

## Teacher Cognition and English as a Foreign Language Context: Potential Challenges

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### ABSTRACT

This study tends to explore teachers', students', and administrators' perspectives of the contextual factors influencing teacher cognition in teaching English to university students in an EFL context in Saudi Arab. The Saudi EFL context is unique as most of the university teachers are international since there are not many qualified Saudi teachers in higher education. Teachers, here, face quite a challenging context. To explore the factors posing challenges to teacher cognition, employing sequential qualitative approach, data were collected by using semi-structured interviews. First, eight teachers, selected through purposeful sampling, were interviewed, which helped identify four major factors influencing teacher cognition viz., lack of societal support system, students' negative attitude towards English, unconducive educational policies, and teacher efficacy. In order to embrace the phenomenon holistically, teachers' interviews were triangulated with four students' and administrators' interviews each, selected through purposeful sampling. The three camps were found to have similar perspectives of the first three factors; however, students and administrators were at odds with the teachers about one of the factors—teacher efficacy. The findings reveal that teacher cognition in an EFL context is challenged by factors such as the society, student demotivation, student attitude towards English, ill-planned educational policies, limited instruction time, over-crowded classrooms, assessment procedures, and teaching practices. The study eventually suggests recommendations and has implications for improved teacher cognition and better teaching and learning atmosphere in the EFL context.

### Keywords

Contextual Factors; EFL Context; Language Teaching; Teacher Beliefs; Teacher Cognition

### Introduction

In a language class, the teacher has a significant role to play: the classroom activities have in their background a thought, a plan, and a belief that develops in the mind of the teacher—teacher cognition. It does not develop in isolation; it is influenced and shaped up by various factors. Some important constructs are education, training, family, society, experience, and context.

Language teacher cognition literature presents evidence about the influence of contextual factors on English language teaching (Sanches & Borg, 2014). Andrews' study (2007) proves that the contextual factors such as attitude and level of students, syllabus and time constraints impact teachers' preparation/application of lessons. Similarly, Borg (1998) also finds that the teacher's selection of grammar work is based on his students' expectations and language learning needs. Pahissa & Tragant (2009) also report that the participant grammar teachers are motivated to employ the teaching technique of L1-L2

comparison to address the learners' needs for the university entrance examination. Based on the available evidence about the influence of contextual factors on language teachers' decision making, Sanches and Borg (2014) recommend further research about the influence of contextual factors on language teachers' decision making and emphasize the inclusion of context in the analysis.

Language teacher cognition studies provide confirmatory evidence that contextual factors are essential in mediating between language teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices. The results also provide evidence that every context is unique (Borg, 2009) and thus, presents unique, challenging factors. Research further reveals that there is relatively little focus on presenting a comprehensive picture of the internal and external contextual factors that influence teacher cognition in language teaching. Most of the studies concentrate on presenting the internal factors only, that is, academic factors, and exclude the external/social factors. Moreover, there is a research gap in presenting the opinions of all

stakeholders involved. To address this gap, this study attempts to present a holistic picture by considering the internal and external factors by gathering the views of both genders of EFL teachers, their students, and the administrators. Besides, the study focuses on teacher cognition in the Saudi EFL context that presents a unique setting where the majority of university EFL teachers are international, both native and non-native, whose cognition evolves in a very challenging context: there have been social disapproval of the use of the English language and its teaching/learning; the native language, Arabic, dominates in all fields of life; the students reaching higher education do not have a sound background in English language learning, and the cultural gender discrimination is maintained in education too (Hussain, 2018). The study results intend to enlighten the teachers and policymakers to help them mitigate the factors detrimental to the teaching/learning process. This study attempts to identify the contextual factors influencing teacher cognition in teaching English to university students in an EFL context with the help of the following research questions:

1. What factors influence teacher cognition in teaching English to university students in an EFL context?
2. What are the perceptions of students and administrators about teachers' beliefs of the factors influencing their cognition in teaching English to university students in an EFL context?

### Literature Review

Research cognition here refers to what teachers think, know, believe, and do (Borg, 2003). Since teachers' beliefs cannot be observed, what they actually do in the class is the only observable evidence of what they believe, or by directly asking them of their beliefs about teaching, and specifically language teaching may be the only way to understand the unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching. Their practices are directed by what they believe. How the teachers develop and modify their teaching creed has been another critical question in research. Borg (1997) believes that teacher cognition consists of beliefs, knowledge, theories, attitudes, images, assumptions, metaphors, conceptions and

perspectives about teaching, teachers, learning, students, subject matter, curricula, materials, instructional activities, and self. Teacher cognition develops due to the influence of schooling, professional coursework, classroom activities, and contextual factors. According to Borg (1997), contextual factors help develop teacher cognition and continually modify it, thus making it dynamic. Since teacher cognition works on varied dimensions, the present study is delimited to teacher cognition about the trio inside the class-teacher, students, and subject matter (the English language-text and practice). The present study mainly focuses on the importance of teaching context concerning these beliefs of teachers teaching the English language to adult learners in Saudi Arabia. The teaching context in Saudi Arab presents a remarkably different picture owing to the historical and cultural background of the country—the dominant role of Arabic in all walks of life, the strong resistance towards English language learning, the gender discrimination in education, a significant number of international teachers (Khan, 2011; Hussain, 2018). Therefore, studying the influence of teaching context on English language teacher cognition may lead to some striking findings.

Research in language teaching recognizes the importance of teaching context and teacher cognition; however, few studies have investigated the effects of contextual factors (Jamalzadeh & Shahsavari, 2015). The available evidence suggests that contextual factors may have a facilitative or hindering influence on language teaching and learning (Burns, 1996; Cuayahuitl & Carranza, 2015). Borg (2006) acknowledges a strong relationship between language teachers' beliefs, practices, and contextual factors. These relationships are not linear but occur in a variety of ways. While emphasizing the influence of contextual factors on language teachers' classroom actions, Borg maintains that "The social, institutional, instructional, and physical settings in which teachers work have a major impact on their cognitions and practices" (p. 275). He also believes that investigating teachers' cognitions and classroom practices without considering the context will result in teachers' flawed characterizations.

Many researchers report various socio-psychological constructs that contribute to the ever-evolving teacher cognition. L2 teachers' pedagogical decisions are influenced by psychological, socio-cultural, and environmental factors (Sanches & Borg, 2014). The extent of the influence of context on teachers' decision making, as reported by Johnson, Kraft, and Papay (2012), shows that work context has a more substantial influence on teacher cognition than financial considerations. Therefore, these factors affect teacher cognition directly or indirectly.

Teacher cognition, thus, changes and evolves in the context of teaching. However, the relationship between teacher cognition and the context is bidirectional. Contextual factors may create tensions between language teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices which lead to decisions contrary to their beliefs (Phipps & Borg, 2009). Woods (1996) also affirms that curriculum influences language teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge (BAK), and at the same time, language teachers' BAK influences the interpretation of the new curriculum. Woods' study reveals that two different interpretations will result if a new curriculum is given to two different teachers. It implies that curriculum mediates between teachers' beliefs and their decision-making. Canh and Bernard's (2009) findings support Woods' (1996) claim. They found out that implementing a new learner-centered curriculum in Vietnam created a discrepancy between teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices. Teachers' beliefs about the examination requirements, students' proficiency level in English, and level of motivation caused them to deviate from the curriculum requirements. Similarly, Carless (2007) reports that contextual factors such as classroom discipline, noise, students' use of their L1, and grammar-oriented examinations create hurdles in implementing task-based language teaching. Students' expectations also lead to undue emphasis on grammar teaching. Crookes and Arakaki (1999) also argue that heavy workloads and difficult working conditions influence teachers' pedagogical decisions.

More recent research studies also provide insights into how teacher cognition and context interact in shaping teachers' decision-making in language

teaching. Nishimuro and Borg (2013) reported that EFL teachers could not cover the syllabus due to limited time. Although teachers acknowledged the necessity of communicative activities, yet lack of time interrupted them to employ them. Another factor reported by the teachers is examination requirements due to which they taught grammar explicitly. Hos and Kekec (2014) opine that language teaching practices may be influenced by personal characteristics, social factors, and work environment. These include age, gender, educational background of teachers, students' preferences, and the differences between teachers and students regarding how L2 should be learned. In their study, the participant teachers articulated that course content/objectives and the available resources determined their teaching practices. Teachers further expressed that students' needs and motivation were crucial factors that influenced them. Similarly, Phipps and Borg (2009) find out that the contextual factors of classroom management concerns, student preferences, and expectations lead teachers to teach contrary to their beliefs. Larenas, Hernandez, and Nararrette (2015) also acknowledge that social, institutional, and physical factors often influence teachers' classroom practices.

The present study focuses on the interaction between teacher cognition and context in the Saudi higher education (EFL) perspective. Saudi Arabia has a unique higher education culture. The inception of the formal school education system was quite late, i.e., 1935, when the first public school was established (Alsharif, 2011; Wiseman, 2010). It was in 1960 that female students were formally enrolled in schools (Al-Zarah, 2008), and then, much later, they got a chance to get enrolled in female-only campuses of universities. Though now, the country has 25 public and eight private universities providing education in various disciplines, most public universities were established in the last 15 years (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015). However, gender discrimination is still a part of almost all university education, not only among students but also teachers.

Moreover, the Saudi government has been trying to encourage the youth in education through various means. First, the government provides

various incentives to encourage students to pursue higher education in the form of monthly rewards of US \$225 to US \$250 (Alamri, 2011). Second, the government even offers students scholarships to study internationally. Moreover, since English is the only foreign language taught in schools, and there is a lack of qualified Saudi English teachers, the universities have hired foreigners. These teachers include native speakers of the English language as well as bilinguals from neighbouring Arab countries. The list also includes many non-Arab and non-native teachers, for example, from Pakistan and India. However, research states that the students' exposure to the English language is limited to the classrooms. There is no social environment in which they can practice English (Alqahtani, 2011; Khan, 2011). Lack of reinforcement from society for learning/speaking English demotivates some Saudi EFL students (Alrashidi & Phan, 2015). Therefore, the teaching context in such a scenario seems quite challenging for the English language teachers. It seems pertinent to study how the teaching context affects teacher cognition. The present study directly involves the teachers/ the practitioners whose cognition is influenced by the context: they are interviewed about what contextual factors are responsible for making their teaching practices more challenging and changing teacher cognition.

### Methodology

This paper studies the contextual factors affecting teacher cognition in a challenging EFL setting of Saudi universities. Since most EFL teachers are non-Saudi, they modify and compromise their teaching creeds to adjust to an entirely new setup. Data were mainly collected from non-Saudi EFL teachers (Arab and non-Arab) to explore the significant external and internal factors that influence teacher cognition. Later, these results were triangulated and hence verified by interviewing the students and administrators who were all Saudis. The second phase of data collection helped in identifying whether the other two stakeholders (students and administrators) are aware of the challenges faced by teachers and whether they too think these factors exist and pose a challenge to the teachers.

### Participants

This and administrators in universities are all Arabs by nationality; however, there is the majority of international teachers, especially in EFL classes. Thus, this study's population comprises non-native EFL teachers, students, and administrators, working at a public university in Saudi Arabia. The study sample had eight teachers (four Arab and four non-Arab), four students (two males and two females), and four administrators (two males and two females). The non-Arab teachers, purposefully selected for this study, had a working knowledge of Arabic. All the respondents were symmetrically distributed according to gender. Eight teachers, four students, and four administrators were interviewed as per sample size in qualitative research stated by Creswell (2012) and Dörnyei (2007) that the concept of saturation should be the guiding principle.

### Instrument(s) and Procedures

This study utilized two semi-structured interviews: one for teachers and the other for students/administrators. Teachers' interviews comprised four questions embracing social, institutional, teachers, and students' factors. Interview questions were predetermined that inquired about the challenges they faced in teaching English to Saudi Arabian students, focusing on the social and contextual factors and how those affected their teaching creed and practices. The follow-up questions were asked for clarification. The responses of the teachers were studied, and a list of themes was formulated. These themes helped identify specific factors that affect teacher cognition. In the second phase of data collection, students and administrators were interviewed. Students'/administrators' interview tool was devised based on the analysis of teachers' responses in semi-structured form. This second tool was based on teachers' perceptions of the contextual factors influencing their cognition. The second tool aimed to ensure triangulation, verification and thereby securing an in depth exploration to reveal the contextual factors that work in tandem to shape teacher cognition. The procedure of member-checking was also utilized to help improve the credibility of qualitative data. Participants were sent a copy of the interview



transcriptions to confirm the accurate record of their beliefs.

### Data Analysis

Since it was a qualitative study, it was necessary to record each detail about the participants and the process. Therefore, the profile of each participant was developed by assigning a code. Teachers were provided codes based on mother tongue and gender. For example, NAMT stands for a non-Arab male teacher, NAFT for a non-Arab female teacher, AMT for an Arab male teacher, and AFT for an Arab female teacher. Similarly, students and administrators were also provided codes. For instance, BS stands for a boy student, while MA stands for a male administrator and FA for a female administrator.

Data were inductively analyzed, which is based on generalizations from specific observations (Patton, 2002). Through repeated readings of the data, codes/themes were identified and categorized. The segments of the text were labelled with codes. Then, several codes were reduced to avoid overlapping/redundancy of codes. The code labels were collapsed into broad categories. Constant comparisons/contrasts were made in the process of data analysis. Factors influencing EFL teacher cognition in teaching English in Saudi Arabia emerged due to inductive analysis.

### Results

The contextual factors affecting teacher cognition identified as a result of teachers' interviews are divided into four major categories, followed by various data-led sub-categories. Moreover, teachers' data are triangulated with students' and administrators' data to get a comprehensive picture of the contextual factors influencing teacher cognition.

#### 1 Lack of Societal Support System

Effective language teaching and learning demand a holistic approach. Students learn a foreign language not only in the classrooms but also practice it outside. In the Saudi EFL context, there is no support system outside the classroom. The teachers engaged in teaching English need to develop new strategies and techniques in such a

context. In this regard, the following social factors have been identified as barriers in providing societal support to the teachers:

#### 1.1 Socio-cultural Barriers

All the non-L1 teachers mention the conservative nature of the society that it constraints the acceptance of English. This, in turn, becomes an important contextual factor influencing the teaching creed and practices. The NAFT2 asserts that "social context does not let them use the English language much . . . in their official jobs, they use L1. It is only for the international communication that they need to learn English". She argues that "recognizing the importance of English is quite less" in the EFL society. This lack of recognition trickles down to students who avoid communicating in English. NAMT1 lists three kinds of taboos: A) students are greatly influenced by religious scholars not favouring English, B) students are discouraged from speaking English as they get shy, and C) students' pride in L1 leads to unfriendly attitude towards English. Due to this, teachers fail to find the expected results and experiment with new ways to motivate them. However, native L1-speaking teachers opine that English is gaining importance in the society. The positive change in attitude in learning English is slow but steady.

Both administrators and students confirm teachers' beliefs about cultural barriers constraining teaching/learning English. MA1 asserts, "we take big pride in everything related to our culture including language". Therefore, whenever students try to speak English "they have some kind of psychological resistance". FA1 also confirms "...even the educated EFL learners prefer to speak L1, due to which, if someone likes to speak English, she steps back". MA2 articulates that social context is such that "people are not encouraged to speak English". Students point out that English teaching starts in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, due to which they do not develop a sound basis. Then, there are people in the society "who push their children to learn L1 more than English because of their religious convictions", says BS2. Therefore, when the students reach a higher level, most of the students do not get interested in the language learning process despite teachers' efforts.

### 1.2 *Students' Inadequate Exposure to L2*

Teachers are unanimous in their views that EFL students' exposure to L2 is inadequate. "When students go outside the classroom, there is no English. The newspapers, the news channels and everywhere, there is no English" (NAMT1). The NAMT2 also lists the factors which prohibit students' exposure to English: "...the home environment, the marketplace, their tribal relationship; there is not much support". The NAFT2 asserts, "only English teachers teach them in English . . . that is the only kind of L2 exposure they get". The AFT2 claims, "students don't even listen to English . . . there are lots of channels in English, they don't listen to them . . . if you look at a graduate, she might not speak English for weeks". Students do not practice English outside the classroom due to an un-supporting society. This makes the teachers' job difficult and demanding.

The administrators and students endorse the teachers' opinions. MA1 asserts, "outside the classroom, no question!" FA2 acknowledges, "... This is a sorry state of affairs, a sad reality". Students unanimously express that they are exposed to English only in classrooms.

## 2 *Students' Negative Attitude*

Students' positive attitude towards English leads to efficient learning. However, a negative attitude leads to failure. In the EFL context, students prefer high grades rather than real learning of English. Their negative attitude towards learning the target language is due to the following factors:

### 2.1 *Demotivated Students*

Motivation drives students to participate actively in learning activities to achieve the desired goal. Lack of motivation figures strongly in considering factors responsible for students' non-involvement in learning activities (Mohamed, 2006). Most of the EFL students are not motivated. The participants point out factors that influence students' motivation to learn English. NAMT2 argues that the students are demotivated because "society doesn't support them, media doesn't support them, and their economic interests are not involved so much in learning English".

Similarly, NAMT1 considers difficulty in learning English grammar as the main reason for demotivation. He maintains, "the percentage of students who fail in grammar is much higher than the other subjects". Non-L1 female teachers consider "grades" as the primary source of motivation for students. AMT1 considers lack of learning goals as the fundamental reason for students' demotivation and asserts, "their goal is to get a job, not learn something".

The administrators and students agree with teachers' opinion regarding the students' low motivation in learning English. MA1 states, "majority is less motivated.... students' main goal is to get stipends from the university". MA2 also corroborates that students are mostly demotivated but believes that the inherent difficulty in English language and teachers' teaching methodology might cause it. FA1 adds to the list of factors and claims that, since "English is not their own language, so, its ok, they have a license to speak wrong English". FA2 argues, "some teachers also do not make extra efforts to use innovative techniques to motivate the students". BS1 enlists three reasons for students' lack of motivation: the difficulty level of English grammar; students' lack of awareness of the importance of English; and teachers, teaching merely from examination point of view. BS2 also agrees with him. However, GS1 claims that "some [students] do like to learn English but others not". GS2 asserts, "now the students are taking more interest in English because students want specialities in courses that require them to learn English". Thus, lack of student motivation makes the teachers' job difficult and requires them to be more innovative.

### 2.2 *Students' Academic Preferences*

Another theme which emerged regarding students' negative attitude towards English is their educational preference. All teachers acknowledge that their students are more interested in grades than real learning. The NAMT1 claims, "the percentage of the students who really want to learn something is not more than 20%". The NAMT2 portrays what happens inside the classroom that some students prefer to "sit back, play with their mobiles, or mentally switch off". The non-L1 female teachers emphasize that students' real interest is grades. NAFT1 believes

that only 10% of students take an interest in real learning. The native L1-speaking teachers also share the same views. All teachers are unanimous in their views that the students do not have keen interest in real learning. This upsets the teachers. In the face of this reality, it is not surprising that the students' English proficiency is low.

The administrators also agree that the students lack the thirst for learning. However, they believe that the situation may be changed for good if, in the words of MA1, "we harmonize the teaching, teaching material, and assessment system". In agreement with teachers' beliefs, FA1 admits that there are only a few "students who are keen on learning English". FA2 emphasizes that "students are mostly interested in passing their exams and getting good grades, due to which they cram the rules of English grammar mostly the night before examination. Some of them [students] want to pass the exam without knowledge". The students endorsed the opinion of the teachers that the students, in general, are interested in getting grades.

### **2.3 Lack of Communication in L2 inside Classroom**

Teachers also highlight that their students prefer to communicate in L1, often even inside the classroom. The NAMT2 claims, "when it comes to student-student communication, even if the teacher wants them to communicate in English . . . they never listen; they switch to L1". However, he maintains that since he is a non-L1 teacher, his students communicate with him in English. This point of view has been endorsed by NAMT1, "if a teacher is non-L1, students talk to him in English". The two non-L1 female teachers also acknowledge that most of the students do not communicate in English. NAFT1, however, says that though students believe in communication in English, "but they don't do that practically". NAFT2 also adds, "a few students have the realization that communication in English can help them become proficient in English", but due to lack of competence, they do not want to communicate in English. The native L1-speaking teachers also report the same. AFT2 maintains, "students prefer to communicate in L1 even inside the classroom".

Administrators confirm teachers' perceptions and believe that student to student interaction is excessive in L1. However, some of them hold L1 EFL teachers responsible for this. MA1 points out that "because these teachers share L1 with the students, so unconsciously they start going on that track". He further adds, "I believe that non-L1 teachers . . . out of compulsion or out of planned strategies make less use of L1" due to which the students communicate with them in English. Students also assert that they try to speak English with the non-L1 teachers, but not with the L1 teachers. BS1 claims, "the L1 teachers mostly speak L1. Sometimes a teacher speaks two or three sentences in English, and then he starts [switches over to] L1". However, girl students maintain that they try to speak English in the classroom.

## **3 Unconducive Educational Policies**

Teachers and students do not work in isolation; educational policies influence their efforts. EFL teachers cannot apply proper teaching methods due to their students' low proficiency level. Moreover, they face over-crowded classrooms with limited instruction time. Furthermore, they cannot innovate in the format of examination to ameliorate students' proficiency level in English.

### **3.1 Restrictions on Teaching Practices**

Teachers point out some potential issues regarding educational policies. For instance, the administration emphasizes on English-only approach, but there are times when the students want some explanation in L1. NAMT2 argues that occasional, planned, and well thought out use of L1, with the sole purpose of keeping the students involved, should be allowed. Another policy that is criticized by the teachers is the teaching of grammar through specified books. The non-L1 female teachers suggest that grammar should be taught in context, as the NAFT1 claims that "the books, they have been using, are all sentence-based grammar, and this is one of the major hurdles . . . it does not make students effective communicators". The native L1-speaking teachers also have reservations about institutional policies. AMT1 suggests that "it's better to give the teacher more flexibility to practice what they believe in." The AFT2 also criticizes the university policy for

pushing "the students to focus on the grades more than understanding." These teachers argue that, because of institutional policies, teachers are unable to practice what they believe.

Defending these policies, the administrators have their reasons. MA2 confirms that institutions "have a clear policy that there must be [only] English inside the class." MA1 emphasizes that the "policy of no-L1-use is mainly to discipline the teachers". FA2 also emphasizes that "the university does not encourage L1-use. If you allow it, they will use only L1. It will kill the objective of learning English". The administrators also pointed out that the textbooks approved and provided require both teachers and students to communicate in English. However, they agreed that the assessment policies focused on only reading and writing and a little on listening with no place for speaking skills, and thus, is perceived to be a big hurdle in motivating the students to practice speaking. Therefore, FA1 suggests that teachers should be given a margin of judicious use of L1 if students' proficiency level is deficient, so that they may be able to get good grades.

Students generally approve the English-only policy. BS1 believes "it's the best way, only English in the class." BS2 argues, "if we just talk in English, maybe they [students] will improve in English and they will speak English." GS1 declares, "if she [teacher] is teaching English, she should not use L1, so that the students can adapt to English." However, GS2 advocates that limited use of L1 "can help students by translating specific words in L1." This may help students improve their grades since evaluation does not include speaking but other skills only. Therefore, the students need to understand the textbooks to prepare themselves for examination in grammar, reading, writing and listening only.

### **3.2 Limited Instruction Time**

The expected duration for language class makes it easy for teachers and students to internalize the structures fully. On the contrary, limited instruction time creates hurdles to automatize them. NAMT1 argues that three hours per week for language skills is not enough; it should be increased. The NAFT2 complains, "the kind of course to be covered during the week, that is quite

challenging." This challenge is rooted in teachers' submission of weekly reports about the course covered in a week, as specified in the course breakdown. The AMT1 complains that the instruction time for grammar is "very limited, we need more time for teaching grammar". Teachers express that it is near to impossible to achieve the course objectives in the limited time. Thus, teachers' focus shifts from teaching to internalize structures to finishing the prescribed syllabus in the designated time. Resultantly, English language teaching remains flawed.

The administrators and students also believe that the time given for language teaching is not enough. MA1 agrees, "the credit hours given for English teaching are quite less; language learning is a skill; you cannot develop the skill without doing it." MA2 says, "if you explain the grammar rules, there must be time for the students to practice them inside the class." FA2 also endorses that "time is certainly limited. Students need more time to practice". BS1 maintains that since "students' base in the English language is very weak"; therefore, more time should be allotted for practice. However, the girls' students opine that the time allotted for the English language is suitable.

### **3.3 Large-size Classes**

Another factor affecting teacher cognition, as pointed out in interviews, is large-size classes. NAMT1 maintains, "some classes have 40, 50 [students]. It affects [language teaching] because you need the active participation of the students in class". NAFT2 insists, "You need to have smaller classes so that you can focus on every student. You have to make sure that every student understands the concept and is able to use that effectively". Similarly, NAFT1 emphasizes, "when we teach smaller groups, we have more interaction with the students, and can get better feedback." The Arab teachers also find large classes a big hurdle in effective teaching.

Administrators and students also criticize large classes. MA1 agrees, "ideally speaking, class should not be more than 25 [students]; however, even if the class size is large, it can be utilized for effective teaching by applying some cooperative learning strategies". MA2 also corroborates, "most of the classes are overcrowded in the university



...after explaining the difficult grammatical rules, the students must get a chance to practice that", but because of large-size class, "the actual participation of the students is almost 20%". FA1 admits that in a class with a smaller number of students, "the performance of the students is much better, and even the teachers are much relaxed." BS1 complains, "not everyone [has] the chance to speak English with the teacher." BS2 suggests, "I prefer the class to be around 20 to 25". Girl students also complain of large classes and their adverse effects on English language teaching/learning.

### 3.4 Current Examination System

An important theme, which has emerged in the interviews with teachers, is the students' current examination/ assessment system. Teachers' responses demonstrate that the majority are not satisfied with the examination system's ability to properly assess students' abilities. The NAMT1 claims that the examination system "mostly checks the students' memory, not their abilities," and "the examination system is written exam only." He reveals that though there is a listening/speaking course, there is no oral examination to test students' oral skills. AMT2 asserts that the examination system is "in a way frightening them and putting them into the cocoons where they never come out of." The non-L1 female teachers criticize the format of questions as NAFT2 argues, "multiple-choice questions lay much margin for guesswork. In that way, many students, who are not competent enough, sometimes get good marks". She asserts, "such questions take away the element of creativity from students." The AMT1 maintains that the examination system should evaluate students' use of language in context.

The administrators admit that the current examination system is ineffective and requires reforms. MA1 affirms, "there is a need to bring reforms." MA2 also acknowledges, "I am not satisfied with the examination system at all. Students cram certain rules to reproduce them in the examination to get high grades". FA1 criticizes the objective type format for assessment and suggests changing it so that "...students should produce their own answers instead of just choosing the answers". FA2 also admits that the

examination system has "loopholes... it only consists of multiple-choice questions".

The students also give negative feedback about the current examination system. BS1 points out, "there is no speaking skill exam" and shows his discontent with the examination system, "we need to change the system of the exam, because some students pass by luck, by guessing the choices." BS2 opines, "it [the examination system] doesn't work with the students; maybe if they go to higher level, they [will] not have enough knowledge [of language]." GS1 suggests, "I think it should be writing also instead of multiple choices" because, in the words of GS2, "... some of them [students] get good grades with multiple choices" undeservingly.

## 4 Teachers' Efficacy

Successful language teaching demands the teacher be well qualified and aware of the specific teaching context's strengths and weaknesses and the students' learning requirements. The absence of any one of these indeed affects the teaching/learning process. Teachers' interviews reveal that they consider themselves well qualified as they claim to be aware of the EFL context and understand their students' learning requirements.

### 4.1 Bilingual Instruction

Teachers assert that according to the students' needs and the lessons, they employ limited and judicious L1-use. NAMT2 uses bilingual strategies, as he claims when the "class is going towards unwanted directions, and you throw L1 translation of some difficult terms . . . [then] they pay attention". NAFT2 indicates that at times, "the things become a little complex for students to understand, so it's better to make use of L1." NAFT1 finds it essential to "... resort to some L1 words to get students relaxed". AMT2 argues, "it [being bilingual] will make you feel better because you put yourself in their shoes." AFT2 declares, "my students feel safe when they have a bilingual teacher."

The administrators endorse the teachers' opinions about the usefulness of bilingual teachers; however, they disapprove of excessive use of L1 in class. MA1 argues that L1-speaking EFL teachers make excessive use of L1, while non-Arab EFL teachers make its planned use. MA2

also points out, "the feedback that we get shows that non-L1 teachers use maximum English; while the L1 teachers use maximum L1 with the students." FA1 also insists that non-L1 teachers' use of L1 is "minimal...it can give more positive results," whereas L1 speaking teachers' use of L1 is pervasive.

Students, too, have their reservations about the excessive use of L1 in English classes. BS1 argues that L1-speaking teachers use more L1, "as it is easy for them to speak it." BS2 asserts that limited use of L1 is beneficial at the lower level; however, "this method will not work well with the students . . . at the higher level". GS1 and GS2 approve the limited use of L1 by suggesting that the teacher can tell the definition of complicated terms in this way.

#### 4.2 Understanding Learners' Requirements

To capture the EFL teaching-learning context, the teachers have also categorized the students' specific requirements in learning English. NAMT1 lists three requirements of the EFL students. According to him, grammar should be taught in integration with other skills; the excessive use of L1 should not be allowed, and examination should be such that students should use English in the correct context. NAFT2, however, declares, "students come with the expectation that they would get to know certain number of structures which would help them as per the requirements in exams." However, she asserts that since reliance on L1 is too much in the EFL context, there should be "use of contrastive analysis." NAFT1 advocates that "traditional grammar should be just the starting point ... then functional English or language in communication". She recommends that both inductive and deductive approaches should be used in teaching grammar. While discussing their students' requirements in learning English, the native L1-speaking teachers pinpoint that students require integration of grammar with other skills.

However, the administrators and students have a different view to present the teachers' ability to understand and consider the students' learning requirements. MA1 shares his observation, *It is sad to note that teachers do not go on the feedback of their learners. It is one-way traffic*

*most of the time. Nothing is planned from the students' perspective. Once students' perspective is taken into account, many reforms can be brought.*

MA2 also observes, "we have a number of teachers who don't understand students' needs." However, FA1 claims, "teachers modify their teaching methodology according to what their goals are." FA2 concludes, "it varies from teacher to teacher depending upon the experience and professional approach of the teacher, all the teachers may not be able to understand students' needs." BS1 insists, "I think they don't see the requirements, because most teachers are concerned with exams. They only do what the book says. He doesn't give new skill or new techniques". However, BS2 argues that it varies from teacher to teacher, and believes that "some of the teachers push the students to learning . . . [while others] just give the lesson and go away". Moreover, he points out that teachers use the deductive approach by maintaining, "they teach us the rules and then the exercise." Girl students affirm that some teachers try to understand their leaning requirements through feedback, while others do not.

### Discussions

Harmony between contextual factors and teachers' deep-seated beliefs leads to consistency between teachers' beliefs and practices, whereas inconsistency is caused by contextual factors' capacity to alter the belief system, which obliges teachers to submit to the context (Borg, 2003). Contextual factors shape teachers' belief systems and are widely recognized in language teaching research to guide teachers' decision-making (Borg, 1999, 2001, 2003; Freeman & Richards, 1996; Pajares, 1992). The study's findings highlight that teacher cognition in the EFL context is challenged by a host of factors which are lack of societal support system, students' negative attitude towards learning English, unconducive educational policies, and teaching efficacy.

First of all, the social approval of a language helps to motivate the people towards its learning and use. However, the study shows that, overall, Saudi society does not have an encouraging attitude towards English. The social taboos create hurdles

in successful English language learning. This finding is consistent with that of Nishino's (2012), who reports that society's socio-educational conditions influence teachers' classroom practices. Hall (2011) also argues that what happens in a language classroom is inseparable from its socio-cultural context, which plays a pivotal role in developing students' target language as it influences the classroom environment. Students are part of the broader context in the classroom, which significantly impacts what takes place in the classroom. The interference of socio-cultural taboos in the EFL context makes the pedagogical process complex and has a detrimental effect on the students' motivation.

Next, this discouraging behavior of society trickles down to students, and they develop a negative attitude towards English. As found by Liton (2012), this study shows that students' lack of motivation influences teachers' performances and students' learning outcomes. The present study suggests socio-economic issues like social barriers, students' lack of goals, and students' perception that English is difficult. These pressures lead them to avoid communication in the target language even inside the classroom, which is further augmented by EFL students' inadequate exposure to L2 in society. Furthermore, students' main objective remains to achieve good grades with little attention to academic growth. The finding also confirms Shehdeh's (2010) assertion that the EFL students lack motivation and have a poor attitude towards English. Resultantly, teachers' job in the EFL context turns out to be more challenging.

Additionally, unconducive educational policies are challenging teacher cognition. These policies include the restriction on the teaching process, limited instruction time, large-size classes, and the current examination system. First, EFL teachers are not autonomous to choose their teaching methods. The institutions encourage them to follow the communicative approach; however, students' proficiency level is deficient and requires the limited use of L1. Consequently, teacher cognition remains sandwiched between institutional policies and students' learning requirements. Hall (2011) also asserts that teachers remain baffled between institutional

policies and students' expectations. Second challenge to teacher cognition is limited instruction time. Chen and Goh (2011) and Yeh (2010) discussed this challenge in EFL contexts. EFL teachers find themselves in testing situation to achieve the desired objectives by teaching the prescribed syllabus in the designated time. Third, the over-crowded classrooms pose another challenge, and teachers are not able to focus on every student. They cannot get better feedback, and hence EFL teaching remains the victim. This finding is consistent with that of Marais (2016), who reports that overcrowded classrooms pose enormous challenges for teachers and students. Last, the existing system of students' assessment encourages cramming of rules rather than their use. Moreover, there is only a written examination and no oral examination, where multiple-choice questions lead to guesswork. In this way, many incompetent students get good grades, get promoted to higher levels without any sound base, and pose a more significant challenge to teacher cognition.

The last group of social factors that have been found to affect teachers' cognition is teachers' efficacy. EFL classroom is the manifestation of teachers' skills demonstrated in their handling of various issues. Findings of the study reveal teachers' fair understanding of the EFL context. Teachers have articulated three primary requirements of their students: limited and judicious use of L1, integrations of grammar with other skills, and both inductive and deductive approaches. This finding is inconsistent with that of Khan's (2011), who reports that non-L1 EFL teachers are not well-aware of the local EFL context. However, teachers' perception of bilingual strategies has not been fully endorsed by most administrators and students, who claim that L1-speaking EFL teachers do not use bilingual strategies, while non-L1 EFL teachers claim to use limited and planned use of Arabic. Researches (Atkinson, 1987; Harbord, 1992; Rinvolutri, 2001) believe that extensive use of L1 is counter-productive, while limited, judicious, and systematic use of L1 produces positive results. Moreover, most of the administrators' and students' views are contrary to teachers' beliefs regarding students' learning requirements. They assert that teachers do not value students'

perspectives, and teachers' main concern is to finish the prescribed syllabus in the designated time, without any innovation in teaching.

### Conclusion

This study explored the factors influencing teacher cognition in teaching English to university students in an EFL context. The study found four challenging factors: lack of societal support system, students' negative attitude towards English, unconducive educational policies, and teacher efficacy. The study reveals that teachers, students, and administrators have consistency of perceptions about the first three factors; however, the findings suggest inconsistency in the beliefs of Arab EFL teachers and most of the administrators and students about teachers' use of bilingual strategies and their understanding of the learning requirements of students. Teachers consider themselves bilingual strategists according to teaching demands and learning needs. On the contrary, most of the administrators and students believe that Arab EFL teachers lack bilingual strategies, and their use of L1 is extensive, leading to detrimental effects on the teaching/learning process. Conversely, students and administrators believe that non-Arab teachers' use of L1 is limited and judicious, which is instrumental. Moreover, despite being fully aware, teachers cannot consider their students' learning requirements due to the three adverse factors.

The study suggests that teachers must be mindful of the adverse factors. They should be imaginative, innovative, and flexible to nullify them. Also, policymakers need to realize teachers' value as thinking decision-makers and trust them to implement classroom policies. Teachers need to be taken on board in policymaking. Unconducive educational policies weaken teacher cognition and result in unsuccessful teaching/learning, as teacher cognition acts as a filter through which instructional judgments are made (Borg, 2009). Moreover, the stakeholders need to understand that students emerge from a specific socio-cultural context and are influenced by the factors rooted in that context. Therefore, it is their responsibility to make the classroom an English language island for the students so that they may get the maximum opportunity to practice English.

### Limitations and Future Studies

The study's findings may help teachers and policymakers take measures to counter the factors affecting teacher cognition, which resultantly victimize English language teaching/learning. This study was conducted under certain limitations. Future researchers can pay attention to the more significant number of participants and focus on the other variables like age and experience in determining the factors affecting teachers' cognition so that a more holistic picture may surface.

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