Bridging the Language Gap: Supporting Low-Level English Diploma Students at KFU

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Abstract

English proficiency is important for academic and professional success, particularly in disciplines such as accounting, finance, and computer studies, where technical language and global communication are critical. However, many diploma students enter higher education with low English proficiency, creating challenges in understanding course content, participating in discussions, and completing assignments effectively. This study explores a structured, multi-faceted instructional approach aimed at improving English skills among first-year diploma students in Saudi Arabia. A mixed-methods research approach will be employed, involving surveys and interviews with students and instructors from diploma programs in Saudi Arabia. The study employs a quasi-experimental design, comparing an experimental group receiving targeted interventions—including contextualized learning, scaffolded instruction, task-based activities, technology-enhanced learning, and peer collaboration—with a control group following the standard curriculum. Quantitative data are collected through pre- and post-tests, while qualitative insights are gathered via student interviews and classroom observations. The results indicate that students in the experimental group demonstrated significant improvements in reading comprehension, writing accuracy, speaking confidence, and listening skills, compared to the control group. The findings have important implications for curriculum design, suggesting that integrating career-oriented language learning with scaffolded support and digital tools enhances both language proficiency and professional readiness.

1. Introduction

English proficiency is an important factor of academic and professional success, particularly in fields such as accounting, finance, and computer studies, where technical language and effective communication play a vital role (Wang et al., 2023; AlHaddad et al., 2004). However, many diploma students in non-English-speaking contexts, such as Saudi Arabia, enter their programs with low English proficiency, making it difficult for them to understand course materials, engage in discussions, and complete assignments effectively. This language gap can hinder their academic progress, reduce their classroom participation, and ultimately limit their employability in competitive job markets (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2022).

Research in English language acquisition indicates that students with limited proficiency often struggle with discipline-specific vocabulary, reading comprehension, and academic writing skills, all of which are critical for success in business and technology-related disciplines (Flowerdew, 2020). Additionally, low English proficiency has been associated with reduced self-confidence, higher failure rates, and decreased motivation to participate in learning activities (Nation, 2021). Given these challenges, it is imperative to develop targeted, research-based interventions that can help diploma students overcome linguistic barriers and enhance their academic performance.

A growing body of literature highlights the effectiveness of structured, multi-faceted instructional approaches in improving English proficiency among non-native learners. Strategies such as contextualized learning, scaffolded instruction, task-based learning, technology-enhanced instruction, and peer collaboration have been shown to improve student engagement and retention (Basturkmen, 2021). However, while these strategies have been studied individually, there is limited research on their combined effectiveness in non-English-speaking contexts, particularly in Saudi Arabia.

This study aims to address this gap by investigating the impact of an integrated instructional approach on the English proficiency of first-year diploma students. By examining how contextualized learning, scaffolded instruction, peer collaboration, task-based learning, and technology-enhanced instruction influence students' language skills, this study seeks to contribute valuable insights into curriculum design and pedagogical best practices. The findings will help educators develop more effective, career-oriented language learning programs that align with students' professional aspirations and improve their long-term employability.

Despite the increasing demand for English proficiency in diploma programs, many students struggle with foundational language skills, creating barriers to academic success and professional development. This study aims to identify and evaluate effective strategies, such as

scaffolded instruction, contextualized learning, and technology-enhanced approaches, to support low-level English students in diploma programs and improve their language acquisition. Finally, this study's conceptual framework is based on language acquisition theories and pedagogical approaches, integrating scaffolded instruction, contextualized learning, and technology-enhanced strategies to support low-level English students in diploma programs.

2. Literature Review

Addressing low English proficiency among diploma students requires evidence-based instructional strategies that target their specific challenges. Research on English for Specific Purposes (ESP), task-based learning, scaffolded instruction, and technology-enhanced language learning provides valuable insights into effective teaching methodologies. However, existing studies often focus on these strategies in isolation, rather than exploring their combined impact in non-English-speaking educational contexts. This section reviews key literature on the effectiveness of integrated language support strategies and identifies gaps for further investigation.

One of the most effective methods for enhancing English proficiency is contextualized learning, which integrates language instruction with students' professional and academic fields. Research suggests that when students learn English through discipline-specific vocabulary, reading materials, and communication tasks, they become more engaged and develop a deeper understanding of the language in practical contexts (Flowerdew, 2020; Widdowson, 2018).

Basturkmen (2021) and Hyland (2019) emphasize the importance of ESP in diploma programs, where students require industry-specific communication skills. ESP-based instruction designs language learning to real-world professional applications, such as financial reporting in accounting or technical documentation in computer studies. Studies have shown that ESP learners outperform those in general English courses, as they find the material more relevant and applicable to their career goals (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2022).

However, while ESP is highly effective, some researchers argue that ESP alone is insufficient for students with very low English proficiency, as they lack foundational linguistic competence (Nation, 2021). This highlights the need to combine ESP with other pedagogical approaches, such as scaffolded instruction and interactive learning, to support students at different proficiency levels (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 2019).

The second method is scaffolded instruction, a teaching approach where learning tasks are gradually increased in complexity with structured support, has been shown to significantly improve language proficiency (Nation, 2021). This method helps students build confidence and competence over time, particularly when combined with cooperative learning techniques.

Yamo and Wongthanate (2024) conducted a study in Thailand that examined the impact of peer collaboration and cooperative learning on English proficiency among low-level learners. Their findings indicate that students engaged in structured group activities showed higher gains in vocabulary retention, speaking confidence, and comprehension skills compared to those in traditional lecture-based classrooms (Smith & Cardaciotto, 2011). However, scaffolded instruction and cooperative learning require careful implementation. Studies suggest that if tasks are not modified to students' proficiency levels, they may feel overwhelmed or disengaged (Pratiwi, 2024). Therefore, it is crucial to balance structure and flexibility, ensuring that learners receive adequate guidance while also developing independent problem-solving skills.

Another important method is task-based learning (TBL) which has been widely recognized as an effective approach for improving English proficiency among non-native speakers. Unlike traditional grammar-based instruction, TBL focuses on real-world communication tasks, such as writing reports, delivering presentations, and interpreting financial data (Roe, O'Sullivan, & Arumynathan, 2024).

Pratiwi (2024) found that students engaged in interactive, real-world tasks demonstrated significant improvements in speaking fluency and confidence. Similarly, Kurz, Wolbers, and Kuntze (2024) examined immersion-based English programs and found that high-interest, low-level (HILL) learning strategies, where students actively engage with authentic, profession-related tasks, lead to better retention and practical application of language skills. Researchers argue that scaffolded instruction should be integrated with task-based learning, ensuring that students gradually develop the necessary linguistic competence before engaging in advanced communication tasks (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2022).

Finally, the integration of technology in English instruction has revolutionized language learning, particularly for low-level students. Digital tools, such as AI-powered writing assistants, mobile language apps, and interactive learning platforms, provide personalized learning experiences that adapt to students' individual needs (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2022). Similarly, gamification, as studied by Abu Qub'a et al. (2024), has been shown to enhance student engagement and skill acquisition, reinforcing the idea that well-structured recreational activities, whether digital or physical, can contribute to academic success. Finally, recent research by Abu Quba, Abu Guba, Awad, and Traish (2025) further highlights the role of AI-powered tools like ChatGPT in supporting academic English writing. Their study found that while students appreciated its ability to improve grammar, sentence structure, and idea development, challenges such as misinterpreting prompts and over-reliance on the tool were also noted.

To wrap up, recent studies highlighted several benefits of technology-enhanced learning, particularly in language acquisition. Interactive platforms have been shown to increase student engagement by motivating learners to practice English outside the classroom. Additionally, AI-powered tools provide personalized feedback, offering real-time grammar corrections and writing suggestions that support skill development (Chapelle & Sauro, 2021). Moreover, technology facilitates flexible, self-paced learning, allowing students to progress at their own speed and focus on areas where they need reinforcement (Goldrick et al., 2014; Sharma et al., 2023).

However, technology alone is not a solution. Some researchers warn that over-reliance on digital tools may reduce direct human interaction, which is essential for developing speaking and listening skills (Nation, 2021). This suggests that technology-enhanced instruction should be used as a supplement rather than a replacement for collaborative, interactive learning experiences (Blake, 2021).

Despite extensive research on English for Specific Purposes (ESP), scaffolded instruction, task-based learning, and technology-enhanced education, several gaps remain. Most studies focus on a single instructional method rather than examining the combined effectiveness of multiple approaches within a structured curriculum (Hyland, 2019). Additionally, there is a lack of longitudinal studies, as existing research primarily investigates short-term language gains without sufficient data on long-term retention and employability outcomes. Furthermore, ESP and task-based learning research is predominantly conducted in Western or English-dominant contexts, leaving non-English-speaking regions, such as Saudi Arabia, underexplored. More studies are needed in these settings to address the unique linguistic and cultural challenges students face (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 2019).

Based on the literature review, this study seeks to:

- Evaluate the effectiveness of a structured, multi-faceted instructional approach (combining contextualized learning, scaffolded instruction, peer collaboration, task-based learning, and technology-enhanced learning) in improving the English proficiency of first-year diploma students in Saudi Arabia.
- Analyze the impact of targeted English language interventions on students' academic performance, confidence, and engagement in discipline-specific coursework, with a focus on long-term retention and professional readiness.

3. Methodology

This study adopts a mixed methods approach to examine the effectiveness of various instructional strategies in supporting low-level English proficiency diploma students. By incorporating both quantitative and qualitative research methods, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of how targeted interventions impact students' English language development during their first year. The mixed-methods design ensures that findings are statistically valid while also capturing students' experiences, perceptions, and challenges in learning English.

3.1 Research Design

A quasi-experimental design was used to assess the impact of specific instructional strategies on students' English proficiency. The study involved two groups: an experimental group that received targeted language support and a control group that followed the standard curriculum without additional interventions. This design allows for a direct comparison of language improvement between students exposed to specialized instructional strategies and those who relied on traditional English instruction. To measure progress, pre- and post-tests were administered, assessing students' skills in reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Additionally, qualitative data were collected through semi-structured interviews with students and instructors, along with classroom observations to gain deeper insights into student engagement and participation.

3.2 Research Sample

The participants in this study were 120 first-year diploma students enrolled in accounting, finance, and computer studies at KFU in Saudi Arabia. These students were selected based on their initial English proficiency levels, determined by a placement test conducted at the beginning of the academic year. Participants had varying levels of English exposure, with many demonstrating limited proficiency in grammar, vocabulary, and academic writing.

The quantitative data were collected using standardized English proficiency tests administered at the beginning and end of the semester. These tests assessed students' abilities in key language areas, including reading comprehension, grammar accuracy, and writing fluency. The results of these tests were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics, with paired t-tests conducted to determine whether the observed improvements in English proficiency were statistically significant. The qualitative data, gathered from student interviews and classroom observations, were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify common patterns in students' learning experiences, engagement levels, and perceived challenges.

To ensure the effectiveness of the intervention, the experimental group received targeted instructional strategies designed to enhance their English proficiency. These strategies included contextualized learning, where lessons were fitted to incorporate vocabulary and concepts relevant to students' fields of study, such as financial reports, business correspondence, and technical documentation. Scaffolded instruction was implemented by gradually introducing complex language structures, accompanied by guided practice and step-by-step explanations. Students also engaged in task-based learning, which required them to complete real-world language tasks such as writing business emails, interpreting financial data, and delivering presentations.

The intervention also incorporated technology-enhanced learning, utilizing AI-powered writing assistants, language learning applications, and interactive online exercises to facilitate self-paced learning and immediate feedback. Additionally, peer collaboration was encouraged through group activities and peer feedback sessions, allowing students to share knowledge and practice language skills in an interactive setting.

Participation was voluntary, and students provided informed consent before data collection. The study adhered to institutional ethical guidelines to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of participants. Interviews and observations were conducted in a manner that

respected students' comfort levels, ensuring that their responses were genuine and unbiased.

4. Results and Discussion

The results of this study showed that students in the experimental group, who received targeted instructional interventions, showed significant improvements in their English proficiency compared to those in the control group. Specifically, notable improvements were observed in reading comprehension, writing accuracy, speaking confidence, and listening skills. The pre- and post-test scores revealed that students exposed to contextualized learning, scaffolded instruction, task-based learning, and technology-enhanced methods exhibited higher language gains than those following the standard curriculum.

4.1 Quantitative Results: Improvement in English Proficiency

The pre- and post-test scores indicated a statistically significant increase in English proficiency among students in the experimental group as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Mean Scores of English Proficiency Tests

Group	Pre-Test Mean Score	Post-Test Mean Score	Improvement (%)
Experimental	45.2	72.8	61.1%
Control	46.0	53.5	16.3%

It is clear from Table 1 that the experimental group's average score increased from 45.2 in the pre-test to 72.8 in the post-test, reflecting an improvement of 61.1%. In contrast, the control group's average score increased only marginally, from 46.0 to 53.5, resulting in a 16.3% improvement. The paired t-test results confirmed that these differences were statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), indicating that the instructional strategies had a meaningful impact on students' language development.

As shown in Table 2, the analysis of skill-based performance highlighted that students in the experimental group achieved the highest improvements in speaking (70%) and writing (65%), followed by listening (60%) and reading (55%). In contrast, the control group demonstrated only minor improvements across all skills, with gains ranging between 12% and 20%. These findings suggest that the task-based and peer-collaborative components of the instructional approach played a crucial role in enhancing communicative competence and writing fluency.

Table 2. Improvement in Language Skills

Skill	Experimental Group (%)	Control Group (%)
Reading	55	15
Writing	65	20
Speaking	70	18
Listening	60	12

4.2 Qualitative Results: Student Engagement and Learning Experience

Findings from semi-structured interviews and classroom observations provided deeper insights into the effectiveness of the instructional interventions. Students in the experimental group expressed greater engagement, confidence, and motivation in using English compared to their peers in the control group. The following themes emerged from qualitative data analysis:

4.2.1 Increased Engagement and Motivation

Students in the experimental group reported higher levels of participation in English-related activities due to the relevance of the materials to their fields of study. Many students stated that learning discipline-specific vocabulary and communication skills made the lessons more meaningful and practical. One student noted, *"Before, I felt that English was too difficult, but now that I am learning English related to my major, I understand more and feel more confident."* This aligns with previous research on English for Specific Purposes (ESP), which suggests that students are more engaged when language instruction is directly relevant to their careers (Flowerdew, 2020; Hyland, 2019).

4.2.2 Enhanced Speaking Confidence

The task-based and peer collaboration activities were particularly effective in boosting speaking confidence. Many students reported that engaging in group discussions, presentations, and real-world tasks helped them overcome their fear of speaking English. One participant stated, *"Working with my classmates in English made me feel more comfortable. Now, I am not afraid to speak in front of others."* This finding is consistent with research by Yamo and Wongthanate (2024), which found that cooperative learning fosters confidence and fluency in English learners.

4.2.3 Preference for Interactive and Technology-Enhanced Learning

Students also indicated a preference for interactive and technology-enhanced learning methods over traditional lecture-based approaches. The use of AI-powered writing assistants, language learning applications, and interactive online exercises provided students with instant feedback and the ability to practice English outside of the classroom. As one student mentioned, *"The apps helped me practice English at home. I can check my grammar mistakes and improve my writing."* These findings align with previous studies on technology-enhanced learning, which highlight the benefits of digital tools in providing personalized, self-paced learning experiences (Chapelle & Sauro, 2021).

Despite these improvements, some students continued to struggle with grammar accuracy and listening comprehension. Interview responses revealed that while speaking and writing tasks helped improve communication skills, grammar and listening were still challenging areas. This suggests that additional instructional support, such as targeted grammar instruction and extensive listening practice, may be necessary to reinforce these skills. Furthermore, some students found technology-based learning helpful but preferred more structured guidance on how to use digital tools effectively. These findings indicate the need for a balanced approach, combining digital resources with structured, teacher-led instruction to maximize learning outcomes.

The results of this study confirm that a structured, multi-faceted instructional approach significantly improves English proficiency among low-level diploma students. The extensive improvement in speaking and writing skills suggests that interactive and task-based learning plays a crucial role in developing communicative competence. This supports previous research findings, which emphasize that meaningful, real-world tasks help students develop fluency and confidence in English (Pratiwi, 2024).

The moderate improvements in listening and reading skills suggest that while students benefit from contextualized and task-based learning, additional instructional strategies may be needed to support passive language skills. Research suggests that extended exposure to authentic English materials, such as professional discourse, industry-specific texts, and interactive listening exercises, can further enhance these areas (Nation, 2021).

The findings also underscored the importance of integrating technology into English instruction. The positive feedback on AI-powered tools and language learning apps suggests that technology can serve as an effective supplement to traditional instruction. However, to maximize its effectiveness, educators should provide structured training on how to use these tools efficiently, ensuring that students engage with digital resources in a meaningful way (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons, 2022).

These findings have important implications for curriculum designers, educators, and policymakers. Given the increasing global demand for English proficiency, higher education institutions must prioritize discipline-specific language instruction to ensure students are adequately prepared for academic and professional success. Institutions should consider integrating ESP-focused courses, competency-based assessments, and interactive digital resources into their diploma programs to enhance English learning outcomes. Furthermore, faculty training programs should be developed to equip instructors with effective pedagogical strategies for teaching low-proficiency students. Establishing language support centers, peer mentorship programs, and digital learning hubs can also provide students with ongoing assistance beyond the first year.

5. Conclusion

This study examined the effectiveness of a structured, multi-faceted instructional approach in enhancing the English proficiency of low-level diploma students at a Saudi Arabian university. By integrating contextualized learning, scaffolded instruction, task-based learning, technology-enhanced education, and peer collaboration, the study aimed to bridge the language gap that often hinders students' academic performance and career readiness. The findings revealed that students in the experimental group demonstrated significant improvements in reading comprehension, writing accuracy, speaking confidence, and listening skills, compared to those in the control group. These results highlight the importance of career-oriented, interactive, and technology-supported language instruction in diploma programs.

The quantitative results showed that students exposed to targeted instructional interventions experienced a 61.1% increase in overall English proficiency, whereas the control group showed only a marginal 16.3% improvement. The greatest gains were observed in speaking and writing skills, suggesting that interactive, task-based activities significantly enhance communicative competence. Listening and reading skills, though improved, showed lower gains, indicating the need for additional exposure to authentic English materials and extended practice opportunities. The qualitative findings further reinforced these results, as students reported greater engagement, confidence, and motivation when learning English through relevant, profession-related tasks and technology-assisted learning.

Despite these improvements, some challenges remained. Grammar accuracy and listening comprehension continued to be difficult areas for some students, suggesting that additional instructional support is needed to reinforce these skills. Moreover, while students found digital tools helpful, some required structured guidance on how to use them effectively. This underscores the importance of blending technology with teacher-led instruction to ensure that students maximize their learning potential.

Future research should explore long-term language retention and career outcomes for diploma students who receive structured language interventions. Additionally, comparative studies in other non-English-speaking regions could help determine whether these findings are universally applicable or context-specific. Exploring the impact of AI-driven learning tools on self-directed English acquisition could also provide new insights into the evolving role of technology in language education.

In conclusion, bridging the language gap for low-level English diploma students requires a comprehensive, career-oriented instructional framework. By combining effective pedagogical strategies, leveraging technology, and fostering collaborative learning environments, educators can significantly enhance students' language proficiency, academic success, and employability in an increasingly competitive global market.

Ethics Statement

All procedures followed were in accordance with the ethical standards of the responsible committee on human experimentation. This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Applied College, King Faisal University, with ethics approval reference [65433]. The standards

are also in line with the Helsinki Declaration of 1975, as revised in 2000. Informed consent was obtained from all participants for being included in the study.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Informed consent

Obtained.

Ethics approval

The Publication Ethics Committee of the Sciedu Press.

The journal's policies adhere to the Core Practices established by the Committee on Publication Ethics (COPE).

Provenance and peer review

Not commissioned; externally double-blind peer reviewed.

Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.

Open access

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