of mixed methods, to research the key questions, enhances interpretability (Robson, 2002; p.371). This is also important, as greater interpretability tends to lead to greater validity. The use of quantifiable questionnaires allowed for greater reliability of the data, which were collected more objectively as there was no change in the 'instrument' (Wagner, 2010). In addition, Rasinger (2010) suggests that planning for questionnaires and other methodological tools is important to ensure the provision of reliable and valid findings.

Democratic validity refers to the levels of collaboration between the stakeholders and the relevancy of the finding to the participants. Although, in the process of this research there was some collaboration with the stakeholders, in that the Saudi Embassy sent a representative to present at the workshop, it was limited and it is foreseen that after dissemination the collaboration will increase to promote the findings.

Catalytic validity is how both the researcher and participants are able to deepen their knowledge and start further transformation. Personally, the use of action research has enabled me to further develop my practice in the field of educational and identify how it is possible to reflect within my own professional context. This research has inspired me to establish some pre-departure workshops for Saudi students in the future.

Dialogic validity is strong in this research as it has been reviewed by my supervisor and I have presented it to other academics at conference.

Limitations of the Study

As with all research projects there were some limitations in the methodology used. As this is a PhD thesis, the work undertaken is inherently limited in terms of the time available and the financial constraints necessarily placed upon the scope of the research. Although this may be true, the relevancy would be stronger as the same type was used for the preliminary and intervention study groups.

One of the most notable difficulties was that the transcription, translation, and analysis of the preliminary interviews and questionnaires took more time than expected. The rectifying of the confusing question in the questionnaire caused further delay, as the issue was identified after one month, by which time the survey responses had risen to 40. I was alerted to the confusing question, when I received enquiries from some participants who contacted me via the social media app. It should be noted that although the questionnaire was conducted in English, an

Arabic version, translated by 'Todaytranslations' translation company, was available upon request. However, none of the participants requested the Arabic version, which may have been due to the questionnaire being principally composed of simply written closed questions, meaning that they required less explanation.

As previously discussed, the preliminary interviews were conducted in English for reasons of communication. Although this approach was communicatively effective, it required translation from Arabic to English, which caused some difficulties. This meant that some of the interviews were entirely in Arabic, while others were in both English and Arabic, which made it time consuming and complicated to switch between the languages. Larkin et al. (2007) explain this phenomenon by stating that different languages perceive social aspects differently, which can create methodological problems for qualitative research. The influence of the translator can also create a 'hybrid' interpretation as the translator seeks to define the words spoken by their own cultural understandings (Temple and Young, 2004, p.171). As a consequence of this, I found that I had to review the translated version and add missing information. As a native speaker of Arabic I was able to draw upon the information expressed in Arabic and reduce the influence of the translator.

As a result of the difficulties with language switching that were encountered in the preliminary research, the decision was made to conduct the reviews in Arabic and then translate the extracted parts into English, thus reducing the aforementioned deficulties. The methodology has utilised both qualitative and quantitative research methods in order to ensure that the validity and the reliability of the research findings are adequate to comprehensively address the research questions, with due diligence to issues of validity and reliability.   These questions pertain to the cultural competence of Saudi learners of the English language, and how this level of cultural mastery could be improved through intervention. The overall structure was therefore based upon Nunan's (1992) seven-step cycle for action research, which uses workshops as the intervention.

Participants in the Study

This section describes the demographic profile of the sample of Saudi English language learners to determine their age, gender, city of origin in Saudi Arabia, and the region in which they studied in the UK. The preliminary questionnaire participant group consisted of 84 students who completed the online survey and the hard copy, covering issues related to intercultural communication and competence. Participation was on a voluntary basis; however, 17 participants were subsequently

excluded because one of the opening questions identified them as not meeting the criteria of being within six months of starting their course in the UK, which left a total sample population of 67 students. This sizable rate of deletion is attributable to the failure to identify this shortcoming in the pilot, meaning that it was not rectified earlier. The number was not increased due to limitations in time and resources.

Recent arrivals were used as they could be in their early stages of their language learning and at a lower level of cultural adjustment and at the earlier stages of Bennett's (1986) DMIS. The questionnaire analysis revealed that the majority of respondents, 46%, were from Riyadh, 16% from the city of Jeddah, with the remainder, 38%, coming from 15 other Saudi cities. This demonstrates that although the questionnaire sample group included students from a wide variety of origins, the majority originate from the largest cities, which is indicative of the largely urbanised population in Saudi Arabia, whereby in 2014 83% of Saudis live in cities (The World Bank, 2016).

In addition to confirming the representativeness of the participant group, the different cities of origin may potentially indicate their previous intercultural experiences. The different cities have quite different cultural contexts, for example, students from Mecca and Medina will have been regularly exposed to different cultures due to the annual influx of pilgrims and visitors from all around the world, seeking to fulfil the holy duties of 'Islam'. This research defines cities with a population of over 1 million as major cities, with all smaller settlements being defined as minor cities. The analysis showed that three quarters of the questionnaire respondents came from major cities, with one quarter coming from minor cities. This may be described as representative of the Saudi population in general, as in Saudi Arabia the population is concentrated in cities and the population growth is also within the cities (Hilal, 2013). Whether the Saudi English language learners live in a more cosmopolitan city could influence the amount of intercultural experience that they have had within their home country and ultimately in their own development of intercultural competence, as discussed previously.

The Demographics of the Interview Group

The preliminary research stage included qualitative interviews with Saudi English language learners. The language level of the courses that they were taking ranged from elementary to upper intermediate, while their specialty fields included law, statistics and mathematics, management, nursing, psychology and art and design. A total of 9 semi-structured interviews were conducted, with three male and six female participants aged between 19 and 44 years. The participants were all in

the UK to study English, except participant BI9 who was here acting as a companion to his wife, sharing familial responsibilities and fulfilling a caring capacity whilst studying English so that he could complete his Master's degree. This preponderance of females may be attributable to a number of factors, firstly, culturally, as a female interviewer it may be easier to make and maintain contact with the same gender, due to the gender segregation in Saudi society. Another factor may be the increase in female students studying in the UK, perhaps again as a result of the expansion of the scholarship program (Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern, 2015) and its resulting motivation enabling many female Saudi students to study overseas (Saudi Arabian Cultural Mission, 2012).

The interviewees were recruited through social networks, by word of mouth, through Saudi cultural clubs for students, via Twitter and by email. The social network of the researcher is principally female, which may have influenced the sample composition, although an effort was made to mitigate this factor through the participation of male contacts in forwarding on study details. The fact that Saudi males often feel uncomfortable speaking with Saudi females may have influenced the recruitment process, this is illustrated by Before Intervention (BI) participant 9 who mentioned that he did not like to be in a class with females and felt embarrassed. Therefore, if a male was contacted by a female he may not have responded to the interview request unlike in the questionnaire distribution.

Overall Evaluation

Some participants stated that they had received a three-day orientation but that it had been restricted to those students who specifically received the King Abdullah scholarship. However, PI6 attended a longer orientation course in Saudi Arabia, which lasted for eight hours over 14 days and which was aimed at all students studying abroad, regardless of country. The previous orientation course that he described had 80 students, who would be going to the UK, the US, Australia and Japan. The course utilised a combination of lectures, texts that the students summarised, and an exam at the end.

An interview was conducted with the presenter from the Saudi Embassy to develop an understanding from different views and develop a more rounded evaluation of the workshop intervention. She commented that the comparatively small number of students in attendance gave them more confidence when discussing issues with each other. She recognised that there were numerous potential cultural issues for Saudi English language learners studying in the UK, adding that the lack of cultural awareness could often be attributed to the fact that

'*English language was taught only to be used within the Islamic context of the Kingdom, instead of being used as an international language*'. This may be as a direct result of the Saudi national curriculum being devoid of other cultural references (Al- Qahtani, 2003; Al-Jarf, 2006; Al Samami, 2014; Al-Seghayer, 2014; Mahboob and Elyas, 2014).

With over 148,000 Saudi students being granted government scholarships in 2013, (Ministry of Higher Education, 2013), the large numbers of students may have placed pressure on the embassy services, with the representative stating that '*Many people from different backgrounds and classes went abroad, some of whom had never left the Kingdom. This resulted in culture shock once those students arrived in the country they were going to study in*'. The representative, who presented at the workshop, went on to explain that, due to the female scholarship being relatively new, the Embassy had focused on the female students by attending three days of meetings at Princess Nourah bint Abdulrahman University (female). At these meetings, they had attempted to collect the views and experiences of the different academics and embassy officials. In response to these meetings, '*the Ministry of Higher Education adopted the idea of three preparative days for students, and they were mandatory for the scholarship to be approved*'. The effectiveness of the Embassy intervention on the acculturation of Saudi students may be difficult to determine; this is in line with the literature review that revealed different orientation programmes in use. However, there were not any details of evaluation and reflection on the effectiveness of the orientation, whereas as this research uses Nunan's (1992) seven-step cycle, it therefore contains multiple different stages of evaluation.

The Embassy representative stated that conferences had been held on the topics of domestic violence and other important social issues. The focus of these conferences had tended to be on the different cultural understandings of these issues and the possible conflicts that could therefore naturally arise. Through these discussions, it became evident that the priorities of the Embassy are generally linked to the fulfilment of legal requirements, whereas this study concentrates on communicative ability. This is in stark comparison to this research which tries to make the participants active in the change.

Overall, the interview revealed progress within the Saudi Embassy about the issues facing overseas students. However, it showed a general lack of formal research into the outcomes of orientation provision and allowing the students to study, without support, in developing their intercultural awareness. This underlines the importance of evaluation and the development of an effective intervention.

PI6 was asked to compare the two different orientation courses. He replied,

'There is a large difference between them, I don't see there is any need [for a person] to take the orientation before he decides where he wants to go and which country he is going to, and you should attend this course in the host country because he will be experiencing the situation whilst he is imagining it'.

The pre-departure orientation that he experienced was a general course for all students studying abroad and therefore not specific to his needs. The use of a preliminary stage to develop the topics may have helped to refine the content of the workshop. In comparing the two different approaches, he found the post-arrival intervention within the context was more beneficial for him. PI4 added that *'The one that you did and your speaker when she was lecturing I was experiencing it. I was very keen and interested in the topics and I pray for you'*. In addition, Byram's model (1997) also emphasises the importance of developing interest in the exploration of a new culture whilst being able to be critical of your own.

The students were asked to evaluate the workshop by providing an overall score out of 10. These scores are subjective, reflecting the individual view of each participant and thus it was only useful to gather information about their personal opinion of the value of the workshop. All of the participants rated the workshop over 8, which showed that the participants were satisfied with the workshop. This finding triangulates well with the previously analysed anonymous initial evaluation sheets. PI4 gave the workshop a top score: *'I give it [the workshop] 10 out of 10. I thought it was good, everything was good, the cooperation, cleanliness and calmness. We listened well and I [really] liked it'*. PI2 also thought that it was *'very useful'*. PI2 and PI4 would recommend the workshops to those coming to the UK. PI2 explained that this was because *'I benefited; that means I took the maximum amount of information for example about the way of studying and the way of communicating with their culture and communicating within the life here. How each one lives, how you know the renting system works and the system of everyday life'*. Both of these participants explicitly stated appreciation of the usefulness of the content, the atmosphere and the organisation of the workshop. In support of PI2, PI4 valued the workshop and said that *'I swear by God I am telling you and I will tell others. I mean it's something great, it wasn't complicated, it was masterful and it is something refined in its contents [parts], it's really very good. The information contained within the workshop [training] was very good'*. PI3, while only attending for one day, said that *'my impression was that it was excellent, from 8, 9 to 10'*. The positive experience was also mirrored in PI6's evaluation, as he gave it a maximum score and said, *'I give it 10 out of 10 I swear by God that I don't say this to please*

you but I felt that it impacted on me. I felt that there is care for Saudi students, and there is advice because when I came here I was lost'.

These positive responses showed that the participants felt welcome and cared for at the workshop; this may be because they were with other Saudi English language learners and felt that they were protected within their own culture comfort zone. These findings are in agreement with and extend upon the concept of acculturative stress as expressed by Berry (1998). As a female Saudi student who studied in the UK, I did not receive any orientation upon arriving. Therefore, I have shared the same experiences and difficulties that the participants have, and in hindsight can fully appreciate the potential benefits of an orientation that can go towards decreasing the stress of moving to a new country and assimilating into a new culture. Thus, I feel that if the workshop was put together and hosted by a non-Saudi instead of a fellow Saudi, the results would be different. Being Saudi allowed me the opportunity to deliver the information in the workshop from a Saudi perspective, keeping cultural nuances that are specific to Saudis in mind.

However, as a researcher, particularly one who was present at the workshop and accompanied by my family, it could therefore be easily perceived that I would be keen for the intervention to be a success. P16 had possibly also considered this point to be a possible issue, therefore by explicitly swearing to God, he showed that he was being honest in his praise. PI6 added in his general evaluation that, '*After about one month, no one taught me and no one called me. This is true that everyone should rely on oneself but there are some things that we are unaware of at all and don't know anything about it'.* His response demonstrates that there were some cultural issues that he had previously been unaware of, and it seems possible that he was able to identify this lack of awareness because of his raised cultural competency awareness, which is one of the main aims of this research. The raising of cultural awareness was mentioned by other participants. For example, PI7 related, '*I saw it as very useful because there were things that frankly I didn't care about'.* Additionally, PI5 mentioned learning new cultural facts from the intervention, saying '*About the rules in London, the important things in London, I mean I didn't know it before but in the workshop I learnt a lot about the etiquette'.* All of these participants described an increase in their awareness about possible issues. This can be described in terms of the stages of intercultural competence, as discussed by Byram's model in developing their capability of communication within the new culture.

In the workshop, a more communicative approach was adopted. The resulting interaction and active role of participants seemed to have been appreciated by many

of the students. Being active rather than passive may lead to greater student engagement, thereby enabling engaged students to experience a collaborative inclusion. This engagement therefore leads to active discussion and exchange with students being prepared to change (Barnett, 2003). The learners reflecting and being self-critical in their own perceptions of their culture may also cause an increase in the willingness for them to change and adapt to their new host cultural environment.

PI1 appreciated the more active role and said, '*Also what I liked that it was not only a workshop; for example there are exercises, there were questions, participation, I mean we take and we give, not only you are presenting alone, I mean it's not boring*'. This participant was taking an active role and appreciated this aspect, which may be related to the skills of discovery and interaction described in Byram's intercultural competency model. Through the use of these skills, a participant may be better equipped to gain cultural knowledge of social practices in the UK context. After this, through further raising of awareness and development of critical awareness, they may then be able to be critical from multiple perspectives and, in so doing, ultimately be able to enhance their own cultural competency. These communication competency components may be improved through the development of discovery and interaction skills, while interaction skills may be important for the other participants.

In addition, the ability to interact was important for other participants. The chance to talk with the presenters is something that PI3 picked out as being valuable and advantageous in the development communicative awareness: '*When you talk about this workshop there are professionals and you can talk face to face and discuss, ask but if it is written you can only give information. That means you don't know if it's right or wrong. In general you will take the useful content from this*'. PI7 was also interested in interacting with the presenters and the combination of both British and Arab speakers, saying that,

'*The first thing that the people were talking in English, this gave us an idea that it was not only Arab with Arab, we do not only rely on Arabic – there is a use of the second language. There are some British who gave us valuable information; we use both languages mixed and its good for people who first come to the UK*'.

This comment demonstrates the participants' appreciation of the value of the use of native speakers. Although this expression showed the prestige given to the native speaker, this research views the intercultural speaker to be the model as Byram and Nichols (2001) state; the ideal is not to become a native speaker but to

be a competent intercultural speaker. The workshop also used Arab speakers presenting in English and through this approach of portraying an intercultural speaker, the culture was conveyed through the target language and this interlinking of the aspects of these two aspects may have benefited the Saudi learners (Ho, 2009). In agreement, it is maintained that 'language and culture are not separate, but are acquired together, with each providing support for the development of the other' (Mitchell and Myles, 2004, p. 235). These findings support the idea that it is important for individuals to consider the target culture with the language and culture, while not ignoring their own cultural origins. For this reason, the chosen approach utilised a mix of Arabic and English languages and cultures in order to give the language learners more confidence in and awareness of the correct use of the second language.

Additionally, PI2 was pleased by the use of presenters who lived in the UK. He argued that before arrival a person may not be able to appreciate what they will need to know and therefore, if left to research independently this approach may not be effective. He therefore found the workshop extremely beneficial. When evaluating the workshop in the interviews, PI3 described them as *'Excellent '*and said that *'all the people who were talking were excellent '*and also commented on the language used. '*The language was very useful, thank god, I acquired it from you and I have to use it also, I mean the British culture is open so I can learn it'.* Despite being translated, this comment conveys that the workshop could not possibly contain all of the required information; however the content was perceived to be a useful introduction to many areas.

Despite the feedback being mostly positive, there were issues identified by two participants around lateness. PI1 gave the workshop 8.5, not because of a lack of content but because she had missed one section due to arriving late. This lateness was also an issue for PI7, who rated the workshop 9.5 because some of the other participants had been late. Practical issues may have led to some of the late arrival of some of the participants travelling from outside London, which then delayed the start of the workshops. The decision was made to delay, in order that the maximum number of participants would have had covered all of the topics in order that the maximum number of participants could attend all of the topics. Both of these participants stated that lateness was an issue.

PI8 scored the workshop generously and gave 8 out of 10, providing the following review: *'Very nice, I attended the first day it was nice but the second day was better, I was not very keen to attend the second day but it was better'.* This shows that this participant perceived a difference in the two days, which supports

the use of evaluation to improve the delivery, and shows the value of subjects shedding further light on the effectiveness of the workshop. Moreover, increasing communicative intercultural experiences and reflection may increase cultural awareness. The fears and concerns felt by the participants affected the evaluation of the most useful topic, and therefore needed to be included to enable the intervention to become more relevant to the Saudi learners' needs.

Recommendations from the Participants about the Effectiveness of the Orientations

All of the participants recommended that orientation courses would be useful and should therefore be attended by future students as students are not aware of the British culture or any surrounding issues until they arrive in the host country (Baker and Hawkins, 2006). PI4 spoke positively of the benefits, stating *'Yes, again and again it's very beneficial. If I'm honest. I mean those who come [to the workshop] don't realise that they will benefit from many things'*. She added that she would advise her sister to look for similar workshops or to read literature about British culture. Most of the students thought that preparatory courses should be undertaken earlier, at the initial stages of settling in to the host country, as shown in the Schumann's acculturation model.

PI1 and PI4 both thought that a course should be provided prior to intercultural experiences. PI1 said, *'I recommend that people attend it before starting their studies, before they interact with the British because the workshop describes British culture in general and some things that in their [British] concepts, we have to understand it'.* She provided idioms as an example of the kinds of items that need to be learnt. When asked whether the orientation should be before they come to the UK, PI4 replied that,

'Yes, so they can know information about the things they will encounter, it's good, and once they come I am sure they will be given more information in different places, second choice. No it's good, a person then has an idea, I mean if I go to a place and know what to do'.

PI8 recommended that new arrivals ~~should~~ take orientation courses, explaining that *'It will make everything easy for them, especially universities'.* When asked about whether these should be done before or after individuals arrive in their host country, she replied *'yes, maybe, before they arrive, or within one month'.* She provided the example of the problems in using different kinds of

transport, particularly if the new student had not been to the UK before. PI3 thought that delaying the orientation may make it obsolete, explaining *'But if it is held after 2 or 3 months there is no need, because, the students after a month might face some problems and learn from them'.* The early experience could be positive, raising the cultural awareness and cultural competence of students, or alternatively it could potentially make them retreat into their own culture. This latter example is supported by Yang and Kim (2011), who found that some culturally negative experiences can lead students to interact with their home culture rather than the host culture as their beliefs change. Such culturally negative experiences could potentially face PI5, who relies on her husband to communicate with the British community.

PI7 recommends orientation for new students because of the opportunity to gain an idea about the country and rules, without focusing exclusively on language. Despite the workshop not focusing entirely on language, cultural awareness leads to greater language proficiency; a view that is supported by Lambert (1972). PI7 added that university colleagues had expressed an interest in learning these kinds of skills and knowledge, explaining *'When we attended, we told our friends about it, it was nice for beginners and they asked us where it was and if they were holding another one'.* This shows that there was an interest among her peers in this workshop. PI5 stated that *'I recommend that in early September and every three months for the new students because I benefited a lot'.*

Additionally, PI3 thought that the workshop should be held for new arrivals and stated that the course should also be held intermittently, throughout the year, *'from time to time'.* PI3 went further, saying that *'They must make it compulsory for everyone'.* This belief that such courses should be obligatory and that the Saudi Cultural Bureau should supply all the requirements underlines the positive role she perceived that these kinds of interventions could play in student life. PI2 agreed and thought that the government should provide workshops, stating *'I prefer that it is held in the Saudi Cultural Bureau'.* He added that while advice can be found on the website and in leaflets, it fails to cover certain important areas tackled by the workshop, such as renting, or formal rules and regulations. He repeated three times that he would recommend this workshop for new students because of content that was important but which they would be unlikely to learn easily in other contexts. This demonstrates a lack regarding awareness of cultural competence before students arrive in their host countries as they may not be able to foresee the difficulties.

Furthermore, although the Saudi Embassy representative interviewed

identified the role that cultural differences play in creating difficulties for Saudi students in the UK, she also perceived the Saudi culture of dependence upon the government as an issue. In fact, she went on to describe the Saudi learners as viewing the government as 'Santa Claus'. She thought that other potential issues often included a lack of awareness regarding important rules, issues around wearing the headscarf, and even a perception among some individuals that learning about another culture will erode your own beliefs. When asked if she had read or knew of any research to support these ideas, she stated that the claims were based on her own experience. Nevertheless, these statements support Auty's 'Santa Claus' concept.

In addition, the Saudi Embassy representative compared the conferences that were held by the Embassy and the workshop intervention, and said that

'*As for the workshop which you held, it was so beneficial and I think it should be held again in the future, because students do not feel safe in big events, whereas s/he is more motivated in these workshops. Workshops that include 12 to 15 students who can discuss, learn and ask each other as a group and this is not found in big meetings where the students are more like viewers*'.

This research workshop had 10 participants (five extra came on the second day) ~~participants~~ and was therefore smaller and this comment clearly demonstrates the perception that the intervention was beneficial for the participants, and that smaller workshops rather than larger events can be more useful to many Saudi learners.

Discussion

These research findings are particularly significant in the context of Saudi Arabia because, at the current time, there is a substantial increase in the numbers of students leaving the Kingdom on the King Abdullah Scholarship Program. This results in a larger number and wider range of learners, who are likely to all benefit from some level of support during their study periods overseas. Through my personal experience, as a previous English language learner, I noticed that cultural difficulties often acted as a barrier to learning, both for myself and my peers. Therefore, in order to deal with these obstacles, this research firstly aims to determine the perceptions or understanding that Saudi English language learners have of cultural competence, and if these could be improved by raising their awareness of British culture through an intervention workshop. Secondly, it seeks to ascertain whether the improved awareness would allow students to adapt better and improve their experience in the early learning stage. This may mean that when

students arrive at foreign destinations they are either unaware of cultural issues or are under-prepared to live and effectively interact in their host societies.

Research Conclusions

This research sought to investigate the cultural difficulties experienced by a group of Saudi English learners, how they dealt with these situations, whether they had been effectively prepared by their personal experience or other orientation programs, and whether intervention could increase their cultural awareness. As this thesis is an intervention study, Nunan's (1992) action research cycle was utilised to structure the research. Initially, the seven stages of Nunan's (1992) cycle begin by identifying the gap in knowledge (ibid.).

The cultural differences may be defined with reference to the dimensions described by Hofstede (2014). Hofstede's conceptualisation of the differences in the cultural dimension between Saudi Arabia and the UK included examples such as Saudi culture being accepting of a greater power difference than Britain; the UK generally being thought of as being more individualistic; and Saudi Arabia having a greater level of uncertainty avoidance. This research accepts that overall, there may be a large number of general cultural differences between different nations, however, as cultures are typically thought to be more fluid and less static. This may be attributable to the effects of individual differences for example life styles and experiences or different learning approaches and a greater mixture of cultures through globalisation.

Although there is an argument that the cultures may be blended to some extent, the Saudi English language learners in the UK are nevertheless clearly studying and living in a new cultural context. Bennett's DMIS (1993) model may explain the process that the Saudi English language learner may experience whilst developing cultural sensitivity to the extent they become acculturated to the British culture. In general, it should be noted that most Saudi English language students are not seeking to integrate, however the development of a greater acceptance of local cultural differences may well assist them in coping with differences in international classrooms, as well as within the larger context of living and studying abroad. The ability to communicate with people with different cultures could be described as intercultural competency. Intercultural competency is understood in this research through Byram's (1997) model of intercultural competency. This model attempts to identify the different components of intercultural competence, which led this research to implement an intervention that endeavoured to explore several of the most applicable to the Saudi English Language learners' context of these

components, such as increased critical awareness and the process of becoming more reflective.

Other intervention studies have found that intervention can help students studying abroad to improve their intercultural competency. Therefore the use of the previously described concepts may enable interventions to become more effective. The second stage of the preliminary investigations focused on an examination of whether the Saudi English language learners faced intercultural issues, as well as the possible effects that these had on them. The preliminary stage combined qualitative semi-structured interviews with quantitative questionnaire findings to develop the findings, which were then used for the third stage of the Nunan's (1992) cycle which identifies the issues and proposes the hypothesis to be used in the intervention. The issues identified were implemented in the workshop.

The procedures used for the workshop intervention, stage four of the Nunan cycle, were detailed in the methodology. Importantly, post-intervention, an evaluation was performed of the intervention in accordance with stage five of the Nunan Action Research Cycle. This intervention evaluation was primarily qualitative given that the focus of this research was to investigate the development of cultural competency as a complex process that therefore required a more holistic evaluation. The findings of the preliminary research and the workshop evaluation were combined within the discussion in order to create a critical discussion that examined the findings within the context of the research questions and other intervention studies.

The final stage in the Nunan Action Research cycle is the follow-up, which involves sharing findings and making recommendations. By writing this thesis and sharing my findings, I have attempted to effectively disseminate the valuable findings revealed by this research. Additionally, I was able to attend the *2014: 2nd Global Conference on Linguistics and Foreign Language Teaching conference.* There, I had the opportunity to present some of my findings in a speech entitled 'Increasing Cultural Competence in Saudi English language Learners in the UK'. During the questioning phase, one member of the audience argued that they had perceived Saudi students as tending to segregate themselves and that the Saudi government actually wanted them to be segregated. I replied that my findings did not support this claim as the students wanted to integrate more and the Saudi government is financially supporting the large King Abdulallah Scholarship Program. The questioning at the conference demonstrated to me that there was a broadly held perception that Saudi learners did not want to integrate and that the issue may therefore be with the host countries desire to communicate, rather than

with their intercultural competence, however this would require more research.

The workshop intervention evaluation highlighted that a number of the participants had started the process of becoming more aware of cultural differences. This suggests that further research conducted to determine how best to develop the orientation given within this research may be advantageous to the development of intercultural competency among students. As culture is acquired gradually, ongoing classes and consultation would support students in the further development of their intercultural competency.

The need for positive intervention may be endorsed further because of the lack of cultural awareness demonstrated by Saudi English language learners[2], which was compounded by a lack of perception regarding its importance. This finding was common in both the preliminary research and the workshop evaluation. These activities identified that the vast majority of Saudi English language students seem to be heavily focused on the assessment and development of linguistic ability. As a result, they tend not to consider cultural aspects to be as important. This may be due to their previous English language learning experience in Saudi being taught within a Saudi cultural context with little influence of the target English language culture (Al- Samani, 2014). The learning heritage of English language learners often affects their expectations and attitudes to different pedagogy (Wesely, 2012). Their previous language learning experience may have led them to believe that English language proficiency and the ability to gain acceptable proficiency scores in their IELTS only requires linguistic ability and therefore cultural knowledge should be secondary. As with students from many nationalities, and in recognition of the importance that this certification can play in academic studies and even visa applications, Saudi English language learners were largely motivated by their IELTS results. The fact that the learners had time limits available to study English because of their scholarships also acted as an incentive in this regard.

A key aspect within this research was that the workshop was rated highly by the participants and that they recommended it to newly-arrived students. This further supports the recommendation for orientation programmes to be provided to English language learners from Saudi Arabia. In this regard, the participants demonstrated preferences for face-to-face interaction that took place in a comfortable environment. It was also of paramount importance to the participants that they would have an interactive role within the intervention. In addition, online orientation may not have been as effective as other approaches, with workshop participants often becoming more aware of differences than those on other kinds of programmes (Lou and Bosley, 2012). One of the main positive findings in this

research is that the students reflected upon their own critical cultural awareness after the workshop and that this may increase their willingness to adapt to their new host environment. This may have been beneficial for the intervention participants' outcomes in developing their cultural competency. Therefore any orientation must be interactive and also responsive to the Saudi English language learners' needs. The content should then also be responsive to the learners' needs. Therefore, the next conclusion is related to the specific content that should be included in the intervention. This content should be selected on the understanding that the intervention should be implemented according to the requirements and specific needs of the Saudi English language learners. The use of Nunan's cycle was beneficial to this aspect of the process, as it included a preliminary stage that sought to identify the issues within the acculturation of the Saudi English language learners. The participants rated the content very high, probably because it was based upon the initial investigations. Therefore the positive outcomes of implementing and adapting Nunan's cycle for improvement of intercultural communicative competence for foreign language learners could be used with different nationalities and learner groups in different contexts.

One of the more surprising findings that emerged from the preliminary research was that many of the participating language learners were extremely concerned about various laws and regulations. For this reason, specific content about this area was used in the workshop, which uncovered that the workshop participants were also anxious about laws and regulations. The stress that students had about these concerns may have affected their ability to study and therefore this issue needs to be addressed urgently. Saudi students require these issues to be addressed before they come to the UK to study. This supports the requirement for UK specific orientation, which should cover specific issues facing Saudi students have studying within the UK for extended periods.

Another factor that contributed to the success of the workshop was the specificity of the cultural content to the particular needs of the Saudi English language learners. The subject of racism was covered and was found to be topical as one Saudi lady was reported in the news to have been tragically stabbed to death in what was reported to be a racist attack. This made the workshop participants more aware of the issue of racism and cultural integration, as well as perhaps making them more fearful of life in the UK. Another popular subject was the topic of non-verbal communication, which gave rise to multiple opportunities for cross-cultural comparisons to be made. Although in many respects the analysis of these comparisons was relatively crude, the resultant discussion amongst the participants

may have enabled them to more effectively perceive certain cultural differences from the 'other' perspective.

Within this research, intervention was found to be positive. The exploration of other types of practical interventions could be a continual resource for the Saudi students in the UK, offering different ways in which their development of intercultural competence could be fostered. The provision for recently arrived Saudi students could be improved by approaches such as making a group forum within the Saudi Cultural Bureau web page that includes a problem page that could be used for information or help as required. Information could also be given to the Saudi students about how to positively engage with the local community, with the goal of reducing the issues that they face and making them better informed. This would make the information that they gain responsive and specific to their needs, thereby increasing their engagement and hopefully developing their intercultural competency further. This intervention research could be expanded and the effectiveness evaluated continuously to improve the appropriateness of the information.

Orientation is thought to be not only the responsibility of the Saudi government but also collaboration with the host (UK) government. The orientation programmes could be held in the language centres themselves, including not only practical but also cultural information about life and study in the UK. Continual reflection provided through discussion has been shown to be beneficial to the development of intercultural competency, so the inclusion of this approach into English language classes may benefit the students in language centres facing similar issues.

Contributions and Recommendations

The importance of this study is that it is the first endeavour, using a mixed methods approach, to develop a conceptual framework informed by both the available literature and the experiences of Saudi English language learners in the UK. This research has added and developed further the theoretical framework, such as the understanding of ICC, the development of ICC and the adaptation of ICC in their learning process these are detailed in the following discussion. Importantly, the development of the conceptual framework and the intervention was from the perspectives of Saudi English language learners which these were targeted to assist.

Firstly, Byram's theory of intercultural competency, as a set of skills, was found to be acquirable and could be taught with the use of intervention. The intervention in this research was over two days and the post-workshop interviews

were conducted once therefore future research may use a long-term approach to develop further the findings of this research. Overall the findings of this research substantiated Bennett's (1986) theory of intercultural development from an ethnocentric to an ethno-relative stance but contradicted the DMIS view of this being a linear development with set stages. The findings support a more process based, less linear view of intercultural communicative competence development.

This research had two major aims, firstly to investigate the intercultural issues that the newly arrived Saudi English language learners were experiencing in the UK and secondly to implement and evaluate an intervention to try to resolve these issues by raising their cultural competence awareness. Overall, this thesis sought to investigate holistically the intercultural issues that Saudi English language learners experience and develop a more rounded understanding of student learning contexts.

Although Al-Qahtani's (2011) study discovered needs, it only concentrated on students already in a postgraduate course in the UK whereas my study seeks to understand the needs of those students at an earlier stage of their English language learning. Al-Qahtani's study found similar issues to this study in regards to Saudi learners having academic cultural issues. However, my study was not restricted to identifying the issues but also to investigate a solution, implementation it and then evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention. My research recommendations include preparation courses. This thesis has focused on raising cultural competency through intervention with recently arrived students which was lacking in the other studies described in the literature review. Although Lou and Bosley (2012) used an intervention to improve and develop intercultural competency among students these previous studies did not focus on Saudi learners.

A primary finding is that in both the preliminary investigation and the workshop evaluation, this research identified that the Saudi English language learners tend to be under- prepared for their studies in the UK. This research identified that those individuals who did receive orientation tended to find that it was too generalised and did not cover specific issues of studying within the UK context, consequently offering real benefits.

This study adds to current knowledge as it discovered that lack of cultural awareness resulted in the research participants having issues and needs relating to a lack of cultural content knowledge. Therefore, the first recommendation of this research is that Saudi English language learners need to be effectively prepared for the shift from studying in Saudi Arabia to studying in the UK. Therefore this research makes recommendations that orientation should begin with pre-arrival,

followed by recent arrival, and be given at all stages of study. Pre-arrival orientation should be specific to the host country and include all of the family, with workshops designed to include individuals from different age groups together orientation would be most effective if it was held for recent arrivals into the UK and so it should be held prior to the commencement of the English language course ideally, cultural acclimatisation should be continuous and therefore more courses should be held throughout the students' stay. The giving of continuous orientation and support may increase the opportunities that Saudi English language learners have for reflection and the corresponding development of their critical awareness, which may increase their cultural competency.

A number of studies reviewed by Berg, Paige and Lou (2012) found that orientation not only offered legitimate gains when conducted prior to the students' arrival, but was also a valid activity when undertaken during the period of study. The current research seeks to fill the gap in terms of the lack of intervention research with Saudi English language learners, specifically to improve their cultural competency. In recognition of the importance of these findings and potential benefits that could be offered to overseas students as a consequence of these findings, the finding also shed light on the process that cultural competence and intercultural communication should be raised.

This study has established a need for the orientation of recently arrived Saudi English language learners within the UK. The following recommendations strive to pro-vide Saudi English language learners with more effective, targeted orientation programmes for their lives in the UK. This could be achieved through the improvement of cultural knowledge by means of workshops; in this research, the use of workshops resulted in some of the Saudi students beginning to compare and reflect upon their own culture and that of their hosts. Making an improvement in cultural competency may enable Saudi English language learners to more effectively complete their English language studies within the timeframe set by both the Saudi Arabian and UK governmental requirements. a greater level of cultural competency may enable Saudi learners to be able to communicate with others with different cultural understandings that may be advantageous in an increasingly globalised world with ever changing expectations.

1. Limitations of Intervention and the Research

Limitations of the implementation of the intervention included several practical issues which are discussed further in this section. Firstly, the research was primarily conducted over four years and over this period there have been a lot of

changes in the context of Saudi learners. These include the changing of the Saudi Kings, with the corresponding changes that this has brought about in the construction of the ministries, as well as within the specific scholarship regulations. The awareness of the issues in the Saudi Cultural Bureau has been developing with a recognition of the adjustment needs of Saudi English language learners. These developments and reforms have resulted in the creation of pre-arrival orientation programmes for scholarship students. This may have had an effect on the needs of the Saudi learners. It is also likely that some issues covered in the workshop may have been more effectively covered before arrival.

The length of time taken was also an issue as it resulted in the preliminary research group being different from the intervention participants, because the preliminary stage required investigation and analysis to ensure that the intervention was more appropriate. Therefore, I did not conduct pre- and post-intervention assessments of the participants, which may have enabled valuable comparisons to be made of their cultural competence. For instance, Ho (2009, p.72) suggested that pre-and post- intervention interviews may allow an assessment of cultural competence development. Therefore, it seems likely that this research may have benefitted from pre- and post-intervention interviews with the participants. This would have provided the opportunity to more effectively determine whether they had developed their intercultural awareness and competency. This may have been difficult to do within this research however, as cultural competency is recognized as a complex concept. Moeller and Nugent (2014) also considered that intercultural competency is difficult to quantify as it explains how the speaker goes from an 'ethnocentric' to a 'a noncentric. This is likely to make comparisons burdensome, as it would have increased the participants commitment and the information would have been too detailed and potentially limited the benefits available to the overall findings of this intervention research.

The methodology of the preliminary research had some limitations. The preliminary research questionnaire had a confusing question that stated 'Have you started your studies recently?' A clearer definition of 'recently' may have prevented the large rate of deletion. The interview schedule of the preliminary and workshop evaluation also both lacked questions concerning the development of identity among the participants. While these questions may have produced a broader set of findings, it is also possible that the additional information yielded might have increased the research burden for a lone researcher to analyse, within the time frame of this study.

Given these limitations, and informed by meaningful reflection, further

adaptation of the workshop could enable improvements to be made to the content and value it offers students. Additionally, Nunan's (1992) cycle could be repeated to optimise the findings. Therefore the limitations encountered should be considered by other researchers who are to embark upon further research within this field.

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