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Exploring the academic, social, and cultural experiences of English language learners from Saudi Arabia at a Midwest university in the U.S.

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EXPLORING THE ACADEMIC, SOCIAL, AND CULTURAL EXPERIENCES OF
ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS FROM SAUDI ARABIA AT A MIDWEST
UNIVERSITY IN THE U.S

An Abstract of a Dissertation

Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Approved:

Dr. Frank Kohler, Committee Chair

Dr. Patrick Pease, Dean of Graduate
College

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May 2018

ABSTRACT

The world is experiencing an increasing number of international students who leave their countries to study abroad. The value and benefit of studying abroad influences many students to go on this educational journey. Research conducted over the past 20 years indicates that studying abroad provides both rewarding and challenging experiences. For example, studying abroad exposes students to exciting new cultures and places, developing academic/language skills and gaining social and cultural exposures which in turn enrich their global experience (Geeraert et al., 2014; Lillyman & Bennett, 2014; Wu et al., 2015). However, studying abroad can also pose certain challenges, including loneliness, learning styles, language difficulties, cultural issues, social interaction with the host community, prejudice and discrimination (Al Murshidi, 2014; Lillyman & Bennett, 2014; Wu et al., 2015).

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore the unique experience of Saudi students who are studying English in the U.S. Specifically, the study aimed to examine the academic, social and culture experiences of Saudi students in the English language program at a Midwest University in the U.S. with a focus on the differences, successes, challenges, and/or difficulties among this group of students. The sample of research participants consisted of five students who enrolled at the program on August 22nd, 2016 or January 9th. 2017. This research used Creswell's (2013) strategy to analyze qualitative data. The interview data was transcribed classified and interpreted into codes, then categories, and then generated themes. The findings showed that the students experienced both positive and negative outcomes related to their academic,

social, and cultural experiences. In general, these students made grade very good progress in their study abroad journey as well as improved their personal growth.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

For decades, individuals crossed international borders to pursue education abroad. Whether its for learning a new foreign language and/or pursue a degree program, each year thousands of people travel abroad to engage in an educational journey. Western countries like the United States of America (U.S.), United Kingdom, and Canada, receives a large number of international students each year. Studies have shown that in the last decade, the population of international students around the world increased by 80%, from 1.78 million to 3.18 million in 2010 (Geeraert, Demoulin, & Demes, 2014). Most of this increase came from the U.S. In fact, this country has seen a significant increase in its international student population over the years. For the academic year 2013/2014 alone, the U.S. received more than 800, 000 thousand international students pursuing both an undergraduate and graduate degrees, an increase of 10% from previous years (Staton, 2016). The biggest question that may be running in one's mind is that why this increasing trend in study abroad. The answer to this question may be based on the value placed on and benefit of studying abroad.

The value and benefit of studying abroad influences many students to go in this educational journey. Studying abroad provides both a rewarding experience and result in challenges. As an international student in the U.S., I experienced both positive and negative things since I started studying in this country. The same can be said for other students. For international students, the benefit largely pertains to developing academic/language skills as well as social and cultural exposures. In fact, much research

has been conducted that explore and examine the unique experiences of international student. First, studying abroad exposes students to exciting new cultures and places, which in turn enrich their global experience (Lillyman & Bennett, 2014; Geeraert et al., 2014). Second, students gain prestige as a result of studying in a foreign country (Al Murshidi, 2014; Wu, Garza & Guzman, 2015; Geeraert et al., 2014). For example, in my country, Saudi Arabia, a degree or diploma from the U.S. is valued more than those awarded in the country mostly because studying abroad is considered a prestigious undertaking. Also, for the host university/college and community, international students bring economic benefits that ranges from the payment of tuition and fees, which are much higher than in-state costs as well as incomes from rent, and other amenities such a grocery and entertainment (Lillyman & Bennett, 2014; Wu et al., 2015).

From a social and cultural perspective, international students bring-in diversity to the communities and host universities/colleges, which in turn enable them to learn new cultures and provides them with the opportunity to socialize with individuals from different countries (Lillyman & Bennett, 2014; Wu et al., 2015; Geeraert et al., 2014). In essence, while the students gain exposure into a foreign culture, the local communities, and host institutions also benefit from having these students in that they get to learn about a new culture and other social norms. As a result, their worldviews are broadened. Also, studying abroad improves the career and employable prospect of international students when they return to their country or when they participate in the global job market (Lillyman & Bennett, 2014).

Much research has been conducted on the academic, social, and cultural experiences of international students. Most of the research focuses on the different experiences and challenges faced by different groups of international students on the basis of their academic, social, and cultural experience in the host college/university and/or community (Terui, 2012; Yuan, 2011; Wu et al., 2015; Lillyman & Bennett, 2014; Al Murshidi, 2014; Geeraert et al., 2014). Some of the challenges they encounter include food, weather, loneliness, learning styles, language difficulties, cultural issues, and social interaction with host community. International students also experience prejudice and discrimination (Al Murshidi, 2014; Wu et al., 2015; Lillyman & Bennett, 2014). For example, students from the Arab world may be looked at and treated differently because of their religion (i.e., being a Muslim), especially in recent years due to the wide coverage of terrorism by the media. This then creates the necessity to continue to improve our understanding of the experiences of international students in the U.S. with a specific focus on students from Saudi Arabia.

Statement of the Problem and Significance of the Study

International students from Saudi Arabia face unique experiences related to academic, social, and culture. In particular, Saudi students studying in the Western world like the U.S. faces unique cultural, academic, and social experiences. This is because of the huge differences in educational system, language, culture, social norms, and religion. Also, because currently thousands of Saudi students are enrolled in American English programs and higher education institutions, it is vital to explore and understand the unique experience of this group of international students.

It is important to expand our understanding of the academic, social, and cultural experience of Saudi students in the U.S. This is because there are limited studies that specifically examined the unique experiences of Saudi students who are learning English as a Second Language (ESL) in the U.S. Their experience is unique in that language barriers and differences in educational system, social and culture poses significant challenges, which in turn is likely to have an impact on their social adjustment as well as academic performance. As an international student from Saudi Arabia who first came to the U.S. to learn English and now pursuing a degree program, I had both positive and negative academic, social, and cultural experiences, which in turn influenced my overall experience in the U.S. I have a conviction that it is vital for English programs and institutions of higher education to learn more and understand the unique experiences of their different groups of international students. This is because the experience of a Saudi student may be different than that of a British or Canadian studying in the U.S. Therefore, conducting international studies like this one contributes and adds to the existing literature on international students. This in turn can help improve our understanding of the unique experiences of the different groups of international students on the basis of country of origin or culture.

More specifically, few studies have explored the unique experience of students from Saudi Arabia, whom mostly travels abroad to study ESL before venturing in to pursuing degree programs. In other words, they first enroll in English language programs that aim to provide them the English skills necessary to be admitted into an undergraduate or graduate program of study. Their experience in such English language

programs determines their path and potential for success in an academic field of study. Therefore, it is important to explore their experience; in particular challenges and successes, in English language programs so as to understand their experiences, which in turn may yield important information that may lead to potential recommendations that may help English language programs and institutions of higher education to improve the academic and social experience of their international students and also to help high schools in Saudi Arabia in preparing these students for this kind of programs.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the experience of Saudi students who are learning English in the U.S. Specifically, the study aims to examine the academic, social and culture experiences of Saudi students in the English language program at a Midwest University in the U.S. with a focus on the differences, successes, challenges, and/or difficulties among this group of students.

The research questions are the following:

- (1) What is the Saudi students' experience in the English language program at a Midwest University in the U.S.?
- (2) What is/are Saudi students' social/cultural experiences in the U.S.? and
- (3) What strategies are used to overcome challenges and difficulties?

Theoretical Framework

This study is situated within a well known cognitive social psychology theoretical framework known as attribution theory. To understand attribution theory, it is first important to define what "attribution" mean. Its basically an explanation of the cause(s)

of a certain event or behavior. For example, when a teacher observed that a student is giving the wrong answers to a reading question, he/she may attribute this to either the student's lack of comprehension of the reading material or failure to read an assigned class reading. Attribution can also be based on self-evaluation. This means that "people also form attributions for their own behaviors and outcomes" (Harvey & Martinko, 2009, p.147). A student may attribute failing a test to failure to study for the test because he/she was partying all night. The opposite can be true as well. A student who received a very good grade on an exam may attribute his grade to either because he/she studied very hard (well prepared) for the test or just to being lucky.

Attribution theory focuses on people's tendency to explain why they behave in certain way. In other words, the theory primarily "focuses on the human propensity to explain why people behave the way they do" (Gedeon & Rubin, 1999, p.20). More specifically, self-attribution, which is "how one evaluates one's own performance," (Gedeon & Rubin, 1999, p.20) is relevant or applies to a student's self-evaluation of his/her own performance. According to this theory, individuals tend to explain their achievement(s) that are related to certain event(s) using one of four attributions – ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck. For example, when a student scored an excellent grade in an exam, he/she is most likely to attribute or explain this successful outcome "in one of four ways: (1) that she is very intelligent (ability), (2) that she studies very hard (effort), (3) that the test was easy (task difficulty), or (4) that she is just a good guesser (lucky)" (Gedeon & Rubin, 1999, p.20).

Ability and effort are considered to be internal (within a person's control), which represents the qualities of a person/individual. This is because "ability is an inherent aspect of an individual's brain and physical prowess," whereas, "effort refers to how hard an individual appears to work" (Gedeon & Rubin, 1999, p.20). On the other hand, task difficulty and luck are classified under the external scheme because they are considered to be outside the control of the individual, not part of the person, but part of the environment. In other words, they are external to the individual in that they are not unique to that person per se.

The attribution theory applies to this study in that it helps explain the cognitive social psychological processes involved with students' perception on their performance in learning ESL and their interaction with teachers as well as their evaluation of their current English program experience in the U.S. In essence, attribution is based on perception of the individual. However, it is important to acknowledge that, "as with all perceptions, attributions are not always an accurate reflection of reality" (Harvey & Martinko, 2009, p. 149). For example, a student who performed poorly on an exam may end up blaming someone else or something for his/her poor performance. But, his/her failure may be due to his/her own fault, not someone else or something.

In this regard, the theory is mostly relevant to student performance/self-evaluation because it helps explains student's perception on things that may have influenced/caused their learning outcome. In fact, "research indicates that the formation of causal attributions is vital for adapting to changing environments and overcoming the challenges we are confronted with in our daily lives (p.147). In this case, the international students

who participated in this study came from a country that is very different than the U.S. in all aspects (i.e., language, culture, norms, educational system, etc). Therefore, this group of students found themselves in a changing environment and thus makes all attempts to cope with the challenge inherent in living and studying in a foreign environment.

With regards to the students' academic performance evaluation, attribution styles represent a person's "tendency to consistently attribute positive and negative outcomes to a specific type of cause" – internal, external, stable, unstable (Harvey & Martinko, 2009, p. 149). These styles are comprised of optimism, pessimism and hostile. First, as the name suggest, the optimistic attribution style is characterized as a situation in which an individual (in this case a student) attribute positive outcomes/experience to internal factors and negative outcome/experience to external factors. For example, a student can be optimistic because he/she believes that his/her learning success is under his/her control and believes he/she will be successful in school because of his/her ability and effort. In essence, "people with optimistic attribution style often feel good about themselves and their capacity for success" (Harvey & Martinko, 2009, p. 149). This boost self-confidence in one's ability to be successful in whatever it is the person is engaged in.

On the other hand, the pessimistic attribution style represents the direct opposite of optimism. It is the tendency for an individual to attribute his/her negative experience/outcome to international factors such as lack of intelligence and positive outcome/experience to external factors such as good luck. As a result, "people who exhibit this tendency often lack confidence in themselves and are pessimistic about their

chances for success” (Harvey & Martinko, 2009, p. 149). Such an attitude or behavior can ultimately lead to depression and most likely to a situation of feeling helpless.

A major component of the attribution theory is its focus on motivation. For this study, attributions tend to influence students’ state of motivation. These motivational states comprised of learned helplessness, aggression, empowerment, and resilience. Firstly, learned helplessness is a situation in which an individual has learned to be helpless largely based on his/her previous experience. This is because “when specific behaviors do not achieve desired outcomes, the motivation to perform those behaviors is lost” (Harvey & Martinko, 2009, p. 151). As a result, the person becomes hopeless in that he/she “come to believe that effort is futile because failure is inevitable” (Harvey & Martinko, 2009, p. 51). Such a learned helplessness is mostly attributed to external barriers that are stable such as the policies and norms of organization and the behavior of leaders in an organization. For example, a student may develop learned helplessness if he/she feels like he cannot pass a class regardless of his/her effort largely because the teacher is so hard on him/her and/or doesn’t like him/her. In this case, the student may not put much effort in the class, especially when he keeps getting failing grades in assignments and tests. He/she may just conclude that no matter what he/she does, he/she is going to fail the class any ways.

On the flip side, empowerment represents a positive feeling about one self. It is “a heightened state of motivation caused by optimistic effort-reward expectation” (Harvey & Martinko, 2009, p. 153). People who are optimistic are most likely to have a feeling of empowerment. This is because an empowered individual tends to have a feeling that

his/her effort and ability can ultimately help him/her to achieve desired goals/outcomes. For this reason, the person is motivated to put more effort into whatever is needed to achieve the desired outcome/goal. For example, a student may spend hours to study for a test, do assignments, and complete all required class work because he/she believes in passing the class with a very good grade. Therefore, the student is motivated to work hard and put more effort in his/her class work with the expectation of getting a very good grade at the end of the semester.

Finally, resilience is a motivation state that represents an individual's ability to adapt to changing unfavorable situation or environment. Specifically, it is a "staunch acceptance of reality... strongly held values, and an uncanny ability to improvise and adapt to significant change" (Harvey & Martinko, 2009, p. 154). In other words, resilient people accept the reality they found themselves in and try to adapt to the situation. For example, international students face many different changes in their new environment abroad, thus resulting in both significant positive and negative experiences. Those that developed resilience tend to be successful in their study abroad journey. In fact, "research suggests that resilient people are relatively good at developing accurate attributions" (Harvey & Martinko, 2009, p. 154). Therefore, resilience most likely help individuals to avoid making "attribution errors that can hurt motivation level" (Harvey & Martinko, 2009, p. 154). Therefore, this theory will be used to help explain and understand the findings of this study – the academic, social, and cultural experience of Saudi students.

Definition of Terms

The following terminologies will be used in the study.

- *English as a Second Language or ESL* is used to refer to non-native English speakers who are learning the language. For this study, ESL represents the academic focus of the Saudi students who are learning English in a Midwest University's English program.
- *English Language Learners* is used in this study interchangeably with ESL as defined above. In this case, it refers to a person who is engaged in the learning of ESL.
- *Saudi Students* refers to international students from Saudi Arabia who are studying in a foreign country.
- *Resilience* is a psychological state of motivation that represents a person's ability to adapt to changing unfavorable situation or environment. For this study, resiliency is used to explain the Saudi students' ability to overcome the challenges they experienced and adapt to life in the U.S.

Organization of the Study

This study consists of an additional four chapters. Chapters two discuss and synthesize the literature on the experience of international students with a focus on the study areas – academic, social and cultural experiences. In Chapter three, the qualitative methodology, research participants and their demographic characteristics, data collection and analysis are presented. Chapter four presents the results, which is then followed by the discussion chapter that provide in-depth analysis of the findings as a well as situate the results within a conceptual framework.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The world is experiencing an increasing number of international students who leave their countries to study abroad. Most of this global educational travel takes place in the West, where students from non-Western regions travel to Western countries such as the United States (U.S.) and United Kingdom (U.K.) to pursue their education. According to Geeraert et al. (2014), in the last ten years, the “number of students studying abroad grew from 1.78 million in 2000 to 3.18 million in 2010, an increase of nearly 80% (p.86). In particular, the U.S. has been experiencing a significant increase in the flow of international students (Al Murshidi, 2014; Staton, 2016; Wu et al., 2015). For the academic year 2013/2014 alone, the U.S. received 974,926 international students both at the undergraduate and graduate level, an increase of 10% from previous years (Staton, 2016).

The value and benefit of studying abroad influences many students to go on this educational journey. Research conducted over the past 20 years indicates that studying abroad provides both rewarding and challenging experiences. Studying abroad exposes students to exciting new cultures and places, which in turn enrich their global experience (Geeraert et al., 2014; Lillyman & Bennett, 2014). Much research has been conducted that explore and examine the unique experiences of international students. Most of the research focuses on the different experiences by different groups of international students on the basis of their academic, social, and cultural experiences in the host educational institution and/or community (Al Murshidi, 2014; Geeraert et al., 2014; Lillyman &

Bennett, 2014; Terui, 2012; Wu et al., 2015; Yuan, 2011). In other words, studying abroad brings with it rewarding experiences as well as poses challenges.

International students receive benefits mostly based on the rewarding experience that emerges as a result of studying abroad. Such benefit mostly pertains to developing academic/language skills as well as gaining social and cultural exposures. In addition to improving one's academic and foreign language skill such as English, international students get to be exposed to other culture(s) mostly due to interaction with other students from different parts of the world, including the culture of the host community and/or country. For example, students from Saudi Arabia studying in the U.S. get to experience the diversity of the American society because they are likely to meet and possibly interact with Americans from different racial and/or ethnic background. In turn, the Saudi students not only learn about the American way of life, but also learn about some social and cultural norms. The same can be said for the host community, including professors and university staff who interact with these students. For instance, for the host university/college and community, international students bring economic benefits that ranges from the payment of tuition and fees, which are much higher than in-state costs, as well as produce incomes from rent, and other amenities such a grocery and entertainment (Lillyman & Bennett, 2014; Wu et al., 2015).

However, studying abroad can also pose certain challenges to international students. Some of the challenges they encounter include food, weather, loneliness, learning styles, language difficulties, cultural issues, and social interaction with the host community. International students also experience prejudice and discrimination (Al

Murshidi, 2014; Lillyman & Bennett, 2014; Wu et al., 2015). For example, students from the Arab world may be looked at and treated differently because of their religion (i.e., being a Muslim), especially in recent years due to the wide coverage of terrorism by the media.

The purpose of Chapter 2 is to summarize research that has examined the experiences of international students who study abroad. The literature review will be presented for the areas of academic experiences first, followed by students' social experiences. Finally, Chapter 2 will end with a discussion of the cultural experiences associated with studying abroad.

Research Examining the Academic and Language Experiences of International Students

It can be said the primary reason that motivates and influences students to study abroad is the pursuit of academic and/or language learning. In other words, students mainly travel abroad to pursue their academic and/or language education, among other reasons. Such experiences can be positive, while challenging as well.

The academic experiences of international students pertain to a variety of different areas. A first and primary area is enrollment in a language program that the host university offers to assist the student with learning the native language. This involves enrollment in courses that extend for 1.5 to 2 years. Related to students' academic experiences, then, are interactions with course instructors, completion of course activities, assignments, and tests, and overall progress with the language program. The language experiences of international students have also been examined, and pertain to the students' progress and ease/comfort of learning the native language.

A number of studies have examined the academic and language experiences of international students. For example, Wu et al., (2015) examined the academic and socio-cultural experiences of international students in Texas. The research addressed two specific questions: (1) what are international students' academic, social, and cultural struggles? and (2) what support and resources are needed for overcoming these struggles? As a qualitative study, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews of 10 undergraduate and graduate students from different countries who were studying in Texas. These students also had experience taking English language classes in the U.S. The interviews were tape and video recorded for transcription.

Results from the study indicated that students had a combination of positive and difficult or challenging experiences. For example, multiple students reported that their professors were nice, approachable, and professional in demeanor. At the same time, students also reported discomfort and difficulties communicating with professors due to language barriers, cultural differences, and different expectation that the professors held. Specific course activities such as participating in class discussions were often problematic due to disparities between the professor's expectations and prior experiences of the student. Individual students also reported difficulties following classroom conversations and lectures due to the rate of speech and pronunciation of words.

Some students in the Wu et al., (2015) study used on-campus support services that included the writing center, counseling center, and recreation as well as participated in different student organizations and on-campus activities. These support services helped them to release stress and cope with school life, including their academic struggles, and

find strategies to help them deal with such challenges. For example, while some of the students reported using the writing center to revise their papers, one of them reported using counseling services to seek help deal with stress/pressure related to school and interaction with professors.

Other studies have explored how the language capability of international students impacts or creates challenges in their academic activities. For example, in a case study of international students in South Africa, Sibomana (2016) explored the English language challenges experienced by graduate students from Rwanda studying in South Africa. For these graduate students, English is a foreign language because they mainly speak French and Kinyarwanda. But, their education in South Africa was in English. The study focuses on assessing language challenges experienced by these students in their academic and research activities at a South African university. Methodologically, the researchers administered questionnaires to 21 students and then interviewed four students as well as, three professors who were supervisors to these students. In addition, assignments and professors' feedback on assignments as well as students' research work were analyzed.

The results illustrated a combination of positive and challenging experiences for the students. The graduate students encountered difficulty with English, which negatively affected their academic performance and research activities. This situation was greatly influenced by the mismatch between the student's language abilities and the university's expectation regarding English language proficiency. While the students acknowledged their limited language proficiency, and therefore expected the university to provide them with language support, the university assumed that these students enrolled in their

academic programs with the understanding that they were enrolling in an institution where the medium of instruction is English, and therefore assumed they were prepared to study in English. This mismatch negatively affected the students' academic performance due to their difficulty with the English language and the lack of effective language support. Interestingly, it was found that the "students' previous academic 'ways with words' differ from those expected by their lecturers and research supervisors" (p. 1). This then created misunderstanding between the students and their professors and research supervisors.

However, the Sibomana (2016) study found that graduate students used a number of strategies that helped them deal with their language struggles. These students used a combination of self-help language strategies that included the use of English-French dictionaries and machine translation that translated their reading materials into English for better understanding. With regards to writing, while most of the students reported giving their writing projects/research papers to their Rwandan colleagues who were more proficient in English for revision and/or editing, three of the students reported using the writing center on campus to help them with their draft papers.

In addition, the university offered/provided support to help these students address their academic challenges with a goal of helping them do well in their studies. The institutional support provided to these students included an English language course designed to help them improve their writing and reading skills. Upon discovering that these students faced serious language difficulty, the university allowed the students to enroll in an English language course to help them improve their language skills. Also,

professors/research supervisors helped the students address their writing challenges. For example, some professors responded positively to students' weaknesses, extended assignment deadlines, listened carefully to students' problems and suggested possible solutions, allowed students to re-write a paper if grade was below 60%, as well as provided additional tutorials to some students to provide them with more opportunities for detailed discussion and understanding of course-materials covered in class.

As the above discussion illustrate, while international students experience some benefits, academically, they also face challenges, especially in terms of language difficulty. This in turn, affects their academic performance due to problems completing assignments, exams, and research activities. Despite these challenges, international students reported positive experience interacting with their professors, which included understanding their unique academic and language needs and helping them address such challenges such as providing extra time to these students to discuss class materials as well as extending assignment deadlines. The host university also tends to provide institutional support such as writing centers, language courses, and counseling services. Therefore, because the university/college is the first place where needed resources could be provided for international students, it is crucial they focus on and understand the challenges experienced by this group of students so as to provide adequate support for them.

Research Examining the Social Experiences of International Students

Studying abroad brings with it social reward and poses certain challenges. First and foremost, international students contribute to the diversity of their host institution and community. Such diversity tends to improve inter-cultural understanding between the

host institution and community, and the students. Also, the presence of international students on campus brings diverse, new/fresh ideas into classroom discussions, which enrich and broaden the perspectives of everyone involved including professors and local students. For the host university, community and local students, their interaction with international students can broaden their global perspectives. For example, a lasting friendship may be developed, which may extend years after graduation of international students. Next, the interaction between the host community and international student tend to foster positive social experience. For instance, some colleges/universities have host family programs that partner international students with American families. Such a relationship tends to result in rewarding experiences for the host family and students.

However, moving to a different country and living in a new community can also bring certain challenges or difficulty. First and foremost, international students immediately have to deal with the issues of arriving/living in a new community such as finding a place to live, making new friends, lack of interaction with host students and community, lack of participating in community and university activities, buying grocery, and having the support system needed to live in their new community. Social barrier due to isolation, loneliness, and difficulty making friends also represents a common struggle for international students. This being said, it is crucial that host universities focus on providing a positive learning experience for international students that take into account not only their academic issues, but also their social situation.

A number of studies have examined the social experiences of international students. Most studies that examined academic and cultural experience of international

students also look at their social experiences. International students experience a combination of positive and negative social issues. For example, Yuan (2011) examined the cultural and academic experience of Chinese students at a mid-size American university located in the South. This study focused on the positive and negative experiences of this group of international students, including their social interaction and attitudes towards assimilating into the American culture. The research questions were stated as: (1) what kind of academic experiences do Chinese students in the U.S. have? (2) What kind of social interaction do Chinese students in the U.S. have? and (3) how do Chinese students think about adapting to American culture?

Methodologically, 10 Chinese undergraduate students were interviewed face-to-face to share their academic, cultural, and social experience in the U.S., including their interaction with Americans on and off campus. Network sampling was used to recruit research participants (i.e., author used his/her social network for recruitment). Two American professors were also interviewed to share their experience teaching Chinese students. The researcher also performed participant observation by participating in social gatherings organized by Chinese students and other student organizations on campus, attended a computer science class and several English classes, including an event on international conversation hour.

The results from this study showed a combination of positive and negative experiences by the Chinese students. First, these students reported mixed feelings regarding their interaction with Americans as well as harbored different attitude towards assimilating to American culture. While some of the students reported having good

experience in their interaction with Americans, some of them expressed negative experience, especially in terms of their interaction with the host community. For example, most of the students reported attending social events organized on campus, which helped them to meet new people. Interestingly, some of the students reported having American host families. Having a host family provided the students an opportunity to learn about the American culture, including its social customs and their way of life. The same goes for the host families, who get to learn about the Chinese culture, including some of the social life of their host students. This in turn, fostered a deeper appreciation of social understanding between the students and their host families. However, most of them reported having difficulty making new friends, especially meeting Americans.

With regards to their academic experience, nearly all of the students and the professors reported language difficulty as the major problem for them, which in turn negatively affected their participation in class discussion. For example, one of the students said, “I often worry if others will laugh at me when I speak, or they may not understand me” (p. 148). Despite this language struggle, some of the students held a positive view of the American educational system. For one, most of the students reported receiving a quality of education in the U.S.

In addition, the Yuan (2011) study also found that most of the students didn't interact with Americans. Instead, most of them spent a big part of their time studying, working, and hanging out with other Chinese students. They barely spent anytime meeting or making American friends. One of the biggest barriers for their interaction

with American was the presence of uncertainty about each other. They were not sure what to expect in their interaction with Americans. For example, one of the Chinese students admitted, “I feel intimidated on some occasions, and I cannot behave as comfortably as I did in China. I can ask Chinese people questions without hesitation, but I always feel hesitant to ask Americans questions or say hello to them” (p. 149). In essence, these students didn’t feel comfortable interacting with Americans mostly due to the different social norms as well as the lack of Americans reaching out to them. Making American friends wasn’t easy for this group of Chinese students. In fact, all of them complained that Americans showed little interest in the Chinese students and their country.

With regards to socio-cultural issues, Chinese students held mixed feelings and attitude towards American culture and social life. While some of the students reported liking Americans’ tolerance of heterogeneous opinions and groups, values of freedom and privacy, some of them disliked the social life of young people. For example, one of the students stated American youth “are party animals, good at chasing girls, and seldom worry about the future” (p. 150). Some of the students also expressed resentment of Americans because they perceived them as being arrogant, shallow, pretentious and materialistic. Interestingly, the Chinese students reported that Chinese people have more of closer relationships than American people. This may be due to the collectivist nature of the Chinese society as opposed to the individualistic nature of the American society.

Because international students experience a combination of positive and negative outcomes due to their social situation, it is important that host universities/colleges focus

on providing needed support for these students in terms of promoting a positive learning experience for them. For example, Lillyman and Bennett (2014) conducted an in-depth review and analysis of the literature on international students in the United Kingdom (U.K.) with the purpose of identifying how, with planning, support and understanding; universities can provide and develop a positive experience for everyone involved in the education of international students. The main purpose of the literature review was to “identify ways of creating and enhancing a positive learning experience so that universities and their international students can continue to enjoy a mutually beneficial relationship” (p.64). The researchers reviewed 87 research articles published in journals between 2000 and 2012 that focused on international students’ experience in the U.K. and other countries around the world. To guide their review of these studies, the researchers used a thematic-synthesis method to identify themes related to international student experiences, which includes the reasons behind their choice to study abroad, experiences of students and universities/colleges, the problems students encounter before leaving their country, living and studying in a foreign country as well as the opportunities and threats faced by academics, administrators, and universities when engaging with international students.

The finding from this review revealed multiple ways/factors that can help host universities to create a positive learning experience, including addressing social issues, for international students, which will also benefit the institution itself. Specifically, peer support, teacher support, language proficiency services, positive physical learning environment, and cultural learning and interaction contributes to improve the positive

experience of international students as well as foster positive learning experience for everyone involved in the business of international students.

In summary, studying abroad consists of both the good and the bad in terms of social experience. While international students gain social benefits like interacting with different people, they also experience challenges like isolation and loneliness. The friendship or professional network that can be created during the time international student spend at a university/college could lead to an improvement in global understanding, especially within the educational field. Such a relationship may lead to collaboration in various educational activities like research and student exchange. In particular, the literature found that host educational institutions benefit from the presence of international students on their campuses, which includes increasing diversity, improving inter-cultural understanding, thereby bringing diversity in classroom discussions with new and fresh ideas. Therefore, it is important and crucial for educational institutions hosting international students to provide opportunities for them to interact with host students as well as engage in diverse student activities on campus. In fact, social interaction between international students and their hosts create a better opportunity for them to develop needed skills and behaviors that ultimately helped these students adjust to their new environment

Research Examining the Cultural Experiences of International Students

Much like academic and social experience, studying abroad brings with it a combination of cultural experience for international students and their host institution. For one, the presence of international students on campus tends to foster cross-cultural

understanding. Another benefit is that faculty and local students develop and improve their cultural sensitivities and skills as a result of working with international students from different backgrounds. In fact, these students provide American students, faculty, and host community the opportunity to experience different cultures, tradition, and language. For the international students, studying abroad broadens their cultural learning and understanding. For example, it provides them the opportunities to confront different ways of thinking and doing in the U.S.

However, the experiences of international students in the host country often deviate from their own cultures with regard to norms, attitudes, values, and expectations. Such experiences are mostly due to the cultural differences between them and the local people at their host institution and community. International students face cultural barriers due to cultural shock as a result of dealing with a difference value system, communication pattern, interpersonal relationship, concept of time/punctuality, prejudice and discrimination (Wu et al., 2015; Yuan, 2011). Such cultural difference often leads to miscommunication and misunderstanding between professors and international students.

A number of studies have examined the cultural experiences of international students. For example, Al Murshidi (2014) investigated the social and cultural challenges international students from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirate faced at U.S. universities as well as explored their coping strategies for dealing with such challenges. The study attempted to answer two questions: (1) what cultural and social challenges do Emirati and Saudi students face at U.S. universities? And (2) what are the Emirati and Saudi students' coping strategies to face their challenges? Using a mixed methods

approach, the researcher administered an online questionnaire to 219 Saudi and Emirati students as well as conducted in-depth interviews with 6 of these students.

The results of the study reveal a number of interesting positive and negative experiences for these students. First, there was a difference in the way Saudi and Emirati students interact/work with different gender in the classroom, with the Emiratis being more comfortable than Saudis with members of the different gender. Interestingly, both student groups were comfortable discussing cultural issues related to their region. The study also found that both student groups tried to interact with Americans and held a positive view of the American culture. They even tried to adjust to the American culture. Some of the students reported their interaction with American students in the classroom and on-campus also helped them to improve their interaction with other Americans off-campus. As a result, they improved their adjustment to the American culture.

Both groups of students also experienced challenges due to cultural difference. For one, each group reported difficulty understanding culturally-based words and phrases in the English language, which in turn negatively affected their class participation and written exams/tests. Similarly, their professors struggle to understand the students mostly due to being non-native English speakers and having low English language proficiency. In addition, females from both countries encountered communication challenges with their male classmates. Interestingly, the researcher found that Saudi female students experienced more freedom in dealing with personal life in the U.S. than in their home country. This may be the case because of the tradition in Saudi in which men has more say in making decision within society and in the family when compared to Western

societies like the U.S.

Based on their cultural experience, the students used a number of coping strategies to deal with their challenges. Some of these strategies include family support, engaging in student activities organized by students from their region, peer support from students from the same region, and socializing with American students.

In another study, Yan and Berliner (2013) assessed the personal and sociocultural stressors experienced by Chinese students in the U.S. The purpose of the study was to investigate the stress and concerns of Chinese students within the context of cultural, social, economic, and immigration factors. The study attempted to answer these questions: (1) what are the most stressful aspects of the Chinese students' personal and social lives in the U.S.; (2) how do they characterize their stress; and (3) what conditions they believe tend to account for their stress? As a qualitative study, the researchers conducted a semi-structured face-to-face interview of eighteen Chinese students enrolled in graduate programs at a large public university in southwestern U.S. The interviews were tape recorded for transcription.

The results indicated a number of personal concerns and sociocultural stressors experienced by the Chinese students. First, the students' personal concerns included job opportunities and visa problems, pressure from dating or getting marriage, and financial difficulties. They stressed that their students (F-1) visa was a major concern for them as it serves a barrier for future employment after graduation. This worries them in terms of their future staying in the U.S. and gaining employment. This made them feel they were disadvantaged as international students living in the U.S.

With regards to the pressure of dating or getting marriage, the students reported difficulty in finding a Chinese partner. This was a major personal concern for these students because most of them were in their late 20s to early 30s, which is the traditional age range for marriage. This then puts the pressure on them to find a partner. For example, the Chinese females complained that while they would like to date Chinese men, these men fail to take the initiative. They found that this may be the case because Chinese men spent most of their time studying, and thus spent less time engaging in leisure activities. Interestingly, the females acknowledged that while they would like to date Caucasian men, they were concerned about the cultural difference in that they share nothing in common with these men. On the contrary, the Chinese male students complained that they couldn't find their dream girlfriend or wife who they characterized as pretty, caring and submissive. For them, Chinese female students in the U.S. are too academically oriented and manly, which makes them less attractive to their liking. As a result, many of these students (females and males) reported being stressed from the breakup of their long-distance relationship.

Financially, more than half of the students reported having money problems. For example, some of them fail to get adequate health and car insurance. Interestingly, nearly all of the students mentioned obtaining financial aid played a significant role in their choice of university as they need all the financial help they can get.

On the other hand, the results indicated multiple socio-cultural stressors that these students experienced. Their concerns included interaction with Americans, language and cultural difficulties, and clash in values. Even though most of the students acknowledged

that Americans were nice and friendly, some of them reported that such friendliness was superficial. This then made it difficult to develop a close friendship with Americans. The students mentioned that the individualistic nature of the American society and the heavy focus on privacy prevents them from developing intimate relationships. Another finding was that these students experienced language and cultural deficiency. In other words, the students reported language problems negatively affected their adjustment. They specifically mentioned having difficulty with listening comprehension and oral communication. The students also indicated their lack of knowledge about American people, culture, society, and their way of life. This in turn, presented difficulty in understanding the cultural nuances when interacting with Americans, including their professors. For example, they had difficulty in actively engaging in class discussion because sometime they didn't understand culturally-based words or phrases or expressions.

Finally, the clash of values between Chinese students and Americans was found to be a major concern and stressor for these students. One area of the major clash was based on the concepts of aggressiveness and humbleness. In the Chinese society, social harmony is more important than the pursuit of individual goals. In this light, obedience, patience, and restraints are all considered to be good characters to have. Individual efforts to achieve personal goals are most of the time looked at as inappropriate. However, these values clash with that of the American society that is founded on aggressively pursuing individual goals. As a result, the Chinese students found themselves in society in which their values clash with that of the U.S.

In summary, an abundance of research has conducted studies on the unique experience of international students. As the above studies indicate, international students experience both positive/benefits and challenges mostly based on their academic, cultural, and social contexts in their new environment (i.e., host educational institution and community). Despite these challenges, international students use different coping strategies to deal with their challenges. The following section discusses some of these strategies.

Strategies for Supporting Positive International Students Experiences

The literature indicates that there are a number of strategies or resources that can help in supporting international students and their host institutions of higher education and communities to successfully work together to improve their positive experience. Firstly, the cultural difference between professors and international students serves as an important challenge for both of these groups. Therefore, understanding students' cultural background has been found to be an important factor to effectively work with this group of students (Lillyman & Bennett, 2014). Therefore, cultural competency programs or services should be provided for professors so as to help them learn and understand unique cultural attributes of their students.

Also, the need to create opportunities for international students to interact with Native-English speakers has been found to be an important aspect of helping these students improve their English competency (Al Murshidi, 2014; Lillyman & Bennett, 2014; Liu, 2011; Wu et al., 2015; Yuan 2011). Therefore, it is crucial that educational institutions and English language programs create opportunities for these students to

socially interact with American students so as to enable them to acquire English language speaking skills such as learning slangs and culturally-related words. For example, having a conversational partner/peer who is a native speaker can help improve the international students' language proficiency outside the classroom (Lillyman & Bennett, 2014; Terui, 2012; Wu et al., 2015).

Also, organizing and participating in on-campus student activities help boost social interaction among international students and those from the host country and/or community (Al Murshidi, 2014; Wu et al., 2015). Additionally, many studies that examined the international students' cultural adjustment found that social interaction between these students and their hosts creates a better opportunity for them to develop needed skills and behaviors that ultimately helped these students adjust to their new environment (Al Murshidi, 2014; Wu et al., 2015). In addition, academic support is vital to address the challenges related to their course-work (Liu, 2011; Wu et al., 2015). In fact, peer support has also been shown as a successful strategy to help international student deal with their social and academic challenges (Lillyman & Bennett, 2014).

Furthermore, as international students face tremendous stress as a result of their academic and social life in a new environment, on-campus counseling services can go a long way to help them deal with their stress (Wu et al., 2015).

Conclusion and Purpose of the Study

As the literature suggests, international students face both the positive and negative experiences of studying abroad. As a result, it is important to expand our understanding of the academic, social, and cultural experience of this group of students.

There are limited studies that specifically examined the unique experiences of international students who are learning English as a Second Language (ESL) in the U.S. Their experience is unique in that language barriers poses significant challenges, which in turn is likely to have an impact on their social adjustment as well as academic performance.

Few studies have explored the unique experience of students from Saudi Arabia, whom mostly travels abroad to study ESL before venturing in to pursuing degree programs. In other words, they first enroll in English language programs that aim to provide them the English skills necessary to be admitted into an undergraduate or graduate program of study. Their experience in such English language programs determines their path and/or success in their academic field of study. Therefore, it is important to explore their experience; in particular, challenges and successes, in English language programs so as to understand their experiences, which in turn may yield important information that may lead to potential recommendations that may help English language programs and institutions of higher education to improve the academic and social experience of their international students and also to help high schools in Saudi Arabia in preparing these students for this kind of programs.

In sum, the main focus of this study is to explore the unique experience of Saudi students who are studying English in the U.S. Specifically, the study aims to examine the academic, social and culture experiences of Saudi students in the English language program at a Midwest University in the U.S. with a focus on the differences, successes, challenges, and/or difficulties among this group of students. This dissertation is designed

to support and extend the existing literature that has examined the academic, social, and cultural experiences of international students.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Overview and Rationale for a Qualitative Method

Qualitative research method has been increasingly conducted over the past decades to explore a particular phenomenon or problem in its natural setting. Qualitative research takes place in a natural setting, “in the field where participants experience the issue or problem under study” (Cresswell, 2013, p. 45). It is thus situated within the context (or setting) of the participants’ social, cultural, economic, and political environment. The main focus or aim of qualitative inquiry is to “learn about the problem or issue from participants and engage in the best practices to obtain that information” (Cresswell, 2013, p.47). Therefore, qualitative research is conducted on the need to explore and understand a particular issue or problem from the perspective from lived-experiences of a person or persons concerned. At the same time, the goal is to make sense of what is being or has been observed or explored (i.e., interpret/create meaning out of what is being observed or studied). This research method is simply characterized, as Creswell (2013) observes, as a research that focuses on the unique perspective/voices (i.e., lived-experience) of participants, including their meanings and subjective views on the issue or problem being studied.

Furthermore, the qualitative study allows for the use of multiple techniques to collect data. Such techniques include field observation, interview, document analysis, and audio and/or visual materials (Cresswell, 2013). Qualitative research uses multiples methods as well as interpret/create meaning through different representations, rather than

using a strict single standardized research procedure (i.e., not relying on a single source of data). The qualitative researcher uses multiple methods and approaches to collect as well as interpret data. For example, deductive (from general to specific) and/or inductive (from specific to general) reasoning/logic is used, through developing themes, codes and/or categories (Creswell, 2013). As Creswell (2013) effectively summarized, the “inductive process involves researchers working back and forth between the themes and the database until they establish a comprehensive set of themes” (p.45).

A qualitative research design for this study is appropriate because its main focus is to explore the unique experience of a group of international students (Saudi Students) who are studying English as a second language in a foreign country (the United States). The study wants to explore their perspectives/voices by interviewing them using open-ended questions. In fact, most studies on the experience of international students used a qualitative study design (Al Murshidi, 2014; Geeraert et al., 2014; Lillyman & Bennett, 2014; Liu, 2011; Staton, 2016; Terui, 2012; Wu et al., 2015; Yuan, 2011).

Specifically, this study used a qualitative case study approach to explore academic and social experiences of the Saudi students. As Creswell (2013) suggests, a case study is a:

qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) overtime, through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (e.g., observations, *interviews*, audiovisual material, and documents and reports), and reports a case description and case themes (p. 97).

I chose to use a case study because I want to explore a specific issue (i.e., lived-experience of studying in a foreign country). To do this, it is essential to select a case or

cases (an individual or individuals) who understands or have a lived-experience of the issue. In this case, students who are studying English as a second language in a foreign country. Case study then presents an in-depth understanding of the case or cases, as Creswell (2013) noted.

Description of Interview Methodology

To explore their perspectives related to their experience as international students in the U.S., the researcher conducted in-depth interviews with five Saudi students currently enrolled in the English Program at a Midwest University in the U.S.. A set of open-ended questions were developed to guide the interviewing process as well as to allow individual participants to share their experience (i.e., each one telling his/her story). In this case, a semi-structured interview was used because it allows the researcher to collect particular data relevant to the goal of the study as well as gives participants the opportunity to tell their individual stories based on their unique experience without having to answer pre-selected questions developed by the researcher. In other words, a semi-structured interview allows both the researcher and participants to engage in a less structured conversation, which in turn help provide some guidance and structure to the interviewing process, while at the same time give participants the opportunity to share their individual perspectives on the issue or problem being explored by the research project. In fact, the majority of studies on the experience of international students collected their data using multiple techniques that include semi-structured interviews and participant observations (Al Murshidi, 2014; Lillyman & Bennett, 2014; Liu 2011; Terui, 2012; Wu et al., 2015; Yuan, 2011).

Research Sample and Description of the Program

The main focus of this study is to explore the unique experience Saudi Arabia students who are studying English as a second language the United States of America (U.S.). It aims to examine the academic, social and culture experiences of Saudi students in the English language program at a Midwest University with a focus on the differences, challenges, and/or difficulties among this group of students. The sample of research participants consisted of students who enrolled in the English Program on August 22nd, 2016 or January 9th, 2017. The sample was specifically focused on the Saudi students between the ages 18 and 21 years old.

This English Program primarily focuses on building and helping English language learners to develop these skills-set: listening, speaking, writing/grammar, and reading. The program has 7 levels, with 1 being the beginner's level and 7 being the highest and final level. Levels 1 and 2 are the beginner's levels, which focuses on preparing students for everyday language use. Levels 3 through 7 focuses on building the students' language skills that prepare them for academic learning such as enrolling in an undergraduate program or taking an academic class.

I choose to select a sample of students from the English Program because it is an important program for international students who are learning English, which makes it suitable to meet and interview students who are learning English as a second language (ESL; also referred to as second language learners). The Program is made up of a diverse group of international students who came to the U.S. to study English. Students in this Program come from different countries and diverse backgrounds. This makes this group

of international students very interesting because each one of them has a unique story to tell about their experience learning English in the United States, including the social and academic challenges they face. This makes it uniquely interesting largely as a result of its large number of second language learners. The program also provides a unique and diverse international student population that have a wealth of perspectives to share regarding their experience studying and living in the U.S.

Moreover, I choose this English language program for this study because it is required for non-English speakers who are not proficient in English in order to gain admission into this university or any university in the U.S. for that matter. This English program fulfills the English language proficiency required for admission into colleges or universities in the U.S., both at the undergraduate and graduate level. Therefore, Saudi students are required to first enroll in English Program and complete the program, before they are allowed to apply for admission into a degree program at the university.

In addition, the Program poses challenges for students enrolled in it. It is a challenging program mostly because students have to take tests, quizzes, and complete assignments as part of their assessment. For second language learners, these forms of assessments pose challenges to them. For example, a student may easily read a passage and understand what he/she read, but most likely have difficulty summarizing it because of writing difficulties. In other words, the Program challenges the students to be proficient in all learning areas, which are comprised of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Fourth, my familiarity with this program and the students makes it more appealing

to choose it as a program to draw a sample from. Many of the students are from Saudi Arabia, which means I am familiar with some of the common social, cultural and learning issues some of them may encounter.

However, despite my familiarity with the program, I am curious to investigate the unique experiences of Saudi students enrolled in the program. In essence, my familiarity with the program and having been a second language learner myself puts me in a better position to clearly understand and be able to explain the unique experience of ESL students.

To recruit students for this study, I contacted the international students' office and requested access to new students from Saudi Arabia who enrolled in the program after August 22nd, 2016 or January 9th, 2017. I explained to them the purpose of the study and requested their assistance to recruit five students. They provided me with a list of the new Saudi students in the program. I then sent an email to all the students on the list and requested their participation in the study. For this communication, I wrote the text of the e-mail that briefly described the purpose of the study, including my contact information. (See Appendix C)

Based on the email sent out requesting student voluntary participation in the study, I was contacted by students interested in participating in the study. I then set up a meeting with the student at the university library, where each research participant was interviewed.

Before engaging in the process of recruitment of research participants and conducting the interviews, an IRB proposal was submitted to the university IRB board.

After the proposal was approved, then the recruitment of participants and data collection was conducted. Each research participant signed an informed consent form before the interview was conducted.

Participants

The data of this study came from interviews conducted with five international students from Saudi Arabia who were enrolled in the English program at the university. The students were made up of three females and two males. Their ages range from 19 to 22 year old. Some of the students joined the English program in Fall 2016, while others enrolled in the program in Spring 2017. In essence, some of them have been learning English in the U.S. for a year, while others had less than a year learning experience in the U.S.

In addition, the students were enrolled at different proficiency levels in the program for each of the three skill areas – listening and speaking, writing and grammar, and reading. The program levels start at 1 and ends at 7. A new English language learner is placed in any level based on his/her placement test's result. Each prospective student takes an English language placement test for each of the three skills. The results from each of the skill illustrate the student's proficiency level, and therefore determine at which level the student is placed. Because the participants for this study had different proficiency levels prior to being enrolled at the program, they were placed at different English language levels in it.

Student 1

She is a 20 year old female. She had been learning English as a Second Language (ESL) in the U.S. for less than a year. She joined the program in Fall 2016 and she only learned English beginning at sixth grade in her country. Her level of English learning was very limited in her home country. Her current levels in the program are

Reading	Writing and Grammar	Listening Speaking
4	4	5

Furthermore, she described herself as extrovert person. She has many friends and she also likes to meet and talk with people. She doesn't think that she is a shy and quiet person. She likes to go out very much. Her family lives in Saudi Arabia and consists of her mother, her father, a sister and 3 brothers and she is the oldest one of her siblings. She now lives off-campus with her husband, who is a student at the university, and her 9 months old son. During her study here she gets support from both her family and her friends.

Student 2

She is 19 year old female. She had been learning English as a Second Language (ESL) in the U.S. for less than a year. She enrolled in the program on January 9th, Spring 2017. She only learned English beginning in sixth grade in her country and her level of English learning was also very limited in her home country. Her current levels in the program are

Reading	Writing and Grammar	Listening Speaking
4	4	4

She is an extrovert and friendly person and she likes to meet and talk with people. She is not a shy or quiet person too. She prefers to go out instead of staying at home. Her family lives in Saudi Arabia and she has three sisters and five brothers. Her father died when she was in fifth grade. She likes to talk with her friends more than talking with her siblings because they have different ages than her. She has three of her siblings here in the U.S., but they are studying in other cities. She lives off-campus and her roommate is from her own culture. She gets most of the support from her friends during her study here.

Student 3

He is 22 year old male. He learned English at a private institute in Saudi Arabia for one year before coming to the U.S. and he joined the program in August 22nd, Fall 2016. He has been learning English as a Second Language (ESL) for more than a year. His level of English learning was very limited in his home country. His current levels in the program are

Reading	Writing and Grammar	Listening Speaking
4	4	5

Moreover, student 3 described himself as an introvert person. He said that he doesn't like to meet with people and he doesn't have many friends. He feels hard to make friendship with people and he is a shy and quiet person. He doesn't like to go out and he prefers to stay at home most of the time. He lives off-campus and his roommate is from his own culture. His family lives in Saudi Arabia too, and he has five sisters and 4 brothers. His best friend is his brother who is 2 years older than him. He gets support from both his family and his friends.

Student 4

He is 22 year old male. He also learned English at a private institute in Saudi Arabia for one year before coming to the U.S. and he began the English program in August 22nd, Fall 2016. His current levels in the program are

Reading	Writing and Grammar	Listening Speaking
5	5	5

He described himself as an introverted person, but he became a little extrovert and friendly after he came to the United States. He now likes to meet other people and make new friends more than when he was in his country. He was a shy and quiet person in the past before he came here, but not now. When he was in his country, he preferred to spend his time with his family instead of going out with his friends. He just used to go to gym, mosque, and his grandfather's house and he has just five friends. Now, he spends most of his time in studying at the library and meeting and talking with people there. He lives off-campus and his roommate was from a different culture, but he moved to another city. His

family lives in Saudi Arabia and he has 3 sisters. He doesn't have brothers. His best friend is his cousin. His family supports him during his study here.

Student 5

She is 21 years old female. She had been learning English as a Second Language in the U.S. for less than a year. She joined the English program in August 22nd, Fall 2016 and she only learned English beginning of sixth grade in her country. Her level of English learning was very limited in her home country. Her current levels in the program are

Reading	Writing and Grammar	Listening Speaking
4	4	5

She is married and has a newborn baby. She is an introverted person and is a somewhat shy and quiet person the most of the time. It is not easy for her to meet and talk with new people and to make new friends. She likes to go out with her husband or her friends but if she needs to study, she prefers to stay home and study. She lives off-campus with her husband, who is a student at the university, and her daughter. Her father died when she was 11 years old. She has five sisters and three brothers. She is very close to her sisters. Two of her sisters and one of her brothers are studying here at the United States. Her best friend is her younger sister who is 2 years younger than her. She gets support from her family while she is studying here.

Data Collection

The interview data collection technique was used for this study. This technique is widely used in qualitative studies, and thus represents a more effective way to collect

data that focuses on the perspectives of individuals on any particular issue. The majority of studies on the experience of international students collected their data using a face-to-face interview and participant observation (Al Murshidi, 2014; Lillyman & Bennett, 2014; Liu 2011; Terui, 2012; Wu et al., 2015; Yuan, 2011). In their exploratory meta-analysis of qualitative and quantitative studies to determine the effectiveness of instructional practices for English language learners, Gersten and Baker (2000) found that most of them used classroom observations and interviews of educators and researchers across the U.S. To aid in the data collection process, a questionnaire was developed (i.e., interview protocol).

To explore their perspectives relating to their social and academic experience as international students in the U.S., I conducted in-depth face-to-face interviews with five Saudi students enrolled in the English program at a Midwest University. A set of open-ended questions was developed to guide the interviewing process and to allow individual participants to share their experience (i.e., each one telling his/her story). The questions were categorized under the areas related to the focus of this study – academic/language, social, and cultural experience.

A questionnaire (interview protocol) that consists of open-ended questions relating to academic/language, social, and cultural experience was developed to guide the semi-structured interview. The questionnaire was made of ninety-one (91) questions in total (these questions includes follow up questions asked to clarify or verify something an interviewee said and/or to further explain more about something mentioned in a response to a particular question). To be more specific, twenty-eight (28) questions were related to

student's academic/language experience. Twenty-seven (27) questions were asked in relation to student's social experience, and sixteen (16) questions were related to cultural experience. The other twenty (20) questions were related to the student's organizational pattern, learning/studying habits and learning preference (see Appendix B for a list of these questions).

As the main focus of this study was to explore the social, academic, and cultural experiences of Saudi students, some of the open-ended questions include asking the student to talk about his/her experience living in the U.S., including his/her social interaction with people in his/her community and at the University. Another open-ended question asked participants to talk about their experience studying English in the English language program. The questionnaire also includes follow-up questions consisting of those that ask about students' interaction with their English teachers, including their overall self-evaluation of their own learning.

A semi-structured interview was conducted because it allowed the researcher to collect particular data relevant to students' academic, cultural, and social experiences as well as gives participants the opportunity to tell their individual stories based on their unique experience without having to answer only pre-selected questions developed by the researcher. In other words, a semi-structured interview allows both the researcher and participants to engage in a less structured conversation, which in turn help provide some guidance and structure to the interviewing process, while at the same time give participants the opportunity to share their individual perspectives on the issue or problem being explored by the research project.

Each research participant was interviewed twice. The first interview was done during the third and fourth week in the Spring 2017 semester and the second one took place during the seventh and eighth week into the Spring 2017 semester, which is the end of the program semester or level because they have 8 weeks in each level. The second interview was conducted with the purpose of having the students confirm and/or verify the information they provided in first interview as well as invite the participants to elaborate or add information related to their academic, social, and cultural experiences. The interviews were conducted in a private room at the university Library. The first interview ran for one hour and the second took almost 30 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded for transcription.

Data Analysis

This research used Creswell's (2013) strategy to analyze qualitative data. My overall process of data analysis was guided by a number of strategies to coding. First, I used within-case analysis by doing a detailed description of each case (i.e., each student) and themes within each case. Then I performed a cross-case thematic analysis across the cases as suggested by Creswell (2013). I then interpreted the meaning of codes based on the perspectives of the students.

After all the interviews are conducted, I organized the data to enable me to code it, which involved transcribing the student interviews. After this was complete, I coded the data. As Creswell (2013) notes, data analysis for qualitative study requires coding. In this data analysis process, I first generated codes, then categorized the codes, then generated themes from the categories. I did this for all the interviews conducted.

During this coding process, I relied on the students' perspectives to help me come up with codes. But, I cannot claim that my coding is free from my own bias, which was guided by this study's research questions. In other words, the coding of the data is certainly influenced/guided by the participants' perspectives and the study's research questions. In this respect, I used a combination of the inductive and deductive (Cresswell, 2013) approach to coding and categorization. To do this, I transcribed all the interviews to generate the codes for each one of them.

After doing the coding for each interview, I reduced the codes into categories and then generated themes. This approach to coding reflects Creswell (2013) analytic strategy of identifying codes and reducing codes into themes. In essence, I described, classified and interpreted the interview data into codes, then categories, and then generated themes. Therefore, this study is not driven by hypothesis, and thus is not making any prediction as to the findings. But, the analysis primarily based on the perspectives of the research participants that were synthesized from the interview transcripts.

For the sake of making sure the data was accurately coded and categorized, I did a "member check" with one of my dissertation committee members. The data was shared with this committee member who confirmed and provided assistance in developing the themes that emerged from the data analysis process.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The main focus of this study was to explore the unique experience of a group of international students (Saudi Arabia students) who are studying English as a second language in a foreign country (the United States of America). Specifically, the study aimed to examine the academic, social and culture experiences of Saudi students in the English language program at a Midwest University with a focus on the differences, challenges, and/or difficulties among this group of students. Therefore, the goals of the study can be summarized as exploring the perspectives of international student on relating to their academic and social experiences as English language learners. With this in mind, the findings will be discussed within this context.

Students' Academic and Learning Experience

As one of the goals of the key focus of this study was to explore the academic/language experiences by Saudi students who are learning ESL, it was appropriate to generate themes based on academic and language experience that attempt to answer the research question. The themes emerged from the data as reflected in the students' perspectives. The academic/language experience goal is characterized by themes and categorizes that tell the story of the students' overarching academic and leaning experience in the program and as a student learning English as a second language.

The coding process resulted in six themes emerging from multiple codes and that were categorized into 13 areas (see Table 1 in Appendix A). The coding process reveals

that Saudi students had both positive (success) and negative (challenges) experiences in learning the English language as well offering specific recommendation into ways teachers and English program can help to improve their learning. For this reason, this section presents and discussed the findings related to each of the six themes: (1) I was a good student before I came to here; (2) I don't learn much English in my country; (3) I try to have some study habits; (4) I try my best to overcome my challenges; (5) It depends on the teachers; (6) Understand me before teaching me

Theme 1: I was a good student before I came to here

“From the experience of the past we derive instructive lessons for the future.” John Quincy Adams (BrainyQuote, n.d.).

The students also shared their previous academic experience prior to traveling to the United States of America (U.S.) to study English. First, the students' academic performance/grade level in their home country before traveling abroad to study English sheds some light into their academic standing prior to starting to learn English. This is important background information because it helps contextualize the students' unique academic experience abroad in terms of learning ability. In other words, it's important to describe the previous academic/learning experience and performance of the Saudi students before they embarked on a journey to study abroad.

Most of the students described themselves as being above average learners in their home country (with grades in the As and Bs category). Nearly all of the students reported having a very good grade in school, and even excellent academic performance in their country. Specifically, *Student #1* reported having a good academic standing while in Saudi Arabia. “I never failed in any class. My grades were between 90-100 % through

elementary school and middle school and 97% - 80% in high school. I end a high school with 85%,” she explained (Interview 2, line 5-7). Similarly, *Student #2* reported getting all ‘As’ in elementary school, but getting mostly ‘Bs’ in middle school, and then receiving more ‘As’ and ‘Bs’ in high school. *Student #4* characterized his academic performance back home as very good. He reported grades above 90% in both elementary and middle school, including first and second year in high school. However, he was not so good during his junior and senior year in high school. Finally, *Student #5* reported being an ‘A’ and ‘B’ learner back in Saudi Arabia. She never had a grade below ‘B.’ On the other hand, *Student #3* falls along the level of an average student. According to him, “I was a very good student in the elementary and middle schools, but in the high school my level reduce a little. I failed in one of my class, but I never repeated a year” (Interview #1, Lines 25-27).

Theme 2: I don’t learn much English in my country

“Learning another language is not only learning different words for the same things, but learning another way to think about things.” – Flora Lewis (BrainyQuote, n.d.).

Moreover, the students also described their experience learning English in their home country. All of them had some experience learning English back home. However, their level of English learning was very limited in their home country. For example, *Student #1* explained his previous experience learning English in Saudi Arabia in this statement: “I just learn English from the English classes in our schools which begin from middle school and is very general. The problem was that our English teachers are not prepared enough to teach English even that they have bachelor in English major” (Interview #1, Lines 78-80). *Student #2* had similar experience as she also only learned

English beginning at sixth grade. But, didn't feel like she gained any language proficiency. Interestingly, two of the students had experience learning English at a private institute in Saudi Arabia for one year before coming to the U.S. to study English.

When asked to describe their English language proficiency in terms of their skills in reading, writing, listening, and speaking before being enrolled in the English program, all of them reported having very limited language skills because they felt their English teachers in Saudi Arabia were not that good. As a result, they didn't learn that much. All of the students reported to have taken some English classes in middle and high school in their home country. All of the students described their English language skills in terms of having limited proficiency. Some of them were good in certain skill areas, while having a fair skill level in another area. For example, *Student #1* reported not being good in reading and writing. She mentioned that before joining the program, she was unable to write more than one paragraph or 10 sentences. This student couldn't decide on the proficiency of her listening and speaking skills before being enrolled in the program because her schools in Saudi Arabia didn't focus much on this skill.

Another student (#2) reported that before starting the English program she was not very good in reading. But, *Student #3* describes his English language skills before enrolling in the program as being very good in writing, but just good enough in grammar to pass the class. However, he has some difficulties with listening. He couldn't understand everything that native speakers say. It was difficult for him to understand the conversation between two native English speakers. "I can't understand everything that native speakers say. It is hard especially when they talk with each other and when

listening to someone voice without seeing him,” *Student #3* explained. Interestingly, he doesn’t have difficulties with speaking.

Student #4, had a good proficiency in reading before coming to here. He was also good in writing. This student also had a fair skill in grammar. In addition, he had a fair reading skill, which has improved a bit. Similarly, *Student #5* described her skill level before joining the program as being good in reading, but not very good at writing. Before coming to the program, she was fairly good at listening and speaking.

With regards to the classroom environment in their home country, the students described it as large and lack of cultural/ethnic diversity. Their classrooms are large when compared to their classrooms here. One of the students reported having more than 30 students in her classrooms. Such a large number of students make it difficult for the teacher to focus on each student. As *Student #5* described her classroom, “there are almost more than 30 students in the class. Which makes it very hard for a teacher to know each student needs and challenges” (Interview #1, Lines 89-91). In addition, there is a lack of cultural or gender diversity in their classrooms as all the students are from Saudi Arabia and of the same gender. As one of the students puts it “all students are from same culture and same age” (Student #2, Interview #1, Lines 105-106).

Theme 3: I try to have some study habits

“Seek for ways to study better” Sunday Adelaja (BrainyQuote, n.d.).

The participants shared some aspects about their studying and learning habits. They described their organizational pattern that helps them to progress in their learning of English. While two students made a list of their daily schoolwork, especially for

assignments, the majority (3 of them) doesn't use any form of a planner. Those that made a list of their schoolwork mentioned that it helped them to be more organized and complete course work on time. For example, *Student #1* made a list of assignments and quizzes so she can plan her studying time better. She also liked to complete her schoolwork on time by doing them as quickly as possible. On a similar situation, *Student #4* made a list of things to do such as assignments and their due dates. This helped him to be organized and complete course work on time. He even said the list helped make it easy to complete his schoolwork. He also does his schoolwork days early before their due date. He first works on the difficult assignments and leave the easier ones for last. "I try to do the assignments that take much time before the due date, but I always do the easy assignments in the due date," *Student #4* explained (Interview #1, Line 12-13). On the other hand, three of the students didn't see the need to have a planner mostly because they stated doing their course work more frequently. However, two of these students mentioned procrastinating on their schoolwork. They wait until the last day that an assignment is due before they start to work on it. This finding reveals that a lack of organization may be contributing to the student's inability to complete schoolwork on time. Organization is an important and even a critical tool that is important for success in school.

The data also illustrates students' learning/studying habits. Students' learning habits differ, yet share some similar characteristics. First, two of the students reported creating a quiet place to study. This is because noise distracts and makes them loose focus. Interestingly, three of the students didn't mind the noise and reported that they can

study anywhere. For example, *Student #2* listens to music and sometime watches TV while studying. As she stated, “I am a noisy person. So, I am studying in any place that I can make my noise in without bothering anyone. I like to listen to music and watch TV while I am studying” (Interview #1, Line 14-15) Another study habit that emerged from this data relates to taking notes while studying or learning, especially in terms of simplifying complex ideas. While *Students #1 and #2* take notes while studying and learning, the others don’t take notes. The students gave different reasons for engaging or not engaging in this study habits.

Student #1 take notes as she studies by using her words to simplify complex ideas. She often reviewed her notes on hard materials. She reported that “If I need to back to it [notes] or to use the information in it for other assignment. Also, if the materials in it very hard, I like to review it frequently, so I will not face much difficulties at the test time” (Interview #1, Line 26-28). Similarly, *Student #2* often take notes when studying, including reading a textbook. She feels like it’s easier to study for a test or quiz using her own notes than reading complex materials from the textbook. In other words, she relies a lot on her notes. She only reviewed her notes when the need arises such as studying for a test or quiz. On the other hand, three of the students don’t take notes while studying. Time consuming and distraction (loosing focus) were the reasons the students who didn’t like to take notes. As *Student #1* explained, “no, I don’t like to write when I study. I actually can’t focus if I study and write at the same time and this take much time for me” (Interview #1, Line 17-18). He only reviewed notes that teachers gave to him to prepare for a test or quiz only once and a day before taking the quiz or test. In other words, he

didn't take notes and not review notes given to him by his teachers on a regular basis.

Another important learning habit is time devoted to studying course materials outside the classroom, especially in terms of working on homework and studying for a test or quiz. On average, these students spent 2 hours (minimum) to 6 hours (maximum) to do homework and/or study for test or quiz each night. While one of the students (#3) spent, on average, 1-2 hours doing homework each night, *Student #4* spent 6 hours daily. But, it's important to note that some of the students reported that the time spent studying/doing homework mostly depends on the amount of schoolwork that need to be done. Sometime they spend more time and sometime less time. As result, they were asked to give an average of their time spent on homework on a nightly/daily basis.

The learning habits of students may be due to and/or situated within their context of their learning style and preference. They exhibited multiple learning preferences in two main areas – visual and auditory. Learning preference is an important factor in designing an instruction that addresses the different learning style of students. When asked about their preference for having written assignment directions versus spoken direction (visual vs. auditory), the students responded differently, yet share similar learning preferences as well. The questions on students' preferences were centered on three key learning areas – written versus spoken assignment direction, group discussion versus reading a lone, and problem-solving, including trying things individually (experiment). All of the students preferred oral explanation of assignment direction over written directions. These students prefer spoken assignment direction because it gives them the opportunity to discuss it with the teacher when she/he explains it as well as

enable them to question the teacher to clarify anything about the assignment. Among these students, two of them (Students #3 and #4) actually preferred a combination of written assignment direction, followed by a teacher's oral explanation of the homework. *Student #4* reported that written direction is a good idea because it gives him the opportunity to ask someone else for help to explain the assignment if he doesn't fully understand the teacher's oral explanation.

Secondly, group discussion is liked by all the students (except for one; Student #5). They liked group discussion because it helps them understand the topic or subject-matter better than reading the material or about the topic alone. As *Student #1* reported, "this is because, with group discussion, "we[students] come with questions and try to figure out the answers of them and also come with different ideas and opinions from different perspectives" (Interview #1, Lines 54-56). Similarly, as with all other participants, *Student #3* preferred group discussion in the classroom because he understands more from a group discussion than reading. Group discussion is also good because students share different perspective on the topic being discussed. This then help improve their understanding of the topic or subject-matter. On the other hand, *Student #5* preferred reading and studying alone than engage in group discussion.

However, the students were not so welcoming about the challenge of having a problem to solve (i.e., problem-solving challenge). Nearly all of the students (except for one) like having a problem to solve. They said its depends on the problem to be solved. If its something that is of interest to them or useful to their learning, then they will try it out. For example, *Student #1* doesn't like the challenge of a problem to solve (well, not so

much). For her, this may depend on the kind of the challenge that needs to be solved. If it is something that she like, then she would like to challenge herself in doing it. But, if the challenge in something she doesn't like or something boring, she wouldn't like to solve it. For instance, she noted, "I don't like to spend much time doing research about a topic that I am not interesting to it" (Interview #1, Lines 64-67). On the opposite side, *Student #2* doesn't like the challenge of solving a problem. As she puts it, "I like to deal with the easy or normal thing that don't need much time or effort to be done" (Interview #1, Lines 51-52). Nevertheless, this student like to try things out by herself (i.e., experiment to find the best way to do things). But, it all depends on the task at hand in relation to her interest. If it is interesting, she will do it, but if not interesting to her, she won't. To this end, two of the students (#3 and #4) prefer to first try to solve the problem by themselves before asking for any help. Finally, while *Student #3* described himself as a patient person who don't despair quickly on something he is working on, Student #4 explained, "I like to try doing thing by myself before I ask for help. I like to try and find the best way to do thing" (Interview #1, Lines 49-50).

Theme 4: It depends on the teachers

"The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires". William A. Ward (BrainyQuote, n.d.).

All of the students mentioned that their overall experienced was mostly influenced by their interaction and experience with teachers. Nearly all of the students viewed some of their English program teachers in a positive light. For example, they reported that some of the teachers motivate them and make learning English interesting. For example, *Students #1* reported, "Teacher who cares and encourages us, makes me like

to study for her/his class and do my best in doing homework and doing well in the class tests. She/he makes me feel that the class is very easy.” (Interview #1, Lines 137-139). Despite such positive experience, all of the students reported negative experiences with their teachers.

While some of the teachers were viewed in a positive manner, others negatively affected the students’ overall experience. Firstly, the students reported being frustrated, angry, disappointed, and not getting needed support from some of their teachers in this program. For them, the negative teachers make it difficult for them to have a positive learning experience. Specifically, *Student #3* explained that most teachers don’t know how to help him. “They deal with you as college students who are studying in the university or college with their native language, not as students who are studying in a ESL institute with a second language,” he stated (Interview #1, Lines Similarly, *Student #5* reported having a negative experience with some teachers. According to this student, some teachers are not efficient to teach second language learners. They even don’t know how to help the students. “They deal with you like if they teach English to native speakers. They don’t have enough efficient to explain the idea and to make you understand,” she explained.

More specifically, *Student #5* described a horrible experience with one of her teachers. She reported that the passing grade for one of her courses was 73%. She failed that class because she only got 72.50%. At the time, she was in the last month of her pregnancy. Despite this, with all the pains and discomfort of being pregnant, she worked hard and did all her best to pass the class. But the teacher didn’t care to provide any extra

support to her or take into account all the effort she made to complete coursework. When asked whether she spoke with the teacher and asked for explanation for failing the course, she responded:

“No, because I don’t think that this teacher will like to talk with me, but I went to the program office and talked with them. They didn’t try to do anything and they told me that this what I got and they will not change it [the grade]. They refused to help me and they said that this is the teacher decision and she will not change it. She is a very hard teacher. She never helps us and she always take from our grades even if we make a simple mistake. Some students and I tried to talk with her after our midterm exam, but she was not willing to help us with anything. The office told me that they understand my situation, but they can’t do anything because this was the teacher’s decision” (Interview #2, Lines 19-27)

What this situation and the above student statements reveal is that a teacher plays a key role in the experience of the English language learner. A teacher ultimately influences the outcome of a student’s overall experience in learning ESL. For example, when asked about her overall experience learning the English language in this program, *Student #1* reported mostly having a positive experience. But, she emphasizes that her experience mostly depends a lot on her teachers. While some of the teacher mad their experience positive, others made it negative. *Student #1* also added that teachers play a big role in rating her experience with the program. For instance, she mentioned that the difficulty in learning a second language could be significantly lessened if she has a teacher who has enough efficiency (highly qualified and experienced) to teach English to second language learners like herself. Some students even mentioned that teachers also play role in students’ class attending. As *student #3* stated, “Some teachers, make the class interesting and not boring which make students like to attend their classes every day. Other teachers make class boring and we just feel sleepy in it and want it to finish “

(Interview #1, Lines 116-118). He also added, “ this experience depends on the teachers characterize in teaching. Teacher can help us to make this experience good or bad, positive or negative” (Interview #1, Lines 139-140).

Theme 5: I try my best to overcome my challenges

“Believe in yourself, take on your challenges, and dig deep within yourself to conquer fears. Never let anyone bring you down. You got to keep going.” Chantal Sutherland (BrainyQuote, n.d.).

The students experienced difficulties in their learning of the English language. The challenges they faced include problems with reading comprehension, writing, listening and speaking, spelling, and grammar.

Firstly, whereas some of the students mentioned that while they read books at children level with common language (in particular, books or articles written for ESL learners), they have serious difficulty reading books or articles with complex topics like science and history. The students also complained about the difficulty of reading and understanding class materials. They reported the readings are very difficult to read and understand. For example, *Student #1* specifically reported experiencing difficulty with reading class assignments.

Secondly, some of the students faced problems with writing essays using proper English. They experienced difficulty with writing, especially in relation to taking a written test. As *Student #1* explains, “writing is difficult too especially the test because we don’t have any idea about the topic before the test. During the test time, you need to think about the topic, come with some ideas to support this topic, and to search in your mind for the appropriate words to use in writing” (Interview #2, Lines 92-95). In other

words, taking a test in class posed a challenge to some of the students mainly because they have limited reading proficiency, which in turn affects their understanding of test questions. As a result, they are most likely not to do well in reading and written test.

Another challenge experienced by three of the students is spelling. They have a serious problem with spelling. As one of the student explained, “spelling also is very hard especially the long words and the words that have silent letters” (Student #1, Interview #1, Lines 96-97). Similarly, *Student #4* described his problem with spelling when he stated, “They [teachers] also graded us for spelling which is not an easy thing especially if the words used in the lecture are new for us. Sometime even if you know the word, you may miss a letter because you are writing fast to don’t miss the information” (Interview #1, Lines 109-112). Such a spelling problem also affects student’s note-taking ability and listening comprehension. As *Student #3* explained, “I have challenge with the listening class in taking notes and spelling. It is hard to understand everything I hear especially if there are many words that I don’t know” (Interview #1, Lines 107-109).

Finally, some of the students faced problems with grammar. The difficulty with grammar mostly comes from the difficulty in applying the idea itself. For example, *Student #1* said that “grammar is another hard thing. We understand the idea when the teacher explained it, but it is not easy to apply it through the activities and tests” (Interview #1, Lines 95-96). Similarly, *Student #5* described her challenges with grammar in terms of comprehension. She said, “In grammar, sometime there is difficult ideas that I can’t understand, so I try to ask my husband, he tries to explain them to me several times and to give me some examples and questions” (Interview #2, Lines 11-14). In essence,

while the students may understand the meaning of a particular grammar, they mostly have trouble applying that understanding when presented in a test or activity format. In addition to the language proficiency challenges, student experienced other challenges. The next section presents such challenges.

Some of the other challenges experienced by the students include difficulty understanding native English speakers, the burden of schoolwork and completing homework, and being a parent. Firstly, some of the students reported having some difficulty in understanding the conversations of and/or talk from native English speakers such as their teachers. In particular, *Student #1* experienced difficulty listening, especially in listening to lecture and writing notes in class. Interestingly, the results illustrate that having a face-to-face conversation makes a big difference in student comprehension. For example, *Student #1* reported to understand what is being said when she is having a face-to-face conversation than when talking on the phone. This is because, as she stated, "... it is not easy for me to understand someone who talk different language without seeing her face features or expressions and her hand movements" (Interview #2, Lines 23-24). This may have been the case mostly due to the difficulty in understanding the accent of some English speakers. In fact, some of the students struggle to understand the accents of some English speakers, including their teachers. One of the female students said that when watching movies in English, it is very hard for her to understand because of the different accent and the rate of speech (too fast for her). In the classroom, she understands the teacher most of the time, but some time feels that she need to hear the information again and again to understand it.

An interesting finding relate to the aspect of face-to-face conversation with native English speakers. The results indicated that speaking to a person face-to-face helped most of the students to better understand what is being said than when speaking over the phone. The opposite was true as they found it difficult to understand someone speaking over the phone. This maybe the case because of non-verbal cues/gestures like watching the lips movement of the speaker that often help in understanding what is being said.

Another major challenge experienced by all of the students is based on the amount of school work assigned to them. The course load posed a major problem for the students. All of them complained about the amount of class work they are assigned on a daily and weekly basis, especially assignments/homework. All of the students complain that teachers gave them too many assignments to do, but less time devoted to understand what is being taught. As *Student 2* illustrated,

I am facing challenge with the too much works that we have to do in the this program. The work is overwhelming and we don't have enough time to do all these works. Also, we have too much information in a very short time. The information is too much for the time we have or spend in this program. I like learning English. It is hard, but interesting and I really enjoy learning and studying it, but the program makes it hard and difficult with all these works. It something new for me, so I need enough time to study and do all the requirement works (Student # 2, Interview #1, line 93-98).

Furthermore, two of the students mentioned just focusing on completing assignments just for passing the classes and didn't learn anything in the process. As one of them stated,

I don't say that we don't need to have assignments, but which I mean that we are learning a new language to acquire it and then go to the university for our academic study. With all these assignments, we don't care if we acquire the

language or not, we just want to pass the class and go to the university (Student # 1, Interview #1, line 163-167).

Even though some of them don't mind the amount of assignments given to them, they frustrated with the length of the assignments because some of them are very lengthy and took a lot of time to complete. As *Student #1* reported:

I am not against the too much of homework, I just don't like or feel comfortable with the very long assignments. They really make us bored. They [teachers] can give us many short, good and interesting assignments instead of these very long and boring assignments. This will make us like to do our homework and even to manage our time (Interview #2, Lines 27-30).

Similarly, *Student #4* was not happy with the too much workload to be completed for his classes. Such a workload has a negative effect on the student's psychological outcome. *Student #5* reported that the amount of schoolwork to be completed for her classes, especially assignments, overwhelmed her, which made her very stressed-out and sometimes depressed. In summary, this group of students is overwhelmed by the amount of schoolwork assigned to them by their teachers.

From the above discussion one can conclude that students feel that the amount of assignments being assigned to them is not worth it as it takes away all their time, which in turn also leads some of them to be very stressed. For example, one of the students complained about the time it takes to complete an assignment. *Student #1* stated, "For some assignments, we need to do search to answer them and this is really very hard for me. It is not easy to find articles that you can understand well and this also take much time." The other students expressed similar concern over too many assignments.

Therefore, to ease such a burden on the students, maybe one service the English

program and the university as a whole can provide this group of students is help them learn ways/techniques focused on time management as college students. May be they are perceiving the assignments to be a lot as a result of lack of having better time management skills, which is a common challenge facing most college students. Another option may be for this program to review the amount of assignments giving to students on a daily and/or weekly basis. This may lead the program to reduce some of the assignments or replace some assignments with in-class activities. Despite all these challenges, there are many things than can be done to help students to progress in their learning. The following section discusses the things that students, teachers, and the English program do to help student be successful in their learning of the English language.

While all the students reported having some limited skills in reading, writing, listening, and speaking with some degree of variation in terms of being good or very good, it should be noted that their perception of being good or very good at any of the skill level identified above may be different than what an English language program rate as good or very good in terms of reading, listening/speaking, and writing/grammar. This is because a student's understanding or perception of being good at any skill area may not satisfy the assessment criteria used by such an English language program. As a result, a student may get frustrated when he/she realize that the teacher's perception of his/her skill level is lower than what he/she thought. For example, some students may get frustrated or surprised when they are placed in level 2 writing and then found the class materials to be more difficult or that their writing contain many errors based on the

teacher's review of their writing.

Despite such potential conflict of perception between a teacher and student, the pre-post semester results indicate that most of the students made progress in their reading, writing, and listening skills, including grammar, since starting English classes. In other words, the students worked hard to overcome their challenges, which is described in coming paragraphs.

Since joining the program, the students have made some progress/success in their learning. This section describes what the students did and how they all progressed. They made very good progresses/successes in many areas that include English language proficiency, passing classes, making presentations, and improving ability to communicate with others.

The pre-post test results, based on a number of questions that asked students to describe their English language proficiency level based on key language skill areas – reading, writing, grammar, listening, and speaking – after being enrolled in the English program, reveals some successes for these students. In general, the students reported improvement in all the skill areas. Specifically, the students made progresses in reading, writing, grammar, listening, and speaking.

Firstly, students reported making good progress in reading. *Student #1* explained her reading successes in the following statement:

Now I know that there are specific things that I need to focus in during reading the chapter or article such as the main idea and details and I also know the differences between them. I also learn how to read between the lines. I am not good enough in this, but I try my best to practice it in everything I read (Interview #1, Lines 96-99).

On a similar situation, *Student #2* reported making progress in reading especially in terms of getting the main idea from an article. According to her, “I can understand most of the articles I read and I can find the main idea and the principle points” (Interview #1, Lines 76-77). *Student#4* also made some reading progress along these lines. He reported being able to read faster and “know more about how to find the main ideas and details and the difference between the main idea and supporting ideas” (Interview #1, Lines 66-69). *Student #5* reported being very good at reading as well.

Secondly, the students mentioned improvements in their writing and grammar skills. *Student #1* compared her previous writing skill to assess the progress she has made since joining the program. Prior to being enrolled in it, she could barely write a complete paragraph, but she reported making tremendous progress in writing. “Now I am able to write a good essay, I am very good in coming with ideas and expressing my feeling or writing about myself,” she explained (Interview #1, Lines 101-104). Also, *Student #2* and *#3* felt they can now write good essays. For example, *Student #2* reported that she now feels she can write good essay, but only when she has enough time to do it. This is because she wasn’t fast in writing and in bringing ideas, and thus need to take her time to write well. In addition, she is making progress in grammar. For *Student #4*, he has made some very progress in writing. In particular, he stated that “what I learn here is writing the different kinds of essay such us argument essay, opinion essay and others. I learn about these kinds in the English institute, but we have more information about them here and also we apply them more” (Interview #1, Lines 72-75). On the other hand, *Student #5* evaluated her writing skill as not very good, but not bad. She reported to have

made very good progress in her writing. In terms of grammar, the students reported making some progress. Specifically, *Student #2* reported gaining some successes in grammar. *Student #4* and *#5* reported being fairly good in grammar.

Thirdly, all of the students made progress in their speaking and listening skills. As *Student #1* puts it, “I learn much in listening after I came here. I try my best to talk English, I call to schedule my dentist appointment by myself and depend more in myself to buy my stuff. I also try to not make my husband go with me to do this. I also try to watch more English movies than Arabic one” (Interview #1, Lines 108-112). *Student #2* shared similar proficiency. According to her, she can now “understand people when they talk with me. I can understand most of the words when I watch in TV” (Interview #1, Lines 83-84). She also reported being good at speaking because people can understand her when she speaks to them. *Student #4* also reported success in good listening and speaking skills. He credited the university community, including the English program for his improved skill in speaking English. His speaking skill has been improving since coming to the program mostly because of the need to use the language every day for everything. As he explained, “I learn most of the speaking after I came to here because I need to use the language every day in ever thing” (Interview #1, Lines 79-82). He reported to have improved much in speaking and communicating with others. He can do a long conversation with people and try to learn new words from them and try to make them understand him. For this reason, he always tries to practice everything he learn in class so that he can store it in his mind and be able to use it in real life situation. In other words, living in an English-speaking community plays a key role in this student’s

improvement in speaking because he has to learn the language to perform his daily life chores in a community of English speakers. *Student #5* rated her listening and speaking skills as fairly good. In addition to making progress in their language proficiency, some of the students also reported some successes in other learning areas. The next section presents these other successes.

Not only did the students make some progress in English language proficiency, they also reported some successes in other related areas. Some of the students reported passing their classes, making presentations, communicating with others and doing long conversations. More specifically, while *Student #4* suggested that he studies hard so that he doesn't have to repeat any class, *Student #3* reported successes in making presentations. In fact, he learned how to do presentation at this program.

On the other hand, two of the students were successful in their ability to communicate with others. Both *Student # 1* and *#4* were successful in this area. For example, *Student #1* reported communicating with the Dentist and setup appointment by herself without any help from anyone. She also reported being able to understand her teacher and taking notes.

Finally, another student mentioned success in doing long conversation. *Student #4* reported being able to engage in long conversation. As he reported "I can do long conversation with people and try to learn new words from them and make them understand me" (Interview #1, Lines 85-86).

Things That Help Students Progress or Lead to Success in Learning

This section specifically identifies and discusses the things that students, teachers, and the program do to help student progress in their learning. This is important because there are multiple factors and or learning strategies that help students to successfully progress in their learning. This section will first present what teachers do, followed by what the English program do, and concludes with the students' own strategies that help them learn better.

What Teachers Do

The teachers in the program do multiple things that help their students to make successful progress in learning the English language. The data reveals the things that teachers do to help these students. These things are as follows:

- Caring about their students' needs
- Encourage students
- Understanding their students
- Interaction with students
- Connect with students
- Using activities and games in the class
- Support student outside the classroom
- Be flexible
- Making class interesting and not boring
- Willing to help students
- Using activities and games in the class

- Using strategies and methods

As the above list indicate, some teachers in this program did some of the things listed above to help their student progress in their learning. Specifically, some of the teachers encourage, showed caring, and motivate their students to learn as well made learning in the classroom more interesting and not boring. *Student #1* explained that “some teachers always try to encourage students and see these students’ strengths more than their weaknesses. They are always willing to help us and make us do our best to pass the class. They make us feel that we really can overcome any challenge or difficulty” (Interview #1, Lines 284-287). She also mentioned that some of the teachers gave students extra credit for trying hard in class. This in turn made them feel like the teachers cares about them and their schoolwork. In terms of motivation,

On the other hand, being flexible was reported by the students as one of the things teachers do to help them learn better. For example, *Student #2* explained that “some teachers are flexible with the works. They give us much to do, but they don’t ask us every day if we did it or not. They believe that we are old enough to realize the benefits of doing this work. They also very flexible about the due dates of assignments” (Interview #1, Lines 143-146). In addition, some of the teachers support their students outside classroom, showed understanding of their students, and showed some caring. This was particularly the case for *Student #3* who described his experience in the statement below:

There are also teachers who are really helpful and can understand our potential. They try to correct out mistake and give us chance to learn from these mistakes before the give us the final grades to our work. I have a teacher who try to spend time with us every day after class to help us in anything we need specially the spelling (Interview #1, Lines 157-161).

As the statement above indicates, other students also experienced similar support from their teachers, especially in terms of getting support outside the classroom. Some of the students reported getting help only from their teachers. For example, *Student #2* reported getting writing support from her teacher. As she stated, “I always try to talk with my teacher after class if we have a new topic to write about. I like to make more understanding of this topic before I write in it. Sometime I need to have more information about what the requirements are and the ideas that I have to include in this essay.” Similarly, *Student #3* got help from his teacher. According to him, “sometime also I go to writing teacher to help me with my essay before I submit the last draft. Unfortunately, not all teachers are willing to do this with their students.” In fact, *Student #4* mostly received help in grammar from his teacher during or immediately after class. He clearly described his experience in the following statement:

Most of my teachers are willing to help me when I ask them or go to their offices for help. Sometime I even if I can't find my teacher, I ask another teacher who taught me before or who is teaching me other class and some of them are willing to help. Sometime if I have midterm or final exam, I like to go to my teacher to get more example or activities about some ideas because I feel that I really understand these ideas, but I am still confused about how to apply them correctly (Interview #2, Lines 16-21).

In other words, some of the teachers were willing to help and did provide support to the students in anything they need in terms of their course work.

Finally, some teachers used different strategies and methods to help student learn better. Firstly, some of the teachers highlight and make students focus on the important things to be learned on any given topic or subject-matter. In addition, some of them used

activities and games in the classroom to teach a topic or illustrate a key concept. As *student #4* explained, “some other teachers always try to make the class active by doing some activities and games which relate to the lesson idea. This is really good way to make us understand better it makes us try our best to understand the topic and compete to win the game” (Interview #1, Lines 125-127). *Student #5* also mentioned some teachers using examples to explain the topic being learned.

Also, some of the teachers used videos such as YouTube and pictures illustrate/explain an idea or concept. This was particular true for *Student #5* who reported that “one of my teachers always tries to act the new words for us so we can understand the meaning of them and it also make us remember these words and use them when need. Also, he tries to find some video on YouTube and brings some pictures about these words” (Interview #1, Lines 152-155).

What the English Program Do

The English program at this university organized different things to enhance the students' experience in learning English. The program organized different activities and events, go on trips as well as connect students with conversation partners and host families. Above all, the program is perceived to be using a good English curriculum. These things in turn may help students to progress in their learning as reported by most of them. One of the students summarized his experience with the program in the following statement:

Which I liked about this program is that they do many and different activities to help us practice the English language... they also make some trips to other cities... Also, they provide a conversation partner and host family to any student.

They also have a very good curriculum for the grammar (Student #1, Interview #1, Lines 268-273).

The other students in the program shared similar observation of the program in terms of the things it does to help improve their learning outside of the classroom. For example, *Student #2* said she liked the way the writing classes are designed as it lets the teachers to allow them to do more than one draft which give the students a chance to know their mistakes and avoid them later. The students also liked the different activities, events, and trips that this program organize for them. For example, *Student #4* found the program activities to be helpful to his learning of the English language. As he stated, “They provide to us varied activities and events. I like the one that we go to old people and make conversation with them. It is good to practice your speaking and listening and also to know much about the American culture from them” (Interview #1, Lines 160-162). In essence, these things that this English program does for its students help supplement and therefore, enable students to progress in their learning. For example, *Student #4* reported to have improved much in speaking and communicating with others. He can do a long conversation with people and try to learn new words from them and try to make them understand him. For this reason, he always tries to practice everything he learn in class so that he can store it in his mind and be able to use it in real life situation. This being said, the students also do their own unique things to help them progress in their learning, as the next section will show.

What Students Do

In addition to what the program and teachers do to help students in their learning, these students also do their own unique things to help them be successful in their

learning. The students did different things to help them progress in their learning. The things they did are as follows:

- Asking for help
- Time management
- Taking notes
- Making a list
- Making connection
- Using English frequently
- Review hard materials frequently
- Participating in community and university activities
- Participating in the events and activities that the program organizes for the international students
- Having a conversation partner and/or host family
- Using a planner or agenda to keep track of the study progress
- Doing practice
- Thought process (in Reading and Writing)

As the above list indicates, the students do different things to improve their learning. One of the major thing they do is to seek support outside the classroom. They see this as very important, if not the most important thing they can do that is under their control in terms of helping them make good progress in learning English. Students reported getting academic/language learning support from teachers and other people outside the classroom such as a friends and spouse. The support received by the students

ranged from review of writing draft to help with grammar and reading. Specifically, *Student #1* reported to have asked her husband for help with a difficult reading assignment. In addition, this student described the extent of academic support she received from her husband. “He sometime helps me with some ideas that I may use, but I am very careful with this because not all teachers allow us to get this kind of help. Some of them consider this as cheating and I don’t want to violate the rules. So, I may have some ideas from him, but I write these ideas by myself with my style” (Interview #1, Lines 16-21).

On a similar situation, *Student #5* got help from her husband and teacher. She often asked her husband first and only sought help from her teacher when her husband was not able to help her. She explained that sometimes she has difficulty with grammar, especially in terms of understanding the ideas behind them. So, she asked her husband to explain them to her several times and gave her examples and questions. However, she added, if that doesn’t work, she often goes to her teacher and ask for help. In other words, this student first attempts to figure-out the problem she is having with a particular schoolwork. When she couldn’t figure it out, then she asked her husband for help. She only went to her teacher for help when she and her husband’s effort didn’t lead to her understanding of the problem.

Other students also experienced similar support from their teachers, especially in terms of getting support outside the classroom. Some of the students reported seeking help only from their teachers. For example, *Student #2* reported seeking help for writing from her teacher. As she stated, “I always try to talk with my teacher after class if we

have a new topic to write about. I like to make more understanding of this topic before I write in it. Sometime I need to have more information about what the requirements are and the ideas that I have to include in this essay.” Similarly, *Student #3* got help from his teacher. According to him, “sometime also I go to writing teacher to help me with my essay before I submit the last draft. Unfortunately, not all teachers are willing to do this with their students.”

On the other hand, *Student #4* mostly received help in grammar from his teacher during or immediately after class. He stated, “if I don’t understand something in the class I immediately ask the teacher or sometimes I ask him or her before I leave the class. But if I don’t understand something while I am studying for test or quiz, I send an email to my teacher and ask her or to take an appointment with her early before the test time.”

One of the student actually sought help from his friends who are enrolled in a degree program at the university. This is because he believes they were in a better academic position to help him with problems related to his coursework in the English language program. As such, the student preferred to ask them first for help before asking the teacher. *Student #3* summarized his experience as follows:

I have some friends who are studying at the university and I prefer to ask my friends first because they willing to repeat the explanation to me until I can understand it and even to explain it with Arabic language. The biggest reason is because I always do my assignments or study at late time and if I send an email to my teacher at that time she or he will not respond. If I don’t understand something during the class like the grammar ideas, I ask my teacher before I leave the class (Interview #2, Lines 12-17).

As the above findings illustrates, this group of students recognized the importance of seeking support (asking for help) for their schoolwork. They used both informal and

formal support resources largely based on convenience and their unique situation. While some of them sought help from their husbands and friends, one of them only sought help from his teacher. On this basis, it is important to observe that all of them reported seeking and receiving some kind of support from their teachers. This in turn suggests that the students recognize the need and importance of getting help from their teachers and others.

Theme 6: Understand me before teaching me

“A good teacher can inspire hope, ignite the imagination, and instill a love of learning.”
Brad Henry (BrainyQuote, n.d.).

The students provided multiple recommendations for teachers. The recommendations stemmed from their current experience with teachers in this English language program. The recommendations can be summarized as follows:

- Reduce number of classwork and assignments
- Give more vocabulary practices
- Choose topics that is of interest to students
- Flexibility for student to choose topic to write about
- Make classroom more interactive
- Help student apply the ideas/topics being taught and learned in the classroom
- Provide help during tests
- Trying to understand their students/
- Understand that students are different
- Encourage students

The summary list of recommendations suggests students are highly interested in improving their learning experience, but also wants to help their teachers become better

teachers in meeting the learning needs of their students. The hope is that such recommendation can help teachers to improve their teaching, especially in relation to their instructional strategies and methods used to teach this group of international students. Now, let discuss some of these recommendations in more detail as reported by the students.

Firstly, some of the students highly suggested for teachers to make the classroom and learning English more interesting. In this aspect, they reported that teachers need to make learning English a desirable thing, not just mandatory to enter the university to pursue a degree.

In essence, teachers need to serve as motivator to these students in order to encourage them to be resilient with the challenges they encounter as ESL students.

Student #1 summarized her suggestions in the following statement:

Teacher should be interesting. She should encourage her students. She need to let her students feel comfortable and make them feel that they do good, but they may need help to do better. She should help her students and make them believe in their abilities. She should make her students like the class and willing to study for it (Interview #2, Lines 35-40).

Another recommendation is for teachers to get to know and understand their students. This is a crucial way for teachers to be able to connect with their student much better. *Student #3* stated that he prefer/like a:

Teacher should not just think that her or his role is to explain the lessons ideas, but also to care about their students and try to know them, understand them and listen to them. I have some good teachers who try to know their students level and needs before they teach them. They ask us what we want or need to learn. They try to know our abilities and teach us depend on this ability so we can understand.

They even ask us about the kinds of the activities and assignment (Interview #2, Lines 48-55).

Also, *Student #2* explained that “I think teacher has to understand her or his students and to understand their cultures before anything to make her class interesting. Because by doing this teacher can know the needs of her students. She should know and understand the ages, cultures, countries and languages for each student to know how to deal with them and what may be interesting to them” (Interview #2, Lines 52-56).

By making this effort to understand their students, teachers can, in the process of getting to know and understand their students, learn about the unique differences among their students. Knowing how different their students are, teachers can be in a better position to tailor their teaching methods and strategies, and learning support to each student. For example, *Student #4* summarized his recommendation to teachers in the following statement:

Teachers need to focus on the needs and difficulties of each student. There are some teachers who do this, but there are teachers who cannot discover their students’ needs or challenges through the level. It is really important to understand that students are different. Teachers have to try to know the strengths and weaknesses of each student. I know that a teacher has many students and classes, but this is something important and one of the most important role of teachers. Some teachers evaluate their students continuously to help them discover what they need to improve, but other teachers don’t help the students to do this (Interview #1, Lines 186-193).

With regards to the question relating to what students think on how teachers can make a class more interesting, *Student #1* summarized her suggestion below:

The important thing for teacher is to make her or his students willing to come to the class and to not feel boring during it. This depends on teacher ability and method. Each teacher has her or his method, but to get the results of this method

teacher needs to be efficient. Teachers have to make class active and to make students interactive during class, to make them participate and discuss the topic instead of just sit and listen. I prefer the teacher who allows us to ask questions and discuss the ideas with her during her explanation more than the teacher who likes to finish her explanation first and then allow us to ask (Interview #2, Lines 58-65).

On a similar note, *Student #5* suggests that teachers should collaborate with students to help them learn better. In fact, she explained that making a class interesting

Depends on the teacher's way or style in teaching. I have some classes that I never feel bored or lost my attention in them because of the teachers. I even don't make attention to the time during these classes. These teachers can make us focus with their explanation, activities and examples without getting boring. But I have some other classes that I can't focus in them even if I try my best to do this. I just feel distracted and that I don't understand anything (Interview#2, Lines 102-108).

Also, *Student #3* recommended for teachers to give them more interesting activities during class rather than using the entire class period to give lecture.

Moreover, the students recommended a reduction in schoolwork, especially assignments. This is because, as discussed earlier in this paper, they feel they are giving too much homework, which takes up most of their time. In fact, *Student #2* suggests that a good teacher is someone who doesn't give many assignments every day because students also need to have some free time. *Student #1* summarized her feelings regarding the need to reduce homework as follows:

I am not against the too much of homework, I just don't like or feel comfortable with the very long assignments. They really make us bored. They [teachers] can give us many short, good and interesting assignments instead of these very long and boring assignments. This will make us like to do our homework and even to manage our time. For me, if I have a very long assignment, I can't get rest and complete it later because this will distort me and will make me confused. I need to

work in it continuously or I will lose the idea and I also will lose my focus (Interview#2, Lines 27-33).

Another recommendation was for teachers to make the classroom more interactive. This can be done by giving students more class activities and games that allow them to interact with the learning materials, the teacher, and each other. *Student #1* suggests that teachers “should make activities in class to make us understand better” (Interview #2, Lines 35-40). Also, *Student #2* offered similar recommendation in that teachers should give them more activities or practice in class rather than giving them too many homework.

Relating to the previous point is that students want teachers to be helpful to them when they ask for help. In other words, some of the students recommend that teachers should help student apply the ideas/topics being taught and learned in the classroom. *Student #5* described her ideal teacher as someone who “should collaborate with her students to help them be better. She should help her students not just during class, but in any time students need help” (Interview #2, Lines 88-89). In addition, *Student #3* wants teachers to know that the most important thing he really hope them to do is to make students apply the ideas that they teach to them.

The most important thing that I really hope teachers to do is to make us apply the ideas that they teach to us. We need to do some activities or games relate to the lesson idea to understand this idea better especially in the grammar. We can't understand if teacher just try to explain idea by lecture (Interview #1, Lines 187-190).

Another student recommended for teachers to be flexible with them, especially in terms of understanding their unique learning challenges. Specifically, *Student #5* suggests

that teachers “should understand us and excuse a student if she or he has a serious excuse to not attend the class or to not do the assignments. She should care about her students and to not make them stress with too much works” (Interview #2, Lines 90-92). On a similar note, *Student #2* ask for more flexibility. She suggests for teachers to recognize their students’ challenges in learning English. She said, “I hope that they [teachers] can understand that we are international students and that English is not our language. I hope that they can deal with us more flexibility and try to focus on each student’s needs instead of focusing on finishing the curriculum” (Interview #1, Lines 159-161).

In addition to all the recommendations for teachers discussed above, students also gave some suggestions to the English program. These recommendations will be discussed next.

Students gave some recommendations for this program itself. A summary of the students’ recommendations are as follows:

- Create opportunities to interact with native English speakers
- The program administration need to improve in addressing student concerns
- Extend the length of each level to be more than two months or reduce the amount of coursework for each level
- Give student freedom in choosing their teachers
- Understanding the needs of the students
- Collaborating with the university academic sector to discuss what are the important things for students to learn in order to be well prepared to be enrolled in an academic degree program.

The recommendations listed above are based on students' current experience in the program. They came to these recommendations as a way to share their idea as to the things the program could do to help the students have a successful and positive experience learning English. This in turn could enable them to better learn what is being taught. From this basis, the next step in this section is to present some of these recommendation in more detail as reported by the students.

Firstly, nearly all of the students recommended the program to create more opportunities for them to interact with native English speakers. This opportunity is important to their learning of English because it will give them first-hand experience in using the language as well as build their language proficiency. For instance, Student #2 suggests that the "program needs to focus more on providing activities to international students instead of just focusing in providing classes. It also should make some activities that merge the students with the university students. This will help us to practice the language and also to be familiar with the university laws and requirements" (Interview #2, Lines 40-43). On this same point, Student #5 stated that the program "have to focus in making students acquire the language not just to learn it" (Interview #2, Lines 94-96). According to the student, this can be done by organizing activities for students because they tend to learn more from such activities than class lectures. On a similar note, Student #1 hopes that this program can help her to be able to get benefits from the learning and social opportunities provided to students in the program. She also wants the program to make students feel that they care about their learning, and that it's not all about paying tuition.

Another recommendation from the students focus on the need for the program administration to improve in addressing student concerns. Some of the students don't feel like the administration adequate addresses their concerns. More specifically, *Student #1* explained that this program need to "make students feel that they care about their learning, not about the money." Also, the program/administration need to "make learning English desirable thing not just mandatory to enter the university." For example, the student observed that "most of the students in this program struggling with reading, so I think they have to find what the problem with this and try to do something to help students overcome this problem" (Interview #1, Lines 290-293). Specifically, *Student #3* suggested that the program Director to make some improvement in addressing student concerns, especially when a student directly asks for her support with an issue related to his/her classes and/or learning. This student hopes that the Director try to hear students if they come to her and don't just hear the teacher. "I hope she try to give the right and fair decision even if the teacher is wrong," the student suggested (Interview #1, Lines 183-185).

Another recommendation was for the program to focus more on providing students with learning opportunities focused on improving their language acquisition abilities not just comprehension. *Student #4* recommend the program focus more on improving students' language acquisition by giving them more practices and activities in class and outside the classroom. This student suggested that it will be "better if the program focuses on teach us by practices, activities, and games not just by lectures. I hope they give us enough practices especially in reading before the midterm and final

tests, so teachers can determine the needs of each student and difficulties that this student has before these tests and try to work with the student to overcome these difficulties.

These practices also help us to know what improvements we need to make for ourselves” (Interview #2, Lines 51-56). For example, *Student #2* suggests that “a good English program should focus in how to improve students’ abilities in English... I also think it would be better if they give us easy stories and articles at the beginning and then make them hard through the levels especially the scientific and historical articles or stories” (Interview #2, Lines 51-56).

On the other hand, some of the students recommend for the English program to collaborate with the university academic sector to discuss what the important things are for students to learn in order to be well prepared to be enrolled in an academic degree program. For instance, *Student #5* hope that the English program can collaborate with university to discuss what are the important for them to learn. She based this recommendation on what she’s been hearing from former English program students who are currently enrolled in the university degree program. She reported that “I know some students who studied at this program and now they will graduate from the university soon, they told me that they don’t use almost 50% of what they studied in the program in the university classes (Interview #1, Lines 135-139). In other words, the program needs to coordinate or collaborate with the university academic programs to discuss what the important things are for students to learn that can help them greatly when they start taking academic classes and/or enrolled in a degree program at the university.

Finally, one of the students recommended the English program to give students the freedom to choose their class teachers when the need arises. *Student #3* suggest that the program give students the option/freedom to choose a teacher for any class, especially when a student has a reason to do so. He summarized his recommendation in the following statement:

I have friends who are studying in the English program here at the U.S. but in another state, students in this program can choose their teachers. It is like the university. You can choose with which teacher you like to take your class and even you can change your teacher if you attend the class and then feel that you don't want to continue in it. But here in this program, you can't do this even if you have a problem with a teacher and you really don't want to take the class with her, they force you to take it and don't allow you to move to other class with different teacher. In one of my class, I just feel that I have difficulties to understand the teacher explanation. I went to the program director and told her that I want to move to the other class with the other teacher because I have problem in understanding the teacher, but she refused to let me move (Interview #1 Lines 163-174).

Social and Cultural Experiences

Another key focus of this study was to explore the social and cultural experience of Saudi students. Thus, it is appropriate to generate themes based on social and cultural experience that attempt to answer the main research question. The themes emerged from the data as reflected in the students' perspectives. The coding process of the interview transcripts resulted in four themes related to the student's social experience that emerged from multiple codes that were categorized into 11 areas (see Table 2 in Appendix A). The data also reveals the students' cultural experience, which is illustrated in three themes that emerged from many codes that were categorized into eight areas (see Table 3 in Appendix A). The coding process shows that Saudi students have both a positive

(success) and negative (challenge) social and cultural experience during their time in the U.S. as English language learners. This section first presents results related to each of the four social themes: (1) I spend most of my time in studying and doing assignment; (2) I feel more comfortable to have friends from my culture; (3) I discover my strengths and overcome my weaknesses; (4) Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.

Theme 1: I spend most of my time in studying and doing assignments

“Balancing school and social life can be difficult.” Emily Osment (BrainyQuote, n.d.).

To understand the students’ social life, it may be necessary to get a glimpse of their daily routine. The life of these students revolved around their school. All of them spent majority of their time doing schoolwork. Only a small amount of time was left for spending with family and/or friends. For instance, Student #1 summarized her daily routine in the following statement:

I spend most of my time in studying and the rest of it in taking care of my child. Sometime I even need to study and taking care of my child at the same time because my husband is having class or assignments to do, so he can’t take care of our child. At night, after my child sleep I spend some time in cleaning my apartment before I go to sleep (Interview #1, Line 382-385).

Most of the student shared similar life style. While Student #2 reported spending most of her day attending classes, and doing homework and used the weekend to spend time with friends, Student #3 used any time left from doing schoolwork to go to the gym. Student #4 paint a detailed picture of his daily routine as follows:

I wake up at the morning and go to English institute after having my breakfast. My classes start at 9 am. At 12pm I have my lunch break. Sometime I have my lunch in the university. I finish my classes at 4pm. I go to library directly after classes to study. Sometime, if I finish my study early I go to gym by my bicycle. It is hard to do this most of time because we have much assignments and works to do every day (Interview #1, Line 254-259).

There doesn't seem to be enough time for the students to engage in socialization with non-family members and/or other people who are not their roommates as majority of their time is spent doing schoolwork and/or spending time with nuclear family and roommates who happened to be from the same country. Despite their time consuming daily routine focused on school and family, some of the students were able to squeeze some of their time and attended social events and activities organized on campus. Previous studies also found that some international students did attend social events organized on campus (Evans & Morrisson, 2011; Kitsantas, 2004; Wu et al., 2015; Yan & Berliner, 2013; Yuan, 2011).

While some of the students reported not having time to go to university or community events, two of them said they enjoyed going to these events, and try to attend when they had the time. Specifically, Students #4 and #5 reported to have attended activities organized by the university and the English program. For example, Student #4 stated that "sometime, this English program provides some activities during the weekend, so I go to there. I like most of these activities. Last time we went to skating" (Interview #1, Line 269-271). On the other hand, three of the students (#1, #2, #3) reported that even though they would like to attend events hosted on campus or in the community, they didn't have enough time to attend events or social activities on campus. For example, Student #1 mentioned "I don't have time for that. I would like to go, but because of the many works and assignments I have this is not possible" (Interview #1, Line 387-388).

Theme 2: I feel more comfortable to have friends from my culture

“One of the most beautiful qualities of true friendship is to understand and to be understood.” Lucius Seneca (BrainyQuote, n.d.).

The students liked the diversity in the program. Students in this English program are from different countries that represent diverse social and cultural backgrounds. This diversity improves the Saudi students’ social skills because they had opportunities to interact with people from different social and cultural backgrounds. On average, these students reported having 7 friends. Some of them reported having more companionship with most of their friends than just friendship. For example, one of the students said that she had a very close friend with whom she shared some personal information about her life. More specifically, all of the students (except one) lived with a family member such as a husband or someone from the same country, Saudi Arabia (roommates are from same country or a family member). Most of them lived off-campus. Even though the students liked the diversity in this program, they prefer to make friendship with students from their country rather than having friends from other countries. Therefore, almost all of their friends in the U.S. were from Saudi Arabia. But, some of them had American friends and other international students from other countries that include Korea, Oman, China, and Japan. For example, Student #4 interacted with other students during study time. According to him, “I always interact with people in the library. I also always connect with my classmates and meet with them in the library to do our works together” (Interview #1, Line 238-239).

Student #1 said, “I sometime invite some girls from other culture especially from U.S. We invite them to our apartments and sometime have lunch or dinner together, so

they can know more about our culture and we also know more about their culture” (Interview #1, Line 392-395), but she also said, “I don’t like to go out with them. I don’t feel comfortable to do this because we have different cultures, different traditions, and even different food” (Interview #2, Line 110-111).

More specifically, four students said that most of their friends are from their culture. Two of them don’t even have any friend from another culture (neither other international students nor American students). One of these students reports that he doesn’t like to make new friends who were from a different country. When asked why not having friends from another culture, he said, “I don’t like to do this. I don’t feel comfortable to make friendship with people from other cultures” (Student #3, Interview #1, Line 254-255). He also illustrated, “I don’t like to interact with people from other cultures because they have different believe and traditional than us and this make me feel hard to deal with them socially.” (Student #3, Interview #1, Line 230-232). However, even the student who reported not having many friends from his country here was willing to have more friends from his own culture. As he stated,

I hope that I can know more people from my culture, but most of them live away from the campus and I don’t have car which makes it not easy for me to go to the places that they meet in constantly. I know it is more positive to know people from other culture to learn faster and better, but sometimes you also need to talk with someone who have your same culture, religion, and norms (Student #4, Interview #1, Line 248-252).

This may be the case because nearly all of the students reported getting support from their family and close friends from the same country. In fact, the students lived together and did everything together. They get almost all of their support from family

members living with them. For example, one of the female students reported getting support mostly from her husband (e.g., academic and emotional support). Another student also stated,

we live in a foreign country, we need to be close to each other to support and help each other. I need to know people how can understand me and who respect everything I do especially my religion. I do have some friends from other cultures, but I don't like to spend much time with them (Student #2, Interview #2, Line 98-101).

The interaction of the Saudi students mostly among themselves instead of hanging-out with American students is similar to findings of other studies on international students (Al Murshidi, 2014; Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Evans & Morrison, 2011; Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2010; Wu et al., 2015; Yan & Berliner, 2013; Yuan, 2011). For example, in their study that examined the change in beliefs of 70 international students enrolled at two American universities, Amuzie and Winke (2009) found that these students had fewer opportunities to interact with American students/native speakers than they had expected prior to coming to the U.S. Also, these students spent nearly all of their social and learning time interacting with peers from the same country. In other words, almost all of their friends in the U.S. and at school were from the same country. Yuan (2011) also observed similar finding among Chinese students attending an American university – they socialized with other Chinese students, and in fact, their roommates were also Chinese.

Theme 3: I discover my strengths and overcome my weaknesses

“You gain strength, courage, and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You are able to say to yourself, ‘I lived through this horror. I can take the next thing that comes along.’” Eleanor Roosevelt (BrainyQuote, n.d.).

As the results so far have illustrated, the Saudi students made good progress in their learning and addressed the social challenges they experienced. To get to this point, the students and the English program used many strategies to help them adjust. This section will first present the strategies used by the program and then those used by the students.

The English Program Strategy

The program used strategies inside and outside the classroom that helped students to socially adjust to life in their new environment. The strategies used by this program are the following:

- Students having classmates from different countries (different cultures).
- Creating groups of students from different countries for class discussion.
- Organizing different activities and events for students on campus.

Student #1 mentioned that the program helped enhance their students' social experience. She said that they had "classmates from different culture and make groups that have students from different countries during classes... they make different activities and events for international students" (Interview #1, Line 400-402). Student #2 also reported similar experience. "They try to put us in a group of students from different cultures. They provide activities and events for international students. They also sometime make class exchange with the university class and the students in this program. I mean that they take us to attend some classes at the university and talk with the students there" (Interview #1, 225-228). Student #3 also mentioned that the activities organized by the program provided them with opportunity to interact with people from different

countries and cultural background.

Student #5 summarized the strategies that this program used to improve students' social experience. According to this student:

They do classes exchange with the university classes. So, we can meet Americans and know more about their culture. We also told them about our country, religion and traditions. Which make them understand and respect us more. They also provide some events that give us chance to meet with old American people. They talk about wars and their families (Interview #1, Line 229-233).

In general, the program created opportunities for students to socially interact with individuals from different countries and cultures. In fact, the program classroom and the program as a whole is made up of people from different countries who represents diverse social and cultural backgrounds. This then exposed the students to other individuals from different cultures. In addition, the program organized different events on campus and off-campus such as field trips to other states. These events were attended by students, teachers, and people who represented different countries and cultures. As a result, some of the students met and talked with people from different parts of the world, including native-English speakers [American students and faculty).

The Student Strategy

The results also showed that students used different strategies to help them socially adjust with life in the U.S. The adjustment strategies used by these students are listed below:

- Having a conversation partner.
- Having a host family.
- Participating in the program events/activities.

- Trying to interact socially with other students.
- Having friends from another culture.

Majority of the students (#1, #2, #5) reported having friends from another country as well as socially interacted with people from different social and cultural background. Specifically, Student #2 stated, “I try to interact socially with others here, but this is not easy because I don’t have much time...This is not a problem for me because I like to talk with English language even if I make mistake I don’t care much, but I try to learn from my mistakes” (Interview #1, Line 368-373). Also, Student #2 said that, “I try my best to interact socially with others. I have some friends from other cultures. We meet and talk with each other during breaks” (Interview #1, Line 198-199). Student #1 made friends from other cultures as a way to adjust to social life in the U.S. For example, she invited friends over to her place for lunch or dinner as well as became friends with her child’s babysitter. “I tried to make some American friends and try to talk with people who I don’t know. I made a friendship with my son babysitter. I meet with her some time even if I don’t need her as a babysitter,” She explained (Interview #2, Line 190-192).

Moreover, Student #5 liked to have a conversation with English speakers to help improve her language skills and also to get to know people who are not from Saudi Arabia. The same was true for Student #4 who summarized his reason for interacting with students from different countries in the following statement:

Learning English is my principle reason and goal of coming to U.S. and having many friends from other cultures is a very great way to reach this goal. I even learn some words from different languages from them. I know some students who are studying in the U.S. and don’t have friends from other cultures. I learn English faster than them even that some of them are here before me and we almost have the same level of English when we came to here. I don’t say that we don’t have to

have friends from our culture, but if you want to learn English quickly, you need to have many friends from other cultures and to spend much time with them (Interview #2, Line 87-94).

Finally, some of the students had conversation partners and a host family. The program provides students with the opportunity to have a native-English speaker as conversation partner as well as a host family program that link local American families with International Students. To participate in either program, a student must make a request. For this study, two students reported to have either a conversation partner and/or a host family.

Student #2 reported to have a conversation partner she met with frequently (at least once a week). Student #4 also reported to have a conversation partner and a host family. Even though he didn't meet with the conversation partner often, he still saw this as helping him to interact with a native English speaker and therefore get to learn some things about Americans. He summarized his experience with the host family in the following statement:

I just meet with them four time from August until now [as of date of interview]. We have too much homework every day, which makes it hard to find time to meet with them. For this I try to not just depend on the host family and the conversation partner to practice my English. I always find someone in the library and make conversation with him or her (Interview #1, Line 279-283).

In summary, the students used different strategies that helped them to socially adjust to life in their new environment. For one, some of them made friends with other students who are from different countries, including American students, others attended events and activities organized by this program, while two of the students had a conversation partner and host family. The adjustment strategies used by these students

are consistent with previous studies (Al Murshidi, 2014; Lillyman & Bennett, 2014; Liu, 2011; Özturgut & Murphy, 2009; Yuan, 2011).

Theme 4: Do what you can, with what you have, where you are

“Stay positive and happy. Work hard and don't give up hope. Be open to criticism and keep learning. Surround yourself with happy, warm and genuine people.” Tena Desae (BrainyQuote, n.d.).

Moving into the U.S. led Saudi students to experience interesting social outcomes, especially in relation to their interaction with people who are not from their home country and/or not share same cultural background. Therefore, another theme that emerged from the data relates to the students' challenges and benefits of their social life in the U.S. To begin this discussion, the data illustrates the students' personality and life in the U.S.

Saudi students represented two distinct personalities. This is to be expected as no two individuals are similar. Also, in general, male and female sometime tend to have different personality. This was the case for the research participants who were made up of males and females. As illustrated in the method section, students have different personality traits, which influence their social behavior with other people. Majority of the students reported being extrovert (3 students), and thus socialize with people. They reported having many friends in Saudi Arabia, but only few friends in the U.S. These students like to meet and talk to new people. They don't like to stay at home. They like to go out and spend time outside their home such as going to the movies and restaurants.

On the other hand, two of the students were introvert in that they didn't like to interact with people; they were reserved (shy and quiet), and only interacted with friends or people they knew. These students found it difficult to meet new people. As such, they

didn't like to go out. Instead, they preferred staying home. But, back in their country, they liked going out with family.

The students reported several social challenges they experienced while they are living here. Firstly, there was a lack of adequate time outside their school that allowed them to engage in social activities such as spending time with friends and family. They blamed this lack of time on their assignments. All of the students complained that too many assignments created a barrier for them to go to community or university events because they spent most of their time doing assignments and other schoolwork. Too many assignments also prevented them from relaxing and spending time with family and friends. Some of them said this made them very stress. In fact, they were given lots of homework at the end of the week that was due on Monday, which meant they spent weekends doing homework. This in turn takes away time they could have used to relax and with family or friends. As one of the students complained, "I spend all day doing my assignments" (Student #4, Interview #1, Line 120-121). Another student also said, "I don't have time for that. I would like to go, but because of the many works and assignments I have this is not possible" (Student #1, Interview #1, Line 387-388).

Secondly, the students reported facing difficulty to socially interact with Americans at the university. This is mostly due to the cultural differences between them. Such a cultural difference sometimes led to misunderstanding. For example, two of the female students reported having difficulty interacting with men, especially when men try to shake hands or hug them. Student #1 stated that:

The hardest thing for me is when a man wants to shake my hand. I really don't know what I should do at that time. I always try to explain why I can't do this.

Some men really understand this and accept it, which makes me comfortable, but unfortunately, some don't understand me and they felt annoyed (Interview #1, Line 501-507).

To put this student's experience in context, In Saudi Arabia women don't shake hand or hug men who is not their husband or very closed family member. This is because, as another female student explained, "the men here [the U.S.] always want to shake hands with women and this is not accepted or allowed in our religion" (Student #2, Interview #1, Line 312-313). As a result, the female students found it difficult to interact with men from other cultures. The same was the case for the male students. Some of them reported having difficulty interacting or making friends with students from another country. This in turn made it hard to work with opposite gender in the classroom.

In summary, the other challenges reported by the students are as follows:

- Feeling lonely or homesick because of being away from family and home.
- Having children. The female students reported that having children created a lot of time-related challenges for them as students. This was because they were mostly responsible for taking care of the children. This is time consuming and the too much schoolwork also caused them lots of stress.
- Lack of transportation or not having a car. For example, Student #4 said that not having a car limits his ability to do the things he wanted to do such as going out to buy the things he needed like grocery and also hanging out with friends. He relied on his friends to give him a ride on their own time, which is often inconvenient for him. But, he said that, "If I have car I will go out more especially on the weekend" (Interview #1, Line 224-225).

The social challenges reported by these students are similar to results from previous studies on international students. Many studies found that international students in general experienced severe stress, difficulties in making friends with host/local students, feeling of loneliness/homesick, social isolation, culture shock, and difficulty interacting with the opposite sex (Al Murshidi, 2014; Evans & Morrisson, 2011; Kitsantas, 2004; Li et al., 2010; Liu, 2011; Özturgut & Murphy, 2009; Russell, Rosenthal, & Thomson, 2010; Wu et al., 2015; Yan & Berliner, 2013; Yuan, 2011). For example, Evans and Morrisson (2011) noted that most international students experienced adjustment difficulties abroad mostly due to the feelings of loneliness/homesickness and cultural shock. Li et al., (2010) also found similar outcomes for Asian students studying abroad in that they experienced severe stress, homesickness and felt being isolated. Yan and Berliner (2013) also observed that Chinese students in the U.S. who participated in their study experienced significant stress and social isolation during their time in the country. Despite the social challenges experienced, the Saudi students in this study also experienced some positive social outcomes. The next sub-section presents this finding.

Even though that these students are facing some social challenges, they always try to overcome these challenges and get benefits of this experience. An important benefit of studying abroad is exposure to other people from different countries, and thus from diverse social backgrounds. Studying abroad provide international students with the opportunity to interact with people from different social and cultural backgrounds. As a result, they learn about other people and their way of life. This in turn tends to improve students' social skills in living in a multicultural place. The Saudi students in this study

reported to have benefited from living and studying in a foreign country (the U.S.). The benefits they reported include self-reliance, freedom, self-confidence, become daring, and learning about other countries and cultures.

Firstly, all of the students reported learning about other countries and cultures. This is mainly because students in this English program come from many different countries that include China, Korea, Palestine, Oman, and Japan. As a result, the classroom provides an opportunity for students to learn about other countries and share some cultural things. Outside the classroom, some of the students also had some American friends and/or native English speakers as conversation partners and/or a host family that were Americans. The interaction with Americans also made the students to learn about the American culture and some social norms. For example, Student #1 reported that she sometimes invited other girls who were from different countries, including Americans, to her apartment to have lunch or dinner as well as spent some time together. For her, this interaction created an opportunity for them to learn about each other's country and social life. In a similar situation, Student #3 reported that one of the benefits of living in the U.S. is that he experienced "knowing about different people from different cultures" (Interview #2, Line 146).

This finding is consistent with previous studies which found that international students appreciated having a host family; benefited from interaction with a host family as well as the family benefited from such interaction – the student and family learned about each other's country, culture, values, social norms, and customs (Al Murshidi, 2014; Özturgut & Murphy, 2009; Yuan, 2011). This interaction resulted in mutual

understanding and improved the participants' world view. For example, a survey of over 3,400 international students by the Institute for the International Education of Students reveal that "study abroad leads to long lasting friendships with other U.S. students and still impacts current relationship... Seventy three percent [of these students] said the experience continues to influence the decisions they make in their family life" (Dwyer & Peters, 2004, p. 1).

Furthermore, the students reported being self-reliant and confident. This finding is not surprising because the students had no other choice but to rely on themselves almost everything because they were living in a foreign country where everything is different. In fact, some of the students didn't have any relative in the U.S. In other words, living in the U.S. helped improve their self-reliance and confidence. All the students attributed their experience living in the U.S. to have helped them become more independent, self-reliant, and confidence. For example, Student #4 explained his independence and self-confidence in the following statement:

I do many things by myself now. I cook, wash my clothes, and clean my apartment. Sometime I call my mother by Skype to help me with cooking something step by step. I also take care of all my bills and stuff. I now have many responsibilities (Interview #1, Line 361-364).

Student #5 shared similar experience. She explained that:

I have more freedom here [U.S.] to do anything I want. I discover my strengths and overcame my weaknesses. I depend on myself in many things without getting help. I now have more responsibilities than in my country and this because I am living away from my family (Interview #1, Line 475-478).

Student #1 also painted a similar picture on how she saw herself after moving to the U.S. to study at the English program:

I rely on myself in everything here [the U.S.]. This make me feel independent and confident. I feel that I am a very strong woman. I am a wife, a mother, and a student and I can do everything by myself. I face some problems here, which I couldn't confront in the past, but here I could do this (Interview #2, Line 181-184).

This finding aligns with the attribution theory in that these students overcame their challenges by being resilient and optimistic. As a result, they became more self-reliant and more confident.

After discussing the benefits and challenges they experienced living and studying in the U.S., at the university in particular, the students were asked to describe their ideal life in the U.S. This question was posed to the students to get a sense of their perception on how they envision their life should be like in the U.S. In other words, it's a way to understand the students' perception regarding things that need to be in place in order for them to have a more successful and positive experience living and studying in the U.S. The students reported a diversity of things they wanted to happen that could help them to live an ideal life in this country. The things reported are as follows:

- Finish/complete the English program. Graduate with a very good grade.
- Go to the university. Get a scholarship to the university.
- Have more time to socialize with friends from other cultures.
- Being more self-reliant.
- Finding daycare.

Specifically, Student #1 stated that her ideal life in the U.S. should look like this: "I hope that I finish the English classes in this program and go to the university. To find daycare to my son. I hope that I graduate with a very good grade" (Interview #2, Line

186-187). Student #2 said that completing the English program, getting a university scholarship from her government, and having more time to interact with people from other cultures as well as relying more on herself are the things that would help her to live an ideal life in the U.S. In addition to getting a university scholarship from his government, Student #4 said that he also wanted:

to have a car and go to other states and cities here [the U.S.]. Sometimes, I feel that I need to have to go to somewhere especially in the holidays or breaks. Also, if I have car I will be able to go out with my friends. Sometimes, even if I have to study or to do assignments, I feel that if I go out for some time, I will do it better and study better (Interview #2, Line 153-156).

However, Student #3 didn't envision any ideal life in the U.S. he wanted to complete the English program and return home. He said this – "I don't think about my life here because I just want to finish my study and back to my country. I don't want to have a life here" (Interview #2, Line 149-150).

Students' Cultural Experience

In addition to their social outcomes, Saudi students reported unique cultural experiences. Several themes related to culture emerged from the coding process. three themes were generated from many codes that were categorized into eight areas (see Table 3 in Appendix A). The coding process shows that Saudi students had a positive (success) and negative (challenge) cultural experience during their time in the U.S. learning the English language. This section presents and discusses the results related to each of these four cultural themes: (1) I always wonder of the way of thinking that American people have; (2) They make you feel that you are weird; (3) I should make some changes to my life

Theme 1: I always wonder of the way of thinking that American people have

“It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences.” Audre Lorde (BrainyQuote, n.d.).

As expected, the data illustrates the cultural and educational differences between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia as perceived by the students. There are unique differences between the two countries in terms of culture and educational system at the college/university level. The unique cultural difference will be presented first, followed by the educational system difference.

Cultural Differences

A major finding of this study is the cultural differences between Saudi Arabia and the U.S. that were reported by the Saudi students based on their lived-experience in this country. Some of the unique differences are summarized below:

- Type of clothes.
- Freedom/tolerance.
- Religion.
- Relationship between a woman and man.
- Interaction between a woman and man (e.g., touching)
- Thinking.

The list above indicates that there are many cultural differences between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. Firstly, clothes worn in Saudi Arabia are different than those in the U.S. People from Saudi Arabia dress differently than Americans, especially for women. Two Saudi female students reported feeling shocked when they first saw the way women

dress in America because to them its not modest and they only wear such clothes in the home. Student #1(a female) described the unique cultural differences as follows:

There is a very big different in the type of clothes, which I mean that the clothes that they wear in the street or out of the home are not suitable in our culture. We just wear these kinds of clothes in the home. So, I just felt weird when I first saw this. I think they also felt the same when they first saw us cover our head or hair. Sometime I feel the people look to me with a question mark in their head about why I wear Hijab or cover my hair, but sometime they just make me feel that they just understand that (Interview #1, Line 418-423).

The type of clothes people wear is mostly influenced, if not dictated, by one's culture. In this case, in Saudi Arabia, as in many Muslim/Arab countries, women are required to dress modestly, which includes wearing hijab or covering one's hair. This is because the Islam religion requires women to dress modestly. As a result, Muslim women either cover their hair and/or wear hijab all together. This clothing practice is the norm for women in Saudi Arabia and many Arab/Muslim countries.

As the above discussion suggests, there is a difference in religion. There is only one religion in Saudi Arabia (Islam), but America has many religions. This leads to difference in belief and sometime the way people behave. For example, boyfriend/girlfriend relationship is not allowed in Saudi Arabia because Islam prohibits having non-marital affair. But, this is the direct opposite in America, where having boyfriend or girlfriend is the norm.

In addition, one of the students felt that Americans have lots of freedom when compared to people in Saudi Arabia. According to Student #2, "they [Americans] have too much freedom. There is too much touch between men and women, over touch, in the public places, I just feel that there is no privacy in their life" (Interview #1, Line 246-

247). In other words, the student seems to suggest that the men and women (boys and girls) have freedom to interact with each other without much public restriction, especially in public places. In Saudi Arabia, the interaction between men and women are restricted, especially in public places. In fact, lots of public places are segregated for only men and only women. Therefore, it is not permitted for a man and woman to touch each other if they are not married. This rule applies to both when in public and at home. As a result, you don't see men and women socializing in public places and touching each other.

Another student actually mentioned this difference in religion. According to Student #5:

... One of these [cultural] differences is the religion. In my country, all people have the same religion and we strongly believe on it. Here people have different religions and some of them don't have any religion. Also, few of them believe on their religion. Also, having boyfriend or girlfriend or having children without getting married are not something suitable in my country (Interview #1, Line 246-250).

Another unique cultural difference is based on the idea of tolerance for multiculturalism. The students liked the diversity in the U.S. in that many different cultures live together in this country. The Saudi students mostly like that people in the U.S. accept and respect other cultures. While the students liked the tolerance and openness to other cultures that they observed in the U.S., some of them also acknowledged that some people are not so friendly to people that look different than them. For instance, Student #3 specifically stated:

I like how most people here respect other cultures. They are friendly and always smile with each other. They think of you as a human, they don't care about your religion, country or culture. But not all people here is like this. Some of them are racist and don't like us because we are Muslims (Interview #1, Line 274-277).

Student #4 also shared similar observation. According to him, “I like how most of Americans like to talk with other people even if they don’t know them. They greet you and smile in your face when they see you. In my country people just greet others who they know, they never say hi to any one they don’t know” (Interview #1, Line 295-307).

Finally, one of the students took note of the way people think in the U.S. as different than that in his culture. Specifically, Student #4 summarized his observation in the following statement:

I always wonder of the way of thinking that Americans people have. They think much about women and drink [alcohol]. In my country, women mean marriage and we don’t drink. Sometime I just feel that Americans are deceived by freedom. I don’t feel that they really have freedom. Do you even think that they selected Trump as a president by themselves? I don’t say that all Americans people think like that, but many of them are. There are Americans who are good in their works and always think about their families and take care of them. They don’t betray their wives or husbands. But in my country people care much about their families and parents. They meet every week if not every day. Here I just feel that each person is just care about her or himself. They don’t care about their family and they don’t see them for years (Interview #1, Line 295-307).

In addition to the unique cultural differences between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia, the students talked about the educational differences between the two countries. The next section presents these differences.

Differences between the University Experience in the U.S. and Saudi Arabia

The students reported differences between their U.S. educational experiences compared to that of their home country. Before discussing these differences, it is important to first describe the students’ perception of the American college education. Their perceptions of college education in the U.S. are based on these key concepts – students and teachers’ freedom, teaching ways, learning English, rules and respect.

Firstly, some of the students perceived American college education to be flexible and practiced freedom for students and teachers. But, they disliked the lack of respect that American students show to their teachers. For Student #2, while she liked the flexibility giving to students, she didn't like the fact that American students don't respect their teachers/professors. Student #3 also mentioned his dislike for students who don't respect teachers. According to him, "I don't like the lack of respect between students and their teachers. In my country, we really respect our teachers as we respect our parents" (Interview #1, Line 299-300).

Furthermore, one of the students perceived American education as giving teachers too much freedom and not giving student flexibility. Student #1 mentioned that while teachers have the freedom to write the course syllabus and choose class materials such as the textbooks for example, students are not giving flexibility in doing the class work assigned to them by their teachers. This is what she said: "I shocked in some aspect about education here. I always hear that American people have freedom and they can say their opinions about everything, but I really don't see this in the English program. Teachers don't like us to say our opinion in them or express our feeling. I heard that this is different in the university, but I don't know if this right or not" (Interview #1, Line 443-446). In fact, this student was critical about the education she was receiving at the program. She summarized her observation of her American education in the following statement on the basis of learning English and the rules governing education. According to her:

Learning English in the university in my country is better than here in the ways that the teachers use to teach, but here is better because you learn it from native

speakers. In my country, they teach you the principles of English that you will need, but here at this program they go very deep in something that we will never use in the university classes. For example, in the listening [class] teachers read your notes and graded them. They even put grades for spelling and words shortcuts that they give to us. I don't think that there is a professor who corrects or grades his or her students' notes. I don't say that we don't have to learn how to take notes, I really believe that this is very important, but there is no need to grade them. They can make us take notes and then give us questions to answer from our notes, so we will be able to learn how to take good notes that can help us to answer the test questions in the university classes. Something I like about American education is that they don't have decisive [strict] rules that they have to follow as my country. For example, in my country we have to wear uniform even in the universities (Interview #1, Line 446-461).

Student #3 also shared similar perception. She stated that:

I don't like the way that English institute here use in teaching students and the much work they give to us. I like the freedom that students, who are studying in the university, have such as getting acceptance in a major they want, working while they are studying, and having opening conversation with their professors (Interview #1, Line 269-272).

Student #4 perceived American college education in a better light than the English program. He explained that:

I don't know much about the American education. I don't really think that this program is present [representative of] the American education because I heard from students who just finished this English program and enter the university that class at the university are easier than classes in the English program. Even the way that teachers use to deal with their students is different. The university professors are more flexible and the works are much less (Interview #1, Line 326-330).

It is interesting that the students viewed the U.S. college education system in a good way, but were critical of their English language program. This may be due to the evaluation of their first-hand experience with it (as students in the program) versus their perception of the American college education based on comments from friends who were college students at the university. This is interesting in that perception and reality are not

the same. The students' evaluation of the program is based on reality (their first-hand experience as students in the program) and their view is based on perception of college education in the U.S. For example, Student #3 said that, "I don't know much about the education system here, but as I said I like the freedom in the universities and I don't like the way that the English language program use to deal with us." (Interview #1, Line 297-299).

Some of the students' perception discussed above hinted on the differences between college education in their country and the U.S. In general, the students mentioned specific educational differences between the two countries. These differences consisted of student's and teacher's gender, the relationship between teachers and students, rules, and university acceptance/admission.

In terms of schooling, the biggest difference between Saudi Arabia and the U.S. is that in this country, both men and women attend the same university and sit in the same classroom. However, this is not the case in Saudi Arabia, where men and women go to separate university where classrooms are segregated by gender. Some of the students specifically mentioned this gender difference at the university. Even though they were surprised at first to be in a classroom with the opposite sex, especially for the female Saudi students, they seem to have gradually adjusted to this significant change. For example, Student #1 specifically reported that "the biggest thing is that classes here have both male and female in the same class. I don't use to have this in my country. We have separate schools. This maybe not easy at the beginning especially for us as female, but it

is not something bad” (Interview #1, Line 426-428). Student #2 also reported similar experience.

Secondly, the students talked about the relationship between students and teachers, including the issue of respect for teachers. As discussed in the social experience section, Saudi students viewed the relationship between a teacher and students to be built on respect for the teacher. This is because culturally the teacher is to be respected. Therefore, these students were surprised at the kind of relationship that they observed between American students and their teachers. Student #1 categorically explained her observation in the following statement:

There is a big difference in the relationship between the teachers and students. In my country, the rule is that you as a student has to respect the teacher because she teaches you. Students can't talk with teachers in anything that not relate to the school. Here I see my husband and my friends invite their professors to their apartment for lunch or dinner and go out with them to restaurants or cinema. I really like and respect the way that we have in my country of respecting our teachers, but also I think that being friend is not a bad thing. It is positive more than negative (Interview #1, Line 426-435).

Student #2 also shared similar observation. She found it hard to understand the casual relationship between students and teachers in this country. She expressed her feeling in the following statement:

I also feel hard to understand the way that students use to deal with their professors here. I mean that in my country we strongly respect our teachers and professors. I believe that is good to have a friendly relationship between students and teachers, but respect is also very important in this relationship (Interview #1, Line 250-259).

Student #3 gave a vivid example of the student's first-hand experience on respect for teachers. According to him: “In my country, you must call the instructor “teacher,”

you can't call him just by his name. This is disrespect, but here is the opposite. Most teacher don't like us to call them teacher and even some of them get upset if we do this" (Interview #2, Line 81-84). In other words, calling a teacher by his/her name is disrespectful. The respectful way is to call him/her by his/her title such as "teacher" or "professor." For example, saying "good morning teacher/professor" is more respectful than saying "good morning John."

Student #4 actually liked the student-teacher relationship in the U.S. According to him:

We have a good relationship with our teachers also in my country, but I just feel that here you can be more open when you talk with teachers and also we have more than one way to connect with them such as, email, phone, office hours and others. Talking with teachers allow us to know them more and in turn to understand them (Interview #1, Line 310-314).

In fact, Student#5 saw the student-teacher relationship in the U.S. as more beneficial than the one in her country. She clearly explained her observation as follows:

I think the universities in my country is very good and the curriculums are great, but the negative aspect there is the ways that teachers or professors use in teaching. Also, the relationship between the students and professors are not open enough for both of them to acquire understanding of each other. But here is the opposite. Even that I don't enter the university yet, but I know from my friends that the professors try to use different ways or methods in teaching and they have a good relationship with their students (Interview #1, Line 253-259).

Thirdly, the students stressed on the issue of freedom/flexibility that students have in the U.S. when compared to Saudi Arabia. While flexibility is a common characteristic of the America college education, strict rules seem to be a common theme in Saudi Arabia's college education. For instance, Student #2 stated that:

The education system in Saudi Arabia is very strict and hard. Here I think the education system is more flexible and give us more chances to study what we

want. Here also have less rules in the schools and universities (Interview #1, Line 250-259).

Student #3 also shared similar observation. According to him:

I don't attend the university here yet but I know that there is more freedom here than the universities in my country. Also, there is more chance to get admission in a major you like. The rules here are better. I have accepted in a university in my country. I just spent one week there and then I dropped all my classes. The reasons were that they put me in a major that I am not interested about and also they made us took a placement test for English. They put me in a level and I just feel that this level is very hard for me. I told them that I want to back one level of the level I am in, but they refused this. Sometime, I feel that this program is like the university in my country. There is no freedom in it (Interview #1, Line 280-287).

The ease of getting admission to the university in the U.S. was also mentioned by the students when compared to their country. Two of the students reported that it was easy to get university admission in the U.S. than in Saudi Arabia. According to Student #2, "in Saudi Arabia is very hard to get university acceptance in a major you want even if you have the requirement GPA for it" (Interview #1, Line 253-254).

Finally, two of the students mentioned that all students in all grades (private and public schools) in Saudi Arabia wear school uniforms, even those at the university. So, it was surprising for them to see that students here don't wear school uniform. As students #1 stated, "in my country we have to wear uniform even in the universities" (Interview #1, Line 458-459). Student #2 also said, "in my country students ware uniform in all school grades even in the university" (Interview #1, Line 250-251).

In this study, Saudi students experienced academic culture shock as discussed in previous sections. For example, the students were shocked by the gender-mixing in their classrooms, including having a teacher who is of the opposite sex as well as the perceived

lack of respect for teachers in this country by American students. The students struggled to adjust to this different educational environment. Nevertheless, they were open minded and managed to adjust to this new educational environment.

Theme 2: They make you feel that you are weird

“We need diversity of thought in the world to face the new challenges.” Tim Berners-Lee (BrainyQuote, n.d.).

The cultural difficulties experienced by the students fall within the context of lack of cultural knowledge that may have led to cultural misunderstanding between the Saudi students and other people from different cultures. Another difficulty is situated with the context of language acquisition in terms of cultural connotations attached to certain words and phrases.

Firstly, the lack of knowing and understanding the culture of the host community may have created some difficulties for these students during their time as students at the university. For example, one of the students reported being afraid of her teacher because of her experience with teachers in Saudi Arabia. In her country, teachers are giving the utmost respect and therefore it is disrespectful to complain, or argue or criticize a teacher. So, she assumed the same to be the case in the U.S. Even after observing that the student-teacher relationship in this country is different than that in Saudi Arabia, this student struggled to change her mindset. Student #1 explained that:

Because of culture differences, sometime I am scare to ask teachers or let say to complain or objects. I am afraid that because of culture differences, she doesn't understand me or understand something else that I don't mean. Sometime, you don't know what are the suitable words that you need to use to explain something because one words have different meanings in English (Interview #1, Line 509-514)

Furthermore, some of the students complained about the way other people make them feel, especially when they were having a conversation about cultural differences. For example, Student #1 said that although she sometimes felt comfortable talking to other people to learn about their culture as well as tell them about her own culture, “sometime they make you feel that you are eccentric and you did something strange” (Interview #1, Line 522). In other words, sometimes some people are either unwelcoming or looked at the students with strange eyes when they talk to them about their culture such as the reason why women have to cover their hair or wear the hijab. As one student stated, “Sometime I feel the people look to me with a question mark in their head about why I wear Hijab or cover my hair” (Student #1, Interview #1, line 420-422). Another student also added, “Some people asked about the reason of covering our hair. Some of them show you that even they don’t believe in this, they respect it. But unfortunately, few of them don’t respect it and feel that we are strange and they look oddly to us” (Student #5, Interview #1, Line 313-315)

Also, some of the students reported having difficulties, at first, to adjust to the gender- mixing of their classroom. As mentioned earlier in this section, the education system in Saudi Arabia is segregated by gender in that there are female-only and male-only schools and classrooms. In other words, female and male don’t mix in the same school and therefore don’t share the same classroom. So, one can imagine the cultural shock experienced by these students when they got enrolled in the English language program where the classrooms are made up of males and females. For example, Student #4 explained his struggle in adjusting to having a female teacher. He said:

I feel hard to adapt myself with having a female teacher. It was not easy for me because I really don't know how to deal with women who I don't know. I was not feeling comfortable because I don't used to have a female teacher. I was afraid that they [teachers] may misunderstand me and think that I do not respect them. This is something can happen because they have different cultures than mine (Interview #1, Line 333-338).

Also, Student #1 shared her experience on being in a classroom with the opposite sex. According to her, "at the beginning I really felt hard to talk with male students and be with them at same groups, but this is not something difficult for me now" (Interview #1, Line 509-514).

Finally, a major finding, not surprising, these students were scared of the current political climate in the U.S. They were scared that something bad may happen to them. For example, they don't want to go home (Saudi Arabia) to visit their families during the break because of fear that they would not be allowed to return to the U.S. to complete their study; even though Saudi Arabia is not on the list of countries banned from entering the U.S. by President Trump. This political climate is affecting them negatively, especially in their feelings of being targeted because of their religious affiliation. They are scared and worried. Student #1 clearly explained her worry, which is similar to the feelings of the other students. According to her:

I have some difficulties with the new politics or president. I think most of us are experiencing this at this time. We are really afraid to [go] back to our country and they [U.S. government] cancel our visas. I am afraid more for my husband. He is studying at the university and he has finished two years of his studying. I don't want him to lose his study here. Even that people here in Cedar Falls and the staff in the the English program respect us and told us that they want us here, but I still nervous about that (Interview #1, Line 515-520).

Despite all the challenges that come with any change, these students reported some benefits they received/gained as a result of studying in the U.S. In other words, they gained some cultural benefits while studying at the English program.

Theme 3: I should make some changes to my life

"Change is our chance to experience the new, to identify additional options and generate different opportunities." Barbara Lucas (BrainyQuote, n.d.).

The Saudi students made good progress in tackling the challenges and negative things they faced in the U.S. They were resilient and adjusted to life in this country. This section discusses the students' cultural adaptation within the context of the adjustment they've made after coming to the U.S., including changes they made in their lives in order to adjust to life in this country. They reported adapting to life in the U.S. within the context of social and cultural theme. Many things represented the students' adaptation, which are listed below:

- Living without their family.
- Driving.
- Going to the supermarket without being accompanied by a husband.
- Interacting with the opposite sex.
- Celebrating American holidays.
- Learning how to cook and wash clothes.
- Trying to be more friendly and extrovert.

Firstly, some of the students indicated their life have changed since coming to the U.S. For example, two of the students mentioned they adapted to interacting with the

opposite sex. Specifically, one of the female student expressed having adapted to some of the American way of life such as driving a car, going to the supermarket without her husband, and talking to men who are not family members. According to this female student:

The hardest thing I adapted myself to it is living here without my family, my mom, dad, my brothers and sister. To be honest, I still struggle with this, but I try to deal with it. I adapted myself with many things like driving, going to supermarket without my husband to buy our stuff, talking with males (Interview #1, Line 463-466).

Even though it was hard at first to adapt to this way of life, the female student reported adapting well now. This is a big change for the students mostly because in their home country, they were not allowed to drive, go to super market without the company of a male relative and interact with other men. For the female students, this is a huge adjustment to be made while living in the U.S. In fact, one of the male students also reported having to adjust to interacting with the opposite sex.

One of the male students acknowledged trying to adapt to having a female teacher. This is very different for him because in his country, he only had male teachers due to the segregation of school by gender (i.e., no co-ed schooling in Saudi Arabia). The following statement describes Student #4's feelings regarding the change he had to make in terms of interacting with a female teacher. He said:

I feel hard to adapt myself with having a female teacher. It was not easy for me because I really don't know how to deal with women who I don't know... I was not feeling comfortable because I don't used to have a female teacher. I was afraid that they [female teachers] may misunderstand me and think that I do not respect them. This is something can happen because they have different cultures than mine... I believe that because I decided to come to here, I should make some changes to my life especially the kind of changes that will make me learn more (Interview #1, Line 333-354).

The issue of adjusting to interact or mix with the opposite sex is common among Arab students from the Gulf region, whom are predominantly from Muslim countries. For example, in his study of the coping strategies used by Gulf students, including those from Saudi Arabia, in addressing the cultural challenges they faced at American universities, Al Murshidi (2014) found that while all the students made some improvement in interacting with the opposite sex on campus, the students from the United Arab Emirate were comfortable in working with the opposite sex in the classroom than were students from Saudi Arabia. In other words, Saudi students were less comfortable working with a different gender in the classroom than Emirati students.

Moreover, some of the cultural adjustments have to do with being more independent and self-reliant. Since coming to the U.S., both male and female students reported changing their way of life in order to adjust to life in a different cultural environment. For example, some of them mentioned becoming more extroverts, learning how to cook and wash clothes as well as celebrating American holidays such as Christmas and Halloween. Specifically, Student #2 said this:

I become more serious, discreet and I need to depend on myself in many things. I am still trying to adapt myself with washing my clothes in a public laundry. I am living in a building, which has a common laundry for all people who live in it. I really feel hard about this. I even tried to wash my clothes by my hand, but this was very hard too. I also, still don't know how to cook. I tried to cook, but the result was really not good (Interview #1, Line 274-279).

On the other hand, Student #3 mentioned changing his personality in order to interact with people from different cultures. According to him: "I try to know some people. As I said I am introvert person and I don't like to meet or interact with other

people, but now I am trying to change. In my country, I don't have more than three friends, but here I am trying to make some friends and talk with people. I am trying to be more friendly and extrovert. In general, I am trying to change my personality. I become more independent and confident" (Interview #1, Line 302-306).

However, one of the students didn't see the need to adapt to the American culture. Here is what he said: "I don't interact with American people, so I don't feel that I need to adapt myself much with their culture. Sometime, I went with my friends to places that celebrate the American holiday such as Halloween and Christmas, I don't feel hard to involved in these events" (Student #3, Interview #1, Line 308-311).

Despite this student's lack of adaptation to life in the U.S., majority of the other students made tremendous improvements in changing some of their thinking and way of life to adapt to their new home. While some of them accepted the interaction with the opposite sex in the classroom, others became more independent and self-reliant as well as became more culturally aware. In general, the students made some changes in their life style to adapt to the new social and cultural environment they are living in the U.S.

On the other hand, some of the students perceived the American culture to be selfish, and people have too much freedom, which in turn make them do bad things such as not having respect for teachers, chasing girls, drinking alcohol and so forth. Therefore, these students didn't want to live this kind of life and thus did not want to have anything to do with the American culture. Nevertheless, most the Saudi students made significant progress in adapting to social and cultural norms in the U.S.

Common Themes

After careful analysis of the themes discussed in this chapter that are related to the students' academic, language, social, and cultural experiences, two common themes emerged. These two major themes are: (1) I got pros and cons of this experience; and (2) I got more than I expected from this experience. In other words, the students experienced both positive and negative things related to their learning and living in the U.S. At the end, they got more than they were expecting. For this reason, these common themes paint a clear picture of the students' overall experience on living in the U.S. and studying English at the English program or institute. These common themes are discussed in the following sections.

Theme 1: I got pros and cons of this experience

"All of our experiences can lead to a much richer life if we allow our minds to carry forth these experiences and build on what is good and work to eliminate what is bad." Byron Pulsifer (BrainyQuote, n.d.).

Academic Experience

The results also show students' perception about their current experience in the program. The data reveal both a positive and negative experiences learning English at this program.

When it comes to their overall experience learning English, the students expressed a mixture of feelings. The results illustrate a mixed experience among students characterized by some positive and negative learning experience as a second language learner at the university. Firstly, *Student #4* believed that it is better to learn English in the U.S., at this program in particular, because the student will learn it from people whose

English is their native language. In other words, living and studying English in a land where English is the native language is the best way to learn the language as one is surrounded by people who speak it. Moreover, *Student #5* described her learning experience as being mixed with some positive and negative feelings. She reported feeling that learning English at this program or institute is sometimes easy and interesting. Interestingly, all of the students related their learning experience to the teachers. As such, positive experience with teachers helps boost students' perceptions and satisfaction with the program.

Student #3 also described his overall experience learning English in the program both in positive and negative light. While he felt good about learning English at this institute, he sometimes regret coming to the study in the U.S. He hoped he had not made this journey to America to study abroad. He hoped he had just got an admission from a university in Saudi Arabia and study there. His negative experience may be due to the fact that he is still struggling to adjust to living and studying in the Iowa and the U.S. for that matter.

Finally, *Student #5* described her learning experience as being mixed with some positive and negative feelings. She reported that at times she just felt it is very hard and impossible. She interestingly mentioned that her learning experience is linked to the teachers because they play a key role in her learning experience. Again, the role of the teacher came up as an important factor that influence the overall experience of nearly all the students interviewed for this study.

Social and Culture Experience

The students who participated in this study have unique cultural experiences. As is expected, they faced positive and negative cultural experiences while studying in the U.S. Some of the positive experiences includes having knowledge about different cultures, respect for other cultures, and gaining an ability to communicate effectively among diverse cultural groups. Some of the negative experiences include men shaking hands of the female students, being ridiculed for wearing hijab, as well as being stereotyped because of their religious affiliation.

The students experienced some positive things related to culture. The biggest positive cultural experience reported by all the students was learning about other cultures. This knowledge helped them improve their communication skill with people from different cultural backgrounds. According to Student #1, “the most positive thing is having knowledge about different cultures such as, Chinese, Korean, and others. I really learn more than I expected about these cultures” (Interview #1, Line 483-484). On a similar note, Student #4 stated that “most positive thing was learning about different cultures. As I said I know many people here from different countries and cultures and this really help me to acquire much knowledge about these cultures” (Interview #1, Line 367-369). Another student shared similar experience. Student #5 stated: “I learn about many cultures and meet many people from different countries. I learn how to understand other cultures not just respect them” (Interview #1, Line 295-296). In other words, these students had a positive cultural experience in that they were exposed to other cultures, which resulted in learning about such cultures and interacting with individuals from

different cultural backgrounds. In other words, they improved their global understanding of other cultures.

Student #2 and #3 took it one step further by acknowledging that their experience in the U.S. led them to respect other cultures now more than ever before, especially for the foreigners living in Saudi Arabia. For example, Student #3 said this: “now, I am thinking of people from different culture who are working in my country by different way because I am living the same experience now” (Interview #1, Line 321-322).

This positive cultural experience in the U.S. helped some of the students to gain respect for other cultures. For example, Student #1 said that:

... Now I understand them [other people] more and I can interact with them easier than before. I always believe that you have to respect people for their personality not for their culture. If I respect them they will respect me (Interview #1, Line 487-490).

Student #3 also mentioned similar experience. “I learn to respect these cultures more and don’t care about where are the people from, I deal with from or what are their religions,” he explained (Interview #1, Line 316-318). This was also true for Student #2 who said, “I like how the people here accept and respect other cultures. They like to know and to have information about these cultures” (Interview #1, Line 291-292).

One way some of the students showed their respect for the American culture were by attending unique American celebrations such as Christmas and Halloween. This is because, according to Student #2, “I just feel that there is no problem if we share others in their events or holidays even if we do not believe about them. It was a good and great experience for me to engage in such events such as Halloween and Christmas” (Interview #1, Line 298-301). Student #4 also said:

I always respect other cultures, but my experience here makes me know more about different cultures and this make me deal with these cultures by better way because I now understand them more. When you know them more, you will respect them better. After living here. I learn that even if I don't believe about something, I can respect it and even celebrate it such as the American holiday, Christmas and Thanksgiving (Interview #1, Line 374-379).

Student #5 shared similar experience:

I always respect other cultures, but I learn here how to understand them and respect their beliefs. For example, after I understand the reasons of celebrating the Americans holidays like Halloween, Thanksgiving and Christmas, I now respect them and even don't have any problem to attend their celebrations (Interview #1, Line 301-304).

In addition to learning about new cultures and respecting them, the students also reported to have experienced improvement in inter-cultural communication. They reported to have improved their skills in communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds. Student #1 provides an example of how her inter-cultural communication skills have improved since coming to the U.S. According to her:

... Now I can understand them [individuals from other cultures] more and I can interact with them easier than before. For example, at the beginning when teachers ask us to make groups in the class, I was very careful in talking with the students from other cultures and I always felt tense in making discussion, but now I enjoy talking with these students and I feel comfortable to talk about my culture and hear about their culture and I always ask question to learn more (Interview #1, Line 493-498).

Student #4 also reported similar result. He said, "I now can understand them more so I can communicate better with them. It is like when you talk with someone who has a religion even if is different from your religion, he will understand you better than someone who don't believe in any religion" (Interview #1, Line 382-384).

In fact, Students #2, #4, and #5 reported feeling comfortable and liked the fact that they were able talk to other people about their culture. For instance, according to

Student #2, “I like to make other [people] know about my culture. I like to answer all their questions and wondering” (Interview #1, Line 294-295). She also said that: “at the beginning I was very afraid to talk with people from different cultures. I was worry that I may say something and they misunderstand it. But now I don’t have this feeling. I know how to communicate with them without having this misunderstanding. I can through the conversation know what is the suitable things in their cultures and what is not” (Interview #1, Line 304-308). In fact, Student #5 reported being more open now and able to have a conversation with individuals with different cultures.

The fact that some of these students were comfortable and like to talk about their own culture to others with the goal of helping others learn about their culture is consistent with previous findings. For example, Wu et al., (2015) found that the international students who participated in their study reported they reacted to prejudice by being willing to talk about their cultures with others to foster mutual understanding across different cultures.

However, at the time of the interview, Student #3 was still working on his inter-cultural communication. He acknowledged that “I am trying to do this [communicate with individuals from different cultures], but it is not easy for me because I am not willing in that. But I feel that this is very important for me to learn English faster and better” (Interview #1, Line 304-308). The good thing is that he is trying to learn and improve his inter-cultural communication skill.

International students in general faces cultural barriers due to cultural shock as a result of dealing with a difference value system, communication pattern, interpersonal

relationship, prejudice and discrimination (Al Murshidi, 2014; Lillyman & Bennett, 2014; Liu, 2011; Özturgut & Murphy, 2009; Wu et al., 2015; Yan & Berliner, 2013; Yuan, 2011). In this study, Saudi students reported negative cultural experiences. Their unique negative experiences include men shaking hands of the female students, being ridiculed for wearing the hijab, as well as being stereotyped because of their religious affiliation.

Firstly, some of the students reported that cultural barriers made it difficult for them to interact with Americans. Maybe it is because of the difference in their cultures. For example, stereotype and discrimination was one negative thing experienced by some of these students. Student #3 said that: “some of them [Americans] are racist and don’t like us because we are Muslims” (Interview #1, Line 276-277). This sentiment was shared by majority of the students. Some of them felt that people look at them differently because they are Muslims. For the female students, the way they dress also resulted in being stereotyped because of the way they look.

Previous studies have found similar results related to international students’ experience of prejudice and discrimination (Al Murshidi, 2014; Lillyman & Bennett, 2014; Özturgut & Murphy, 2009; Wu et al., 2015). For example, in their study of the challenges of and adjustment by international students in the U.S., Wu et al., (2015) found that these faced both prejudice and discrimination in their social and academic lives. In particular, “they [the students] were marginalized in class or in social events.” They also said that “... American peers might not understand their backgrounds, and they made conclusions for them” (Wu et al., 2015, p.6)

Another negativity experienced by the female students have to do with the way they dress and choose to interact with men. The female students reported a feeling of being ridiculed for wearing hijab as well as men making strange faces when the female students refused to shake their hands. Even the male Saudi students agreed that the female students experienced such negative attitude towards them. Specifically, Student #4 said “sometime, I feel that some people here think that our culture is stupid because women have to cover their hair and most parts of their body and men cannot shake hand or hug any woman” (Interview #1, Line 387-389). In fact, one of the female students shared her personal experience on refusing to shake the hands of men and for covering her hair in the following statement:

I still struggling with some males who have difficulty to understand that in my religion or culture women can't shake hand with any man. I really embarrass of this and I know they embarrass too. I know that is very hard for them to understand this. Some people asked about the reason of covering our hair. Some of them show you that even they don't believe in this, they respect it. But unfortunately, few of them don't respect it and feel that we are strange and they look oddly to us (Student #5, Interview #1, Line 310-315).

Student #2 also said “there are many people who ask me about the reason of covering my hair. I don't feel upset about this and I like to explain the reason to them, but which make me upset some time that some of these people make ridicule” (Interview #1, Line 314-317).

Theme 2: I got more than I expected from this experience

“Experience is the teacher of all things.” Julius Caesar (BrainyQuote, n.d.).

The benefits reported by the students can be summarized as follows:

- Learning English from native speakers.

- More work or job opportunities/better career prospects.
- Becoming more independent and confident.

First of all, almost all of the student (4 of them) mentioned that one of the big benefits of studying in the U.S. is that it helped them to develop English language proficiency mostly because they get to learn English from as well get to interact with native speakers. This then helped them to learn the language much faster and better.

According to Student #4:

Studying here is important for me because I can practice the English language more. I can practice my speaking, listening, reading, and writing more than if I study English in my country. Here I use English in everywhere and in any time, but if I study English in my country, I will just use it in the class. Practicing make my brain remember the words and know how to use them correctly (Interview #1, Line 319-323).

For Student #1, studying in the U.S. “gives me a big and important chance to learn English from native speakers.” (Interview #1, Line 439-440).

Another benefit relates to cultural awareness. One of the student specifically reported that studying in the U.S. gave her the opportunity to learn about other cultures and interact with people from different countries. According to Student #5:

...This is a very great chance for me to learn English and know about other cultures. I still miss my family and I am waiting for summer to go back and see them, but we have to take advantage of any opportunity in our life. As I said it is opportunity to learn something different and to meet different people and know about different cultures (Interview #1, Line 263-267).

In addition to becoming more independent and self-confident as a result of studying abroad, these students mentioned that studying in the U.S. would help improve their career prospect by helping them get a better job. In other words, a college degree from the U.S. would improve their chances of getting a better job back in their home

country. For Student #1, “the degree from here will give me more work chances than the degree from Saudi Arabia” (Interview #1, Line 440-441). Other students shared similar optimism. According to Student #2, “studying here is important for me because here I can study the major I want to study. Also, the degree I will get from here is better because it will provide more chance for me in getting carrier” (Interview #1, Line 266-268). Student #4 also described the benefits of studying in the U.S. in terms of improving his prospect of getting a better job. According to him: “having a degree from here will provide more chances in getting carrier” (Interview #1, Line 323-324).

The above finding is similar to results from previous studies on international students. Many research on international students have found that some of the benefits related to studying abroad include better job/career prospects; improved language proficiency; learning about different cultures and meeting people from different countries; educational attainment; and inter-cultural development (Al Murshidi, 2014; Dwyer & Peters, 2004; Özturgut & Murphy, 2009). For example, Dwyer and Peters (2004) observed that as a result of studying broad, most international students reported that their experience helped them to better understand their own culture, values, and biases as well as motivated them to make friends from different cultures.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore the academic, social, and cultural experience of a group of international students from Saudi Arabia who were studying English as a second language in the English Program at a Midwest University in the United States. The main focus was to identify and explain the differences, successes, challenges, and/or difficulties experienced by these students. The study attempted to answer the research questions below:

- (1) What is the Saudi students' experience in the English language program at a Midwest University in the U.S.?
- (2) What is/are Saudi students' social/cultural experiences in the U.S.? and
- (3) What strategies are used to overcome challenges and difficulties?

After careful analysis of the data, which included in depth coding of the interview transcripts, specific themes emerged for each of the study's focus area (academic, cultural, and social). In addition, two common themes emerged from the students' perspectives on their overall experience living and studying in the U.S. The common themes focus on the students' perspectives on the benefits and bad things they experienced while studying English as well as their overall assessment of their social and cultural experience.

This chapter summarizes and discusses the findings for each theme within the context of the students' academic, social, and cultural experiences. Then a broader discussion will be centered on the challenges and successes experienced by these students

and their overall evaluation of their learning experience at the university and the English program. After this, the chapter will situate the overall findings within the context of the conceptual framework relating to attribution. The chapter will conclude with a recommendation for future research.

Academic Experience

As one of the focuses of this study was to examine the students' academic and language experience, the coding process revealed six related themes that came directly from the students' perspectives on their academic/language experience. These themes are: (1) I was a good student before I came here; (2) I didn't learn much English in my country; (3) I try to have some study habits; (4) I try my best to overcome my challenges and be successful; (5) It depends on the teachers; and (6) Understand me before teaching me. To synthesize and avoid redundancy in discussing findings of this study, the themes are clustered in a way to help provide a holistic discussion of the results presented in chapter four.

The first two themes (1 and 2) relate to students' prior experiences. In other words, these themes relate to the students' academic standing and English language background before coming to the U.S. All of the five research participants viewed themselves as good or successful students before coming to the U.S., although they had limited proficiency with English. They also perceived themselves to be in very good academic standings while studying in Saudi Arabia. It is important to know this background information because it is helpful in understanding the students' academic strengths. Knowing about their perceived prior academic standing as well as their English

proficiency level may help provide insight into the likelihood for them to academically succeed in their study abroad journey.

In addition, themes (3 and 4) suggest that all the students possessed skills or qualities that enabled them to be successful in their learning. These students had good study habits and positive learning attitudes. They worked hard to overcome the learning difficulties and challenges they faced. For example, they spent hours each day studying and completing schoolwork; they were well organized; took notes while studying; and sought help from teachers, on-campus student support services, and other people with their schoolwork. However, despite their good study habits, the participants experienced some learning challenges that included problems with spelling and grammar, reading comprehension, listening and speaking difficulties, and communication with native-English speakers.

Despite those learning challenges, the students made very good progress to overcome their difficulties. As their study habits reveal, they worked very hard to become successful in their learning. They explained their learning progress in that they were becoming more proficient with the language, improved their skills in reading, writing, listening, speaking with native-speakers as well as making class presentations and passing classes. In essence, these students were overcoming their academic difficulties and making progress in their learning. This finding is important as it shed light on the resilient nature of this group of students. They are hardworking and persistent, and as a result, were overcoming their learning difficulties. As will be shown later in this chapter, this finding is consistent with previous studies on international students. They are in

general hard working, possess good academic skills, and have positive attitudes, which in turn helps them to overcome their study abroad academic and language challenges.

Finally, the last two themes (5 and 6) relate to the students' perceptions of the teachers at the program. All of the students perceived teachers in this program as central to their overall learning experience. While some of them held positive views, some of them were not so happy with their experience with some teachers in the program. What this finding reveal is that a teacher plays a key role in the experience of the English language learner. A teacher ultimately influences the outcome of a student's overall experience learning ESL.

In this case, the Saudi students overwhelmingly emphasized the influence of the interaction they had with their teachers on their overall experience in the program. For this reason, the research participants recommended that teachers do their best to first get to know them better on a personal level. In order to effectively teach this group of students, the participants suggest teachers get to learn about their cultural background, prior academic experience, and their learning difficulties. By making this effort to understand their students, teachers can, in the process of getting to know and understand their students, learn about the unique differences among their students. Knowing how uniquely different their students are, teachers can be in a better position to tailor their teaching style, methods, strategies, and learning support to each student. This then could help improve the student-teacher relationship, which in turn could result in effective teaching and positive learning experience. Therefore, ESL teachers need to be aware of this finding and try to understand their students' learning experience by having a

conversation with each student to figure-out how best to support them to get a positive experience in the classroom, on an individual basis. This is because a holistic approach to understanding students' academic, language, social, and cultural experience is crucial to creating a positive learning environment that fosters a better learning experience for ESL students.

Social Experience

Another area of the study was focused on exploring the students' social experiences. For this study area, these four themes emerged; (1) I spend most of my time in studying and doing assignment; (2) I feel more comfortable to have friends from my culture; (3) I discover my strengths and overcome my weaknesses; and (4) Do what you can, with what you have, where you are. Each of these themes will be summarized, followed by discussion on the importance of these findings.

The saying by Emily Osment that "balancing school and social life can be difficult" directly depicts the lived-experience of the research participants. The students struggled to gain a balance between school and their social life. This is evident in theme 1, which illustrates the difficulty students faced in juggling their schoolwork and engaging in social interaction and/or participating in social events/activities. This theme portrays the significant amount of schoolwork and time devoted to studying made it difficult for these students to engage in social interaction as much as they would have liked to. Despite their time consuming daily routine focused on school and family, these students managed to have some kinds of social life.

In particular, they managed to become friends with individuals from different

cultures (theme 2). Even though some of them preferred to develop friendship with students from their country rather than having friends from other countries, some of them changed their mindset and were comfortable enough to develop friendship with individuals whom were not from Saudi Arabia. This may have been the case mostly because studying abroad exposed students to the outside world in that they were now living in a foreign country, in a community and academic setting that is made up of people from different parts of the world. In fact, this English program is made up of students and staff from different countries.

Moreover, a major benefit from studying abroad is improved personal growth. Studying at a Midwest University in the U.S. helped the participants to discover their strengths and overcome their weaknesses (theme 3). The Saudi students made good progress in tackling the challenges and negative social things they faced in the U.S. For this reason, the participants took advantage of socially-related opportunities created by the program such as on-campus social activities/events, conversation partner; host family, and friends from another culture; and trying to interact socially with other students from different countries. This was made possible because the students came to the realization to make the best out of their study abroad experience. The participants did what they can, with what they have and where they were living (theme 4). They had a positive spirit and were optimistic.

The above social experience findings describe an important benefit of studying abroad that relates to personal growth. None of the participants had travelled outside Saudi Arabia prior to their educational journey to the U.S. For the first time in their lives,

they were exposed to people from different social and cultural backgrounds. This exposure in a diverse environment posed serious social challenges to the students. But, ultimately, they took advantage of this opportunity and started interacting with people from different social and cultural background. This is important, as previous studies have also found, international students in general gain personal growth as a result of their social experience in their host community or country. This finding is important because it reveals that the participants gained personal growth, which was manifested in being self-reliant, self-confident, becoming daring, and learning about other countries and cultures.

Cultural Experience

As is expected from anyone who moved to a foreign country, cultural experience is bound to happen. The participants experienced unique cultural outcomes that were gained as a result of moving to the U.S. The experience ranged from cultural shock to cultural awareness. The three themes that emerged under culture are: (1) I always wonder of the way of thinking that American people have; (2) They make you feel that you are weird; and (3) I should make some changes to my life. As a result of the differences between the participants' culture and their host nation (the U.S.), it was interesting the students observed the difference in thinking. They acknowledged their American peers' thinking is very different than their own thinking, especially in relation to respect for teachers and the interactions between male and female (theme 1). While it is common in this country for male and female to socially interact with one another in public, including dating, the Saudi students, especially the females, thought it was inappropriate because,

for example, females and males cannot shake hands or hug each other or go on dates in Saudi Arabia.

Also, cultural differences can lead to an unwelcoming outcome such as feeling weird about the way one looks at you or interacts with you. Some of the students reported that some Americans made them feel weird because of the way they dress, speak, and possibly interact with each other (theme 2). This feeling of weirdness may have come from the cultural difficulties experienced by the students, which falls within the context of lack of cultural knowledge that may have led to cultural misunderstanding between the Saudi students and other people from different cultures. Despite the feeling of being weird and the experience of cultural shock, students recognized and were anxious to make changes in their lives (theme 3). They tried their best to adjust to life in the U.S. and overcome the cultural difficulties they experienced.

The above finding is interesting in that despite the cultural difficulties the participants experienced, they managed to adapt to their new environment. They were resilient and adjusted to life in this country. Almost all of the students indicated that their life changed in some way since coming to the U.S. For example, they adapted to interacting with the opposite sex; living without their family, driving, and celebrating American holidays. So, these students became resilient to the difficulties they faced and made tremendous progress in their learning and personal life.

Common Themes

After careful analysis of the emerging themes relating to the students' academic, language, social and cultural experiences, two common themes emerged. These two

major common themes are: (1) I got pros and cons of this experience; (2) I got more than I expected from this experience. In other words, the students experienced both positive and negative things related to their learning and living in the U.S. At the end, they got more from studying abroad than they were expecting. For this reason, this chapter will contextualize these two common themes within the framework of the attribution theory. This is because the students attributed their challenges and successes to certain things such as strategies used by them and the teaching strategies used by their teachers, seeking support from friends and families, bad teachers, and so forth. In addition, the theme related to the students' report that they got more than they expected will be discussed within the context of the goals of international studies (i.e., goals and benefits of study abroad). This will help situate the students' evaluation on what they perceived to have gotten out of studying at this university, in particular the English language program.

Contextualizing the Overall Findings within a Conceptual Framework

The main purpose of this study was to explore and describe the academic and social experiences of Saudi students who are learning English as a Second Language in the U.S. The key focus of the study can be summarized as exploring the perspectives of international student to understand and explain the positives/successes and challenges/difficulties related to their academic, cultural, and social experiences as English language learners. This being said, the conceptual framework for this study is situated within the context of the attribution theory.

The Goals of the International Study

In light of the two common themes – “I got pros and cons of this experience” and “I got more than I expected from this experience”– it is important to first establish, discuss, and situate the goals of the study within a conceptual framework. First, one need to acknowledge that international students who participated in this study previously had very good academic performance in their home country (Saudi Arabia) with positive learning experience. They left that comfort and embarked on a challenging international journey in pursuit of education. They came here to the U.S. to learn English and now faced many challenges that include learning difficulties. These students experienced significant academic, cultural, and social challenges that not many people in life go through. Therefore, the goals of this international study can be summarized as understanding how does such an experience help/affect the personal growth and development of these students.

Previous research on international students suggested some of the benefits of studying abroad includes building one’s character, confidence, resilience, good attributions, enhancing world view, self-reliance, independent personal growth and well-being, and intercultural development, among others (Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Dwyer & Peters, 2004; Kitsantas, 2004). The results of this study show that the students in deed benefited from studying abroad. For example, Amuzie and Winke (2009) observed that a group of ESL students studying abroad “came to more strongly believe that success in L2 learning depends more on their own efforts outside of class” (p. 374). This was a result of the changes of the students’ learning beliefs due to studying abroad. “These changes in

learner beliefs point toward overall growth in learner independence (Amuzie & Winke, 2009, p.374). In fact, the Saudi students in this study exhibited similar efforts. All of the students reported seeking support/asking for help outside the classroom. They made tremendous effort to learn by asking other people for help, including their spouse, friends, peers, and even their teachers.

This study's results illustrate that the students came out of the challenges and made good progress in their learning. This then suggest the students meet the goals of the international study. In other words, the goal of the international study was established with them in that they came out stronger and more healthy. They made progress in their learning and experienced personal growth. This is because their experience in overcoming the challenges made them resilient, built good attribution, good character, and self-confidence. This then lead to personal growth and enhance wellbeing. In sum, the students experienced significant challenges for the first time in their adult life and they overcame it.

The Attribution Theory and Motivation

This study is situated within a well-known cognitive psychological theoretical framework known as attribution theory. To understand attribution theory, it is first important define "attribution." Its basically an explanation of the cause(s) of a certain event or behavior. Attribution can also be based on self-evaluation. This means that "people also form attributions for their own behaviors and outcomes" (Harvey & Martinko, 2009, p.147). On this basis, the attribution theory focuses on people's tendency to explain why they behave in certain way. In other words, the theory primarily "focuses

on the human propensity to explain why people behave the way they do” (Gedeon & Rubin, 1999, p.20). More specifically, self-attribution, which is “how one evaluates one’s own performance,” (Gedeon & Rubin, 1999, p.20) is relevant or applies to a student’s self-evaluation of his/her own performance. In this regard, the theory is mostly relevant to student performance/self-evaluation because it helps explain student’s perception on things that may have influenced/caused their learning, social and cultural outcomes. In fact, “research indicates that the formation of attributions is vital for adapting to changing environments and overcoming the challenges we are confronted with in our daily lives (p.147). In this case, the international students who participated in this study came from a country that is very different than the U.S. in all aspects (i.e., language, culture, value, educational system, gender norms, etc). Therefore, this group of students found themselves in a changing environment, and thus made all attempts to cope with the challenge inherent in living and studying in a foreign environment.

A major component of the attribution theory is its focus on motivation. Attributions tend to influence students’ state of motivation. These motivational states comprised of learned helplessness, aggression, empowerment, and resilience. While learned helplessness is a situation in which an individual has learned to be helpless largely based on his/her previous experience, aggression simply refers to an individual’s engagement in hostile behavior and action to gain a desired outcome or retaliate with the aim to cause harm to others (Harvey & Martinko, 2009). On the flip side, empowerment represents a positive feeling about one self. It is “a heightened state of motivation caused by optimistic effort-reward expectation” (Harvey & Martinko, 2009, p. 153). People who

are optimistic are most likely to have a feeling of empowerment. For this reason, the person is motivated to put more effort into whatever is needed to achieve the desired outcome/goal. Finally, resilience is a motivation state that represents an individual's ability to adapt to changing unfavorable situation or environment. Specifically, it is a "staunch acceptance of reality... strongly held values, and an uncanny ability to improvise and adapt to significant change" (Harvey & Martinko, 2009, p. 154). In other words, resilient people accept the reality they found themselves in and try to adapt to the situation.

The attribution theory and its component of motivation relates to this study in that the results suggest that success in international studies requires that students possess the attributions and resilience that enables them to persevere. On this basis, the participants possessed the attributions and resilience, which in turn enabled them to overcome the challenges and adapt to their new environment. Also, this theory helps explain the students' attributions to their successes and challenges experienced as they learn the English language. Even though they may not be aware and conscious about the attribution they were making to explain their successes and difficulties in learning and living in in the U.S., this cognitive social psychology perspective help us understand, explain, and contextualize the experience of this group of international students.

The attribution theory evolved in the 1970s and 1980s to explain the learning challenges students with learning disability experience. This concept that we thought relates to students with learning disability is also relevant to other areas as well, including those related to international students learning English as a Second language. Even

though this group of international students who participated in this study didn't have any learning disability, they nonetheless face learning difficulties, cultural shock, and social problems based on the fact that they were living and studying a foreign language in a foreign country at a foreign educational institution. They experience similar challenges that students with learning disability in middle school and/or high school may experience.

The findings of this study shows that the Saudi students, despite all the challenges they faced, worked hard, persisted, and ultimately made good progress in their study abroad journey. This was particular evident in that all of the students reported making good progress in their learning and academic performance. This is particularly notable because nearly all of the students had positive attributions in that they were optimistic and believed that they can be successful in living and studying (empowerment motivation) in the U.S. They tried their best to overcome their difficulties and made progress. This finding is similar to previous research. For example, Evans and Morrison (2011) observed that the successful outcome of the student was achieved through their own effort. "The evidence suggests that this ultimately successful process owed more to the initiative and enterprise of the students themselves, both individually and collectively, than to the guidance of their professors," they concluded (p. 204).

Even though the students attributed some of their learning difficulties to bad teachers, lack of social interaction to the overwhelming schoolwork (external), they recognized that they can do something about it (internal, ability and effort); and didn't fully rely on the teacher or the program alone. In fact, none of these students quit, even though some of them fail some classes and experienced cultural shock and felt scared,

lonely, and isolated at times. They were resilient and continued to persist and didn't give up. This then relates to the theory in that this group of students had good/positive attribution. They did not engage in learned helplessness and/or aggression. In essence, it seems that a concept that was developed and applied to students with learning disability did apply to international students, especially this group of students.

The finding in this study about the students' resiliency and hard work is consistent with previous findings. Previous studies of the challenges facing international students have showed the resiliency of these students in terms of overcoming the difficulties they encounter. According to Evans and Morrison (2011) "what this research also suggests, however, is that international students generally rise to these challenges, and through diligence, determination and the deployment of effective learning strategies are able to accomplish their personal and educational goals during their sojourn abroad" (p.199). In essence, the results of this study is in line with previous findings in that international students, for the most part, overcame the significant challenges they experience related to academic, language, social, and cultural issues.

Moreover, the Saudi students attributed their success in academic and leaning outcomes to their effort/hard work, more so than their ability (i.e., a key element of the attribution theory). This observation is consistent with attributions made by other international students regarding their academic performance. For example, Li and colleagues (2010) observed that "Chinese learners attribute their performance more to their effort than to their ability" (p.5). Similarly, Amuzie and Winke (2009), in their study

of how ELS students' learning belief changes as a result of studying abroad (using a mixed methods approach), found that the students "came to more strongly believe that success in L2 [ESL] learning depends more on their own efforts outside of class. (p. 374). These changes in learner beliefs point toward overall growth in learner independence. In sum, the participants possessed positive attributions and were resilient, which at the end enabled them to overcome their challenges and adapt to life abroad, and therefore made good progress in their academic, social, and cultural lives.

Finally, the results of this study support and extend previous studies on the experience of international students. Previous research on international students showed that this group of students reported social and cultural benefits, which includes building one's character, confidence, resilience, good attributions, enhancing world view, self-reliance, independent personal growth and well-being, and intercultural development (Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Braskamp, Braskamp, & Merrill, 2009; Dwyer & Peters, 2004; Evans & Morrisson, 2011; Kitsantas, 2004). Most international students reported that studying in a foreign country helped them become more independent, self-reliant, have more freedom, and being more self-confident. For example, in their study that measured "changes in students' global perspectives" as a result of studying abroad for a semester, Braskamp et al., (2009) found that these students "gained self-confidence in the way they view themselves after living in a foreign country for a semester" (p.107) as well showed improvement in understanding cultural differences.

Similar results were reported by Amuzie and Winke (2009) in that most international students showed improved self-confidence, expand global learning, and

became more independent in their learning. So, it is no surprise the Saudi students in this study showed similar personal growth. In fact, Kitsantas, (2004) observed that many studies that examined the outcomes of study abroad found that international students experienced improved global understanding, self-confidence, personal well-being, and cross-cultural effectiveness. For example, in her own study of 232 international students from diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds enrolled at four different educational institutions in Europe, Kitsantas, (2004) found that the students experience enhanced cross-cultural skills, global understanding, and high levels of emotional resilience. Russell et al., (2010) also found that 60% of the international students enrolled at a university in Australia who participated in their study were resilient to the challenges they experienced while studying abroad. In other words, “despite challenges, the majority of these students exhibit a constructive and positive sense of self within their host environment” (Russell et al., 2010, p. 246). Therefore, it is no surprise the Saudi students in this study showed similar personal growth. They were resilient, optimistic, and self-confident.

Learning and Teaching Strategies for International Students

Certain strategies have been found to be helpful in supporting international students and their teachers in learning and teaching ESL. This section will first discuss what we know about good strategies used by these students to learn, followed by the instructional strategies used by teachers to teach this group of students.

Strategies Used by Students to Learn

International students use a variety of learning strategies to learn English. As a result of the decades of research on language learning, many strategies have been found

used by English language learners/ESL students. In his extensive review of the literature, Zare (2012) found that international students, in this case ESL/EFL learners, used a great variety of learning strategies that includes: taking notes; self-correction of one's own mistakes; being well organized; interacting with other native speakers; asking questions for clarification; experimentation focused on problem-solving; setting goals; time management; engage in activities that exposed learner to the language; use of sounds and images, frequent practice, and developing a positive attitude toward the language and its people.

Moreover, the literature suggests that learning strategies can primarily be classified into the specific subject-matter at hand and those that focus on learning in general. According to Li and colleagues (2010), "general learning strategies include meta-cognitive strategy, such as planning, monitoring and evaluation of one's own cognition, cognitive strategy, such as integrating new material with prior knowledge, and resource management strategies, such as effort endurance, peer learning and help seeking" (p. 391). In other words, the learning strategies used by international students are many, which means no one strategy(s) can be applied to one student or a student group.

However, the literature suggests certain strategies used by students that are considered "good" in terms of helping student progress and acquire the language they are learning. In his in-depth review of the literature in language learning strategies, Lee (2010) found that there are three points of view that have been found to improve the learning of language learners. These learning strategies were categorized as

metacognitive, cognitive, and social affective. These categories were developed by O'Malley, Chamot, Stewner-Manzanares, Kupper and Russo (1985) as a result of their extensive research on the learning strategies used by ESL students in the U.S. For them, the most good learning strategy(s) includes a situation in which the students plan his own learning, think about the learning process as well as monitor his/her own comprehension or engage in some sort of self-evaluation of his/her learning outcome. This means that when learners use certain strategies when dealing with writing and reading, they can make progress in learning those skills.

From the above discussion, it is important for teachers to be informed or know the learning strategies being used by their students. This is crucial as it will help the teacher to tailor his/own teaching strategy or instructional style to meet the learning needs of his/her students. This in turn is most likely to result in helping students make satisfactory progress in their learning of the English language. In other word, as Zare (2012) suggests, teachers of ESL students “should take their students learning strategies into considerations and try to recognize and identify students’ learning strategies in order to support less successful student to achieve success and master the target language” (p.167). By doing this, teachers can help their students learning the language much better and therefore boost their understanding of what is being taught and learned. This then will help enhance language acquisition. This being said, the next step is to identify “good” strategies used by teachers in teaching their ESL students.

Strategies Used by Teachers to Teach International Students

It is important for teachers to be informed of the learning style and background of

their international students so as to engage in instructional style that is beneficial to their students. According to Hsieh, Jang, Hwang and Chen(2011), previous studies “have suggested that there is an increasing need to consider the issue of learning styles to adapt instructional strategies to learners’ different needs” (p. 1195). For example, Crose (2011) suggests that good instructional strategies for teaching international students include the use of group activities in the classroom, facilitating group discussion (put students in small groups), providing an outline of the lecture, and providing positive feedback. Furthermore, teachers can use different strategies depending on the student’s own style of learning and/or learning preference. For example, some of the strategies have teachers provide opportunities for students to practice what is being taught so that the student can actually try out the practice autonomously/independently (Chamot, 2008). Moreover, teachers can serve as coordinators of the learning process whereby they provide guidance and needed support to the students as well as monitor their progress.

In conclusion, the Saudi students overcame the academic, social, and cultural challenges they experienced and end up making progress in their learning and life style. They adapted to some of the way of life to adjust to life in this country. This was largely due to their optimistic tendency, hard work/effort, ability, and their belief that failure is not an option. As a result, they did different things that help them make progress in their learning and social/cultural interaction with others. At the end, they became resilient, showed sign of personal growth and successful in their academic and learning activities as well as broaden their global world view, became self-confidence and self-reliant.

This finding is not surprising as it is consistent with other studies on international

students. For example, Evans and Morrison (2011), in their longitudinal study of 28 English learning students in Hong Kong completed with over 300 surveys conducted at the same university found that these students experienced four (4) academic /language challenges during their first year at the university. These academic and language challenges are: (1) “understanding technical vocabulary; (2) comprehending lectures; (3) achieving an appropriate academic style; (4) and meeting institutional and disciplinary requirements” (p.198). Interestingly, the students overcame these challenges and other related problems by doing different things that comprised of “a combination of strong motivation, hard work, effective learning strategies and supportive peer networks” (p.198). This was similar to the findings of this international study whereby the Saudi students were highly motivated, engaged in hard work, used learning strategies as well as asked for help inside and outside the classroom. The results were that they made successful progress in their academic and learning outcome. At the end, as this common theme summarized the students’ overall academic/leaning, social, and cultural outcome; “I got more than I expected from this experience.”

Reflection on my Experience Conducting This Study

As the author of this study, I gained a lot from conducting this research project. Even though that I didn’t study at the same English program, I had some understanding of the general experience of these international students mostly because I socialize with and have friends who are studying in it. This study enriched my understanding of the unique experience of Saudi students in U.S. As a student from Saudi Arabia, I have some similar experiences with the Saudi students who participated in this study. For example,

during my first year at U.S, I also experienced the weird looks from Americans mainly because of the way I look based on my dress (covering my hair). But, I must admit that even as a Saudi student here, this study helped me to improve my understanding of the social, cultural, and academic experience, including the challenges and benefits of studying abroad. This study opened my eyes to view the experience of Saudi students beyond just challenges, but also the successes and benefits due to studying abroad. Therefore, I was forced to reflect on my own personal experience, which also included both challenges and successes. At the end, just like the students who participated in this study, I have come to appreciate my personal resiliency in dealing with all the challenges that comes with studying abroad.

Moreover, as the above paragraph illustrate, this study helped me in terms of benefiting from my previous experience as an English language learner in an English program in U.S. During the process of conducting the study, especially during the data collection and data analysis phases, I started to reflect more on the benefits, rather than the challenges, I gained as a result of studying English in the U.S. Similar to the experience of most of the students in this study, my main goal for studying English in the U.S. was to gain the language proficiency level that would help me to be admitted into a degree program in this country. Several years later, I am happy to say that I have achieved this goal. I am about to graduate with a doctoral degree from a great university in the United States. I have to admit, I am very happy and glad that I studied English in the U.S. because it gave me the language proficiency and exposed me to the educational

system of this country, which ultimately prepared me for the successful academic journey.

Finally, my thinking changed throughout the process of conducting this study. During the initial phase of the study, my thinking was focused more on the challenges experienced by this group of students so that recommendations can be made to help improve their experience. But, as I continue to do the research and read more about the experience of international students, my thinking started to shift more towards exploring and understanding their experience within the context of benefits/successes and challenges based on social, cultural, and academic outcomes.

Also, the data analysis and coding process opened my eyes to a whole range of themes that included the resiliency of this group of students. Often times, international studies tend to focus more on the challenges experienced by this group of students, leaving out the resiliency nature of these students. This was eye opening for me. I had never thought about resiliency as something related to studying abroad. As a result, this study helped improve my thinking in terms of the overall benefits and cognitive social psychological outcome of this group of students. Conducting this study served as a self-reflection on my part as I also relate to some of the social, academic, and cultural experiences of these students, especially during my first and second year as an international student at the university. In fact, I feel empowered because as I reflect on my journey as an international student in the U.S. I can say, with confidence, I am resilient and successfully completing my doctoral study in large part because of my hard

work, coupled with my psychological and emotional strength that helped me overcome challenges as well as the support of my family, professors, and friends.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this study can be a stepping stone for further researches on this topic. Because hundreds, if not thousands, of international students from Saudi Arabia are currently studying in the Western world such as the U.S., Canada, and Europe, there is a need to understand the overall experience of this group of students. Building such a body of research can ultimately help improve the learning and living experience of this group of students as well as serve as some kinds of evidence-based literature bank that universities, colleges, and English language programs could utilize to help meet the needs of these students. In essence, more research needs to be conducted that focuses on exploring and assessing the unique experience of Saudi students studying abroad.

In addition, an area of study that may yield useful and beneficial results can be done using a longitudinal approach to research. In other words, I recommend conducting longitudinal studies that follow research participants over longer periods of time (multiple years). This is because understanding the benefits of international study would require following participants for longer periods of time.

It is also important to conduct studies that perform observations and interviews and include both students and university staff. These studies could yield much more information on the overall experience of not just the students, but also the experience of university staff in working and interacting with international students. Findings from such studies could yield very useful information regarding the study abroad experience as well

as that of the host institutions. May be, results from these studies could be used to help improve not only the students' experience, but as well as guide the professional development of university staff that work with these international students.

Finally, it is very useful to conduct studies that focus on the impact of programs that universities offer to support international students. In other words, exploring and assessing the impact of certain international student support programs/services offered by universities could provide constructive results that can be used to help improve, if necessary, the services provided to these students. The practical implication here is that such studies could provide the needed or necessary evidence to improve the rationale as well as boost the impacts of such programs or services provided to this group of students.

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APPENDIX A

TABLES OF CATEGORIES AND THEMES

Table 1: Academic & Learning Experience

Themes	Categories
I was a good student before I came to here	Their previous academic experience before coming to U.S.
I don't learn much English in my country	Level of English learning
	English proficiency level
I try to have some study habits	Learning/studying habits
	Learning preferences
	Organization
I try my best to overcome my challenges	Challenges
	Successes
	Things That Help Students Progress
It depends on the teachers	Positive Teachers
	Negative Teachers
Understand me before teaching me	Recommendations for Teacher
	Recommendations for English Program

Table 2: Social Experience

Themes	Categories
I spend most of my time in studying and doing assignment	Time spend with family and/or friends
	Their social interaction
	Attend events hosted on campus or in the community
I feel more comfortable to have friends from my culture	Students' companionship and friendships
	Their roommates
	Resource of support
I discover my strengths and overcome my weaknesses	Strategies used by students
	Strategies used by the English program
	Challenges
	Benefits

Do what you can, with what you have, where you are	Ideal life in the U.S.
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Table 3: Culture Experience

Themes	Categories
I always wonder of the way of thinking that American people have	Cultural unique differences
	Differences between the University Experience in the U.S. and Saudi Arabia
	Perception of American education
They make you feel that you are weird	Cultural difficulties
I should make some changes to my life	Cultural adaptation they have apply to their lives
	Changes they have after living in USA
	Perception of these changes and adaptations
	Applying family norms, traditions or beliefs after coming to USA

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Demographic Characteristics

Gender: _____ Age: _____

Academic Experience:

1. For how long have you been learning English as a second language?
 - a. When did you enroll in the English program?
 - b. What levels of the English program are you currently enrolled in?
 - Reading
 - Writing
 - Listening
 - Speaking
 - c. How will you describe your English language skill in terms of the following skills before starting the English program?
 - Reading
 - Writing
 - Listening
 - Speaking
2. Can you tell me about your experience in learning the English language?
3. What is your overall experience with this English program?

Social Experience:

1. Can you tell me about your social interaction here?
2. Can you tell me about your daily routine here at the USA?
3. What roles do the English program in enhancing your social experience?

Culture Experience:

1. Please describe some of the major cultural differences that you have noticed since you have been at the USA?
2. Share some positive culture experiences that you have had as an international student at the USA?
3. Share some negative culture experiences that you have had as international students at the USA?

APPENDIX C

EMAIL INVITATION

Email Subject: Invitation to Participate in a Dissertation Study

Dear Saudi Students,

My name is Sukainah Al Subia and I am a doctorate students at the University of Northern Iowa. I am conducting interviews as a part of a research study to exploring academic, social, and culture experiences of English language learners from Saudi Arabia at ----- University. As a student at the English program at this university, you are in an ideal position to give me valuable first-hand information from your own experience.

The interview will take about one hour and is very informal. We are simply trying to capture your experience on being a student at this English program. Your responses to the questions will be kept confidential. Each interview will be assigned a number code to help ensure that personal identifiers are not revealed during the analysis and write up of findings.

If you are willing to participate please suggest a day and time that suits you and I'll do my best to be available. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to ask.

Thank you,

Sukainah Al Subia