

# The Effectiveness of the Intensive English Course on EFL Learners

Dr. Khaled N Almudibry<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics, Majmaah University, Saudi Arabia

Correspondence: Dr. Khaled N Almudibry, Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics, Majmaah University, Saudi Arabia.

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## Abstract

The English skills of students who newly-graduated from secondary schools are not always sufficient for studying a major in English. For this reason, most universities, particularly those in Saudi Arabia, enrol new students, who want to study a BA in English, on an intensive English course. The present study examines quantitatively through questionnaires and proficiency tests, a commonly adopted solution: an intensive English course taken immediately prior to embarking on the English BA. The main findings indicate that both male and female learners' attitudes to the IEC are positive and their English level improves after attending the course. However, compared to international courses in other countries, learners achieve insufficient progress towards a suitable proficiency level. A key reason for this is that the course syllabus itself does not reach such a level, despite being based on international comparisons, as the number of teaching hours being sufficient for that to happen. Furthermore, students do not prioritize their need to learn academic English for their major. Implications are drawn which may resonate much more widely around the world than just in the context studied.

**Keywords:** perceptions, EFL Learners, Intensive English Course (IEC)

## 1. Introduction

In Saudi Arabian universities, it is common to enrol secondary school graduates in one of two solutions to improve their English prior to embarking on their BA degrees in English or science majors. The first solution is enrolling new students who wants to study in sciences or medical disciplines in Common First Year (CFY) deanship. The second solution is to register new students who want to pursue their BA in English and literature departments in an Intensive English Course (IEC). Therefore, several studies were conducted to investigate the level of English among learners and their perceptions regarding these intensive English courses (Abahussain & Ahmed, 2019; Alseweed & Daif-Allah, 2012; Alghamdi, 2015).

Despite of these initiatives in Saudi Arabia, the problem of low English proficiency among university entrants persist, partly due to weaknesses in the teaching and learning that occur at school (Al-Seghayer, 2015). The solutions adopted with respect to first year students are therefore important to scrutinize to find out what does and does not help raise the English level of graduates. The current study is concerned with one such initiative at Majmaah University in Saudi Arabia, namely the Intensive English Course (IEC).

### 1.1 The Intensive English Course (IEC)

In response to a perception that most students arriving from school did not possess an adequate entry level of English proficiency, the Intensive English Course (IEC) was set up at Majmaah University for prospective undergraduate majors in English Language and Literature. The IEC was designed as an obligatory but non-credit bearing one semester preparatory course, taught by English Department staff, to be taken by all English major students prior to starting on the four years (8 levels) of the BA which, unlike other majors, includes further classes devoted to improving their English especially in the first year.

The IEC runs for 14 weeks, of which three are devoted to tests; total teaching hours are 280. in order to proceed to the BA. The IEC must be passed with a score of 60% or better on the final exam. Students, who initially score below 60%, are excluded from English BA and must take one of the Arabic medium degree programs. The IEC, therefore, constitutes a key 'gatekeeping' instrument to help ensure that students' level of English is up to level that is required for the success of the BA English Language and Literature program.

Now that the IEC has been run a few times, it makes obvious sense to evaluate it in order to see if it is performing as hoped in improving students' English and producing students with an adequate threshold proficiency to embark on the BA English program. This is clearly vital information for teachers, the English department and the relevant administrators in the university. It also allows, potentially, for comparisons to be made with other English enhancement systems in operation at this level in comparable contexts.

The current study will, therefore, be of interest more widely in the KSA and beyond to anyone involved in issues of English improvement at university level, especially in countries where English is used as foreign language.

### *1.2 Previous Studies*

As mentioned in the introductory section, several studies have been conducted to evaluate and assess students' improvements in English and their perceptions regarding the usefulness of the IEC for developing their English language skills. Many researchers have mentioned that the IEC can improve learners' level of English (Nagano, 1995; Austin & Gustafson, 2006). Abahussain and Ahmed (2019) investigated 283 students' achievements in English before and after attending the IEC. They used pre and post-tests to assess English improvement and used a semi-structured interview to ascertain attitudes towards the IEC. The results showed that the students' English level improved significantly after attending the IEC.

Ping (2014), for instance, investigated the efficacy of the intensive English program and the improvement in university students' language proficiency via tests over a 10 week-course. The relevant results showed that there was a substantial improvement in the students' proficiency, most in reading skills followed by writing and less so in grammar skills. In Turkey, a context closer in nature to the KSA, Akyel and Ozek (2010) examined through questionnaire and interviews university students' need for improvements in the Preparatory Year Program (PYP) at Majmaah University where English was the medium of instruction. Although based on teacher and student reports, rather than objective measures of English improvement, the results showed a belief that the preparatory provision fell short on meeting the students' needs for improvement in speaking, reading, and writing, and that they were not able to function effectively in their ensuing academic studies.

In Saudi Arabia, Alghamdi (2015) carried out an extensive surveyed of opinions PYP at Al-Baha University. The most positive endorsement, although only a little above the midpoint of the scale, was of the assessment arrangements. Alseweed and Daif-Allah (2012) investigated a PYP at a Saudi university and argued that at least 60% of students arrived with English ability too low even for entry to the PYP. They reported the trial of a two-week (59-hour) intensive pre-PYP course simply to raise these students to a proficiency level suited to entry to a PYP. 69.8% of students reported that this helped bridge the gap between high school and the PYP at university. Objective measures of proficiency were not used however.

In fact, there are "a scant number of empirical studies which focus specifically on the outcomes of intensive English programs" (Nasiri & Shokrpour, 2012:3), and this gap is more obvious more when it comes to students' language proficiency.

Overall, the published literature tends to be strong on reporting opinions about the IEC in Saudi Arabia but weak on providing solid evidence of the proficiency gained through such courses or whether students attain a suitable exit level of proficiency, and if not, why not. It is these gaps the present study seeks to fill.

### *1.3 The Research Questions*

The current study tries to answer the following research questions:

- 1- Is there a statistically significant difference at level (0.05) between the IEC learners' level of English before and after attending the IEC?
- 2- What are the students' perceptions regarding the IEC before and after taking it?
- 3- Is there a statistically significant difference at level (0.05) between male and female students' perceptions regarding the IEC?

## **2. Methods**

### *2.1 Participants*

The participants of the study were 92 learners, who had started their intensive English course at Majmaah University, of 47 are male and 45 are female from the total number of the participants. Their average age is 20 years old. All the participants studied at public schools in Saudi Arabia. The researcher selected the participants randomly. All students have studied English for at least 6 years at elementary and secondary levels.

2.2 Ethical Consideration

The participants' Consent was sought before conducting the study.

2.3 Piloting the study

To ensure the best way of applying the study, a pilot study was conducted with 15 students in order to make sure that the tools for data collection were suitable for achieving the aims of the study.

2.4 Data Collection Tools

Two quantitative instruments were used to gather the data from the participants: a questionnaire and a general language proficiency test. They were distributed to students before and after taking the IEC.

2.4.1 The English Proficiency Test

To answer the first research question, it was necessary to be able to assess objectively what progress was made by students in their English over the period of the IEC course, and what true level they had attained by the end. Therefore, it was important to use an English test which was independent of the materials used in the course and these materials adopted universally recognized evaluation of students' ability. For this purpose, the exams used in the normal way to assess the IEC were not suitable, since they were essentially achievement tests measuring what had been recently learned from the textbooks, and not overall measures of how much English the students knew. Furthermore, they were locally rather than professionally constructed, and not calibrated with any fixed international system of proficiency levels.

Many proficiency tests with suitable qualities are available, such as those produced by Cambridge and Michigan. These are professionally made measures of language knowledge, whose scores are calibrated with internationally recognised categories such as the CEFR, including IELTS, TOEIC and TOEFL. In this study, the Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT) was administered on computer, before and after the students attended the IEC, to establish their objective English proficiency level at each point and how far it had changed.

Table 1. OQPT score correspondence with CEFR and IELTS levels

Level	OQPT /60	CEFR	IELTS
0 beginner	0-17	A1	
1 elementary	18-29	A2	< 4
2 lower intermediate	30-39	B1	4 - 5
3 upper intermediate	40-47	B2	5.5 - 6.5
4 advanced	48-54	C1	7-8
5 very advanced	55-60	C2	> 8

Note: CEFR equivalences are from Oxford, 2001; IELTS equivalences are from the IELTS official site

2.4.2 Student Questionnaires

The questionnaire was written in Arabic as it is the mother tongue of the learners in order to make sure that clear answers were given to each item. The 3-point Likert Scale was used to assess their perceptions of the IEC before and after their attendance (Disagree, Not sure, Agree)

Table 2. Questionnaire Items

Item	Choices		
	Disagree	Not sure	Agree
<b>Perceptions regarding the IEC in General</b>			
1	<i>The Intensive English course helps me in developing my general English.</i>		
2	<i>The Intensive English course helps me in developing my English for travel.</i>		
3	<i>The Intensive English course helps me in developing my English for academic majors.</i>		
4	<i>The Intensive English course helps me in developing English for interpersonal communication.</i>		
<b>Perceptions of IEC for Language Learning Skills</b>			
5	<i>The Intensive English course helps me in developing my speaking skills.</i>		
6	<i>The Intensive English course helps me in developing my pronunciation.</i>		
7	<i>The Intensive English course helps me in developing my reading skills.</i>		
8	<i>The Intensive English course helps me in developing my English vocabulary.</i>		
9	<i>The Intensive English course helps me in developing my writing skills.</i>		

A questionnaire was administered to students at the beginning of the IEC to ascertain relevant aspects of their background. Additionally, informed by the literature (Dörnyei & Csizér, 2012) and the researcher's knowledge of the context, they were asked what they believed to be their main purposes in learning English, and what kinds of English

and what English skills they wanted to learn in the IEC. The Cronbach reliability of the questionnaire was a satisfactory .703 for the kinds of English, and .812 for the skills. These items were mostly responded to on closed rating scales, so analysed quantitatively.

**3. Results and Discussion**

In this section, the gathered data will be analysed and discussed to answer the research questions. Firstly, the results of the proficiency tests will be analysed and discussed to answer the first research question. Secondly, the questionnaire data analysis will be presented and discussed to answer the second research question. Finally, the results relating to gender differences will be presented to answer the third research question.

*3.1 Proficiency Test Scores*

Table (3) shows the scores obtained by students in the OQPT proficiency test administered before and after the IEC course.

Table 3. OQPT scores before and after the IEC

Achievements	Group	N	Mean	Sig
	Pre-IEC	92	17.9	.000
	Post-IEC	92	23.8	

There was a highly significant improvement over the period of the course ( $p=.000$ ). At the same time, it must be said that the actual size of the increase in proficiency was modest. If we translate the mean scores into CEFR and IELTS equivalents, then, on average, the students started at high beginner level A1, as was expected, but moved only to the borderline between beginner and elementary A2. A2 is characterized as follows in the CEFR, and is clearly far from a level suitable for learning an academic subject through English:

'Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.'

In terms of IELTS, these are levels below IELTS 4. Most students however did not attain scores greater than 25 (=A2, around IELTS 3.5). Just ten students achieved a post course score of 43, which equates approximately with IELTS 6.

However, it is clear from the findings that the IEC has a positive effect on learners' English level. The difference between the pre-test and the post-test mean scores was statistically significant at .000 level. This finding is consistent with Abahussain and Ahmed's (2019) study, who found their students' language level improved after attending the IEC.

Even though the results showed a positive improvement in the students' English level, the amount of improvement was insufficient compared to internationally required levels with similar courses. Thus, there seems to be some evidence that the IEC is not changing takers' proficiency as efficiently as comparable courses in other countries. This finding is similar to Akyel and Ozek's (2010) results. Therefore, the IEC does not appear to achieve what is necessary in terms of absolute proficiency level on exit. The above finding answers the first research question, which is: Is there a statistically significant difference at level (0.05) between the IEC learners' level of English before and after attending the IEC?

*3.2 Student's Opinions in the Questionnaires*

To answer the second research question, descriptive statistics was used to analyze the students' responses to the questionnaire items as shown in Table (4) below:

Table 4. The students' perceptions regarding the IEC for English in general

Item	Before IEC	After IEC
<i>The Intensive English course helps me in developing my general English.</i>	<b>2.58</b>	<b>2.69</b>
<i>The Intensive English course helps me in developing my English for travel.</i>	<b>2.52</b>	<b>2.65</b>
<i>The Intensive English course helps me in developing my English for academic majors.</i>	<b>2.54</b>	<b>2.59</b>
<i>The Intensive English course helps me in developing English for interpersonal communication.</i>	<b>2.51</b>	<b>2.61</b>

According to the initial results for the above items in Table (4), all the students have positive attitudes to the effectiveness of the IEC and regarding various possible purposes of English, students rated all the purposes as reasonably important, above the midpoint of the 1-3 rating scale, prior to embarking on the IEC. It is clear that prior to the IEC, the students thought it was most important that the IEC would help them in developing their general

English (M=2.58), while the development of their interpersonal communication was the least important (M=2.51). Their expectations were true as the same result was found after attending the IEC. The students were asked before the IEC how important they considered it that the IEC should help them with various purposes for learning English, given their needs and existing English proficiency. Then, after the IEC, they were asked how far the course had in fact helped them with each. All the mean ratings were above the midpoint of the scale showing that participants at the start indicated that it was important for the IEC to improve all the suggested types and skills of English, and after the IEC they judged that all of these had been helped to some extent.

Coming to the language learning skills, the learners, prior to the IEC, reported that they expected the IEC to improve their learning skills as shown in the table below. All their responses represent the choice Agree.

Table 5. The students’ perceptions regarding the IEC’s usefulness for language learning skills

Items	Before IEC	After IEC	Sig
<i>The Intensive English course helps me in developing my speaking skills.</i>	2.52	2.65	.000
<i>Intensive English course helps me in developing my pronunciation.</i>	2.58	2.63	.003
<i>The Intensive English course helps me in developing my reading skills.</i>	2.54	2.66	.000
<i>The Intensive English course helps me in developing my English vocabulary.</i>	2.51	2.68	.000
<i>The Intensive English course helps me in developing my writing skills.</i>	2.54	2.59	.001
Overall	2.54	2.64	.000

By looking at their answers after attending the IEC, the mean scores of all items indicate that the students’ skills had improved after attending the IEC. The differences in the mean scores for items before and after the IEC were significant ( $p=.001$ ). Before the IEC, learners prioritize improving their pronunciation (M=2.58), while they considered improving their vocabulary of the least importance (M=2.51). However, after attending the IEC, they considered vocabulary building to be the important aspect (M=2.65), while their writing skills were at the least (M=2.59). The differences between their perceptions between before and after the IEC were statistically significant at .050. The results above answer the second research question, which is: What are the students’ perceptions regarding the IEC before and after taking it?

We now come to the third research question, which relates to gender difference in perceptions regarding the IEC: Is there a statistically significant difference at a level (0.05) between male and female students’ perceptions regarding the IEC?

The mean score of the female learners’ was greater than the male learners’ mean score, even if they were at the midpoint (3) of the scale, which represents the positive view “Agree”. The t-test was run to answer the third research question as shown in the Table (6) below:

Table 6. T-test result for gender difference in perceptions regarding the IEC

Gender Difference	Gender	N	M	Sig
	Male	47	2.60	
	Female	45	2.69	

As can be seen above, the mean score of the female learners (M=2.69) is greater than the male learners’ mean score (M=2.60). When the t-test is used, the difference between the two scores is statistically significant at a level of .000. This indicates that female learners were more positive in their attitudes to the IEC than males.

#### 4. Conclusion

The current study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of the Intensive English Course in improving Saudi learners’ English after attending the one semester English course. In Saudi Arabia, two solutions are used to bridge the gap of English level between secondary school and university, especially for those who want to study in English BA or colleges where English is the medium of instruction. The study made use of the proficiency level test and a questionnaire to gather the required data from the participants. The findings showed that there was a statistically significant improvement in the level of learners’ English after attending the IEC. Despite this positive finding, the amount of improvement was insufficient when it compared with the required level in comparable courses outside Saudi Arabia.

In addition, the findings showed that before the IEC, learners saw the IEC helping them improving their general English and language learning skills. After the IEC, the same result was found, indicating that the IEC helped students positively. With regard to gender, the findings showed that female learners were more positive in their attitude towards the IEC than male learners. The difference between the mean scores was statistically significant at

the .050 level.

The current study suggests further studies in different contexts. In addition, it recommends the policy makers at Majmaah University to use proficiency tests that measure a learner's true level of English, not what has been learned from textbooks.

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