

MULTILITERACIES AND THE PEDAGOGY OF EMPOWERMENT: THE PERSPECTIVE OF SAUDI FEMALE STUDENTS

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Abstract. *This paper presents a new approach to teaching in the ESL classroom, one that employs multiliteracies pedagogy (MP) which is an approach that we consider to be significant for empowering Saudi female students in a context where English-language teaching must be responsive to the local culture and realities and must be driven by local needs. This is an action research project that was conducted within the female division of a private university in Saudi Arabia. Results show that multiliteracies pedagogy is a useful conceptual lens to employ in a second-language classroom in order to empower students and help them to find their education to be meaningful. Suggestions are offered for enhancing students' second-language learning and for empowering them by means of this pedagogy. The pedagogical implications for classroom teaching include the recruitment of local female role models, the use of the students' first language and the role of the teacher as a facilitator.*

Key words: *Pedagogy for empowerment, Multiliteracies pedagogy, ESL/EFL, Saudi Arabia, Saudi Arabian female students, language and teaching.*

1. INTRODUCTION

As Saudi Arabia develops into a more diversified regional economic power and an important player on the world stage, the kingdom's education system must begin to develop students' higher-order cognitive skills¹. There is a growing impetus for reforms to the education system that will move students to the center of the learning process and will equip them with twenty-first-century skills such as critical thinking and problem solving.

The approach of multiliteracies pedagogy (MP), which was identified in 1996 by the New London Group² focuses on diversity and multimodality as key aspects of multicultural theory and seeks to accommodate the technological advancement that is a constant feature of the contemporary world. The framework developed by Cazden et al.³ is based on four dimensions: situated practice (experiencing), overt instruction (conceptualizing), critical framing, and transformed practice (see **Figure 1** below). According to Tariq Elyas⁴, we now recognize that earlier Western culture(s) and different paradigms of thinking and different behavioral patterns should be carefully introduced into local cultures, such as the Saudi culture. What previously has been seen as clashes of civilizations are now defined as *differences* between sociocultural practices. Cazden et al.⁵ argue that the

changing landscape of communication and increasing linguistic and cultural diversity (a phenomenon that has begun to be apparent in Saudi Arabia) call for a new method to overcome the limitations of the traditional approach to language learning.

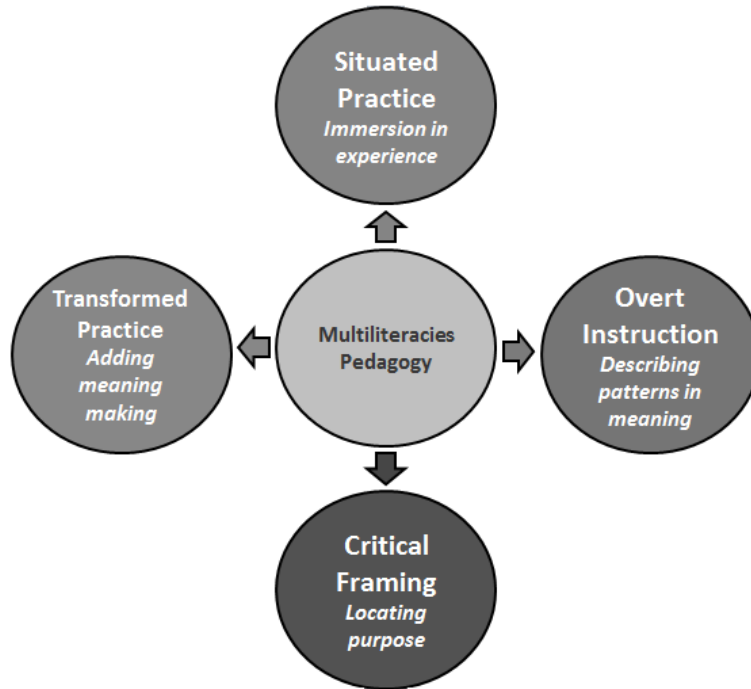


Fig. 1 Four Dimensions of Multiliteracies Pedagogy
(Adapted from Lydia Le⁶)

This action research project was conducted within the female division of a private higher-education institution in Saudi Arabia. The article first provides an overview of the Saudi educational context, followed by a discussion of English language learning in Saudi Arabia and of how cultural norms have an impact on higher education in this country. This article focuses on how multiliteracies pedagogy can be used to empower Saudi female students who are studying English in higher-education institutions. The following section explains multiliteracies and the framework for using this pedagogy to empower students. The possibilities and challenges associated with MP are revealed through a case study, and recommendations are offered for the successful implementation of MP in the Saudi context.

As Shampa Biswas⁷ pointed out, ‘transformed practice’ engages learners to “transfer ideas from one cultural situation to another.” She further stated that students might be encouraged to connect their learning experiences with their daily classroom tasks. ‘Transform action or practice’ is one of the four components of multiliteracies in teaching⁸ cited in Biswas⁹. The change in classroom technology allows students to combine text with graphics, sound, and other visual elements in their learning activities. Back in 2010, when social media was not

yet widespread in Saudi Arabia, the researchers saw the value of using new classroom technology, such as Smartboard, and computer software applications, such as Powerpoint, which gives affordance to students to produce multimedia presentations. Thus, their ESL/EAP (English for Academic Purposes) learners were assigned to use what was available in the classroom at that time for meaning making, language learning and developing basic research skills.

2. AIM OF THE STUDY

Multiliteracies came into being 20 years ago when the New London Group (1996) faced changes in their surrounding social environment, for example, the advancement in technology and the changes in diversity within the school as well as in the community. These social changes contributed to the adoption of new teaching approaches proposed and developed by teachers and students at that particular point of time. The New London Group (NLG) argued that the increase in the number of communication channels and the increasing linguistic and cultural diversity in the world today has demanded for a wider view of literacy in comparison to the traditional text-based literacy. An MP that is based on inclusion will result in the empowerment of students by achieving the “twin goals for literacy learning: creating access to the evolving language of work, power, and community, and fostering the critical engagement necessary for them to design their social futures and achieve success through fulfilling employment”¹⁰.

The theories related to multiliteracies help develop the schemas or frameworks for multimodal and pedagogical repertoires, which address the engagement, transformation, and diversity of the learner. These changes occurred due to the increase in the technologically driven knowledge society. The argument presented by the New London Group stated that in order to have better contemporary literacy education, multimodal representation would work best in comparison to solely written linguistic form. It has further presented four different dimensions of pedagogy (i.e. situated practice, overt instruction, critical framing, and transformed practice) which are very effective in transforming the traditional model.

3. TRADITIONAL PEDAGOGY: LOCAL VS. FOREIGN

Most, if not all, private higher-education institutions in Saudi Arabia employ curricula that have been transplanted from the West without significant modification, a practice that is continuing virtually unrestricted¹¹. Indeed, according to the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE), some private higher education institutions modeled on foreign universities mushroomed in the country “because of the importance of benefiting from the experience of international universities, most private universities and colleges in the Kingdom have entered into contracts of cooperation and partnership with a number of prestigious international universities”^{12, 13}.

On the other hand, as explained by André Mazawi¹⁴, reform in the majority of Gulf countries resulted in uncritical adoption of western (mainly American) university curricula, content and teaching practices which have not always met the needs of the learners. However, debates still rage as to instructional methodology¹⁵. This is a form of cultural adaptation and academic socialization of EFL textbooks not only happening to Saudi Arabia but also to other Gulf countries¹⁶.

The textbooks chosen for preparatory-year English courses, at the time of this investigation, were not culturally appropriate, and in many instances incorporated aspects of the American lifestyle that are irrelevant to Saudi students' lives or to the Muslim Middle Eastern culture. For example, foreign textbooks contain conversations about going out for a movie night in a cinema or for a mixed party that involves both genders. While such kinds of events are quite common in the West, they are not socially acceptable in Saudi Arabia.

4. WHY MULTILITERACIES PEDAGOGY?

In order to understand the term 'multiliteracies', it is first imperative to find out the meaning of the term 'literacy'. Literacy is considered as a concept which is dynamic and complex at the same time. Literacy is considered as one of the simplest processes for building the basic cognitive skills. In addition, socio-economic development and social awareness play a key role in developing these skills. Literacy is one of the most important components, which create social and personal change. The term 'multiliteracies' refers to the two key aspects concerning language. The first aspect is related to the various social domain and cultural contexts. The differences in these multiple contexts are considered to be more significant than reading some communication textbooks which forge language with foreign ideas and concepts that are irrelevant to students' lives. Furthermore, Kristina Robertson¹⁷ maintains that cultural context influences comprehension, and that this phenomenon occurs regardless of an individual's background supported by a cross-cultural reading comprehension study conducted in 1979. As a result, content of effective teaching/learning material should be able to connect to students' background knowledge, including own culture.

The second aspect is that language used today has a different context according to the new communication and information patterns. The widely used social media is an example. Multiliteracies is about the ability and understanding of using technology and language adequately and meaningfully. This is positioned within the multimedia, cultural and linguistic contexts. In regard to the multiliteracies pedagogy, it contains the approaches related to literacy learning and teaching practices. There are two significant schemas which are developed from the multiliteracies theory. First, it is imperative to understand how multiliteracies pedagogy can be employed in the classroom. Second, it has been observed that language learning is not an easy or simple matter. It heavily depends on the political, social, as well as the personal milieu.

Multiliteracies pedagogy (MP) acknowledges the existence of diverse texts and realities¹⁸. MP is a term created by the New London Group¹⁹ to acknowledge societal change, the different technological spheres that enter our lives, and the ways in which these complexities merge with our lives. Such acknowledgment will enable students to have opportunities to participate in communicating with others in an interconnected way²⁰. Thus, the "teaching and learning processes need to be enriched by the multiplicity of cultures and linguistic backgrounds that learners bring into the classroom... Schools need to meet the challenge of preparing students to be rooted in their local environment and at the same time to be aware of the interconnectivity with the world"²¹.

Although Saudi students are immersed in their local culture, they are also being exposed to, engaged with, and influenced by the diverse realities surrounding them, including through satellite television, the Internet, and social media. As a result, their

identities are becoming complex to the extent of even taking on hybrid characteristics. 'Hybrid characteristics' are a result of negotiation between the learner's own identity and the new identity that a learner needs to assume because of their learning of a new language/culture. For example, students do not mind their instructors using songs to teach English provided their instructors explain what the purpose is and ensure that students do not find it offensive to use those materials in class. This is a delicate matter. More importantly, before learners can reach their own internal negotiation of identities, they often find the ways of thinking that prevail in their ESL textbooks are far too imposing. This causes difficulty to Saudi ESL learners to learn the new language because the foreign ideas, such as the American way of living, cannot fully engage the learners. Therefore, this poses learning of English as a challenge to Saudi students. The redesign of the curriculum, therefore, is necessary in order to recognize the plurality of the students' cultural identities and the reaffirmation of the place of community-based cultural identities in pedagogy²². The main issue that ESL professionals at many private universities in Saudi Arabia (the site of this study included) are facing is that the higher education providers allow their preparatory year curricula to be fitted into a straitjacket by modeling their ESL courses on Western university curricula. Bear in mind, the curricula developed by foreign universities were a result of evolution from their own cultures over a long period of time. On the other hand, ESL education in Saudi Arabia has only begun to develop and therefore what ESL practitioners demand is material that can meet the local needs. Muhammad Raji Zughoul²³ pointed out the significance of consolidation of MT teaching and the need for a localized and learner-relevant content of teaching material. What Saudi ESL learners need is material of which the content is relevant to their own local culture. Tope Omoniyi²⁴ argues that multiliteracies can serve as a tool to facilitate the greater contribution of students towards global knowledge production (as cited in Lavoie et al.²⁵). As a result, the redesign of a curriculum which is built on an MP approach will involve facilitating students' meaning making and expression of their cultural identities by using text-based and non text-based teaching/learning materials, such as images and sound.

4.1. Saudi female students' empowerment

As researcher educators, we acknowledge the importance of learning from the perspective of a culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), but the textbooks that we were assigned to use contained culturally *inappropriate* materials. Thus, the difficulty in carrying out CRP and obtaining culturally sensitive teaching and learning materials caused problem in lesson delivery. Another cultural issue is that teachers and language instructors in the classroom, who generally originate from Western cultures, often find it challenging to interact and build rapport with their students²⁶. Such phenomenon is mostly rooted from the issue of the lack of culturally relevant teaching and learning. Teachers in ESL/EFL classrooms should give differentiated material²⁷ and recognize and appreciate the legitimacy of the cultural heritages of different ethnic groups. This is an action to address cultural relativism that is defined as "a philosophy, which in recognizing the values set up by every society to guide its own life, lays stress on the dignity in every body of customs, and on the need for tolerance and conventions, though they may differ from one's own"²⁸. Recent trends in education and classroom instructions are to teach from culturally relevant perspectives in which teaching material, with or without textbooks, should be relevant to students' lives.

Student empowerment occurs when students learn from within their cultural background.²⁹ The perspective of Geneva Gay and her award winning book, *Culturally Responsive Teaching: Theory, Research, and Practice*³⁰ in 2000, defines culturally responsive teaching as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse students to make learning more appropriate and effective for them. More recently, Aylia Khulaif Alshammari³¹ argued that “Anglo-American cultural and linguistic norms and values [dominate the current ESL materials and teaching methods from Grade 4 primary school in Saudi Arabia], and therefore [the existing ESL content] lack[s] the diverse nature of English of today and conflict[s] with the Islamic discourses and values.” Ahmar Mahboob and Tariq Elyas³² argued that historically English in Saudi Arabia is being nativised to reflect local cultural practices. Ahmar Mahboob and Ruth Golden³³ suggested that students’ experiences are used as sources in a foreign language classroom... their *own* experiences as language *learning* and cross *cultural* experiences... whether ones happen to be teaching their first or another language to their students.

Because EFL is considered a way to empower those who are at risk from oppressive practices³⁴ this current research is also a way to help young Saudi women to understand the added value of women achievements. Moreover, some recent studies have painted a bright future of learning ESL as a tool for women empowerment. They indicate that women from various cultures are empowered when learning English. Tariq Rahman³⁵ suggested:

English is also the window to the outside world and has discourses with liberal, democratic values which do have the potential of changing male-dominating, macho values from Pakistani traditional sub-cultures. It can also act as a moderating influence against the influence of religious extremists who are intolerant of points of view different from their own or of women’s empowerment and liberation.

Essentially, connecting ESL learning with the students’ own cultural background and personal experiences by using culturally-relevant material helps achieve student empowerment. Despite the English Language which is originated from a foreign culture, teachers and students will be able to identify the commonality between the students’ MT/culture and the new language/culture.

5. RESEARCH PROCESS

When the research for this study was conducted in 2013, the university was in its infancy as it was first opened in 2006 and as the curricula and textbooks for the preparatory year were still being finalized. The center of the program, as indicated by the philosophy of the university, is the students. In classroom settings where English is taught as a second language, students may not be confident enough to interact in English with their instructors who are native speakers of English.

The researchers wanted to investigate whether student motivation could be improved by empowering their ESL students. It has been proven that people do not learn much unless they are motivated to do so and they believe that they will be able to use what they are learning in a beneficial manner³⁶. Furthermore, students who study in the preparatory program have significantly higher language competence in Arabic, which is their mother tongue (MT), than in English. Therefore, we questioned whether the students could use their MT as their foundation for learning a new language such as English. As a result, we

decided to assign our students a research project which was about “a famous female in the Arab world.” The purpose of this student project was two-fold: 1) to help students to learn English by using their linguistic repertoire and resources; and 2) to empower female students who are not sufficiently represented in textbooks or in the media.

6. METHODOLOGY

6.1. Why action research?

As teaching practitioners, we resorted to conducting action research outside the scope of consulting research literature produced by the academic community³⁷. The group of three female international educators teaching in the preparatory year met several times with a Saudi professor who was, at the time, teaching in the core program and is a theorist in CRP and MP. This professor was interested in how the group was proceeding to motivate Saudi female students in an English Language Learning (ELL) setting and in the issues associated with the chosen textbooks. She later became interested in participating in the research endeavor and in collaborating with the researcher educators in the development and writing of this report.

The study started with the researcher educators asking two main questions. The first question was: “how can instructors integrate the use of Arabic (the mother tongue of the students) into the English class?” The second question was: “how can instructors enable students to use their lived experiences in the classroom?” The plan was to seek evidence pertaining to these questions by asking students to produce a presentation in both English and Arabic about an internationally known female figure from the Arab world.

6.2. Participatory-action research model

The researchers, therefore, sought to strengthen the Saudi female students’ awareness of their capabilities in a manner that took into proper consideration the following facts:

- The students are looking for Arab female who is prominent; and
- The researcher educators are committed to embracing change by empowering young students and by implementing a model for teaching ESL based on MP

6.3. Research protocol

The students received a letter that indicated the instructors’ interest in pursuing the data collection. The cover letter explained the project and the principles of MP, as well as the commitment to maintaining confidentiality and the fact that the data collected would only be used for research and reporting purposes. The instructors’ research was responsive to the situation and to the students’ needs.

6.4. Different phases and components of MP research

6.4.1 Data collection

The instructors collected data from the students’ projects, from interviews, and from responses to a questionnaire. The semi-structured interview questions and questionnaires were checked by members of the research team who are specialized in ESL teaching and curriculum pedagogy. Some questions presented in the questionnaire are sampled below:

During the Project

- Did you have any difficulties to find the information of the person you wanted to research on?
- What are the difficulties you encountered at the start / in the process of your project?
- How did you solve these problems?

After the Project

- Will this person-in-question motivate you and inspire you to set yourself a life goal and so on?
- Are you motivated and empowered after the research?
- Does this research project help you to understand the differences of English and Arabic in terms of their form, function and meaning, etc.?
- Does this project help you acquire social skills, communication skills and interpersonal skills?
- Did the project reveal to you that you can use your mother-tongue as a resource to learn English?
- If you have any comments, please state here: _____

6.5. Validity and reliability

The epistemological position of this research was rooted in social-constructivism³⁸ and multiliteracies pedagogy³⁹. Human knowledge is situated in socio-cultural settings and is heavily contextualized in specific knowledge domain and practices⁴⁰ such as learning a second language. The researchers used interviews as a tool in order to look for insights from the students' perspectives. Students showed great interest in providing detailed information to answer the researchers' questions and qualitative data was collected.

However, in order to establish the validity of this set of qualitative data, data triangulation was used in this study. The benefits of triangulation include "increasing confidence in research data, creating innovative ways of understanding a phenomenon, revealing unique findings, challenging or integrating theories, and providing a clearer understanding of the problem"⁴¹. When a piece of research is said to be 'valid', it means that the findings of the study are 'true' and 'certain'.

According to Lisa A. Guion, David C. Diehl and Debra McDonald⁴², true research findings reflect accurately the situation that the researchers studied and certain research findings are supported by the evidence. In order to establish the validity of our qualitative studies, we first conducted our interviews involving students who had finished the written components of their research projects and then asked them to complete a questionnaire with the 5 prime interview questions embedded. The purpose was to see if both qualitative and quantitative data we obtained from the interviews and questionnaires would mirror each other. The data triangulation outcomes were pleasing.

In terms of reliability, this study is replicable. In fact, after the authors and researchers presented their findings in a faculty forum at the site of this study, some male faculty modified the research assignment and gave it to their male students to do. Although the faculty did not carry out their action research, they saw the benefits of the research assignment we investigated. It is our hope that our fellow ESL professionals in Saudi Arabia would conduct their research in the same vein so that we can compare results in future.

6.6. Participants

The participants in this study were 20 female students in the preparatory year at a private institution in Khobar in the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. The students ranged from 18 to 22 years old and came from neighboring cities, such as Dammam, Jubail, Khobar, and Qatif, which are between 35 miles (56 km) and 90 miles (145 km) away from Khobar. The students would eventually study at various colleges at the institution, such as business administration, computer engineering, law, and interior design. The study was limited to female students as all of the researchers were female and were teaching in an exclusively female campus. The Saudi education system remains gender segregated.

The participants were either intermediate or advanced writing students. At the advanced level, the writing course syllabus required students to write a mini research paper as part of the course's continuous assessment.

6.7. Process

In completing the project, the students needed to utilize their linguistic, cultural, religious, and gender-related identities. This approach optimized the students' language acquisition and content learning. The participants were instructed to pair up to conduct their research and then to convert the research into an in-class oral presentation using a computerized presentation tool, namely Microsoft PowerPoint.

The triangulation of our research, as previously mentioned, consisted of the acquisition of quantitative data from the students' projects and questionnaire responses, and qualitative interviews. Qualitative research in this study is essential for data triangulation which improves the reliability and validity of the data collected. Indeed, "[t]riangulation is a method used by qualitative researchers to check and establish validity in their studies by analyzing a research question from multiple perspectives..."⁴³.

6.8 The students' research projects

The students were provided with a research calendar marked with different stages of the project and timelines. The assessment criteria for the written and oral elements were clearly stated. This provided an opportunity for the instructors to find out the students' choices of research topics. Reciprocally, the students were learning how to carry out research and to present it in written and oral forms.

Below is the research subjects of our students' multiliteracies research projects (it is notable that the majority of our students' research subjects are from Saudi Arabia - these research subjects, because of their life history and achievements, may potentially become our students' role models and ultimately what our students had learnt from their research would empower them in their learning):

1. **Dr. Samia Mohammad AlAmoudi**
Medical doctor, Saudi Arabia
2. **Ala'a Hariri**
Interior designer, Saudi Arabia
3. **Kawala Alkurai**
DNA scientist and an academic, Saudi Arabia
4. **Lubna Olayan**
International businesswoman, Saudi Arabia

5. **Mozah Al Musnad**
Sheikah and women's rights' activist, Qatar
6. **Queen Rania**
Queen of Jordan
7. **Sabah (Jeannette Gergi Fighali)**
Singer/actress, Lebanon
8. **Suad Hosny**
Singer/actress, Egypt

Many would argue that a couple of research subjects listed above (i.e. J. G. Fighali and S. Hosny) may not serve as role models for Saudi students. Nonetheless, students were asked to research on 'a famous female in the Arab World'. Whether the figure is a role model was not one of the criteria set out in the research assignment. In fact, one of the interviewees saw the importance of life accomplishment, but a singing career may not as good as becoming a designer or an architect (see **Analysis of the Interviews**). This shows that our students are capable of exercising their own judgement.

6.9 Qualitative interviews

Five student group leaders were interviewed so that the researchers could understand the students' experience with learning and interacting with others in English over the course of the study. The researchers sampled the five classes taught using MP. The sample was selected to be representative of the student population. The majority of the interviewees were between the ages of 18 and 22. The following five questions were put to the ten participants:

1. What have you learnt from doing this research project?
2. How did you do your project?
3. Are you motivated and empowered after doing this project?
4. Do you have any comments on this project?
5. Do you have any suggestions to how your teachers can help you learn English?

6.10. Analysis of the Interviews

The Findings section of this paper highlights some of the responses from the participants in the interviews. The responses for different questions are recorded group by group. Analysis of these responses is made in this section with illustrations by using visual representations in the hope that readers can see the impacts created by MP. The data presented in the statistics are quantitative which were collected from students' responses to the researchers' questionnaires. (The five prime questions asked in the interview have been included in the last section.)

From the responses of the different groups, the students appeared to be pleased to share their views with each other and the researchers. They improved their English skills and this seemed to be their first opportunity to employ both Arabic and English in their projects. Some of the students began with Arabic sources because there was an abundance of information in Arabic about prominent Arab women. In these cases, they had to translate their information into English. During the translation process, the students acquired a lot of new vocabulary and students realized that direct translation from their MT to English may not work very well when they saw their teachers' comments on their word choice.

The teachers' feedback facilitated the students' learning of the differences between their MT and English. They also became more aware of the use of punctuation. **Figure 2** shows the quantitative data the researchers gathered from the questionnaire responses. Notably, the data correspond to the student responses recorded in the interviews. Moreover, the projects helped them to develop their speaking ability as well as their confidence. They realized that they needed to improve their vocabulary and to use more suitable words and better-constructed sentences.

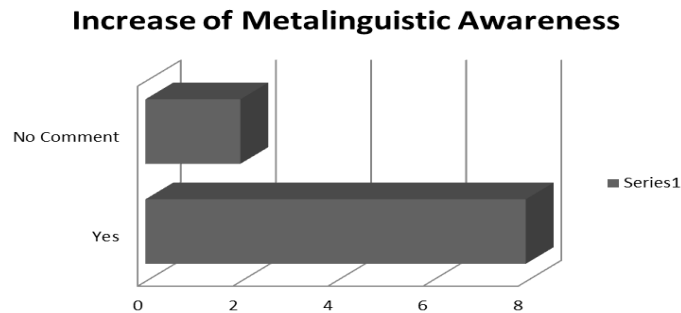


Fig. 2 Increase of metalinguistic awareness?

Before the students began their actual research, some of them performed a preliminary search for information in order to narrow down their options. Some of them looked up information on Arabic websites, watched movies about their research subjects, and used an online search engine. In some cases, the research subject had her own website (as was the case for Queen Rania of Jordan).

The students gained motivation as they searched for and read information about their research subjects. One respondent who conducted research on a singer found that even though she herself would not like to be a singer, her research subject inspired her to pursue a career as a designer or an architect. Another respondent said that she felt empowered because her research subject was her inspiration (see **Figure 3**).

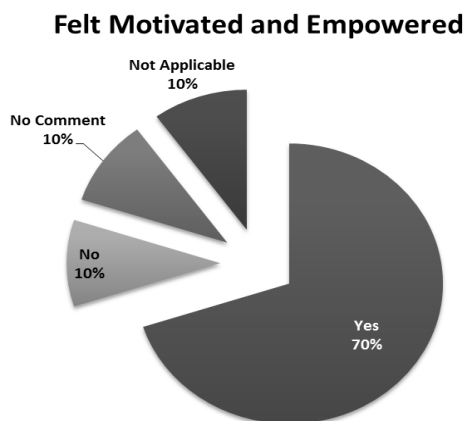


Fig. 3 Respondents felt motivated and empowered?

Students' opinions on the use of monolingualism (i.e. English-only) and the use of bilingualism (i.e. Arabic and English) in their projects were divided. Those who were high achievers were in favor of using English only in their work. Other students appreciated the use of both their MT and English in presenting their research. It is also noteworthy that our quantitative data collected from the questionnaire responses show that majority of the respondents agreed that their projects revealed to them that they could use their MT as a resource to learn English (see **Figure 4**).

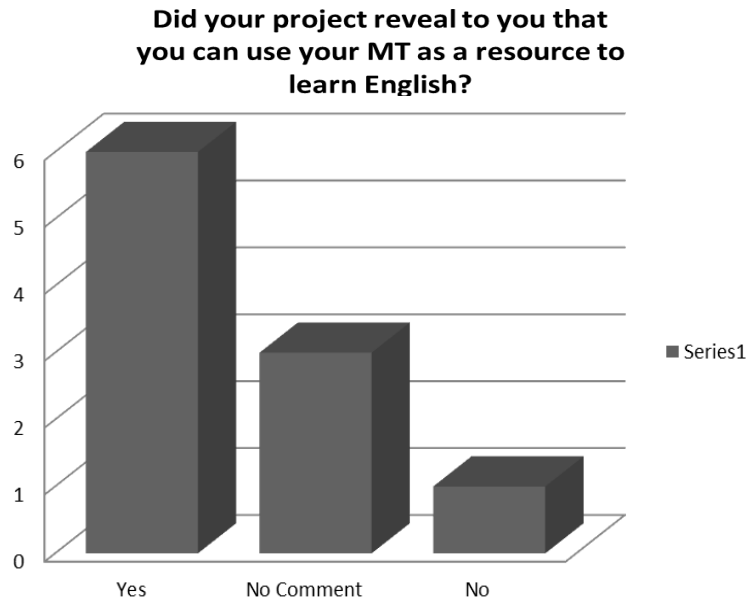


Fig 4. Did your project reveal to you that you can use your mother-tongue as a resource to learn English?

Finally, the interviewees made suggestions about the project and about how the teachers could help them to learn English. These suggestions (see the Findings section below) reflected the level of empowerment that they attained. Also, it demonstrated that the participants were able to monitor their own learning process and understand their individual needs to learn a new learning. This is one step closer to becoming independent learners and this quality is required when commencing studies at university level.

6.11. Findings

By adopting the New London Group's multiliteracies pedagogy, this study shows that the researchers have examined their educational practices. As part of the teaching evaluation, their students were interviewed. Students gave their feedback to their instructors after completing the work for their final projects and, in the process, they showed the ability to analyze, discuss, lead and work with their groups. They provided insights into the research projects and developed self-awareness. Learning occurred while the instructors assessed the students' work from a holistic perspective and provided them with feedback in

relation to the coursework objectives. Detailed written feedback from the instructors was provided to the students, and this helped them to clarify and improve their final product.

In what follows we analyze the feedback from the students and provide an overview of nine important outcomes that emerged from the study. First, there is evidence to show that this project helped ESL learners to increase their level of metalinguistic awareness. The written component helped them become more aware of the use of punctuation, such as commas and colons. In Arabic, these and other punctuation marks are used differently as compared with English. In addition, four out of the ten respondents pointed out that this project provided them with an opportunity to learn vocabulary. They realized that the terminology used in Arabic and English is expressed differently. For example, “women and birth” is used in Arabic while “obstetrics” is the equivalent English term. The students also found that their instructors guided them to use synonyms in order to enrich the range of words that they employed. Although learning vocabulary is important, these students were not aware of the fact that they were also learning how to construct English text at the sentence level.

The second significant outcome of this MP study is that the students involved were empowered by doing their research projects, and this conclusion is supported by the qualitative and quantitative data obtained. As one of the student research groups commented: “There’s a social stigma in Saudi Arabia. A married woman can do more whereas a single woman cannot because she is alone. But Dr. Samia has changed our perception. She’s a working single-parent with a family.” Another participant mentioned, “Ala’a [Hariri] is a very strong and responsible person... amongst the first Saudi designers. She is adventurous. For me, Ala’a is a good example to follow. I want to be like her or even better than her.” It is clear that the assignment helped to build student confidence. One student commented, “I have faith in women, and I have faith in myself to be able to do as well as Queen Rania.” Another mentioned: “Women can do everything even if those are impossible things...”

The third major discovery is that the presentation audience noted that the Arabic texts on the slides helped to explain the English texts and accelerate the speed of the comprehension process. The members of the audience were given enough time to read the English and Arabic texts presented on the slides, and in doing so, it gave them the *confidence* to raise questions about the presentation. The audience showed great interest in what the participants were presenting. In addition, the students said that the bilingual aspect of their research projects enhanced the audience’s understanding of the content.

Among the five respondents who commented on the approach of using Arabic and English in parallel, three of them favored the English-only approach. Relative to the general class performance, these students had superior English skills. On the other hand, two out of the five respondents said that they learned more English during the translation process (from English to Arabic). This was encouraging news for the researchers as this was one of the purposes of assigning the students a multiliteracies project. Students learn more in the process of engaging with their MT and their new language. Finally, the students made suggestions about how instructors could help them to learn English. These are as follows:

1. The university should arrange for students to meet English-speaking people in English-speaking contexts like Saudi Aramco (the national petroleum company based in Dhahran). While at university, students can speak to their English-speaking teachers and peers who should not be allowed to speak Arabic.

2. I want to see the integration of communication skills and writing lessons. Students should be allowed to spend 30-40 minutes on working on making short sentences that can be applied orally to real-life situations.
3. For the slideshow, the Arabic text should be excluded. This will help the student presenters to learn the English words and their meaning by heart.
4. When it comes to sentence making, teachers can show us what the better words (of the same meaning) we can use.

The participants, despite being recent high-school graduates, were able to monitor their own learning processes and certainly had ideas about their own linguistic needs. As educators, we should accommodate their requests in order to help them achieve their goals.

7. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

By researching an Arab female individual, the students have taken a first step towards their own empowerment. Gaining an appreciation of how these women entered and succeeded in the field of their choice is an important step (*situated practice*). The second step is *overt instruction*, which means that teachers will redesign students' learning activities and help some students to accomplish a more complex task. Some researchers refer to this as 'scaffolding meaning'⁴⁴, an approach that is relevant to Lev S. Vygotsky's 'zone of proximal development'⁴⁵.

The third phase, as explained in the diagram of the implementation of MP demonstrated previously, is *critical framing*. In this phase, the teacher helps students to critically analyze what they have learnt and to evaluate their sources of data rather than taking the information for granted.

The fourth stage of MP is *transformed practice*. In this stage, students would be fully engaged in their learning of English as a second language, in researching and writing in their MT and in the target language, and in teaching the members of the audience. This cycle of creating new meaning and of constructing texts using their own cultural context could lead to the transformation of students into better learners and into individuals who would be proud of their cultural role models.

8. CONCLUDING REMARKS

This article takes the position that multiliteracies pedagogy can be employed in second-language classrooms and can serve as a platform for empowering female students in general and Saudi female students in particular. MP builds on what students already know and creates a sense of empowerment, especially when they teach their teachers. Moreover, MP allows international teachers to learn from their students and this enables the teachers to participate in creating a community of learners with the students serving as knowledge producers and thus becoming empowered and moving to the center of the learning process.

Researchers and practitioners in Saudi ESL and EFL classrooms may need to reconsider their practices within the framework of the socio-cultural approach and to empower the students by incorporating their background knowledge and by employing their students' mother tongue and cultural background. This article provides a model for educators that emphasizes critical pedagogy and adherence to a model that acknowledges students' need for a space in which their voice can be heard⁴⁶. This work also represents a new direction

for empowering students and for experimenting with placing students at the center of the language-learning classroom. Teachers are also learning and this is expanding their cultural knowledge and repertoire of skills.⁴⁷ This type of collaborative effort between students and teachers makes MP into a process of meaning making as well as problem solving.

NOTES

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