



Challenges and Strategies in Transitioning to University-Level English Education: A Saudi Arabian Perspective to Bridge the Gap

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Abstract

University education plays a crucial role in shaping students' futures. However, the transition from high school to university-level English education is globally recognized as challenging (Richmond, 1996). In Saudi Arabia, the transition from secondary to higher education presents significant challenges, particularly in English language proficiency, affecting academic performance and career prospects (Al-Rashaidan & Al-Thwaini, 2021; Khoshaim et al., 2018). This study explores the most prevalent challenges affecting this transition gap and proposes strategies to cope with these challenges to better prepare students for university-level English education in Saudi Arabia. Using a mixed-method design, this study employs quantitative and qualitative methods to gather insights from high school English teachers, university English teachers, and students. Using a convenient random sampling method, the study approached 20 teachers from high schools and university alongside 100 university students across Saudi universities to collect close and open-ended responses on a survey. Quantitative data from the survey quantified perceptions, while qualitative insights enriched understanding of transition challenges and strategies. The data was analysed using descriptive statistics and Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) was conducted to identify perceptual commonalities and disparities among all three groups responses. The triangulation of sample responses provided a cross authentication and identified disparities among responses which verifies the critical need for improved school-university collaboration to better prepare students for the university education and language proficiencies (Alhamid, 2020). By addressing identified challenges and employed strategies, this research provides a foundation for the potential gap in school-university transition and recommends further investigations to optimize students' educational experiences and English Language proficiencies, preparing students for global educational standards and contexts.

Keywords: *School-University collaboration, language proficiency, transition challenges, gap bridging strategies*

1. Introduction

Aligning with the Saudi Vision 2030, the Human Capital Development Program and the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) aim to enhance education and training across all levels, from early childhood education to lifelong learning (Saudi Vision, 2030, 2020; OECD, 2021, 2022). English being the global language in the world demands a paradigm shift in English language teaching (ELT) practices at both school and university level to better prepare students for academic and professional language usage in order to gain larger impacts and meet kingdom vision. The current research study aims to bridge the gap between high school English language education and university-level English language teaching in Saudi Arabia by investigating the perspectives of high school teachers, university English language teachers and students regarding the transition from high school to university-level English. The rationale of the study arises with the understanding of English being the medium of education in higher studies and the need to explore the challenges attached to this. This often demands improving English proficiency of students entering university as freshmen, as their language skills from school are not sufficient for fulfilling academic requirements in the university. The systematic study of the literature (Alhamid, A. M., 2020; Howland, 2021; Richmond, G. (1996) revealed that there is a need for more comprehensive study to account for the diversified perspectives of participants on the topic. The study is not only confined to university teachers and students but also includes high school teachers who play a key role in teaching English language to students before they join their higher studies at universities. The findings will account for the insufficient progress



students make towards a satisfactory proficiency level, and the factors like curriculum design, assessment methods or teaching strategies that contribute to the gap in students' English language skills. The study shares recommendations which will contribute to the future of English language teaching and learning at the university and pave ways for students transitioning from school to universities.

2. Objectives of the Study

The current study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- Explore the prevalent challenges identified by three stakeholders (High school teachers, University teacher, and Students) during the transition from high school to university.
- Identify the coping strategies stakeholders adopt to deal with the challenges occurring during the transition.
- Investigate the underlying reasons for the observed gaps in students' English language proficiency (factors such as curriculum design, student attitudes, pedagogical approaches and other relevant aspects).
- Cross-authenticate all three main stakeholders' views by identifying common themes and areas of improvements for future implications and direct future studies to target vulnerable areas for an effective remedial plan.

3. Research Questions

The study investigates answers to the following questions:

Q1. What specific challenges are reported by the groups of three stakeholders (High-school teachers, University teachers and first year students) when transitioning from high school to university-level English education?

Q2. What practices/strategies have students implemented to prepare for the academic demands of university-level English?

Q3. What practices/strategies have teachers employed to prepare for the academic demands of university-level English?

Q4. What commonalities and variations are shared by all three stakeholders under challenges and strategies?

4. Methodology

4.1 Study Design & Data Collection Tool

The research involves integration of quantitative and qualitative approaches reflecting a mixed method design to collect responses of the three stakeholders (High-school teachers, University teachers and first year students) for the study. Quantitative data is collected using a survey questionnaire and qualitative response data is gathered through open-ended questions added to the same survey. The questionnaire was reworded and modified for each group of participants making it appropriate to collect responses from each stakeholder. This mixed method approach of data collection helps in analyzing in depth perceptions and experiences of teachers and students and identify patterns and trends emerging across the three groups.

4.2 Study Sample

Adopting a convenient random sampling technique, 20 high school English teachers working at different Saudi public schools, 20 University ESL teachers working at Saudi universities and 100 students who have recently joined the foundation year at Saudi universities were approached to fill questionnaires and share in depth responses on open ended questions. (See below table 1)



Table 1. Study Sample

Participants	Numbers
High School English Teachers	n=20
University ESL Teachers	n=20
Students (freshmen)	n=100

5. Findings and Analysis:

5.1 Challenges and Implication

To answer the first research question, the survey aimed to collect responses on the challenges faced by each group of stakeholders. Since I have over ten years of experience in the education sector, I listed some prominent themes which were further verified by fellow educators. The thematic categories are Curriculum, Skills, Readiness, and Resources. "Others" was also added to uncover any additional thematic categories. All three groups were asked to either choose from the given themes or add others if their response doesn't match with the given categories. Students were asked the same questions twice (once about their high school experiences and once about their university experiences) to uncover specific challenges and compare findings against each other in the two contexts.

Table 2 presents a complete view of all three stakeholders' responses on the four given themes. As illustrated, the fifth theme 'Teachers' emerged as an additional theme based on students' responses. Many students chose 'other' to add responses from their own side. Most of the responses revolved around teachers' (role, impact, rapport, methods, support) making it another prominent theme. As for the overall percentage, all participants were allowed to choose more than one option to select challenges as they relate to them.

Table 2. Challenges Frequencies Related to Different Themes by All Stakeholders

Stakeholders Groups	Curriculum	Skills	Readiness	Resources	Other (Teachers)
Challenges reported by High school Teachers	30%	100%	40%	20%	0%
Challenges reported by University Teachers	50%	89.3%	75%	17.9%	3.6%
Students' responses to identify challenges at High School	21.3%	22.7%	21.8%	2.3%	25.9%
Students' responses to identify challenges at university	25.9%	36.6%	18%	2.1%	7.4%

5.1.1 High School and University Teachers Responses

First, comparing the responses from high school and university teachers about identified challenges shows notable similarities and differences across key themes.

In terms of **curriculum**, high school teachers identified it as a challenge at 50%, suggesting some potential issues within the curriculum layouts and standards. University teachers found this challenge lower at 30%, which may indicate that they perceive their curricula as more effective than school one. Both University and High school teachers reported **English Language skills** as the most prominent



challenge in a complete consensus rating it 89% and 100% respectively. This highlights a strong concern about the inadequacy of English Language skills development in their teaching in both contexts.

Regarding **readiness**, high school teachers felt that students were relatively prepared, rating this challenge at 40%. In contrast, university teachers expressed more concern, reporting a challenge of 75%, highlighting a perceived disconnect between high school education and the readiness required for university-level work. In terms of **resources**, high school teachers reported a challenge of 20%, while university teachers indicated slightly lower challenges at 17.9%. This narrow range suggests that resource allocation hasn't been a very major concern according to teachers in both educational levels.

5.1.2 Students' Responses Compared to Teachers

Analyzing the student responses for challenges in both high school and university contexts also provides valuable insights, especially when compared to the challenges identified by teachers.

Students revealed challenges at 21.3% in curriculum at high school and 25.9% at university. This suggests that students perceive the university **curriculum** as slightly more problematic than their high school experience. In contrast, high school and university teachers identified curriculum challenges at a much higher rate of 30% and 50% respectively, indicating a stronger belief that the curriculum needs improvement compared to students' perceptions. Secondly, students reported challenges of 22.7% in **learning skills** at high school and higher at 36.6% in university. This increase suggests that students feel less confident with the necessary skills as they transition to university. In comparison, high school teachers recognized skills development as a major challenge at 100%, highlighting a substantial gap between teachers' concerns and students' self-assessments in high school. University teachers, however, rated skills challenges at 89.3%, aligning with students' perceptions of the heightened importance of skills at this level.

In terms of students' general **readiness** to high school and university, they feel fine for university expectations with only 21.8% and 18% challenge rate respectively. In contrast, high school teachers and university teachers expressed more concerns about students' preparation, rating it at 40% and 75%. All three stakeholders reported **resources** as the least concerned area as students reported minimal challenges at 2.3% in high school and 2.1% in university, which are quite low. High school teachers reported a resource challenge of 20%, and university teachers noted a slightly lower challenge at 17.9%. This discrepancy suggests that teachers are more aware of resource limitations affecting teaching and learning than students perceive themselves.

The fifth added category was about **'teachers' role**, their teaching methods, presence, support, and impact on students. Evaluating **teachers' support** or presence as a challenge, students reported challenges at 25.9% in high school and significantly lower at 7.4% in university. This stark difference suggests that students may perceive their university teachers as more impactful compared to their high school instructors. It also suggests the need for further investigation on high school English teachers' practices and the reasons behind such evaluation.

5.2 Coping Strategies

To answer the second and third questions, the survey aimed to collect responses from open-ended questions on the strategies employed by each group of stakeholders. The coping strategies identified by students and teachers' groups across the themes of Curriculum, Skills, Readiness, Teachers, and Resources reflect a commitment to enhancing the educational experience and addressing challenges in both high school and university settings (See Table 3)



Table 3. Prominent Themes from the Thematic Content Analysis of Qualitative Responses

Stakeholders Groups	Themes
High School English Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Vocabulary development practices ● Presentations Practice ● Reading Practices ● Standardized test practices
University ESL Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Language skills practices ● Building Rapport + Motivation ● Active Learning strategy ● Integrating Technology ● Student- Centered Approach
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Watching English movies ● Reading stories ● Podcasts- Social media ● Chatting in English ● Standardized test practices

High school English teachers emphasized a skills-focused approach to address the specific challenges their students encounter. By prioritizing specific skills development, teachers ensure that students are better equipped for their academic demands. Teachers acknowledge that presentations serve as a dynamic method for enhancing communication skills and building confidence, while reading activities promote literacy and comprehension. Furthermore, they also focused on vocabulary development, as it lays the foundation for effective language use across various subjects and contexts and helps in preparing the students for the standardized tests. Teachers' efforts in vocabulary development and standardized test practices highlight these as the main areas of improvements in high school teaching. These areas suggest more targeted approaches to various skills including writing and other integrated skills in order to acquire a better level of proficiency and bridge the gap.

University ESL teachers implement a multidimensional approach to support their students. By prioritizing language skills, they ensure that students gain the necessary competencies for academic success. They highlighted that most students lack the basics of English and struggle with writing and reading as compared to other skills, such as listening, speaking, grammar and vocabulary. They also believe that building rapport and motivation is essential, as fostering a positive relationship can significantly enhance student engagement and learning outcomes. Such practices/strategies demonstrate university teachers' role more supportive for students as compared to high school teachers. Active learning strategies encourage participation and critical thinking, making the learning process more interactive. Also, the integration of technology facilitates access to diverse resources and learning tools, while a student-centered approach tailors instruction to meet individual needs, fostering a more inclusive and effective learning environment. However, many teachers reported that at the start of the academic year they put in additional efforts in accommodating students to the university learning and context which is time-consuming. They also mentioned that students who are accustomed to conventional methods of learning find it a great difficulty in adjusting in more autonomous learning environments where they are expected to work more independently.

The strategies employed by university teachers reflect the efforts teachers are exerting to bridge the gap and provide targeted assistance in their learning. These identified gaps in students' skills can be filled with additional actions and programs such as summer camps and extended orientation. The implementation of these initiatives prior to the academic year would be beneficial for students in



preparing them with the basic language demands and training them psychologically for university life. Also, this would save teaching time used to train students for university demands and work on their basic language proficiencies.

On the other hand, **students** shared some self-adopting strategies as effective strategies to be more prepared for the university including, “watching English movies”, and “using English in social media chat”. Students reported that engaging in such self-development plans offer them contemporary avenues to practice English, and allow them to learn in a more relatable and accessible context. This indicates that students heavily depend on the use of informal or non-academic practices of the language that benefit them in their daily life but may not align with the school and university curriculum or expectations. Such divergence interprets the noticeable gap and suggests the need to provide students with targeted support to improve language proficiency, helping them enhance their academic and communication skills.

Altogether, these strategies reflect a comprehensive effort by both educators and students to navigate challenges and promote a more enriching educational experience. By focusing on language development, skills enhancement, and student engagement, all stakeholders are working toward creating a supportive and effective learning atmosphere.

6. Conclusion

The perceptions of teachers from both contexts highlight students' English Language Skills proficiency level, their general readiness for university and curriculum requirements as major concerns affecting the smooth transition from high school to university. Teachers seem to have a more critical view of the educational processes compared to students, particularly regarding the adequacy and proficiency level of language skills and students' readiness. The perceptions of students, on the other hand, highlight their need for guidance and support. The agreement among all groups regarding resources, as a point of least concern, might be linked to the availability of technology that makes resources more accessible and engaging, making it a less challenging point. All stakeholders adopt various strategies to cope with the challenges occurring in this transition. This analysis indicates a potential area for improved communication and alignment between students' experiences and teachers' assessments to enhance educational outcomes. Some insights are offered for the future studies as they may dig deeper in the issues related to the language skills and curriculum requirements. This study also implies a very strong need to design the remedial plan that bridges this school-university transition gap and facilitates the transition with practical implications, including, summer camps, extended orientations, language centers, university readiness programs and school-university collaborative plans.

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