

# Graduate Students' Perceptions of the Impact of the Alternative National English Course on the Improvement of Their English Language Learning and Their Learning Challenges at the University of Jordan

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## Abstract

This qualitative study addressed the English language learning needs and challenges expressed by a sample of 22 postgraduate students from diversified faculties in the University of Jordan. These students were required to take the Alternative National English course. They wrote a self-report reflecting on their English language learning needs and challenges in the first semester, 2016. The majority of these students endorsed the high achievement attributed to the contribution of the above course. Among the challenges they encountered, according to them, encompassed the positive change they experienced in being familiar with new vocabularies, new grammatical rules and becoming more proficient in reading and writing skills. On the basis of these findings, the study recommended the incorporation and focusing on the gains students got from the course to be considered in the upcoming semesters. Also the students' challenges in learning English should be taken into consideration. The various needs expressed by the participants should be fulfilled by teachers who teach graduate English courses.

**Keywords:** English language learning, TOEFL, National English course, teaching English

## 1. Introduction

Jordan has started to be increasingly multi-cultural and diverse country, a phenomenon which is clearly reflected at school and university levels. Therefore, English proficiency has become an essential language for graduate students and is, similarly, required by the labor market. The University of Jordan requires students to demonstrate an acceptable competency in the English language. To facilitate the toughness of getting a high grade in this foreign language, it has recently asked students to pass an alternative national exam (Ekhtebār Watani) in English while those who fail it twice will have to take a six-credit hour course and if they pass they will be allowed to go further in their graduate studies. Around the world, students need to sit for an English proficiency test where most known tests are the TOEFL, GMAT, GRE, LSAT, IELTS and several national versions of these exams.

### 1.1. Competency in English and the National Alternative English course

The Higher Education Council in Jordan in its seventh session 29/3/2015 decided and confirmed that higher studies students in the University of Jordan who wish to pursue graduate studies should sit for the TOEFL exam and get the required pass mark as an admission requirement. As for students who come from abroad as international students in the University of Jordan, they should get the TOEFL pass grade or the national exam pass grade in English during the first year of their graduate study in the University of Jordan.

The Council also confirmed the decision No. 54 which confirmed the amendment of the 470 decision dated 13/11/2014 to allow Graduate students enrolled in the University of Jordan to study one alternative course in English (equivalent to three credit hours) and get the pass grade if they failed the national English test three times and got above 40% grade in one of them. On the other hand, the student has to register two English courses (six credit hour equivalent) if he or she fail the alternative national English test three times and got a grade below 40%. In all cases the student should get the pass mark in both courses.

The English language center at the University of Jordan, as the setting of the present study, offers courses to serve students to cope with the courses in English in UJ. The need of English for Jordanian university students manifests itself in the presentation of some courses in English while other courses are purely administered in English and others require an appropriate proficiency in this language. Various course readings necessitate reading publications in English and in other courses the terms and concepts are in English. Internationally, graduate students' English competency was highly emphasized. Abney (2008) argue that what is needed is to enable the graduate student to be able to participate in academic discussions, to be able to defend one's arguments, to explain their opinions, develop hypotheses, and to write and as well as defend their dissertations.

### 1.2. Description of the Instructional material

The instructional material used for the purpose of this study encompassed the Longman preparation course for the TOEFL test (2003). It included Listening comprehension skills from (1-27) short dialogues, conversations

and talks. The second section was the structure and written expression. This embodies structure skills from (1-60). The third section was reading comprehension with skills ranging from 1- 13 sub-skills. The final section was a test of written English which ranged from 1-8 sub-skills.

### **1.3. Context of the study**

This study was undertaken in the first semester of the academic year, 2016 where 22 students registered for the graduate English course following the 3-credt hour route. These students came from various fields of study: medicine, nursing, agriculture, engineering, curriculum and instruction, history, geography and special education and counseling. Those who were from sciences faculties were expressed to achieve higher in English than those from humanities while the former were excepted to get more than 75 those from humanities were only to get a pass mark of 50 out of 100. Most of them were PhD students while a few were Master students.

## **2. Previous research**

A number of related studies were selected which are related to the context of the present study.

Ming (1991) conducted a study to test out the influence of English proficiency as indicated by students' self-ratings and their TOEFL score results together with a group of variables on the level of academic difficulties as perceived by international graduate students. A sample of (450) international graduate students selected in a random way from three large universities in New York city who participated in this study in, 1988. The study findings revealed that the Self-rated English Proficiency was the most significant indicator of the level of academic difficulty. In addition, length of previous English language training together with the factor of age were looked at as significant predictors. As far as the TOEFL score was concerned, it was found out to be a non-significant predictor of the students' academic difficulty.

Ginther and Grant (1996) carried out a preliminary study to examine the academic needs of graduate and undergraduate students in universities of the United States. The review surveys literature regarding the academic needs of native English-speaking university students from several various perspectives. The literature reviewed was divided into three groups: (1) literature that addresses student skills either through an investigation of their deficiencies or through categorization of their writing activities they should perform; (2) L1 process and writing of the curriculum literature that addresses the nature of academic writing tasks with respect to the larger theoretical and institutional contexts in which such tasks are executed; and (3) literature which addresses the student's perceptions and attempts to accommodate the academic pressures of higher education.

Evans and Morrison (2011) examined the findings of a study of the learning and use of English at a university in Hong Kong. The study investigated the learning experiences of 28 undergraduate students and to identify their challenges when studying for degrees in the realm of second language learning. This study explored the language problems students encountered in the process of adapting to an English-medium learning milieu. The data from interviews were supported by findings of a large-scale survey of freshmen students at that university. The findings suggested that the students' major sources of difficulty were related to comprehending and employing specialist vocabulary, understanding their instructors' academic demands, processing and constructing special disciplinary genres. The study concludes with implications for English for Academic purposes as well as materials design.

Marwan, Reski and Reski (2016) probed TOEFL needs of students by identifying the TOEFL sub-skills that demand improvement and their preferred teaching strategies. Twenty-four students (24) from an Indonesian Polytechnic participated in this study. A paper-based TOEFL test excluding writing skill was constructed. Test scores were analyzed in order to identify the students' English proficiency level at the onset of the project. Afterwards, the results were analyzed to examine problematic sub-skills. Then, focus groups were included to examine students' learning preferences. Test results demonstrated that 20 students got scores of less than 400 but less than 500. These scores indicated that all students in such a study required more training to improve their TOEFL results. The findings emerging from test analysis suggested that students were considered good in the case of few sub-skills, but they had problems with other skills. Results emanating from focus groups revealed that students preferred autonomous teaching approaches. This study recommends the incorporation of developing module and training plans on the basis of the outcomes of the study.

A literature review by Starr (2009) reviewed related literature and found out that the course content was simple and that the context was not highly relatable with the needs of the students, therefore additional courses were found to be less workable. Hetrakul (1985) argue that because of the lack of practice of English outside the classroom and the fewer opportunities to communicate with other students in the target language, students experience challenges in learning a second language. Therefore, he recommended the frequent use of the language outside of the classroom and forcing the students to use the language inside the classroom.

## **2.2 Statement of the Problem**

In Jordan like many other countries, English is highly recommendable for students at all levels from pre-school

level up to graduate studies level and beyond through whole professional life of an individual. Students of all levels starting from preschool level up to graduate studies complain of the difficulty of English language. Academic institutions have started to highlight the high competency in this international language. For example, the University of Jordan requires postgraduates to get a special level in the English language for that several programs require a significant level in this international language. None of the students will be admitted in their desired courses without demonstrating a high level in English. Those who fail to achieve the required grade are required to take a three-credit hour English course (now six-credit hour course) taught by experienced instructors. This study attempted to investigate the level of achievement after taking this course. Students report on their achievement and several aspects of development in their effort to upgrade their English level.

### **2.3. Research questions**

This qualitative research attempted to answer the following research questions:

- 1-What are the students' perceptions of the impact of the alternative national English course?
- 2-What are the challenges experienced by the students in the alternative national English course?
- 3- What are the gains that graduate students achieved via the alternative national English course?

### **2.4 Significance of the study**

This study gains special significance because it addresses the impact of the alternative national English course offered to graduate students at the University of Jordan. It investigates the kinds of needs of this category of students and their challenges in learning English. Therefore, it is important for teachers and instructors of these graduate courses and also the program directors who implement English courses for both graduate and undergraduate students. It also serves researchers who set out to study this area of research of graduate study English.

### **2.5. Limitations**

The generalization of the outcomes of the present study is limited to the graduate student population, the time of the implementation of the study and the tool used in this study.

## **3. Methodology**

A self report was written by the 22 students who shared in the course who wrote this self- report reflecting on the impact of the course on their development of English skills, specially in the areas of reading comprehension, listening comprehension, vocabulary development and writing skill. The self report in this study is the only tool which the researcher used to answer the research questions.

### **3.1 Sample of the study**

The participants who wrote the self report were twenty (22) as displayed in the table below who were graduate students who registered for the alternative national English course who certainly failed the TOFEL test and the national test and took the alternative national course with three credit hours ( now shifted to six credit hour course according to the new plan) who came from several university departments at the university of Jordan. Four (4) came from engineering, ( 3 ) came from religious education faculty , (3) from pharmacy faculty, ( 1 ) came from agriculture, (1) from department of accountancy, (2) from department of geography, ( 1 ), the rest were from other from other humanities and social sciences. A number of them were PhD students and the others were M.A students.

**Table (1): displays the participants in the study with their level and specialisation**

No. of student as appearing in the course list	Level	Specialisation
1	Post grad.	Accountancy
2	Post grad.	pharmacy
3	Post grad.	Religious education
4	Post grad.	Religious education
5	Post grad.	Engineering
6	Post grad.	Geography
7	Post grad.	Educational management
8	Post grad.	Counseling
9	Post grad.	geography
10	Post grad.	Pharmacy
11	Post grad.	Pharmacy
12	Post grad.	Civil engineering
13	Post grad.	Industrial engineering
14	Post grad.	agriculture
15	Post grad.	Curriculum and instruction
16	Post grad.	Religious education
17	Post grad.	Engineering
18	Post grad.	Political sciences
19	Post grad.	Law
20	Post grad.	Arabic language
21	Post grad.	Special education
22	Post grad.	Engineering

### 3.2 Validity and Reliability of the results

As far as the validity of the instrument, five specialists in teaching English from Jordanian Universities confirmed the practicality and feasibility of using the self-report instrument to achieve the purpose of this study. A small number (6) of the students who self-reported as informants in this study were asked to write again a self-report to reflect on the impact of the alternative national course and the challenges encountered in learning English. Consistency of the results between first self-reporting and second self-reporting showed a high degree (90%) degree of match between the two self-reporting tasks. Intra-rater reliability was computed between first analysis and second analysis of the same analyst which demonstrated a high match degree.

### 3.3 Data analysis

Data collected via the self-report were analyzed manually by two analysts to ensure reliability. Data were first coded and summarized to facilitate analysis process. Then patterns were investigated to depict an appropriate picture of the value and significance of the course content and its contribution to development of the English proficiency among graduate students to enable them to manage with their studies.

## 4. Results of the study

### 4.1 Students' perceptions of the impact of Alternative National English course

Following are the reflections of 22 students who took the alternative national English (TOFEL) course in the first semester, 2016 as collected via an open self report.

One of these students highlighted the impact of the alternative national English course.

The course has contributed to the increase of vocabulary and reading comprehension skills which has reduced the gap between my previous knowledge in English and current knowledge.

There are many advantages for learning English to me from this course, learning vocabulary and grammar, linking words and using vocabulary correctly.

( Postgraduate students 2)

Another student reflected on the benefit in the acquisition of new words and their meanings

I benefited from this course in recognizing the meaning of new words and their different uses. And comprehended the pronunciation of words accurately and practicing them. Also I learned the correct spelling of the words. I became able to identify new terms and their meanings.

Postgraduate students 6

This student reflected on the weakness in communication in English because of the lack of contacting with the native speakers of the English language.

#### 4.2 Challenges in learning English experienced by postgraduate students

A student reflected on the various language skills mentioning that he experienced problems with different skills. The first problem for me was the listening skill because I found difficulty with the context of the listening text and answering the questions that follow. . The second problem was the structure of the English language because I did not recognize how to link sentences with each other. Also I found difficulty with how to use sentences correctly.

(Postgraduate students, 4)

A student pointed out to several problems in grammar, conversation and writing :

I was having a lot of problems in the formation of the sentence as well as to distinguish between parts of the sentence and had problems of the grammatical rules and in conversation in addition to the writing difficulty. After taking this course I gained improvement in identifying correct and incorrect sentences and identifying the mistakes I committed.

( Postgraduate students, 8)

Another (agriculture) student said:

I gained better skills in listening comprehension, structure and written expressions and reading comprehension.( Postgraduate student 10)

The same student confirmed the gains by saying:

These skills helped me improve my reading comprehension and English grammar which was so weak before this course. My English language contained a lot of mistakes. The course gave me the ability to understand other subjects which are taught in English and when I read international articles.

One other student argued that (No. 18)

I was having a few problems in reading and grammar such as I could not distinguish before this course between object and subject pronouns nor between nouns and adjectives. Regarding the reading comprehension, I did not have reading skills and I had lots of problems with understanding the texts. After this course, I have a lot of skills with respect to reading and grammar. I have acquired different skills that improved my English level.

Another student ( No. 15) said:

Before this course I was having a few problems in some skills. But now I have gained several skills training and more skills to become more and more able to understand therefore I learned many skills. For example, I learned how to extract the appropriate title from the different pieces of the texts and I learned the author's purpose and I knew the topic of the passage and what the passage main discussion and how information in the passages was organized. I have added more vocabulary and grammar rules through texts and the various learning activities. I enjoyed the material and the texts used in the course. This TOFEL course has qualified me for a better future by understanding the grammar rules, the reading texts and listening skills.

#### 4.3 Various benefits from the National Alternative English course

A student reflected on the development experienced in reading lengthy passages, and familiarity with vocabulary and grammar:

In the beginning I had a problem with pronunciation of some words and other problems with structure and written expressions. Later after taking several lectures with our professor ,I have become more able to read lengthy passages and know some vocabulary and some familiarity with the proper use of grammar. ( Grad. student 5)

As far as the use of vocabulary development, the same student said:

I can distinguish between the meanings of words and their synonyms as a result of taking the TOFEL course.

As to the grammar of the language this student said:

I have become able to differentiate between the subject and the object and can differentiate between pronouns and between nouns.

This course according to this student and several others was useful as it reinforced their confidence in speaking and promised that this course has encouraged them to read and so that this skill has become a life-long experience.

A postgraduate student (No. 3) said

There are many problems and barriers that faced me before I took this course for example I had a problem with listening, reading, writing and conversation. I could not distinguish sentences from questions when listening to the tape recorder and this made me fail the international TOFEL exam. Now, I am happy to be able to know what the listening passage all about as I can choose the correct answer for the post-listening questions.

This same student reiterated that in the reading comprehension skill, he was more successful.

As for the reading course, the benefit was greater and more effective on my knowledge of vocabulary and the content of the reading passage. Before this course, I could not understand the title of the reading passage and was not able to answer the post-reading questions. (Postgraduate student 15)

The reading problem as the case with several other skills is a serious problem.



#### **4.4 Self-correction**

Due to the structural and vocabulary as well as reading and writing together with the listening and speaking skills, students became more able to self correct their errors and mistakes by themselves as they progressed in the course.

A graduate student said:

I think this course has filled a gap in my English language proficiency. It helped me improve and pass this deficiency in some areas of the English language. I became able to correct wrong sentences, choose the best answers and use the tenses correctly and answer the reading comprehension questions. ( Graduate student 20)

#### **4.5. Relationship between the teacher and the students as a vehicle to promote communication skills**

One student ( No. 16) reiterated:

I think that this course has made English easier for the students and for me and for my classmates. The teacher was friendly and cooperative and always encouraging us to communicate in English. The co-operative and friendly relationship between the teacher and his students makes communication among the students and with the teacher easier and flexible. It also encourages us to study more and improve our level in English.

The above presentation of results that emerged from the self-reports written by the 22 students revealed the various benefits from the national alternative English course administered to the graduate students and also revealed the progress attained by them though still more care about the development of the students in English language learning especially at the graduate studies level should be reinforced and consolidated. These students knowledge about the language and its different uses are still below the accepted standard as graduate study requires a high standard of English to accommodate the various assignments and requirements of a graduate study.

#### **5. Discussion**

The students who participated in this study by writing self-reports highlighted the various needs that they felt to fulfill in the beginning of the alternative national English (for graduate students) course. Among these needs were the mastery of the major English language skills which were reading, writing, speaking and listening in addition to the grammar of the English language.

The study also echoed the actual development in several language skills and in the grammar of the language due to the practice of the several skills in this course.

The challenges, that the students had before taking this course, encompassed several difficulties which embodied the lack of ability to distinguish between subject and object, nouns and adjectives and the difficulties in reading and writing. Evans and Morrison (2011)'s study whose findings suggested that the students' principal sources of difficulty had to do with comprehending and utilizing specialist vocabulary, and processing and producing special disciplinary genres. Alkhalaf (2011, 2011, 2011, 2011, 2012) pointed to the problems students encountered in reading and writing besides vocabulary and other skills.

The findings of this study reported by the graduate students in the above course illustrate the value of the above course in enabling graduate students to improve their listening comprehension, reading comprehension, vocabulary development and their writing skill. They became, according to some of them, more able to handle reading comprehension various questions. They became more confident to identify by themselves differences among several structural forms and meanings of words.

The majority of these students endorsed the high achievement in the course. They also expressed their gains from the course among the challenges they encountered according to them encompassed the positive change they experienced in being familiar with new vocabularies, new grammatical rules and became more proficient in reading and writing.

#### **6. Conclusion and Implications for Teaching the TOFEL course in Jordan and similar educational programs**

The various and multiple implications that rest on the findings of this study are first and foremost directed to the teachers to give special attention to these students needs and overcoming their instructional challenges in the alternative national English course. They should take into considerations the unique needs of graduate students for English language learning and how these needs can be incorporated into their various courses content in their specific fields of specialism. Internationally, graduate students English competency was highly emphasized. Abney (2008) referred to above argue that graduate English programs should enable graduate student to participate in academic discussions, to defend their arguments, to illustrate their opinions, construct their hypotheses, and to write their dissertations.

The study recommended the incorporation of the learning needs of the graduate students and focusing on the gains they get from the course to be considered in teaching this course in the upcoming semesters. Also the students' learning challenges in learning English should be taken into consideration. The various needs

expressed by the participants should be considered and fulfilled by teachers in the next courses.

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