

## Investigating the Academic Enablers and Hindrances of English Language Learning for Saudi EFL Secondary School Students

Suad Abdulaziz Saleh Alhamlan\*

Educational Supervisor for English Language, Ministry of Education, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

\*Corresponding author: Suad Abdulaziz Saleh Alhamlan

**Citation:** Saleh Alhamlan SA (2025) Investigating the Academic Enablers and Hindrances of English Language Learning for Saudi EFL Secondary School Students. American J Sci Edu Re: AJSER-268.

**Received Date:** 15 September, 2025; **Accepted Date:** 22 September, 2025; **Published Date:** 26 September, 2025

### Abstract

*This study investigates the key academic enablers and hindrances in English language learning from the perspectives of Saudi secondary school EFL students and their instructors. It also aims to identify actionable suggestions for improvement. A mixed-methods research approach is employed, sequentially combining quantitative and qualitative data collection. The quantitative phase utilized a questionnaire administered to 760 Saudi secondary school EFL students to gauge their perceptions across various enablers and hindrances. The qualitative phase involved semi-structured interviews with Saudi EFL instructors to gain in-depth contextual understanding. The results revealed a dichotomy where students perceived their teachers as highly supportive and the classroom environment as motivational, yet they faced significant systemic barriers. The most pronounced challenges were a curriculum perceived as difficult, large class sizes, and a profound lack of confidence in speaking English, indicating severe foreign language anxiety. The interviews with instructors corroborated these findings, identifying curriculum misalignment, logistical constraints, and affective filters as primary hindrances, while highlighting their own efforts to create supportive climates through feedback and technology. Based on the integrated findings, five major recommendations are proposed: reforming the curriculum to integrate authentic, communicative tasks; providing teacher training on cooperative learning strategies to manage large classes; establishing extracurricular clubs to foster low-anxiety language practice; reviewing grading policies for greater transparency and perceived fairness; and continuing the strategic integration of technology to enhance engagement and resource access.*

**Keywords:** English Language Learning, EFL, Academic, Enablers, Hindrances, Secondary School

### I. Introduction

The mastery of a second or foreign language is widely recognized as an essential skill in our increasingly interconnected world (Corbett, 2022). English, in particular, has established its dominance as the global lingua franca, serving as a critical tool for international communication, commerce, and education (Andayani, 2022). Its pervasive influence means that English language proficiency is not merely an academic pursuit but a crucial component of success in the 21st century for individuals and nations alike (Dryden et al., 2021). The profound importance of English has spurred significant educational reforms and policy changes across the globe (Ross & Stuckler, 2025). This has made the process of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) acquisition a primary focus of academic inquiry, as researchers seek to understand the complex interplay of psychological, pedagogical, and socio-cultural factors that influence its effectiveness (Inayati et al., 2024).

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, in particular, has placed a high strategic value on English Language Learning (ELL) as a cornerstone of its national development agenda (Al-Mwzaiji & Muhammad, 2023). Under the ambitious framework of Saudi Vision 2030, the government has emphasized empowering its citizens with the skills needed to compete in a globalized economy, with English proficiency seen as a key enabler for this transformation (Albiladi, 2022). English fluency is considered a facilitator for international collaboration and a pathway to diverse career opportunities for a new generation of Saudis

(Alsudais, 2017). Despite substantial investments in the educational sector and these clear national objectives, significant challenges persist in the teaching and learning of English within the Saudi Arabian context (Ashraf, 2018). These obstacles, which can hinder a student's progress, are not uniform and often vary depending on the educational level and demographic (Yokubjonova, 2025). The focus on secondary education is particularly critical, as this stage serves as a pivotal bridge between foundational learning and future academic or professional endeavors (Al-Hassaani & Al-Saalmi, 2022).

Research has consistently documented the challenges Saudi EFL learners face across various linguistic skills (Al-Mohanna, 2024). Speaking, for example, is frequently cited as a major area of weakness among students, often attributed to a combination of internal and external factors that inhibit active engagement (Alzahrani, 2019; Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021). Reading comprehension presents its own set of problems, stemming from difficulties with vocabulary and complex sentence structures (Ahmed & Ahmed, 2023). Students often struggle to apply effective word-solving strategies when faced with unfamiliar terms (Al-Shulayil & Alkhaleefah, 2025). The broader acquisition of vocabulary remains a persistent issue, as students find it difficult to retain new words and integrate them into their productive language use (Hasan, 2024). Writing and listening skills also contribute to a holistic picture of a learning process fraught with difficulties for many students, highlighting the need for a comprehensive investigation into their root causes and potential solutions (Koral & Mirici, 2021; Al-Jarf, 2022). The cumulative effect of these challenges can lead to frustration and

a lack of confidence, which further impedes progress (Soland & Sandilos, 2021).

Academic enablers and hindrances are the specific factors within the educational environment that either facilitate or obstruct a student's learning trajectory (Chun & Abdullah, 2022). These factors are multifaceted, encompassing pedagogical, technological, and socio-emotional elements (Hanny et al., 2023). For instance, a teacher's attitude and instructional strategies are powerful determinants of a student's success (Sun & Buripakdi, 2025). A teacher's ability to effectively integrate modern 21st-century skills and technologies can profoundly impact student engagement and learning outcomes (Akram et al., 2022). Conversely, a lack of awareness or inadequate training in these areas can serve as a significant impediment to effective instruction (Sharma, 2022). Technology itself is a double-edged sword; while it can be a major facilitator of learning, its improper implementation can create new challenges (Wang et al., 2023). This dual nature of academic factors underscores the necessity of a nuanced investigation that goes beyond simply identifying problems and also recognizes effective practices (Elmahdi et al., 2025).

A student's individual disposition and background are also critical academic factors that shape their learning experience (Soland & Sandilos, 2021; Yokubjonova, 2025). Motivation and attitude are key determinants of a student's success in learning English (Alshehri, 2018). Students who feel bored or disengaged from their English classes are likely to make less progress, highlighting the importance of creating a dynamic and engaging classroom environment (Ali El Deen & Ahmed, 2023). A student's self-efficacy, or their belief in their ability to succeed, also plays a crucial role in their willingness to take risks and persevere through difficulties (Soland & Sandilos, 2021). The social and emotional aspects of learning, such as foreign language anxiety, can act as significant hindrances, particularly in tasks that require students to speak and interact (Dryden et al., 2021). These internal factors are often intertwined with external elements, such as the curriculum itself and the teaching environment, which can either mitigate or exacerbate existing issues (Christison & Murray, 2021).

The academic enablers of English language learning are multifaceted and include well-structured curricula and effective teaching methodologies (Al-Hassaani & Al-Saalmi, 2022). The use of innovative approaches, such as integrating technology and fostering critical thinking, can lead to significant improvements in student outcomes (Elmahdi et al., 2025). Curricula that are relevant to students' lives and their future aspirations can also enhance intrinsic motivation (Christison & Murray, 2021). Furthermore, the availability of resources, both digital and physical, acts as a powerful enabler by providing students with the tools they need to practice and improve their skills autonomously (Inayati et al., 2024).

Conversely, the academic hindrances are equally diverse and require careful consideration (Ross & Stuckler, 2025). The lack of exposure to native English speakers and a limited number of opportunities for out-of-class practice are major barriers for many Saudi EFL learners (Alharbi, 2021). Students also face difficulties stemming from instructional methods that may not align with their learning styles (Ashraf, 2018). Some teachers may rely on traditional, teacher-centered methods that limit student participation and autonomy (Sharma, 2022). The curriculum itself can be a hindrance if it focuses too heavily on

rote memorization of grammar rules rather than on communicative competence (Koral & Mirici, 2021). Moreover, systemic issues, such as a high-stakes focus on formal assessment, can create a stressful environment that inhibits genuine language acquisition (Alshehri, 2018). These various hindrances, in combination, can lead to student frustration and a lack of confidence (Soland & Sandilos, 2021).

Despite existing research on general EFL challenges in Saudi Arabia, a notable gap remains in comprehensive, systematic studies that specifically and holistically investigate the academic enablers and hindrances at the secondary school level (Alsudais, 2017). Previous research has often focused on a single aspect of the learning process, such as speaking or reading, without fully exploring the interplay between different factors (Alzahrani, 2019). The unique socio-cultural and educational context of Saudi secondary schools necessitates a focused inquiry to inform targeted interventions (Al-Mwzaiji & Muhammad, 2023). A more granular understanding of what helps and what hinders these specific students is essential for crafting effective pedagogical strategies and curriculum reforms (Al-Hassaani & Al-Saalmi, 2022).

The present study intends to systematically investigate the academic enablers and hindrances that influence English language learning for Saudi EFL secondary school students. The primary aim is to identify the key factors within the educational environment, including pedagogical practices, curriculum design, and the use of technology, that either facilitate or obstruct the learning process. The study also aims to explore the learners' own perspectives on these issues, delving into their attitudes, motivations, and the challenges they perceive in their daily learning experiences. By undertaking this comprehensive investigation, the research seeks to generate actionable insights for educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers. The ultimate goal is to propose evidence-based recommendations that can help enhance the effectiveness of English language teaching and learning in Saudi secondary schools, thereby supporting the broader national educational objectives of Saudi Vision 2030.

## **II. Statement of the Problem**

Despite national efforts to enhance English language education, considerable academic underperformance persists among female secondary school students in Saudi Arabia (Al-Mwzaiji & Muhammad, 2023; Albiladi, 2022). Researchers such as Alshehri (2018) and Alzahrani (2019) attribute these poor outcomes to a combination of factors related to student motivation, the learning environment, and teacher-related issues. This persistent academic weakness is evident in the widely reported struggles with essential communicative skills like speaking (Al-Hassaani & Al-Saalmi, 2022), and foundational skills such as reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition (Hezam et al., 2022; Hasan, 2024). These difficulties are often linked to a lack of opportunities for authentic communication and a reliance on rote memorization over fostering fluency (Al-Jarf, 2022; Sharma, 2022).

The problem is further compounded by a pedagogical environment that can contribute to student disengagement and boredom (Ali El Deen & Ahmed, 2023). A lack of teacher training in integrating critical thinking and technology into culturally responsive teaching also acts as a significant hindrance (Elmahdi et al., 2025). The challenges are not merely a result of individual student factors but are deeply intertwined

with pedagogical and environmental issues (Ahmed & Ahmed, 2023). Therefore, understanding this challenge requires a move beyond simply identifying weaknesses. It is crucial to explore the specific academic enablers of success in English language learning. Just as underperformance results from multiple interconnected factors, academic excellence is influenced by a distinct set of variables, including student motivation, socio-cultural factors, the availability of modern technology, and teacher competence.

Despite the acknowledged challenges, a notable research gap remains in the comprehensive, systematic investigation of both the academic "enablers" and "hindrances" as a holistic system, particularly at the secondary school level (Al-Hassaani & Al-Saalmi, 2022; Al-Mohanna, 2024). Existing studies often focus on isolated aspects without exploring how these factors interact within the broader educational ecosystem. This study aims to address this gap by systematically investigating both the enablers and hindrances of English language learning, with the intention of providing targeted, evidence-based suggestions to improve student outcomes.

### Research Questions

This research seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the perceptions of Saudi EFL secondary school students regarding the academic enablers of English language learning?
2. What are the perceptions of Saudi EFL secondary school teachers regarding the academic hindrances of English language learning?
3. What are the suggestions to enhance English language learning for Saudi EFL secondary school students?

### Research Objectives

This research tries to achieve the following objectives:

1. To assess the perceptions of Saudi EFL secondary school students regarding the academic enablers of English language learning.
2. To evaluate the perceptions of Saudi EFL secondary school teachers regarding the academic hindrances of English language learning.
3. To introduce suggestions for enhancing English language learning among Saudi EFL secondary school students.

### III. Research Significance

This study holds significant theoretical and practical importance within the context of English language education in Saudi Arabia. Theoretically, it aims to address a notable gap in the existing literature by providing a comprehensive, holistic examination of both the academic enablers and hindrances of English language learning. While previous studies have often focused on isolated challenges, such as speaking or reading difficulties, this research will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the interconnected factors that collectively influence student performance. By exploring the perceptions of both students and teachers, the study will offer a dual-perspective insight into the complex educational ecosystem, thereby enriching the scholarly discourse on language acquisition in the Saudi EFL context.

Practically, the findings of this study have the potential to directly inform and improve English language education for Saudi secondary school students. The identified hindrances will provide educators and curriculum developers with a clear

diagnosis of the most pressing challenges their students face, from pedagogical shortcomings to specific skill deficiencies. Conversely, the exploration of enablers will highlight effective strategies and successful practices that can be replicated and integrated into teaching methodologies. The specific suggestions derived from the findings will serve as a valuable resource for teachers seeking to create more engaging and effective learning environments.

Furthermore, this research is directly aligned with the educational objectives of Saudi Vision 2030, which emphasizes developing a highly skilled and globally competitive workforce. By pinpointing the factors that either facilitate or impede English proficiency, the study will provide evidence-based recommendations for policymakers to refine educational policies and allocate resources more effectively. Ultimately, the successful implementation of the study's recommendations could lead to improved student outcomes, greater confidence in using the English language, and a stronger foundation for tertiary education and future careers, thereby contributing to the broader national development goals.

### IV. Literature Review

The acquisition of EFL is a globally recognized prerequisite for academic and professional advancement (Andayani, 2022). In the Saudi Arabian context, English proficiency is a cornerstone of the national educational strategy, aligning with the objectives of Vision 2030 to prepare a globally competitive workforce (Albiladi, 2022). However, a comprehensive understanding of the factors that facilitate and impede English language learning among secondary school students remains a critical area of investigation (Alsudais, 2017). The challenges in language acquisition are multifaceted, involving both academic hindrances and contextual enablers that shape the student's learning experience (Ross & Stuckler, 2025). This paper provides a professional and academic overview of these factors, supported exclusively by the provided scholarly references (Ashraf, 2018).

Academic hindrances to EFL learning for Saudi secondary students are widely documented and include a range of pedagogical, psychological, and environmental issues (Alzahrani, 2019). Speaking proficiency, for instance, is a primary challenge, with many students lacking the confidence and opportunities for authentic communication (Shohsanam, A. D., 2022). The pedagogical approach often prioritizes grammatical knowledge and rote memorization over the development of fluency and communicative competence (Al-Hassaani & Al-Saalmi, 2022). This focus on traditional methods can lead to a lack of engagement and boredom among students, hindering their motivation to learn (Ali El Deen, 2023). Furthermore, reading comprehension skills are frequently cited as a major difficulty for EFL learners (Alharbi, 2021). Students struggle with lexical problems and word-solving strategies, which impede their ability to understand and engage with texts (Al-Shulayil & Alkhaleefah, 2025). Foreign language anxiety is another significant hindrance, creating an emotional barrier that can prevent learners from actively participating in class and practicing their skills (Dryden et al., 2021). Insufficient teacher training in modern pedagogical practices, such as integrating technology effectively, also presents a significant barrier to student progress (Akram et al., 2022). The curriculum itself may pose a hindrance, particularly if it does not adequately address

the development of speaking skills or align with students' real-world needs (Koral & Mirici, 2021).

Conversely, academic enablers are the facilitative factors that can significantly improve the English language learning process (Hanny et al., 2023). A teacher's positive attitude and ability to incorporate 21st-century skills are crucial enablers for effective language instruction (Chun & Abdullah, 2022). When teachers understand and address personal blockers, they can better facilitate learning and foster a more positive classroom environment (Sun & Buripakdi, 2025). Student motivation and self-efficacy play a pivotal role as enablers, as a student's belief in their ability to succeed directly correlates with academic growth (Soland & Sandilos, 2021). The integration of technology, such as generative AI and chatbots, can serve as a powerful enabler, providing international students with new avenues for practice and support (Wang et al., 2023). Allowing for translanguaging, where students use their native language as an emotional safe space, can also enable them to overcome foreign language anxiety (Dryden et al., 2021). Empowering struggling readers to take the lead in their learning can transform English language instruction and foster a sense of autonomy (Sharma, 2022). Student awareness and a positive attitude toward online autonomous learning can also function as a significant enabler for language acquisition (Inayati et al., 2024).

The complexities of EFL learning are best understood through a robust theoretical framework that accounts for both hindrances and enablers. One theoretical lens is the socio-cultural approach, which posits that language learning is not merely a cognitive process but is deeply embedded in social and cultural contexts (House & Kádár, 2024). The social background of students can significantly impact their learning, highlighting the need to consider external factors beyond the classroom (Yokubjonova, 2025). An intercultural approach to English language teaching is essential to create a learning environment that respects and integrates the students' cultural identity (Corbett, 2022). The theoretical concept of curriculum design is also central, as the structure and content of course materials can either enable or hinder the acquisition of specific skills (Christison & Murray, 2021). The psycholinguistic dimension focuses on the internal processes of the learner, such as motivation and attitudes, which are foundational to a student's success (Alshehri, 2018). The challenges in speaking, for example, can be attributed to a student's internal psychological barriers, which are as important to address as external factors (Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021). This dual focus on both internal and external factors is crucial for a comprehensive theoretical understanding.

The existing body of research on English language learning has consistently pointed to various factors that either facilitate or impede students' progress. Starting with the most recent works, Ross and Stuckler (2025) and Sun and Buripakdi (2025) provide a broad, high-level view. The former, a systematic review, identifies common university-level barriers such as foreign language anxiety and inhibitory beliefs, while the latter, focusing on Chinese primary teachers, highlights how teacher perceptions and lack of institutional support can block educational goals like global citizenship education. These studies set the stage by establishing that both internal student struggles and external, teacher-related challenges are critical.

Drilling down to specific skills, Al-Shulayil and Alkhaleefah (2025) and Ahmed and Ahmed (2023) both analyze reading. The first study explores the word-solving strategies of Saudi EFL students, revealing that social and contextual clues are more common than dictionary use. The second, a qualitative study, shows that a lack of unity in paragraphs and L1 interference are major reading comprehension difficulties for university students. This focus on individual skills is echoed by Al-Hassaani and Al-Saalmi (2022) and Alzahrani (2019), who both investigate the weakness of speaking skills among Saudi students, pointing to issues like late exposure to English and insufficient opportunities for in-class practice.

The role of the educator is a recurrent theme across several studies. Chun and Abdullah (2022) demonstrate that teachers' attitudes and the presence of barriers or enablers directly impact their ability to teach 21st-century skills. Similarly, Sharma (2022) argues that a one-size-fits-all approach is ineffective for struggling readers, advocating for a more learner-centered approach. Elmahdi et al. (2025) connect this teacher-centric view to technology, proposing a framework for integrating critical thinking and technology that is culturally responsive, while Albiladi (2022) links teaching strategies to Saudi Vision 2030, reinforcing the idea that effective pedagogy must align with broader national objectives. These studies consistently emphasize that teachers are not just instructors but facilitators whose professional development and support systems are crucial for student success.

While the existing research provides a solid foundation, there's a significant gap that the current study, titled "Investigating the Academic Enablers and Hindrances of English Language Learning for Saudi EFL Secondary School Students," aims to fill. Much of the previous work, particularly from the Saudi context, either focuses on a single academic skill or is confined to the university level. For example, Al-Hassaani and Al-Saalmi (2022) and Alzahrani (2019) zero in on speaking, while Ahmed and Ahmed (2023) and Al-Shulayil and Alkhaleefah (2025) concentrate on reading. These studies, while valuable, often miss the broader picture of how different skills and factors intersect.

Furthermore, most of the research centers on university students, who have different motivations and face distinct challenges compared to their younger counterparts. The doctoral dissertation by Alshehri (2018), for instance, focuses on how motivation changes after immersion in an L2 environment, a context more relevant to advanced learners. The current study is unique because it takes a holistic approach, investigating multiple academic enablers and hindrances across all language skills within the specific context of secondary school students. This demographic is at a critical stage of language development, and their experiences may differ significantly from university students. By focusing on this specific group and taking a broad view of the influencing factors, this research will offer a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how to support English language acquisition during these formative years. This is a crucial area that has been largely overlooked in the existing literature.

**V. Methodology**

**Research Design**

This research employs a mixed-methods approach, strategically blending a quantitative survey with qualitative interviews to investigate the academic enablers and hindrances of English language learning for Saudi EFL secondary school students. This dual-pronged approach captures both broad patterns and nuanced individual experiences, ensuring a comprehensive, multidimensional understanding of the attitudes held by Saudi students and educators. Quantitative data reveal the prevalence of certain experiences, while qualitative narratives provide rich contextual detail that shapes these perspectives. This study is grounded in two core theoretical frameworks: Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), which examines language acquisition as a social process, and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), which analyzes the multiple layers of environmental influence on student development.

**Participants**

The research population for this study comprised all female third-grade students in public secondary schools in Riyadh city, Saudi Arabia. The qualitative sample was a purposive selection of 20 female English language teachers from ten government secondary schools across nine educational offices in Riyadh. Eligible teachers were invited to participate, prioritizing a diverse range of teaching experience (3–20 years) and age (28–55). All participants held bachelor's or master's degrees in English language teaching to EFL students. The quantitative sample was a random selection of 760 female third-grade students from the same ten government secondary schools affiliated with the nine educational offices in Riyadh.

**Data Collection**

Two complementary instruments gathered data:

**A. Questionnaire**

A 20-item digital survey, designed from EFL learning literature, probed students' perceptions of *academic enablers and hindrances of English language learning*. Items used a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*), covering two sections:

1. *Academic enablers of English language learning* (10 statements)

2. *Academic hindrances of English language learning* (10 statements)

Distributed via institutional email, the survey achieved a 100% response rate. Five educational linguistics experts validated content clarity and relevance; revisions incorporated their feedback. Cronbach's  $\alpha$  (0.905) confirmed high reliability. Informed consent preceded participation, emphasizing voluntary engagement and data anonymity.

**B. Semi-Structured Interviews**

Twenty female English language teachers from ten government secondary schools participated in 20-minute interviews to discuss their experiences with academic enablers and hindrances of English language learning and the suggestions for enhancing English language learning. Sessions occurred inside the schools, audio-recorded with consent. A reflexive thematic analysis transcribed and coded responses, prioritizing emergent patterns. Participants validated transcripts for accuracy and could withdraw freely. Confidentiality was ensured through pseudonyms and secure data storage.

**Data Analysis**

Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) software is used to process survey data via descriptive statistics (means, frequencies) to map consensus/divergence in attitudes. Interview narratives underwent inductive thematic analysis: recordings were transcribed, iteratively coded, and synthesized into key themes. Qualitative insights contextualized statistical trends—revealing *why* certain patterns emerged—while verbatim excerpts preserved participants' voices.

**VI. Results & Discussion**

This section provides a detailed analysis of the study's questionnaire and interview results, presenting the key findings and discussing them in relation to the existing literature.

**1- Results of the Questionnaire**

The participant responses to the questionnaire are presented in the tables below. These findings are then discussed in the context of relevant existing literature.

Table 4.1: *Academic Enablers of English Language Learning*.

| S  | Statements   | Frequency (n=760) |       |         |          |                   | Mean |
|----|--|-------------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|------|
|    |  | Strongly Agree    | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |      |
| 1  | I feel comfortable asking my English teacher questions when I don't understand something.                | 306               | 325   | 91      | 26       | 12                | 4.17 |
| 2  | My English teacher provides clear and helpful feedback on my assignments.                                | 253               | 347   | 117     | 30       | 13                | 4.05 |
| 3  | The classroom environment makes me feel motivated to learn English.                                      | 448               | 234   | 48      | 11       | 19                | 4.42 |
| 4  | I have enough resources (like textbooks, apps, and online materials) to help me with my English studies. | 357               | 296   | 74      | 28       | 5                 | 4.28 |
| 5  | I feel that I am making significant progress in my English language skills.                              | 195               | 295   | 133     | 102      | 35                | 3.68 |
| 6  | The class activities and lessons are interesting and engaging.   | 396               | 217   | 89      | 40       | 18                | 4.23 |
| 7  | I can easily find help from my peers when I struggle with English.                                       | 222               | 254   | 179     | 88       | 17                | 3.76 |
| 8  | I feel confident speaking English in front of my classmates.   | 148               | 206   | 209     | 156      | 41                | 3.35 |
| 9  | My English teacher encourages us to participate in class discussions and activities.                     | 245               | 274   | 135     | 74       | 32                | 3.82 |
| 10 | I feel that the grading for my English assignments is fair and consistent.                               | 171               | 267   | 183     | 109      | 30                | 3.58 |

Table 4.1 presents a descriptive statistical analysis of student perceptions (n=760) regarding ten key academic enablers for English language learning. The results indicate that the most potent academic enabler is the classroom environment, which students report as being highly motivational for learning English (Mean = 4.42). This is closely followed by the availability of adequate learning resources, such as textbooks, apps, and online materials (Mean = 4.28), and the perception that class activities and lessons are interesting and engaging (Mean = 4.23). Furthermore, students express a strong sense of comfort in asking their English teacher questions when facing difficulties (Mean = 4.17) and acknowledge that their teacher provides clear and helpful feedback on assignments (Mean = 4.05).

Conversely, the enablers with the lowest means reveal areas of relative challenge. While still positive, students report moderate levels of confidence in their teacher's encouragement to participate in discussions (Mean = 3.82) and their ability to easily find help from peers when struggling (Mean = 3.76). A more significant concern emerges regarding students' perception of their own progress in English language skills (Mean = 3.68). This is compounded by perceptions of fair and consistent grading being only moderately strong (Mean = 3.58). The most pronounced challenge, however, is a marked lack of confidence in speaking English in front of classmates (Mean = 3.35), which stands as the lowest-rated enabler by a considerable margin.

The findings present a nuanced picture of the English language learning environment. The high mean scores for motivational environment, resource availability, and engaging lessons suggest that structural and teacher-driven factors are effectively established. This aligns with the work of Christison & Murray (2021), who emphasize that a well-designed curriculum and a positive learning atmosphere are fundamental enablers for language acquisition. The importance of resource availability is

further supported by Hanny et al. (2023), who identified access to appropriate tools and materials as a critical enabler for successful learning outcomes in blended environments.

However, the lower scores related to self-perceived progress, peer support, and particularly speaking confidence highlight persistent affective and socio-cultural barriers. The acute lack of confidence in speaking is a well-documented phenomenon in EFL contexts, especially in Saudi Arabia. This finding corresponds strongly with the research of Al-Hassaani & Al-Saalmi (2022), who identified speaking anxiety as a primary obstacle for Saudi EFL learners. Similarly, Alzahrani (2019) specifically investigated the reasons behind speaking weaknesses among university students, citing lack of practice and fear of making mistakes as key factors, which is reflected in the low mean score here.

The moderate level of perceived peer support (Mean = 3.76) suggests that collaborative learning may not be fully optimized. This echoes the findings of Ross & Stuckler (2025), whose systematic review identified limited peer interaction as a significant barrier in university-level EFL settings. Furthermore, the fact that students feel comfortable asking the teacher questions (high mean) but are less confident speaking in front of peers (lowest mean) indicates a potential disparity between student-teacher and student-student interaction dynamics, a nuance that warrants further investigation.

The perception of only moderate progress (Mean = 3.68) could be intrinsically linked to speaking anxiety. As noted by Soland & Sandilos (2021), self-efficacy, learner's belief in their capability to succeed, is directly tied to academic achievement. Chronic anxiety in a core skill like speaking can undermine overall self-efficacy, leading learners to underestimate their progress in other areas. This connection between affective factors and perceived progress is a critical consideration for educators aiming to holistically support learner development.

Table 4.2: *Academic Hindrances of English Language Learning.*

| S  | Statements   | Frequency (n=760) |       |         |          |                   | Mean |
|----|--|-------------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|------|
|    |  | Strongly Agree    | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree |      |
| 1  | The English curriculum is too difficult for me to understand.              | 117               | 138   | 164     | 207      | 134               | 2.86 |
| 2  | My English class has too many students, which makes it hard to learn.      | 111               | 140   | 215     | 177      | 117               | 2.94 |
| 3  | The teaching methods used in my English class are effective.               | 282               | 303   | 121     | 29       | 25                | 4.04 |
| 4  | My English teacher is supportive and encourages me to learn.               | 299               | 317   | 88      | 36       | 20                | 4.10 |
| 5  | The classroom environment is free from distractions, which helps me focus. | 262               | 320   | 112     | 42       | 24                | 3.99 |
| 6  | I feel that my current English grades do not reflect my effort.            | 91                | 154   | 209     | 187      | 119               | 2.88 |
| 7  | I find that I have too much homework in English class.                     | 156               | 262   | 146     | 116      | 80                | 3.39 |
| 8  | I feel anxious when I have to speak English in front of others.            | 136               | 209   | 181     | 126      | 108               | 3.18 |
| 9  | My English teacher makes the lessons easy to follow.                       | 252               | 332   | 92      | 52       | 32                | 3.95 |
| 10 | I get enough support from my English teacher outside of class.             | 223               | 313   | 128     | 57       | 39                | 3.82 |

Table 4.2 provides a quantitative summary of student perceptions (n=760) regarding potential academic hindrances to English language learning. The factors that students perceive as hindrances evidenced by high mean scores—are primarily teacher-related. The highest mean indicates strong agreement that the English teacher is supportive and encouraging (Mean =

4.10). Students also affirm that the teaching methods used in class are effective (Mean = 4.04) and that the classroom environment is free from distractions (Mean = 3.99). Additionally, they agree that their teacher makes the lessons easy to follow (Mean = 3.95) and that they receive adequate support from their teacher outside of class (Mean = 3.82).

The data reveals a clear hierarchy of perceived hindrances. The less significant barriers, as indicated by the lowest mean scores, are the perception that the English curriculum is too difficult to understand (Mean = 2.86) and a feeling that current English grades do not reflect the effort invested (Mean = 2.88). These are closely followed by the concern that classes are too large, thereby hindering the learning process (Mean = 2.94). A moderate level of hindrance is associated with the volume of coursework, as students report having too much homework in English class (Mean = 3.39). Furthermore, a notable affective barrier is present, with students expressing anxiety when having to speak English in front of others (Mean = 3.18).

The findings from this study paint a complex picture where significant institutional and affective barriers exist alongside strong, positive perceptions of teacher support and instructional quality. The identification of curriculum difficulty and large class sizes as primary hindrances aligns with broader systemic challenges in EFL contexts. This corresponds with the findings of Ross & Stuckler (2025), whose systematic review identified "curricular overload" and "large class sizes" as critical structural barriers that limit individualized attention and effective pedagogy in university EFL settings. The perception that grades do not reflect effort (Mean = 2.88) may stem from this impersonal environment or from a misalignment between assessment methods and student learning styles, a challenge noted in curriculum design literature (Christison & Murray, 2021).

The persistence of speaking anxiety (Mean = 3.18) as a notable hindrance, even in a table focused on academic barriers, underscores its profound impact on the learning process. This finding strongly reinforces the result from Table 4.1 and is consistent with a body of research specific to the region. Al-Hassaani & Al-Saalmi (2022) explicitly link such anxiety to a fear of negative evaluation from peers, which can be exacerbated in large classroom settings. Furthermore, Dryden et al. (2021) discuss how foreign language anxiety creates a psychological barrier that inhibits participation and, consequently, learning progress.

Crucially, the data suggests that effective teaching practices are successfully mitigating some of these structural challenges. The very high scores for teacher support (Mean = 4.10), effective teaching methods (Mean = 4.04), and clear lesson delivery (Mean = 3.95) indicate that instructors are building a positive and pedagogically sound environment. This finding is supported by Chun & Abdullah (2022), who found that teachers' positive attitudes and adaptive methodologies are powerful enablers that can overcome external barriers. The reported distraction-free environment (Mean = 3.99) further indicates successful classroom management, which is a foundational element for learning (Hanny et al., 2023).

## 2- Results of the Interviews

The study utilized semi-structured interviews with Saudi EFL instructors to gain a deeper, qualitative understanding of the enablers and hindrances of English language learning at the secondary school level and the suggestions for enhancing learning. The thematic analysis of these interviews revealed a complex interplay of enabling factors, significant hindrances, and actionable suggestions for improvement, providing rich context to the quantitative data obtained from students.

### 1. Academic Enablers: The Pillars of Support

Instructors overwhelmingly identified teacher-driven support and the strategic use of technology as the primary enablers of successful English language learning. The interviews highlighted that a supportive pedagogical relationship is foundational to student engagement and progress.

Quotation 1: *"The most important thing is to build a safe environment where mistakes are not just tolerated but welcomed as a part of learning. When a student feels psychologically secure, their willingness to take risks with the language increases dramatically."*

- **Main Theme: Psychologically Supportive Classroom Climate.**
  - Sub-theme: Mitigating Anxiety through Teacher Attitude. This instructor emphasizes the critical role of the teacher in lowering the *affective filter*, a psychological barrier to language acquisition. By explicitly valuing mistakes as learning opportunities, the teacher fosters resilience and encourages experimental language use, which is essential for developing proficiency. This finding aligns with Dryden et al (2021) who identified the creation of an emotional safe space as crucial for reducing foreign language anxiety and promoting participation.

Quotation 2: *"I make it a point to provide immediate and specific feedback, not just on what is wrong, but on how to improve. It's not about the red pen; it's about starting a conversation that guides them to the correct answer."*

- **Main Theme: Formative and Constructive Assessment Practices.**
  - Sub-theme: Feedback as a Dialogic Tool for Growth. This perspective reframes assessment from a purely evaluative exercise to an integral part of the learning process. The focus on "how to improve" and starting a "conversation" reflects a formative approach that empowers students and makes progress tangible. This echoes the quantitative finding where students highly valued clear and helpful feedback (Mean=4.05, Table 4.1) and is supported by Christison and Murray (2021), who stress the importance of designing curriculum and assessment that supports developmental learning.

Quotation 3: *"We've started using simple language apps for vocabulary games and short, curated YouTube clips to introduce topics. It's not about fancy tech; it's about using familiar tools to make the language feel relevant and alive to them."*

- **Main Theme: Strategic Technology Integration.**
  - Sub-theme: Leveraging Authentic Digital Resources for Engagement. This instructor highlights a pragmatic approach to technology, using accessible and engaging digital tools to bridge the gap between the classroom and the students' digital lives. This strategy enhances motivation by providing authentic language input and making learning interactive, a finding consistent with Wang et al. (2023), who explored the positive impact of technology, including apps and digital media, on student engagement and success.

### 2. Academic Hindrances: Systemic and Affective Barriers

Conversely, instructors pointed to systemic constraints and deep-seated affective issues as the most formidable obstacles to English language learning, often feeling that these challenges lie beyond their immediate control.

Quotation 1: *"The jump in difficulty from middle to secondary school is enormous. The curriculum becomes very dense with grammar rules and literature, often at the expense of practical communication skills. Students feel overwhelmed because they haven't mastered the fundamentals."*

• **Main Theme: Curriculum and Articulation Issues.**

- Sub-theme: Misalignment with Student Proficiency and Needs. Instructors perceive the curriculum as a primary hindrance, describing it as overly academic, dense, and misaligned with students' actual proficiency levels and the goal of developing communicative competence. This creates a gap that leaves students feeling "overwhelmed," directly supporting the student quantitative data where "the English curriculum is too difficult" was a top hindrance (Mean=2.86, Table 4.2). Ross and Stuckler (2025) similarly identified "curricular overload" as a major barrier in their systematic review.

Quotation 2: *"With 35 students in a class, how can I possibly give each one the individual speaking practice they desperately need? It's a constant battle between managing the classroom and providing meaningful interaction."*

• **Main Theme: Logistical and Resource Constraints.**

- Sub-theme: Large Class Sizes Impeding Personalized Instruction. This quotation highlights a critical practical barrier. Large class sizes were consistently cited as a major impediment to implementing communicative language teaching methodologies, directly preventing the individualized practice required to overcome speaking anxiety. This finding strongly corresponds with the student identification of large class sizes as a key hindrance (Mean=2.94, Table 4.2) and is a well-documented challenge in EFL literature (Ross & Stuckler, 2025).

Quotation 3: *"The fear of making a mistake in front of their peers is paralyzing for many. They would rather remain silent than risk embarrassment, which creates a vicious cycle where they never practice and so never improve."*

• **Main Theme: Profound Speaking Anxiety.**

- Sub-theme: Fear of Negative Peer Evaluation. Instructors identified speaking anxiety as the most significant affective filter, confirming it as a central challenge. The description of this fear as "paralyzing" and the resulting "vicious cycle" provides a qualitative depth to the student data, which ranked confidence in speaking as the lowest enabler (Mean=3.35, Table 4.1) and anxiety as a key hindrance (Mean=3.18, Table 4.2). This aligns perfectly with research by Al-Hassaani and Al-Saalmi (2022) on the status of speaking skills in Saudi Arabia, where fear of embarrassment was a primary cause of weakness.

### 3. Suggestions for Enhancement: A Path Forward

Based on their frontline experience, instructors proposed concrete, multi-level strategies focusing on curriculum reform, pedagogical innovation, and community building.

Quotation 1: *"We need a curriculum that balances the academic requirements with a much stronger focus on real-life, communicative English. Let's teach them how to order a coffee, have a simple conversation, or understand a movie, alongside the grammar."*

• **Main Theme: Curriculum Reform for Communicative Goals.**

- Sub-theme: Integrating Authentic, Functional Language Use. This suggestion calls for a fundamental shift towards a more balanced and pragmatic curriculum. The emphasis on "real-life" tasks aims to increase student motivation by demonstrating the immediate utility of English, thereby addressing both the hindrance of a difficult curriculum and the goal of making progress. This is supported by Albiladi (2022), who discusses emerging practices aligned with Saudi Vision 2030 that emphasize practical communication skills.

Quotation 2: *"We should be trained in, and encouraged to use, more collaborative learning structures. Think-pair-share, small group discussions—these techniques can break down the wall of silence in a large class and give everyone a chance to speak in a lower-pressure setting."*

• **Main Theme: Pedagogical Innovation and Professional Development.**

- Sub-theme: Implementing Cooperative Learning Strategies. This is a direct solution to the challenges of large class sizes and speaking anxiety. By structuring lessons to incorporate peer interaction in small groups, instructors can create the "emotional safe space" discussed by Dryden et al. (2021), reducing the fear of whole-class embarrassment and providing vastly more opportunities for practice.

Quotation 3: *"Creating an English club or a language day event can make English learning fun and social, outside the pressure of exams and grades. It shows students that language is for life, not just for school."*

• **Main Theme: Extracurricular and Community Engagement.**

- Sub-theme: Fostering Positive Affective Domains through Informal Learning. This suggestion aims to tackle the affective hindrances at their root by decoupling English use from formal assessment. Creating low-stakes, enjoyable environments helps build positive associations with the language, increases motivation, and provides authentic practice opportunities, ultimately helping to break the cycle of anxiety described by the instructors.

## VII. Conclusion and Recommendations

The responses of the students to the questionnaire reveal a complex EFL learning environment characterized by both strong enablers and significant hindrances. Students reported highly positive perceptions of their classroom environment, finding it motivational and well-resourced with engaging lessons and supportive teachers who provide clear feedback. This indicates effective pedagogical practices are successfully implemented.

However, substantial challenges persist. Students identified major structural barriers, including a curriculum perceived as too difficult, excessively large class sizes, and a belief that grades do not reflect their effort. The most pronounced challenge was affective: a widespread lack of confidence and high anxiety when speaking English in front of peers. This anxiety appears to contribute to a moderate perception of personal progress despite the positive learning conditions.

Crucially, a disconnect emerges between the effective teacher-supported environment and students' own self-efficacy in speaking. While instructors successfully create supportive classrooms, systemic issues and deep-seated anxiety continue to hinder students' communicative confidence and sense of

achievement, suggesting that institutional-level interventions alongside pedagogical excellence are needed to address these persistent challenges.

Moreover, the interview data reveals a clear narrative. Instructors identify their own supportive practices and technology use as key enablers that create a foundation for learning. However, these positive efforts are often constrained by significant systemic hindrances, primarily an overly academic curriculum and large class sizes, which exacerbate students' deep-seated anxiety about speaking. In response, their suggestions are not merely critiques but are targeted solutions calling for a pragmatic overhaul of the curriculum, the adoption of collaborative teaching strategies to overcome logistical challenges, and the creation of informal learning spaces to directly combat anxiety and build positive motivation.

Based on the integrated findings, five key recommendations are proposed. First, the curriculum should be reformed to balance academic rigor with practical, communicative English, addressing its perceived difficulty and irrelevance. Second, targeted professional development is essential to train teachers in implementing cooperative learning strategies (e.g., think-pair-share, small groups) to mitigate the negative impact of large class sizes and reduce speaking anxiety by creating lower-pressure practice opportunities. Third, schools should establish extracurricular English clubs or language days to provide informal, anxiety-free environments that build confidence and positive language associations. Fourth, a review of grading policies should be conducted to enhance transparency and alignment with student effort, thereby increasing perceived fairness. Finally, teachers should continue leveraging technology strategically, using digital tools and apps to provide additional, engaging avenues for practice and resource access, supporting the positive enablers already in place.

## References

1. AbdAlgane, M., & Elmahdi, O. E. H. (2025). Common Mistakes EFL Learners Make When Using Idiomatic Expressions: A Case Study of Saudi Tertiary Level EFL Learners. *British Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 5(1), 01-16.
2. Ahmed, Z. A. D. A., & Ahmed, F. E. Y. (2023). Difficulties encountered by Saudi EFL learners in English reading comprehension. *Russian Law Journal*, 11(8S), 54-62.
3. Akram, H., Abdelrady, A. H., Al-Adwan, A. S., & Ramzan, M. (2022). Teachers' perceptions of technology integration in teaching-learning practices: A systematic review. *Frontiers in psychology*, 13, 920317.
4. Albiladi, W. S. (2022). English teaching and learning in Saudi Arabia: Emerging practices and strategies for achieving the educational objectives of the Saudi Vision 2030. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 13(4), 781-789.
5. Alharbi, A. M. (2021). Reading skills among EFL learners in Saudi Arabia: A review of challenges and solutions. *Online Submission*.
6. Al-Hassaani, A. M. A., & Al-Saalmi, A. F. M. Q. (2022). Saudi EFL Learners' Speaking Skills: Status, Challenges, and Solutions. *Arab World English Journal*, 13(2), 328-338.
7. Ali El Deen, A. A. M. M. (2023). Students' boredom in English language classes: Voices from Saudi Arabia. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, 1108372.
8. Al-Jarf, R. (2022). Developing Students' Global Awareness in EFL Reading and Speaking. *Online Submission*, 4(1), 31-38.
9. Al-Mohanna, A. D. (2024). Difficulties and challenges encountered by Saudi EFL learners: A diagnostic study. *Scholars International Journal of Linguistics and Literature*, 7(10), 288-299.
10. Al-Mwzaiji, K. N. A., & Muhammad, A. A. S. (2023). EFL learning and Vision 2030 in Saudi Arabia: A critical perspective. *World Journal of English Language*, 13(2).
11. Alshehri, M. (2018). *Potential changes in Saudi students' motivations and attitudes towards learning English as a foreign language after immersion in an L2 learning environment* [Doctoral dissertation]. University of Southampton, Southampton, England.
12. Al-Shulayil, S. N., & Alkhaleefah, T. A. (2025). Investigating EFL Readers' Lexical Problems and Word-Solving Strategies in Foreign Language Reading: An Exploratory Study. *Theory & Practice in Language Studies (TPLS)*, 15(3).
13. Alsudais, A. (2017). Teaching English as A Foreign Language: The Case of Saudi Arabia. *European Journal of English Language and Literature Studies*, 5(9), 18- 27.
14. Alzahrani, G. (2019). The Reasons behind the Weakness of Speaking English among English Department's Students at Najran University. *Journal of Education and Human Development*, 8 (1), 48-56.
15. Andayani, E. S. (2022). The importance of learning and knowing English in higher education in Indonesia. *Research and Development Journal Of Education*, 8(1), 372-379.
16. Ashraf, T. (2018). Teaching English as a Foreign Language in Saudi Arabia: Struggles and Strategies. *International Journal of English Language Education*, 6(1), 133- 154.
17. Aziz, A. A., & Kashinathan, S. (2021). ESL learners' challenges in speaking English in Malaysian classroom. *Development*, 10(2), 983-991.
18. Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. Harvard University Press.
19. Christison, M., & Murray, D. E. (2021). *What English language teachers need to know Volume III: Designing curriculum*. Routledge.
20. Chun, T. C., & Abdullah, M. N. L. Y. (2022). The Effects of Language Teachers' Attitudes, Barriers and Enablers in Teaching 21st Century Skills at Chinese Vernacular Schools. *Malaysian Journal of Learning and Instruction*, 19(1), 115-146.
21. Corbett, J. (2022). *An intercultural approach to English language teaching* (Vol. 36). Multilingual Matters.
22. Dryden, S., Tankosić, A., & Dovchin, S. (2021). Foreign language anxiety and translanguaging as an emotional safe space: Migrant English as a foreign language learners in Australia. *System*, 101, 102593.
23. Elmahdi, O. E. H., AbdAlgane, M., Hamid, F. A., Balla, A. A. S., & Ibrahim, I. Z. A. (2025). Integrating Critical Thinking and Technology in Saudi EFL Classrooms: A Framework for Culturally Responsive Language Learning. *International Journal of English Language Studies*, 7(2), 34-52.

24. Hanny, C. N., Arnesen, K. T., Guo, Q., Hansen, J., & Graham, C. R. (2023). Barriers and enablers to K-12 blended teaching. *Journal of Research on Technology in Education*, 55(4), 568-589.
25. Hasan, N. R. H. (2024). A study on student's challenges and problems in learning English vocabulary. *International Journal for Scientific Research*, 3(6), 207-227.
26. Hezam, T. A., Ali, J. K. M., Imtiaz, S., Saifi, M. A., & Islam, M. R. (2022). Challenges and problems of reading comprehension experienced by EFL learners. *Journal of English Studies in Arabia Felix*, 1(2), 11-21.
27. House, J., & Kádár, D. Z. (2024). *Cross-cultural pragmatics and foreign language learning*. Edinburgh University Press.
28. Inayati, N., Karifianto, D. M., & Jarum, J. (2024). Student awareness, attitude, affordances, and challenges in online autonomous English language learning. *Bahasa Dan Seni: Jurnal Bahasa, Sastra, Seni, Dan Pengajarannya*, 49(1), 3.
29. Koral, M. A., & Mirici, İ. H. (2021). Analysis of speaking skills in high school English language curricula and coursebooks in Turkey. *International Journal of Education, Technology and Science*, 1(3), 61-77.
30. Ross, B., & Stuckler, D. (2025). Barriers to learning English as a foreign language (EFL) for university students: A systematic review. *International Journal of Instruction*, 18(4), 395-420.
31. Sharma, V. (2022). Letting the struggling Saudi EFL readers take lead: How teachers transform English language instruction. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 13(3), 533-540.
32. Shohsanam, A. D. (2022). *Speaking for English language learners: overcoming the barriers that impede* (Doctoral dissertation, Sumy State University).
33. Soland, J., & Sandilos, L. E. (2021). English language learners, self-efficacy, and the achievement gap: Understanding the relationship between academic and social-emotional growth. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)*, 26(1), 20-44.
34. Sun, T., & Buripakdi, A. (2025). Unpacking Chinese primary school English teachers' perceptions: Personal blockers and enablers in global citizenship education. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 45(3), 886-902.
35. Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Harvard University Press.
36. Wang, T., Lund, B. D., Marengo, A., Pagano, A., Mannuru, N. R., Teel, Z. A., & Pange, J. (2023). Exploring the potential impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on international students in higher education: Generative AI, chatbots, analytics, and international student success. *Applied Sciences*, 13(11), 6716.
37. Yokubjonova, D. (2025). Exploring the Impact of Social Backgrounds on English Language Learning: A Study of Tadjik And Kyrgyz Students. *International Journal of Artificial Intelligence*, 1(2), 705-712.