

Intensive Course Programme at Qassim University, Saudi Arabia: Finding Correlations between Course Shortcomings and High Dropout Rates

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Abstract

ICP in Saudi institutions of higher education is a university preparation course based on an academic curriculum aimed to hone the school leavers' intellectual skills to succeed in the challenge of higher education. Universities all over the world, and especially in the west, offer similar programs, rather they mandate prospective international students whose mother tongue is other than English to opt for such programmes. These are popularly known as ESL (English as Second Language) intensive courses. In the KSA these are limited to the period at the very start of the academic session. However, in the west, students can opt for longer and more frequent programmes with the choice of sitting for these during the vacation periods. In this sense, they are more flexible to suit student needs. The aim is similar as that in KSA: To set the non-English speaking student at a language pedestal where he/she has a fair chance to pursue higher education as the English-speaking one. Seen from this vantage, this is a bridge course to select incumbents for the English courses offered by the universities. Pilot studies in the KSA on the success of ICP failed to yield conclusive results amidst rising agreement to scrap the programme as tangible learning outcomes were not visible. However, before doing so it would have been worthwhile to find correlations. If any, between attrition rates and course shortcomings. This aim motivated the current study across three campuses in the departments of English at Qassim University Colleges of Sciences and Arts in Methnab, Al-Asyah, and Buraidah. The study collected all enrolment and follow up data for the three departments and interviewed fifteen subjects each from among those who completed the course but decided against pursuing higher education, those who dropped out before course completion, and those who enrolled for higher education after undertaking the ICP. Our greater concern was with those who dropped out during the course as they neither pursued higher education nor benefitted as they would have on completing the programme.



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1. Introduction

Coming to institutions of higher learning with their sudden emphasis on self-study immediately after the protective, teacher centred school system can be quite difficult for even the best of the students. It is precisely with the aim of facilitating this transition and adjustment and helping students enhance their academic achievement that intensive or bridge programmes are designed. These programmes may range between a week to a month or the vacation period to keep the performance pressure at a minimal. The idea is to keep the learning concentrated, project based as far as possible, and skill development in an integrated way. In KSA, enrolments to ICPs for English are very high. This fact is heartening in itself. But what is a matter of concern is the high drop-out and failure rates. Pass percentages are abysmally low, and even departments that have students passing the programme, do not see the successful candidates enrolling for higher education in English. Learner dissatisfaction is also palpable on the campuses as with huge funds and even larger human resource being invested in the direction, learning outcomes are pathetic, to say the least. In other words, speculations that intensive programs in EFL may actually be a big waste of time and resources are beginning to look convincing. These and similar concerns guided the current study.

2. Statement of the Research Problem

In universities across KSA, the administration pumps in huge funds to bring the Saudi learner at par with their world counterparts. One essential skill needed to bring this about is higher education in English language and literature. However, the university entrants are found disinclined to opt for these in spite of the intensive bridge programmes offered to familiarise them with the course content and university aspirations. Moreover, where there

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are enrolments seen, attrition rates are high. Result: Fewer and fewer university graduates are majoring with English. This narrows down their options to look westward where many universities request a fulfilment of a basic number of courses in English. The loser is not only the student community deprived of a fair playing ground in world job markets, but also, the Saudi nation whose image as a forward-looking modern country is severely dented. With its far-reaching ramifications, this is an area of concern for the administration, policy makers and academics.

3. Research Questions

This study concerns itself with three questions:

1. What are the learning outcomes targeted by school leavers opting for the Intensive Course Programmes offered for English?
2. Is there a correlation between the high dropout rate and the ICP leading to poor enrolment in the undergraduate language programmes?
3. What remedial pedagogical and course material measures can be recommended to stem the dual problem of attrition and retention?

4. Significance of the Study

The aim of all research is ultimately to benefit the society. As academicians, we concern ourselves with primarily student welfare, and secondarily, giving a positive direction to administrative endeavours in the field. This study is directed at certain outcomes stated here:

1. Evaluation of ICP course content.
2. Devising learners' need based study material for the programme.
3. Developing correlation between ICP and university enrolment for English major programmes.
4. Counselling the freshers to enable them to opt for the right language courses for higher education.

5. Research Objectives

Degree enrolment rates are low in KSA by any metric. This trend adversely affects the country's economic standing. Hence institutions and policy makers endeavour to develop programmes and interventions that can ensure greater enrolment and retention of learners in degree programmes. One common denominator that is a game changer here, is poor English proficiency of the school leaving learners. Institutions of higher learning in the state, whether medical, engineering or teaching, all run bridge programmes where English language content specific to the future course of study are taken up. Their duration varies though from as short as a few days to a few weeks. The obvious purpose is to bridge the divides caused by mediums of learning, transition from spoon feeding in schools to individual and independent study in universities, and even the rural-urban divide. All over the KSA, English is taught not as a language but as a 'foreign language'. For students wishing to take up higher education in English language, literature and translation courses, however, the bridge courses are supposed to act as introduction to the degree curriculum with the aim (as I assume it to be) to encourage them to opt for majors in English. The current trend is to focus on spoken English, comprehension, grammar, listening, and reading. This is an outdated approach: This opinion is validated by low retention rate in the English courses.

What is needed is customisation of the communicative components: Getting the students to speak spontaneously, making the learning truly communicative. This, clearly calls for increasing the duration of the bridge courses. Unfortunately, teachers being hard pressed with time and syllabus constraints, are not prepared for this. Another factor that may be contributing to this casual approach may be the nomenclature viz., 'Bridge Course', which, in itself, underscores its significance.

6. Placing ICP in a Historical Context

Plato, one of the earliest western thinkers, can be called a precursor of the Chomskian philosophy of language. In the classical debate of nature versus nurture, needless to reiterate, Plato sided with nature. In fact, he posed questions that have been the subject matter of much of the modern linguistic discourse on language acquisition. If then, nature is superior to nurture, by default, language and indeed all knowledge is innate. With Descartes, the idea of the innateness of language was taken a step further when thinkers of the movement pointed out that all languages have certain universal principles. In contrast, Locke devoted himself to the philosophy that nurture and learning were superior to all else and that the child was actually a blank slate (*tabula rasa*) on which can be recorded any information. The behaviourist philosophy was based upon the idea of stimulus and response (the classical example being of a dog whose behaviour was 'conditioned' to salivate for food at the sound of a bell) that rejected the earlier thoughts. Finally, in the middle of the last century, Chomsky went to the other extreme to Skinner's and proposed that language acquisition was neither a matter of learned behaviour nor of learned information, it was rather innate to humans as was justified by the universal features of all known languages. The Communicative Approach propounded by Terrell and Krashen since the 1960s has, by far, been the only philosophy of language teaching that has found a more or less stable foothold on the second and foreign language acquisition stage. It works on the idea of immersion, ie, using only the target language in an intensive way in the classroom. This is also the focus of the current study which examines the effectiveness and obstacles of the immersion study modules and pedagogy under the ICP bridge courses at Qassim University.

7. Literature Review

The programmes where the students undergo a comparatively larger number of sessions in a relatively less time than normal is called as Intensive English programs which can also be known as compressed or accelerated sources (Scott and Conrad, 1991; Wlodkowski, 2003). Currently, the usefulness of intensive courses is a matter of debate. Some researchers have reported positive outcomes related to intensive instructional plans, such as, Burton and Nesbit (2002), Grant (2001), as well as Messina *et al.* (1996), while other researchers presented doubts with respect to the effectiveness of such programmes and also emphasized the drawbacks in the studies (Bateson, 1990; Nasiri and Shokrpour, 2012). Proponents of the intensive courses have the ability to provide learning in different academic disciplines including literature (Scott, 1994), educational, mathematics (Spurling, 2001), foreign language (Buzash, 1994), psychology (Brackenbury, 1987), business van Scyoc and Gleason (1993), and algebra and accounting (Caskey, 1994).

In a study of the effects of an intensive immersion programme in a country where the target language was spoken (and this is a catch phrase here as it is in contrast to similar English programmes in the KSA), Tschirner (2007), concluded that such a programme may indeed help to increase the oral proficiency of the learners by at least one level as compared to the pre-programme results. Further, to yield the desired results, the study suggests five necessary components, one of which is highly motivated learners.

In a previous study in the same environment Alseweed and Daif-Allah (2012), investigated learning outcomes of the Intensive Preparatory English Language Module (IPELM). Its aim is to prepare the learners for transition from Arabic to English as a medium of instruction in the university set up. Among other findings, the class observers opined that the course outline ought to be more communicative and the course duration be extended beyond the mandatory two weeks. Another significant finding was that the course did address the learning needs of the novice learners.

As per the statement of Mukundan *et al.* (2012), one-week course of Intensive English may have a positive impact on the achievement as well as the attitude of the learners about learning English. Research also revealed that young learners of the intensive English program are benefited with a good outcome when compared with common English programs provided during the school year (Spada and Lightbown, 1989). Intensive English programs offer cognitive academic language skill and common interpersonal communication skills to the learners and also to their management ability. Moreover the studies of Grant (2001), Hong-Nam and Leavell (2006).

According to Leal *et al.* (1991) as cited in Martin *et al.* (2016), on student attrition and retention rates in language courses in Australia, the reason for high attrition and low retention is a mismatch between students' desired learning outcomes and those of the teaching community. While heads of departments focused primarily on students' linguistic and reading performance, a large section of the students sought a high degree of oral/aural proficiency.

In a research based on foreign language environment experiences spanning ten years, Tim Ferris sums up in his blog the ailment plaguing language courses in these words: "everyone has the perfect conversation in mind until they speak to a real native." He cites four factors that are anathema to the foreign language learner. These are: 1. Viewing teachers rather than study materials as the real moving force in the FL classes. He opines that monolingual materials in the target language are actually a hindrance to the learning process. 2. Slow classes with a curriculum designed for the poorest learner do not help the FL learner in any way. Rather, there should be a broad (even up to twenty were encountered by him in a language school in Germany) range of proficiency levels with little and achievable difference between the curriculums of consecutive levels. 3. Not providing enough one to one interaction possibilities and focusing on the classroom teaching does not help the FL learner who must be exposed to a realistic environment where the brain may adapt to a 'normal' conversation speed and learn coping mechanisms. 4. Having prescriptive teachers who focus more on correctness and formal aspects of the FL to the complete exclusion of informal language structures.

Many other studies reflect that the intensive programmes may enhance the engagement and commitment, and motivation of the learners and the learners also thinks that intensive programmes were more exciting, stimulating, enjoyable, challenging, and efficient when compared with other usual courses (Burton and Nesbit, 2002; Daniel, 2000; Scott and Conrad, 1991). Intensive learning might cause better concentration and attendance of the learners (Daniel, 2000; Grant, 2001). Austin and Gustafson (2006), explored the potential variation within the traditional and intensive semester-length courses was examined with the help of the database with more than 45,000 observations from various semesters and identified that learners are very much benefited from the intensive courses. Likewise, study findings revealed that intensive English programmes might have the most positive impact on the progress of the learner's language knowledge (Abouzeid, 2018).

In a study of the effects of an intensive immersion programme in a country where the target language was spoken (and this is a catch phrase here as it is in contrast to similar English programmes in the KSA) (Tschirner, 2007), concluded that such a programme may indeed help to increase the oral proficiency of the learners by at least one level as compared to the pre-programmed results. Further, to yield the desired results, the study suggests five necessary components, one of which is highly motivated learners.

Depending upon the findings of Nasiri and Shokrpour (2012), about the inefficiency of the intensive courses, further (Gallo and Odu, 2009), stated that in order to learn English, intensive programme is not the only best way though many students choose it because the time period for them in the classroom gets decreased. It was also claimed that psychological learning enhances when the students undergo the latest subjects not intensively instead scheduling it by reducing the longer periods into longer class hours.

Jankowski (2013), reported that majority of the institutions found institution-wide student learning outcomes (SLOs) which distinctly expressed the required habits, attitudes, skills, knowledge and competencies of mind that are

expected to be gained by the students in the higher education institutions. Further, the report showed proofs of the development of the students in attaining SLOs in the programmatic and institutional levels can be gathered through many resources. [Alseweed and Daif-Allah \(2012\)](#), studied the Intensive Preparatory English Language Module's (IPELM) efficiency in making the students of Arabic medium instruction at the high school to prepare for the change into an atmosphere of English medium learning in the university surroundings. The outcome showed that the efficiency of the course in focusing on the academic-based requirements of the novice learners. It helped the students to participate in PYP programme and to match the entry-level requirements; it supported the students get used to the learning atmosphere of the university and to identify the intensive English course. Among other findings, the class observers opined that the course outline ought to be more communicative and the course duration be extended beyond the mandatory two weeks. Another significant finding was that the course did address the learning needs of novice learners. According to [Martin et al. \(2016\)](#), the reason for students' high attrition and low retention rates in language courses in Australia, is a mismatch between students' desired learning outcomes and those of the teaching community. While heads of departments focused primarily on students' linguistic and reading performance, a large section of the students sought a high degree of oral/aural proficiency. The relevant literature reviews illustrated that the studies performed on the intensive programme effective convey unreliable outcomes. Moreover, despite those strong arguments on the problem, only a few empirical studies were available which particularly focus on the intensive English programme's outcome.

8. Methodology

Recent ICP learner data on enrolment, dropout, failure, and re-exam was requested from the three departments. As one department could not provide data for academic year 2017-2018, the data for the previous year was used for all three, ie session 2016-2017. It may be noted here that Al Syah is an all-girls department while the other two at Buraidah and Methnab are mixed gender departments. [Table 01](#) below presents the results of all ICP enrolments in the three departments. The number of candidates in some cases does not add up to the total enrolment as we have left out some categories like 'Exempted' and 'Deprived' as they do not concern our study objectives.

After requesting the departments for student details, questionnaires were emailed to all the available IDs of passed, failed and dropped out students and revert requested in three days. In case of Al Syah, all eight passed students, twelve of the failed students and nine of the dropped-out students responded. In Buraidah, thirty-three passed girl students, eleven passed boy students, ten failed girl students, fourteen failed boy students, all seven of the dropped-out girl students and nine of the dropped-out boy students reverted with their responses. Finally, in Methnab, fifteen of the passed girl students, eight of the passed boy students, seventeen of the failed girl students and ten of the failed boy students, seven of the dropped-out girl students and nine of the dropped-out boy students responded. Thus, the range of responses varied between seven and thirty-three. To maintain parity of representation, it was decided to randomly select seven responses from each category, but where the total number of responses were seven, all seven were included in the analysis. The total number of respondents thus came to one hundred and five.

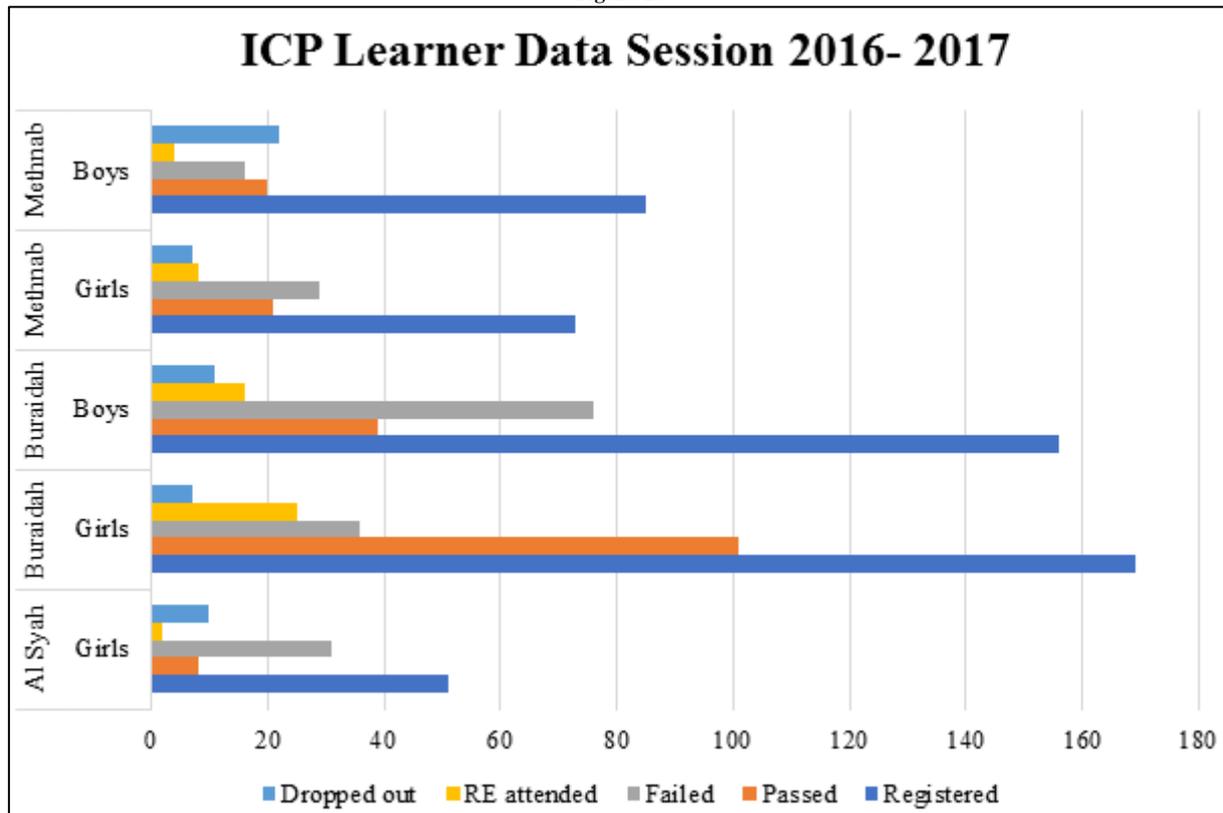
9. Data Analysis

From the data, it can be seen that there is no remarkable trend so far as gendered bias in favour or against the course because while in Buraidah, the number of girls is more than that of boys, the trend reverses in the case of Methnab.

Table-1. ICP Learner Data September 2016- September 2017

No. of students	Al Syah	Buraidah	Buraidah	Methnab	Methnab
	Girls	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
Registered	51	169	156	73	85
Passed	8	101	39	21	20
Failed	31	36	76	29	16
Re attended	2	25	16	8	4
Dropped out	10	7	11	7	22

Figure-1.



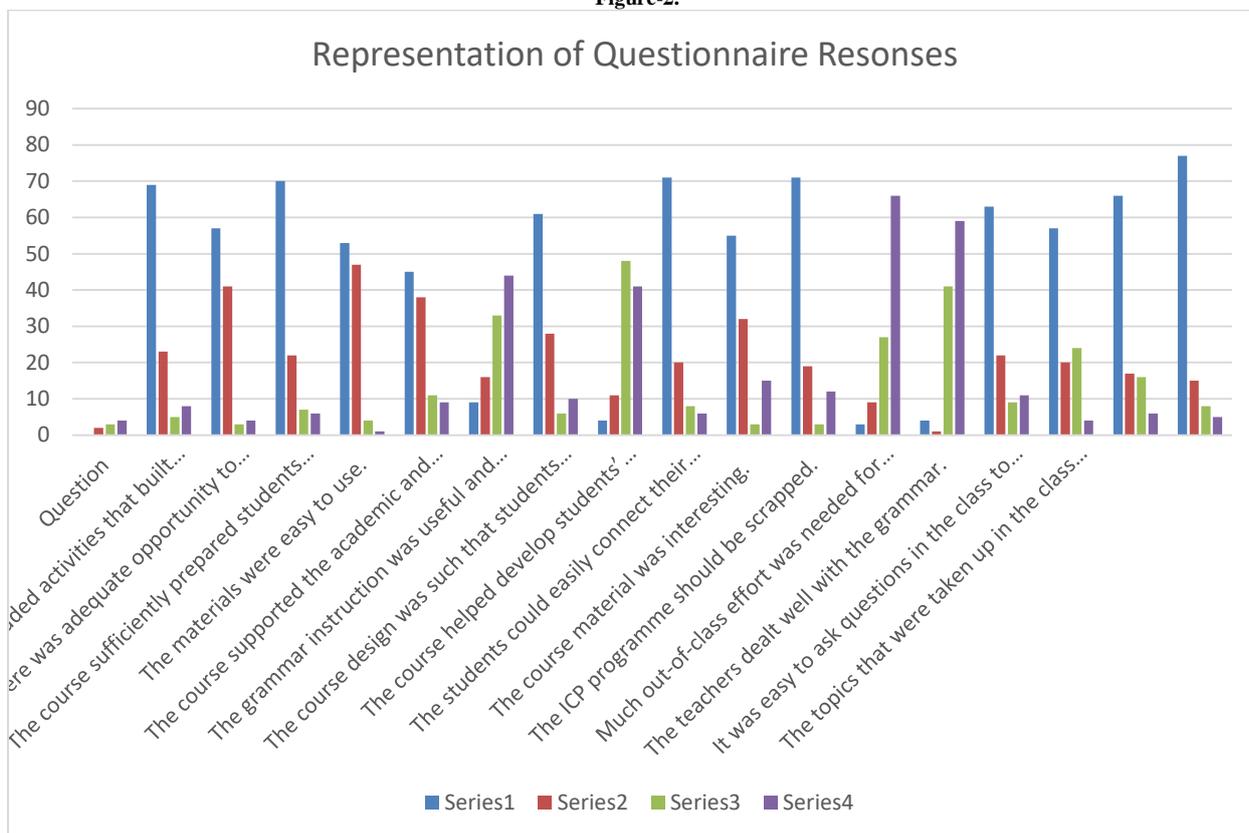
As pointed out earlier, participant response was sought at three levels using emails. One, those who completed the ICP module and decided not to enrol for higher education; Two, those who dropped out of the course before completion; and three, the final year students of English major who took the ICP at university entry level. Questionnaires were sent to all the students in the three categories and revert requested in three days. The questions were open-ended designed to elicit responses on course content, materials design, pedagogy and learner expectation. To simultaneously quantify the responses, a four-point Likert Scale gradation was also used for each of these questions, with options ranging between Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (4). Respondents were requested to write their views about each item of the questionnaire in a few sentences each.

Table 02 below presents the questionnaire with the compiled Likert Scale responses:

Table-2. Likert Scale Responses

Q	Question	1	2	3	4
1	The course included activities that built fluency.	69	23	5	8
2	There was adequate opportunity to participate frequently in the class.	57	41	3	4
3	The course sufficiently prepared students to pursue higher level English.	70	22	7	6
4	The materials were easy to use.	53	47	4	1
5	The course supported the academic and professional needs of the students.	45	38	11	9
6	The grammar instruction was useful and suitable to student needs.	9	16	33	44
7	The course design was such that students felt motivated and interested.	61	28	6	10
8	The course helped develop students' vocabulary.	4	11	48	41
9	The students could easily connect their reading and writing lessons.	71	20	8	6
10	The course material was interesting.	55	32	3	15
11	The ICP programme should be scrapped.	71	19	3	12
12	Much out-of-class effort was needed for students to succeed in the course.	3	9	27	66
13	The teachers dealt well with the grammar.	4	1	41	59
14	It was easy to ask questions in the class to clear any doubts.	63	22	9	11
15	The topics that were taken up in the class were interesting.	57	20	24	4
16	The course helped in speaking and writing correctly in English.	66	17	16	6
17	Students' language skills do not gain at all after taking the ICP programme.	77	15	8	5

Figure-2.



Key:
 Series 1: Strongly Disagree
 Series 2: Disagree
 Series 3: Agree
 Series 4: Strongly Agree

With the given Likert Scale readings generally reflecting trends towards learner dissatisfaction with course content (with the exception of grammar), pedagogy, materials and assessment process, the question that confronted the researcher was, with so much wrong with the ICP course, who are the learners managing to pass the exam and how? The answer was much easier to find than initially thought: In all the three departments under survey, all the learners who passed the exam bore outstanding (to be interpreted as more than seventy percent aggregate marks) EFL marks even before they joined the course. In other words, the ICP programme may perhaps not be credited with their achievement as much as their earlier knowledge and skill set. Seen from another angle, it still brings the study to the conclusion that much needs to be changed in the current ICP course content, materials, pedagogy and assessment criteria.

Responses to the open-ended questions revealed that the main objective behind enrolment in the ICP is the students' need for a truly intensive language training which can prepare them for higher education. A majority reverted with the opinion that the given programme was a slightly better version of other EFL courses they have attended as part of the school curriculum. They opined that the course content needs to be more specifically suited to learner needs which should be properly assessed before seeking enrolment. One respondent suggested that students should be staggered into batches on the basis of the kind of language input they are seeking. For instance, those planning to take up tourism studies later on may be grouped together and the course be specific to their particular needs.

All respondents, however, were positive that two components, at the least, were enhanced through the programme: Grammar and vocabulary. At the same time, speaking and writing were reported by the majority as not benefitting from the course which was contrary to their expectations. A large number of respondents showed dissatisfaction with the study materials and felt that the teachers need to show more ingenuity in developing suitable materials rather than sticking to the prescribed textbooks as these sometimes were rather limited in their scope.

On the count of motivation and engagement, most of the respondents reported that they joined the course with a great deal of enthusiasm and hope that their proficiency would take a jump after the completion, but given the book-based approach, they were dissatisfied with their progress, which was also one of the reasons for their dropping out or even failing the exam. Surprisingly though, to the two items related to the idea of scrapping the course altogether (Q 11, 17), a majority reported that the course was not all that poor but added that changes were indeed required in a great many areas.

On the question of the class hours devoted to the programme, a large number reported that these were not sufficient as outside of the institution, there was no language environment for them to rehearse whatever they learnt. Hence, the need for longer duration was cited by many. One particular respondent who had also attended a proficiency programme with the British Council Division earlier, suggested that the strategy they followed could

have been used here: Complete language immersion in back to back classes that ensured a great deal of speaking opportunities for the students while the teacher stayed in the background adding grammar and vocabulary inputs.

10. Conclusions and Recommendations

The study shows that the fast track bridge programmes like ICP in KSA has great scope for preparing students for higher English studies or for taking standardised tests but with a modified and more directed form of instruction which clearly creates opportunity for enhancement of their long-term language proficiency. The programme in its current state is effective only so far as improving the learners' grammar skills goes. Language, however, is a unique outcome of several skills. Therefore, pedagogical and course material changes is the natural solution to the problem. The materials need to be more student friendly with minimal teacher instruction required. In their current shape, the materials are boring with exercises following a repetitive pattern, un-engaging with large blocks of information that is totally disconnected from the world of the young people, and even look formidable! Large classes are a bane of the Saudi Arabian educational institutions. In case of intensive courses, especially of foreign languages, it is imperative to keep the ideal learner-teacher ratio of 14: 1. These courses are strictly speaking, communication-based and without adequate listening-speaking opportunity, may not achieve the desirable learning objectives. Placement tests to place each student at the right place for optimum learning must be enforced. To ensure better learning outcomes with the ICP, learner and real world needs have to be fairly assessed and provided for in the course content. Teaching strategies have to be modified and learners grouped according to their objectives for being in the programme. Finally, planners, teachers and students have to be sensitized that learning a language for academic purposes comes with a different bag than learning it for occupational purposes. Intensive programmes have to be designed keeping this difference well within the focus. It is clear that the current 'one size fits all' approach of factory line materials, pedagogy and approach being used with all students will only lead to bringing the ICP into greater red. Courses that fail to address learner needs cannot survive the test of time. Changes at the level of policy, materials, teacher education and pedagogy are desirable to make the ICP an enduring and useful course at our universities.

11. Limitations of the Study

The researcher felt that gathering responses over emails may have modified the outcomes to some extent as it is learner psychology to seek the opinion of the peers before tendering answers to queries. Therefore, in following studies, it would be better to personally interview the respondents to cut down chances of distortion. To generalise conclusions and findings, the population of one hundred and five respondents appears to be small. Hence, other such studies can target larger and more varied populations before summarising the findings.

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