Factors Influencing Arab EFL Learners Communication Skills: Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Research in foreign language learning has indicated that the majority of Arab EFL learners face several problems in communication. Therefore, this study aims at reviewing the literature to identify the factors influencing Arab students' communication skills. The study navigated through the literature and found several factors influencing students' communication skills. The review results classified the factors influencing Arab students' communication skills into cultural, educational, cognitive, and psychological. The study sums up by providing some pedagogical suggestions for teachers and policymakers.

Keywords: Influencing Factors, Communication skills, Arab EFL Learners

Introduction

Oral communication is an unavoidable and indispensable element in any interpersonal encounter. Individuals must communicate with one another to function effectively. However, not all students prefer to initiate communication. Some individuals view communication experiences as unrewarding and punishing, and as a result, they tend to avoid situations requiring communication (McCroskey et al., 1977). Arab students are no exception; they avoid communication situations as much as possible (Ahmed, 2022). The majority of them confront several problems in carrying out effective communication in English (Abbad, 1987; Aomr et al., 2020; Rababa, 2002). Several Arab scholars have investigated Arab students' communication skills, and they have reported that most Arab students are less proficient in English communication skills (Abbad, 1988; Al-sohbani, 2013; Al-Zu'be, 2013; Ezzi, 2005; Rababah, 2002). Despite studying English for years, most Arab students still face many obstacles in using English for real communication (Al Hosni, 2014; Aomr et al., 2020). Rababah (2002) points out that communication in a foreign language (FL) is one of the major difficulties that Arab learners face. Abugohar and Yunus (2018) state that Arab students confront several challenges in learning English as an FL, the most of which is their inability to utter English correctly and fluently. Thus, this study gives a comprehensive literature review on identifying the most significant factors influencing Arab students' communication skills.

CULTURAL FACTORS
Lack of Intercultural Competence

The ability to communicate fluently and confidently in English is one of the essential skills that English as foreign language learners (EFL) need to maintain in multilingual and multicultural contexts. Most Arab students avoid communicating in the target language because of fear of cross-cultural differences (Ahmed, 2022). To overcome this communication problem, Tran and Doung (2018) stress

that L2 learners should be interculturally communicative competent so as to communicate effectively and appropriately with people of different cultural backgrounds. The emphasis on developing learners' intercultural competence while teaching an FL or L2 has been frequently addressed by various FL/L2 anthropologists and language teachers (Deardorff, 2006; Byram, 1997; Byram et al., 2002; Szoke, 2018; Taylor, 1994; Ting-Toomey, 1999). Intercultural competence is a significant concept that facilitates learning intercultural communication competence (Szoke, 2018). In other words, Intercultural competence helps intercultural communicators in understanding and respecting other people from different cultures. Intercultural competence is defined as "the symbolic exchange process whereby individuals from two (or more) different cultural communities negotiate shared meanings in an interactive situation" (Ting-Toomey, 1999, pp. 16-17). Thus, the lack of intercultural competence affects intercultural communication competence and often leads to miscommunications (Deardorff, 2006). Yashima et al. (2004) refer to intercultural communication as "the sharing and construction of meaning through interaction with dissimilar people" (p. 145).

Developing students' intercultural competence is almost overlooked in FL teaching, and the focus is often on developing learners' grammatical competence. Aldawood and Almeshhari (2019) indicate that English is taught as distinct from its culture in Saudi Arabia. The focus of most L2 programs is on language rather than culture. Alptekin (1993) argues that culture is mostly neglected in FL learning/teaching. The English language is almost taught/learned separated from its culture in Arab EFL classrooms. Arab students are often taught pure English grammar and not exposed fully or even partially to the English culture. Therefore, they face difficulty in using the English language appropriately and functionally because of the lack of intercultural competence. Teaching linguistic competence of English and neglecting the language's social and cultural aspects mostly leads to communication misunderstandings. Byram et al. (2002) view it as inadequate for students to have just knowledge and skills of linguistic competence of the language. They emphasize that students need to be capable of using the language in socially and culturally appropriate ways. Understanding the target language culture is an integral part of learning that language. EFL learners will not fully understand the FL as native speakers if they are culturally deficient (Aldawood & Almeshhari, 2019). Bennett (1993) labels a person who learns another language without maintaining its cultural dimension as a "fluent fool." He describes a fluent fool "as someone who speaks a foreign language well but does not understand the social and philosophical content of that language" (p. 16). Thus, EFL students need to develop intercultural competence to communicate effectively with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (Abu Alyan, 2013; Keong et al., 2014).

Effect of the Arab Environment

The educational and cultural background of Arab students is utterly Arabic (Ansari, 2012). They usually accomplish their school and university education in Arab environments. They do almost lack the convenient environments to practice English outside classrooms. The classroom is the possible environment for students to use English. However, the lack of suitable opportunities to practice English authentically in everyday situations seems to have a negative effect on students' efficiency in English. Lazaraton (2014) emphasizes the difficulty of developing oral fluency in an FL milieu. He states that the lack of an appropriate environment to practice English outside the classroom where students share a common language is considered one of the most challenging phases of L2 and FL teaching. Students have neither enough time to practice English inside classrooms nor encouragement to practice it in the

outside environment (Al Nakhalah, 2016). Shumin (2002) expounds that most EFL students learn the target language in their culture in which the only means available to practice the language is in the classroom. Khan (2011) stresses the scarcity of Arab environments in presenting opportunities to practice English. Thus, most students are less willing to communicate in English because they are taught to think, read, and write in Arabic. They are not motivated to think critically and express their thoughts and feelings in English (Fareh, 2010; Lakshmi, 2013).

Native Language Proficiency

Arabic is the medium of communication and instruction in all Arab countries. Arab students often overuse Arabic in EFL classes. Lakshmi (2013) states that most Arab EFL teachers use Arabic as the medium of instruction, and students tend to learn the target language using their mother tongue. The Arab school curriculum is designed and taught in the mother tongue, Arabic. The same is true in universities, as Rababah (2002) says that around one-third of Bachelor's degree courses are taught in Arabic, especially in Faculties of Arts and Education. Only some faculties, such as Medicine, Nursing, and Engineering, offer courses in English (Al-Hazmi, 2017; Ansari, 2012).

The majority of Arab people are monolingual and mono-cultural too. Because of strictly affiliating to their home culture and language, Arab students suffer from social, cultural, and religious obstacles while learning English (Alrabai, 2016; Ansari, 2012). Arabs value their language so much for being the Holy Quran's language and consider it a part of their identity. Al-Omari (2008) points out that Arabs' strict affiliation to their language stems from the fact that it is the language of the Quran, the Muslim's sacred book, and their religious reference (p. 73). Similarly, Nydell (2012) states that Arabs have a set of complex faiths in the superiority of their language over all other languages.

English is not spoken widely in Arab countries. It is just used for specific purposes as in commerce, tourism, technology, medicine, etc. As Arabic is the lingua franca for the whole Arabs, English receives little practice in Arab contexts. In most academic settings involving the English language, the use of Arabic is usually indispensable. Besides, English is not used for the sake of communication in the daily lives of Arab people. Western tourists visiting Arab countries might not find common Arab people who speak English. They need to hire professional translators to translate for them.

Pragmatic Transfer

Incorporating first-language rules in the second language production is referred to as "pragmatic transfer" (Kasper, 1992). Much research has been conducted in Arab contexts and concluded that pragmatic transfer hindered Arab students from learning English (Alrefaee & Al-Ghamdi, 2019; Al-Khaza'leh & Ariff, 2015; Hashemian, 2012; Jiang, 2015; Kasper, 1992). Most EFL learners transfer their first language linguistic knowledge, conventions, styles, strategies, and methods when learning the target language. Due to cross-cultural differences, such transfer of first language rules does not help students succeed in getting their message across. Students get anxious when they realize a misunderstanding between them and their interlocutors. This, consequently, affects the learners' learning of the target language.

Foreign/Second Language Proficiency

Learning an FL/L2 is a demanding and complex process because it requires learners to adopt a new language and culture that are totally different from their own. Brown (2000) points out that L2 learning involves learners in acquiring a new identity, and the adoption of a new identity is the core of culture learning or acculturation (p. 183). Scovel (1978) describes language learning as "an act of inheriting someone's else language and culture" (cited in MacIntyre, 1995, p. 245). Brown (2000) maintains that learning an L2 is an intricate and long-term task. It entails learners exerting strenuous efforts that go beyond the boundaries of their first language conventions into "a new language, a new culture, a new way of thinking, feeling and acting" (p. 1). Likewise, MacIntyre and Legatto (2010) argue that L2 acquisition is not as easy as acquiring the native language in a way that enables one to speak easily and flexibly with the community around him. Beyond the acquisition of the essential competencies of the language, an ESL learner is entailed to adapt and switch quickly to new cultural, political, social, identity, motivational, pedagogical, and other issues (p. 149).

To communicate effectively in the L2, students have to internalize the culture of the L2, for speaking in the target language without understanding its culture may expose students to serious pragmatic problems that are more perilous than linguistic ones. Alptekin and Alptekin (1984) emphasize that an ESL learner should be bilingual and bicultural. Similarly, Ho (2009) suggests that EFL students should be "interculturally and linguistically competent" and be aware enough of other people's cultures so as to be easier to interact with them (p. 63). Therefore, it is essential to raise students' awareness of the significance of learning an EFL/ESL language alongside its culture to be interculturally competent.

EDUCATIONAL FACTORS
Defective Teaching Methods

English language is still taught by traditional and ineffective methods in most Arab countries. Despite the frequent emphasis of much past research to adopt the communicative approach in teaching/learning English so as to develop learners' communication skills (cf, Alsohbani, 2013; Bachman, 1990; Bern, 1990; Ezzi, 2012; Richards, 2006; Savignon, 1987; Uysal & Bardakci, 2014), many traditional methods such as the Grammar Translation Method (GTM), the Structural Method (SM) and the Audio-lingual Method (ALM) are still largely used in teaching the language. In teaching the target language, the audio-lingual method, for example, focuses on some pattern drills such as *repetition, inflection, replacement, restatement, completion, transposition, expansion, contraction, transformation, integration, rejoinder, and restoration* (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, pp. 60-62). In ALM, the teacher's role is almost viewed as a drill sergeant (Young, 1991). The GTM focuses on translation, memorizing lists of vocabulary, and overuse of grammatical rules. However, these methods and drills are ineffective for developing communication skills.

The above structure-based mechanic drillings and techniques require students to memorize the target language structures by heart without knowing their actual use (Liu, 2014). Arab students are also taught or exposed to the target language through such pattern drills at schools and universities. Such traditional techniques and drills are ineffective in developing communication skills, comprehension, and actual language use; instead, they develop rote learning and grammatical competence. Arab students play a passive role in language classrooms; their roles are confined to only imitating some words and memorizing lists of vocabulary, sentences, and dialogue and then reproducing them as parrots.

Rote memorization is still prevalent in many Arab educational settings. Teachers mostly focus on rote learning rather than critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving activities. El-Baz (2009) argues that the emphasis on rote learning in school education has contributed to independent thinking impediments. Wilkens and Masri (2011) claim that the continuous focus on rote learning rather than critical thinking at the secondary level has exacerbated the number of unprepared students applying for study at university, which constitutes a hindrance and enormous strain on the system. Al-Omari (2008) points out that "rote learning is an integral part of the Arab educational system. He also states that Arabs encourage "the ability to use the memory in business issues instead of memos, and to recite poetry, tell stories and anecdotes, which are all based on learning by heart" (p. 19-20). Similarly, Rugh (2002) indicates that "pedagogy in most Arab schools and universities is typically based more on rote learning than on critical thinking, problem-solving skills, analysis and synthesis of information, and learning how to learn" (p. 408).

Lack of Training

The dearth of workshops and training courses in Arab countries to develop EFL teachers' skills to keep updated teachings has contributed to the production of low-proficient learners. According to Fareh (2010), "inadequate preparation of teachers, lack of motivation on the part of the learners, teacher-centered methods and inadequate assessment techniques" are among the most founded problems affecting EFL programs to work as expected (p. 3600). Al-Hazmi (2017) points out that there have been debates and calls for reform of the Saudi curriculum due to Saudi secondary students' low proficiency in English, the high number of untrained teachers, and inappropriate materials and pedagogy (p. 131). Similarly, Alrabai (2016) indicates that one of the flaws of the Saudi educational system is that teachers are not required to bring a teaching certificate to join the teaching profession (p. 26). A teaching certificate indicates that a teacher has undergone sufficient training to use various practical methods and useful techniques for teaching a foreign language. However, the scale of employment in the teaching profession at schools requires the teacher to have a bachelor's degree.

Difficulty of Teaching Communicative Curriculum

Arab English curricula are designed communicatively. However, research has shown that most Arab EFL teachers are not adequately competent to employ the communicative approach in their language-teaching classrooms. Al-Murtadha and Feryok (2017) expound that although the Yemeni English curriculum is designed in a communicative way with much focus on developing communication skills, teachers still adopt the GTM most of the time (p. 4). Likewise, Ezzi (2005) points out that Yemeni EFL teachers are incompetent to teach the new Yemeni communicative curriculum *Crescent English Course for Yemen* in a communicative way. There is a problem with EFL teachers in understanding the proper function of the communicative approach. Harmer (2003) indicates that "the problem with the CLT is that the term has always meant a multitude of different things to different people" (p. 289).

Large Classes

Overcrowded classes act as a real barrier to students' interaction; they are also anxiety-generating (Al-Rabai, 2014). Further, in congested classes, the opportunities for student-teacher interaction, questioning, and giving feedback are scarce. Umar (2017) argues that a large classroom may have a negative impact on students' achievements and grades because teachers are unable to provide

feedback for a large number of students or assess all students' work and exercises within a limited time. Aby Alyan (2013) emphasizes the difficulty for teachers to consider all students' needs in large classrooms as well as to provide them with opportunities to communicate. McCroskey and Andersen (1976) argue that a large class is a barrier to successful communication between teachers and students. Students do not get enough time to express their ideas in mass classes, which inhibits their learning (p. 73). Al-Jarf (2006) affirms that large classes affect students' academic achievement as well as teachers' and students' attitudes. She insists on decreasing the number of students in classrooms.

Classroom Equipment

The majority of classrooms in Arab countries, especially in rural areas, are ill-equipped. The lack of necessary equipment and teaching aids and the availability of shabby chairs and tables at some schools are influential factors in Arab students' achievement. Umar (2017) has investigated the effect of the classroom environment on Sudanese First first-secondary students' English achievement. His study comprised two groups: experimental and control. The experimental group was taught some materials in a renovated classroom, and the control one was taught the same materials in a non-renovated classroom. The results revealed significant differences between the two groups in achievement. The results were in favor of the students of the experimental group, which was taught under good classroom conditions. Further, the lack of mobile chairs and desks impairs the process of dividing students into groups and circles in classrooms. Crookall and Oxford (1991) point out that encountering classrooms with chairs fastened to the floors makes cooperative learning (pair and group work) and moving in the class difficult.

Examination System

The exam is considered a motivating factor for Arab students to learn the target language. The teaching/learning of the English language in the Arab world is mainly exam-oriented. The major part of teachers' teaching revolves around training learners on exams and reproduction strategies. Thus, most Arab students are aware of passing English tests rather than having knowledge about the language. Al-Hazmi (2017) points out that the exams in Saudi contexts are mostly grammar-centered and relatively traditional. Oral communication skills are not explicitly examined or assessed periodically at schools and universities. Fareh (2010) maintains that speaking and listening skills are neither explicitly taught nor tested periodically in EFL classrooms, schools, or even in general secondary exams adopted by Ministries of Education. The negligence of regularly assessing speaking and listening skills, same as reading and writing skills, contributes a lot to students' low proficiency in communication.

Arab EFL teachers usually assess the reading and writing skills, and sometimes the exams are purely objective in which students are not required to write anything. Al-Hamzi (2017) points out that the achievement test is the primary assessment tool in Saudi Arabia. This test, however, assesses structure and vocabulary, neglecting oral and written communication and covering only specific aspects specified by teachers. If students are expected to write something in the tests, they are already given a list of specific topics and questions that should be prepared. Students memorize answers by heart and then reproduce them in the exams. Thus, the overemphasis on passing exams leads to rote memorization of knowledge rather than comprehension and creative thinking. The rate of cheating also increases because exams are overemphasized and are the only acceptable criterion for moving to another stage. Abbad (1988) states that Yemeni school students successfully pass their school years depending on rote

learning despite their low English proficiency. Fareh (2010) indicates that Arab students "excel when examinations focus mainly on memorization and rote learning" (p. 3603).

Teacher-Centered Method

The nature of classrooms in the Arab world is predominantly teacher-centered, where the teacher has the authority to control classroom interactions, organize the activities, decide the lesson plans, choose the type of learning tasks, monitor the tasks, give feedback, correct erroneous activities, and determine the criteria of examinations and assessment. Students' role is often limited to listening passively without any active or real participation. The dominance of teachers in classrooms does not provide students with opportunities to communicate, negotiate meanings, ask questions, or have discussions in classrooms. Al-Mahrooqi and Denman (2015) confirm Arab teachers' and students' familiarity with traditional teacher-centered classes where the learner is positioned as a passive recipient of knowledge (p. 3). Al-Murtadha and Feryok (2017) point out that Yemeni teachers tend to adopt teacher-fronted activities despite the emphasis of textbooks on developing communicative skills. Fareh (2010) states that teachers' talking time usually exceeds students' talking time during EFL lectures.

Lack of Communication Opportunities

The lack of practice in the English language in real contexts outside classroom walls seems to be a major reason behind Arab students' low proficiency in English. Arab students have little exposure to the English language. There is no apt environment for Arab students to properly practice English outside classrooms as the language used in daily conversations is Arabic. Shumin (2002) points out that due to "the minimal exposure to the target language and contact with English native speakers, EFL learners, in general, are relatively poor at spoken English, especially regarding fluency, control of idiomatic expression, and understanding of cultural pragmatics" (p. 204). Arab students learn English only through formal education, the classroom. However, even in classrooms, the teachers' talk usually prevails, limiting students' communication opportunities.

Challenges in Learning the Productive Skills of Language

Most of the problems that Arab students encounter in English are related to productive skills−speaking and writing. Rababah (2002) emphasizes that Arab students have problems learning English, particularly in speaking and writing. They face difficulty in speaking skills because there is no opportunity for them to use English in everyday interactions. Rababah (2002) states that Arab students cannot communicate easily, and they terminate conversations when they come short of linguistic skills. He states, "when engaged in authentic communicative situations, students often lack the necessary vocabulary they need to get their meaning across" (p. 183). Khan (2011) indicates that Arab learners of English encounter problems in language productive skills (p. 3449). Al-Zu'be (2013) maintains that the majority of Arab students lack proper oral communication skills.

Many EFL teachers complain about their Arab students' reluctance to speak in English (Al-Rabai, 2014; Khan, 2011; Lakshmi, 2013). Because they are expected to speak in English, most students get anxious and feel frozen in their seats during English periods (Horwitz et al., 1986). Students fear speaking in English, making mistakes, being laughed at by their peers, and being reproached by their teachers during English classes. Therefore, utter silence often dominates EFL classrooms, affecting the development of students' communication skills. Al-Murtadha (2018) points out that despite the

importance of English communication skills for millions of EFL school students studying it as a compulsory subject, many students are often silent in classrooms.

Difficulties in Learning/Teaching the Listening Skill

The speaking skill is still taught traditionally in most Arab classrooms. Ansari (2012) stated that the teacher is the model of teaching the speaking skill in EFL classrooms, and students have no possibility to hear English other than a teacher. For example, there are some listening and speaking skills activities in school textbooks designed to be answered through cassettes. However, the cassettes are mostly unavailable. Thus, teachers manage to teach some listening activities, and others are mostly skipped. The speaking activities are answered orally by teachers' voices, which in many cases fail to motivate students to speak. The negligence of exposing learners to listening skills affects the learning of speaking skills. Without early exposure to listening, speaking becomes difficult. Listening is the foreground of the speaking skill. Shumin (2002) assures that "speaking feeds on listening which precedes it" (p. 205). If students listen well, they will certainly speak well.

COGNITIVE FACTORS
Motivation

Motivation is an essential factor for successful learning of the target language (Dörnyei, 1994). It usually "provides the primary impetus to initiate L2 learning and later the driving force to sustain the long and often tedious learning process" (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 65). Thus, the learning process becomes easy when language learners are highly motivated, and without motivation, even highly proficient learners cannot achieve long-term goals. A less proficient learner who is motivated to learn the L2 can perform better than a more intelligent learner who is demotivated. Dörnyei (2005) believes that "without sufficient motivation, even individuals with the most remarkable abilities cannot accomplish long-term goals, and neither are appropriate curricula and good teaching enough on their own to ensure students' achievement" (p. 65).

According to Gardner and Lambert (1972), motivation can be either integrative or instrumental, intrinsic or extrinsic (Brown, 2000). Integrative motivation is equivalent to intrinsic motivation. On the other hand, instrumental motivation is similar to extrinsic motivation. An integratively motivated learner studies the target language with a desire to assimilate or be part of the target group. However, an instrumentally motivated learner learns the target language with the aim of achieving a particular purpose, such as a job. Several previous studies revealed that despite the difficulties of learning English in Arab contexts, most Arab students are motivated to learn it, at least for practical reasons. Such studies have concluded that Arab students are more instrumentally than integratively motivated to learn English (see Al-Tamimi & Shuib, 2009; Al-Zubeiry, 2012; Khasawneh & Al-Omari, 2015). For Arab students, the English language is agreed upon as the language of the modern age, information, communication, science, technology, etc. There is also a seemingly unanimous agreement among many Arab people on the importance of English; therefore, most people register their children in private schools, which introduce English as a main subject in the first grade.

English is the most pervasive language taught as an FL in Arab countries. For its current and substantial future role in various domains, the Arab governments strongly encourage the learning of English among their people. Arab countries maintain a good relationship with many English-speaking countries. Therefore, they value learning English to communicate with these countries to enhance

cultural, political, scientific, and commercial relations. Alrabai (2016) points out that "the significance of English in Saudi Arabia is no longer limited to linguistic and communicative practicality, but also significant to the social, economic, political, and religious domains at national and international levels" (p. 21). Bose (2001) introduces some significant reasons for learning English in Yemen. He points out that English is needed for building international relations with the country, tourism, higher education in science and technology, communication purposes with Yemeni students studying abroad, and global relationship trade purposes (cited in Ezzi, 2005, p. 7).

PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS
The Anxiety of Foreign Language

Foreign language anxiety (FLA) has been identified as a specific area of research independent of general language anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986). It is specifically related to learners' anxiety about FL learning. Many ESL researchers (cf., Aida, 1994; Crookall & Oxford, 1991; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993; Horwitz et al., 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1991b; Saito & Samimy, 1996) examined FLA among their students, and they reported that their students suffered a lot from this type of anxiety. FLA is found as an influential variable causing students' uneasiness in language classrooms. Horwitz (2001) affirms that FLA can be responsible for inhibiting students' language learning. Many studies investigating FLA confirmed its negative impact on learners' achievement (Al-Khasawaneh, 2016; Al-Rabai, 2014; Dewaele & Al-Saraj, 2015; Horwitz, 2001; Imura, 2004).

Arab learners are no exception, who always show anxiety in a foreign language. Most Arab EFL learners are reticent and reluctant to communicate in the L2, do not volunteer answers, participate less in classroom activities, and rarely ask questions because of language anxiety (Hamouda, 2012; Al-Rabai, 2014). Speaking in a foreign language is the most anxiety-provoking skill, especially in the presence of native speakers (Shumin, 2002). Many Arab researchers investigated the impact of anxiety on Arab students' foreign language learning, and they found high anxiety among their students (Al-Rabai, 2014; Ezzi, 2012; Jendli & AlBarakati, 2019; Yassin & Abdul Razak, 2018). The most anxiety-triggers factors that cause anxiety are low proficiency, fear of speaking in front of others, negative evaluation, shyness, lack of confidence and preparation, fear of mistakes (Hamouda, 2012), psychological, social, and instructional causes (Thaher, 2005), CA, anxiety of English classes, fear of negative evaluation, and test-anxiety (Al-Khasawneh, 2016), teachers' practices, lack of vocabulary, weak school educational system, test anxiety, peer anxiety, and classroom atmosphere (Rafada & Madini, 2017).

Suggestions

Based on the literature review findings, the study provides some suggestions for EFL teachers and policymakers.

Suggestions for Teachers
Developing Learners' Intercultural Competence

Based on the problems identified in the literature review, it is suggested that EFL teachers should organize skills training programs to develop learners' communication skills. They should raise students' cultural awareness of the target culture because Arab students are surrounded by their home culture and have low exposure to the target culture outside classroom walls. Being interculturally incompetent, Arab students usually avoid communicating in English because of fear of what to say and how to respond to

their interlocutors. Learning the target culture guarantees successful foreign language learning (Aldawood & Almeshari, 2019).

The need for teaching the concept of intercultural competence stems from its significant role in enabling people with diverse cultures to effectively communicate as we live in an age of multiculturalism, multi-religions, and multi-ethnocentrism. EFL students should be critically aware of their own culture and that of others as well. Communication exists in every culture, but the way people communicate verbally and non-verbally differs across cultures. Thus, intercultural competence assists students in coping with such differences. Teaching intercultural competence is highly important as "we are living in a post-modern society that is becoming increasingly international, abundant with intercultural encounters through tourism, trade, diplomacy, youth exchange and the mobility" (Larzen, 2005, p. 21).

It is further suggested that teachers adopt Moran's (2001) five cultural dimensions in teaching the target culture. Moran's (2001) cultural dimensions focus on using the language to learn about the culture (p.39). Moran's framework is relatively easy and effective in exposing students to the target culture through language teaching/learning. The framework consists of five cultural dimensions: products, practices, perspectives, communities, and persons. For more details (See Moran, 2001, p. 35-38).

Employing Some Techniques to Highlight Cultural Awareness and Develop Communication skills

Creating communication opportunities is useful for motivating learners to communicate. Teachers should create opportunities for students to communicate in the classroom. The teachers' dominance over classroom talk inhibits learners from active participation. Students' oral communication skills will be improved if they are engaged in real communication, such as creating situations and asking students to role-play them. The availability of opportunities to practice the L2 in genuine situations may increase the level of students' willingness to communicate and the frequency of communication in the L2. To develop students' oral communication skills, teachers should include various oral communication activities such as arguments, discussions, and debates in all courses and highlight assessing these activities regularly (Abu Alyan, 2013).

EFL teachers should also use effective techniques such as role-playing activities when they are teaching a foreign language because such activities are interactive and may reduce students' boredom with learning (Brown, 2000, p. 189). Role-play is one of the most advantageous activities for exposing learners to the target language culture. Teachers can, for example, create situations that entail cultural misunderstanding, such as offending or irritating people. Students are then required to think about what went wrong, why, and how people of the target culture would behave in such situations. This will involve students in thinking deeply about the target culture and developing their attitudes towards it. Such authentic activities help teach the target culture, maintain students' own culture, raise their cultural awareness, and build their confidence to acculturate and use the target language (Shumin, 2002). In role-playing activities, teachers can teach students how to use the target language functions in appropriate social contexts, i.e., how to greet, command, ask permission, ask advice, apologize, warn, suggest, console, express affection, compliment, express a wish, complain, request, decline a request, refuse, etc.

The use of audio-visual materials is highly effective in attracting students' attention to lessons. Audio-visual materials also effectively expose students to the target language's authentic culture and develop a native-like accent. Learners need to be exposed to various scenes, situations, accents, intonations, rhythms, stress, and voices. "A possible way of stimulating learners to talk might be to

provide them with extensive exposure to authentic language through audio-visual stimuli and with opportunities to use the language" (Shumin, 2002, p. 209).

Developing Learners' Communication skills and Reducing their Anxiety

Using the communicative approach is highly suggested for developing L2 students' communication skills. The communicative approach's essence is to use the target language in various real contexts and focus on creating meaning, and function rather than form. L2 learning can be effective if the emphasis is paid to meaning rather than grammaticalness (Canale & Swain, 1980). The communicative approach is concerned with communication as a meaning-based activity and with the role of language functions in expressing, interpreting, and negotiating meaning (Bern, 1990). The communicative approach highlights the student-centered learning method. Learners are the fulcrum of language learning, and the teacher plays the role of a guide or a facilitator who intervenes only when there is a problem. The communicative approach also highlights the implementation of cooperative learning by dividing classrooms into pairs and small groups. Further, the communicative approach stresses using some communicative and mind-engaging activities such as learning games, simulation, role-play, problem-solving, information-gap, reasoning-gap, and opinion-gap activities.

Community Language Learning is another method that assists in reducing learners' communication anxiety. CLL supports the creation of an intimate relationship between teachers and students. Establishing a mutual and friendly rapport can enhance learning a foreign language and help greatly reduce the anxiety factor. The complexity and fear of learning the FL/L2 will be declined to a certain extent as long as there is an encouraging learning environment. Besides, the creation of a caring social environment and the good characteristics of teachers as being humorous, friendly, relaxed, and patient are practical factors in reducing students' anxiety (Young, 1990).

Reducing the focus on tests is another strategy that should be highlighted. The test is one of the most anxiety-generating factors. It is a significant cause of FL classroom anxiety (Horwitz et al., 1986). A test is regarded as a motivating factor for Arab learners to learn various Arabic subjects. However, it can be inhibitory in terms of an FL because of students' unfamiliarity with the language. It is observed that most EFL teachers stress the idea of tests from the beginning of the classes. Thus, it is suggested that teachers should focus on developing learners' language skills rather than test skills. Teachers should educate learners that the goal of the learning process is to develop knowledge of the language, and exams are only a matter of simple assessment for progression. Besides, teachers should avoid making competition between students. They should focus on creating a language environment free of stress and anxiety. Further, teachers should not assess some skills and neglect others. The four skills of the language should be tested simultaneously.

It is suggested that the Arab educational authorities make a change in the criterion of assessment. Students' progress should be measured via periodical assessments, and the final tests should be easy and entail fewer marks. A shift to evaluation rather than an examination of English subjects is advised. English should not be treated as other subjects because it is a language rather than a single subject (Al Nasser, 2015).

Suggestions for Policymakers

In some Arab countries, English is introduced at late stages. However, it is suggested that English is better introduced from an early age, from the first grade.

Regarding curriculum, it is suggested that Ministries of Education should provide the educational institutes with the required learning facilities. The lack of learning facilities is one of the causes of learners' low proficiency in English. New textbooks should be distributed regularly alongside their respective audio-visual materials because they effectively promote learners' performance. It is also suggested that Arab Ministries of Education should do regular training for EFL teachers and update them with the modern and current practices of teaching communicative curricula.

The use of various technology tools in learning is recommended for teaching the target language and culture. Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) is recommended because it motivates learners to learn the target language. "CALL can promote language learning and teaching if it is used as a tool to support pedagogical goals of the class and curriculum" (Rahimi & Pourshahbaz, 2019, p. 3). CALL includes various *technological devices* such as laptops, tablets, smartphones, MP3s and interactive Whiteboards, *technological applications and software* like tutors, edutainments programs, simulations, and *technological environments* such as the World Wide Web and its related databases such as blogs, Wikis, online dictionaries, corpora, etc. (p. 3-4).

Arab Ministries of Education should prioritize the maintenance of the educational institutes because well-equipped and decorated classrooms are effective in successful learning and achievement in the L2. The availability of comfortable chairs and desks, all teaching materials and aids such as textbooks, black or whiteboards, chalks, markers, libraries, and technology are influential elements in the language learning process (Umar, 2017). Ornamented classrooms may increase students' motivation to study throughout the learning process, while dull classrooms may demotivate learners to study (Harmer, 2001).

Finally, the number of students in every classroom should be reduced to 15-20 or a maximum of 25 students in every class. With such a number, teachers can interact with students and provide feedback to them properly without constraints. A reasonable classroom size makes it easy for student-student and teacher-student interaction, which are vital elements of language learning success (Umar, 2017).

Conclusion

The study in hand aimed at reviewing the literature to identify the factors that influence Arab students' communication skills. A review of the literature related to the factors affecting communication skills among Arab students shows that some cultural, educational, cognitive, and psychological factors pose challenges in developing students' communication skills. Thus, it is advised that Arab educational authorities take into consideration these influential factors while designing textbooks. Specifically, EFL teachers should clearly understand these major factors and consider them while teaching English. Understanding the influencing factors that hinder students' communication ability will help facilitate the way for teachers to treat the problem. The review of the literature has found only a few studies in some Arab countries on the factors affecting learners' communication skills. Therefore, further studies are recommended to be conducted in different Arab countries.

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