

**The Challenges for Saudi Females Studying ESL Abroad
in a Mixed-Gender Learning Environment**

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I realize that today I am going to do something more difficult than what I have accomplished because, starting today, I am responsible for applying everything I have learned in my workplaces and my impact, and this responsibility is my new identity, and it determines the future that I have always dreamed of.

Abstract

When Saudi females migrate to countries with mixed-gender learning settings, as are prevalent in an English-speaking country, they face difficulties with this mixed-gender class environment since the situation is different from what they were used to in Saudi Arabia. This study aims to shed light on such difficulties and obstacles those females encounter, the reasons behind these obstacles, and how they can be overcome. Moreover, the study implements a systematic literature review (SLR) technique to better understand why these difficulties occur. No previous research has tackled a similar issue to the best of the author's knowledge.

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Attestation of Authorship

"I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning."

Ashwaq Alhudaib

Signature:

Date: 4 May 2023

CHAPTER 1: Introduction

1.1 Studying Abroad

In the last decade, travelling abroad for varying periods has become a common practice in many countries and Saudi Arabia is no exception. For example, the Centre for Tourism Information and Research in Saudi Arabia ("MAS") reported that Saudi tourists, travelling abroad in the summer of 2018 before the COVID-19 Pandemic, reached more than 16 million and that the number of tourist trips outside the Kingdom during the summer of 2018, amounted to 9.4 million (MAS, 2018). In addition, Saudi universities, in accordance with the Kingdom's Vision 2030 (as discussed below in Section 2.2), have begun to take upon themselves international partnerships, exchanging international scholarship students, and hosting many conferences and educational activities as a priority (Winkel et al., 2021).

Short-term travel for educational purposes to achieve personal development and acquire language skills is a popular and preferred method for most students around the world. However, many Saudi Arabians prefer to travel for only short periods for their academic studies because of age and financial considerations such as housing, study fees, and living costs (Young & Snead, 2017). It is worth noting here that short-term travellers (migrants) differ from immigrants who intend to stay in the host country for a long time or who wish to settle there. In contrast to immigrants, short-term travellers have a clear sense of belonging to a specific country and language and a specific desire to return (Friberg, 2012). In addition, they (short-term students) may also gain cultural awareness, personal growth, and functional knowledge, whereas the students who travel abroad for long-term study acquire supplementary benefits such as a lasting worldview, experience, confidence, and understanding of cultural values (Stone & Petrick, 2013).

1.1.1 Studying the English Language Abroad

Even if they stay a short period in the host country, students are obliged to learn a suitable foreign language to facilitate their communication with the surrounding community, which might be the country's language or any other common language. Moreover, during travel, students will encounter daily life situations that require the use of a common language to communicate. Mostly, they do not ask their academic advisors for support out of shyness, so they are forced to either learn the host country language or the English language

as a lingua franca (Dutta, 2020). In addition, many countries that offer postgraduate studies are either English-speaking countries or have programmes taught in English, requiring students to thoroughly learn this language outside of their classes (Novera, 2004).

1.1.2 Saudi Students Studying Abroad

When Saudi students first arrive in foreign countries, they frequently enrol in language institutions to learn the language of the country, which will eventually allow them to pursue their studies and apply to universities for higher education (Alhazmi & Nyland, 2013; Dorres & Scheuermann, 2007). In the last decade, there has been renewed interest in the challenges faced by Saudi overseas students (Alhazmi & Nyland, 2013; Dorres & Scheuermann, 2007). Extensive research has been directed toward highlighting the differences between Saudi culture and the countries hosting these students, prompting many educational institutions to adopt a strategy to ensure positive relationships between educators and students when they arrive (Alqefari, 2016). According to Ward and Szabo (2019), intercultural transitions can introduce new challenges to individuals, who are required to learn new skills to function effectively in unfamiliar cultural environments, in order to address the tensions between different cultural perspectives and worldviews, and to deal with the stresses associated with significant changes in their everyday life. To achieve academically, students must adapt themselves to overcome these issues. Therefore, it is evident that international students may face multiple challenges in terms of culture, education, and communication skills. These challenges can affect the rate or level of students' language acquisition (Yakunina et al., 2013).

Many studies have been conducted on the experiences and challenges of Saudi students studying abroad (e.g., Barnawi, 2009; Groves et al., 2015; Shaw, 2010). For example, Groves et al. (2015) investigated the level of engagement of Saudi international students in the local community. As a result, they indicated that Saudi Arabian international students can communicate with members of the target language community, but that the take-up varies according to the individual and is frequently dictated by cultural and identity considerations. Moreover, Aldawsari (2017) found that Saudi Arabian students studying at New Zealand universities encountered difficulties in academic settings concerning listening, speaking, reading, and writing, which suggests that the ability of Saudi students to communicate may be negatively affected by their English language proficiency.

Cultural differences may also play an important role here, and these disparities can affect and hinder the language acquisition process. For example, schools in Saudi Arabia are separated based on gender divisions. In addition, interaction between males and females in Saudi Arabia is very different from that in other countries, because they do not typically communicate with each other, or even participate in the same activities. Thus, when Saudi students study abroad in mixed-gender institutions, their academic performance might be affected due to being in such an unfamiliar environment, which, in turn, could hinder their learning process (Young & Snead, 2017).

To investigate this proposition, Alqefari (2016) surveyed a group of female postgraduate students from Qassim University, Saudi Arabia, studying English as a second language abroad. These female students had never had any previous encounters with men in a learning environment since they had never been outside Saudi Arabia, which is generally considered a very conservative country in its attitudes to male and female interaction. Consequently, the results of this mixed-methods study demonstrated that Saudi female students may have difficulties studying with male colleagues or even being taught by male lecturers. Thus, Saudi females who study abroad could face difficulties in maintaining their customary cultural identity, which may then influence their investment in their English learning and language acquisition. For example, according to Aldhahri (2019), Saudi female students' first experience with a co-educational class in the United States increased their anxiety about participating in such a class. In addition, it was found that negative attitudes from classmates toward their Islamic culture or dress code may influence their language learning involvement in class. As a result, Saudi female students may prefer to communicate and interact with other international students who have the same cultural norms or spend time with other female students from their home country. Thus, it is clear that gender issues related to Saudi females studying abroad warrant further investigation.

1.2 Problem Statement

When Saudi females migrate to countries with mixed-gender learning settings, which are prevalent in many English-speaking countries, they may face difficulties with this mixed-gender class environment. This study

aims to shed light on such difficulties and highlight the obstacles females encounter, the reasons behind them, and how they can be overcome.

There are two reasons why this study needs to provide a new perspective on this particular group of international students. First, in contrast to other cultural or international groups (e.g., Asian, or African), Saudi females suffer unique challenges not shared by their male counterparts (Altamimi, 2014) as they may lack confidence and feel uncomfortable in their mixed-gender classes (Alqudayri & Gounko, 2018). Second, since Saudi culture differs uniquely regarding its cultural and social norms, Young and Clark (2017) recommended that future studies focussed on the acculturation process (cross-cultural transition) of Saudi international students, especially females. Moreover, Davis (2016) suggested a study should be conducted on why Saudi males oppose Saudi females pursuing higher education in a foreign country, and to investigate the main reasons that drive some Saudi females' decisions not to continue their education in the host country. Therefore, this study implements a systematic review technique to understand better why these difficulties occur. No previous research has tackled a similar issue to the best of the author's knowledge.

1.3 Research Questions

This study has been carried out to answer the following questions:

1. What challenges do Saudi females face while studying abroad in a mixed-gender environment?
2. What other factors contribute to the challenges faced by Saudi females while learning in a foreign country?
3. How can Saudi females be helped to tackle or overcome these challenges?

1.4 Research Study Objectives

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. Determine the different challenges Saudi females face while studying abroad in a mixed-gender environment
2. Identify other factors that contribute to the challenges faced by Saudi females while learning in a foreign country
3. Determine the appropriate strategies to overcome these challenges

1.5 Research Methodology

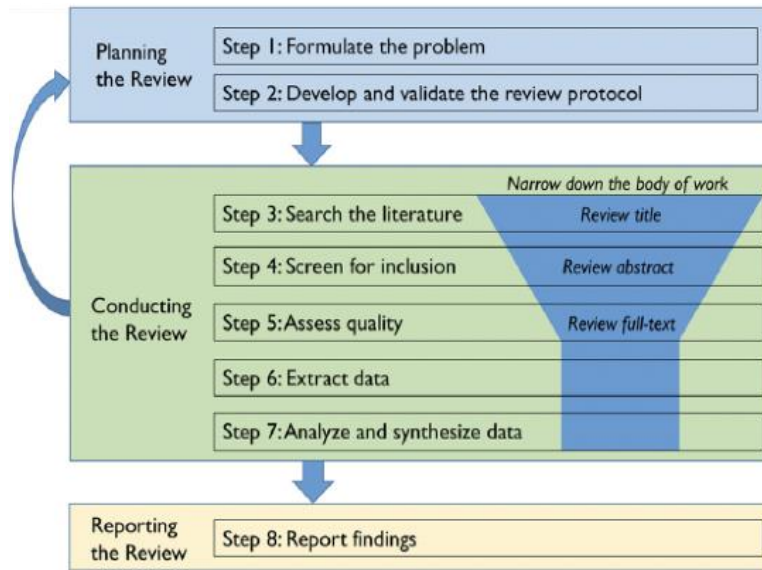
This is a mixed-methods study based on a descriptive-analytical method. According to Saunders et al. (2009), a quantitative approach examines *what* occurs during a phenomenon, whereas a qualitative approach highlights *why* it occurs. Descriptive assessments emphasise environmental variables, and they are based on the direct observation of an individual's behaviour and the events occurring in their natural environment.

The current study employs a systematic literature review technique to research the challenges and difficulties Saudi females studying abroad encounter, the variables contributing to these difficulties, and how they can overcome them. Therefore, this study will rely on the review approach of some previous seminal studies to achieve its goal. In addition, it will adopt the systematic literature search methodology used by Xiao and Watson (2019) as shown in Figure 1 (below), which includes defining the inclusion

criteria for the studies, identifying the literature, performing the literature search, reviewing abstracts, assessing the quality of the selected papers, and iterating, analysing, and interpreting the results.

Figure 1

Framework of the systematic review approach



Note: Framework of the systematic review approach (Figure 1) identifies the literature and performs the literature search, reviews abstracts, assesses the quality of the selected papers, and iterates, analyses and interprets the results.

For the first time, this study presents an exploration of the challenges Saudi female students face in English language studies in countries with a mixed-gender learning environment. This investigation is based on a systematic review of previous literature and benefits from its outputs and implications through a descriptive and analytical approach.

CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

The existing knowledge as discussed below in the literature review enables the assessment of research available on the topic of challenges facing Saudi females when studying ESL abroad. In the literature review section in this study, publications will be analysed to give an overview of the different aspects of the topic, how it is collected, challenges, obstacles, and benefits, to build a better positioning of this study topic. This chapter consists of six sections after this introduction. Section 2.2 presents a background about the importance of the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP) for Saudi education. Section 2.3 briefly highlights reasons for Saudi students' preference for studying in Arab countries, while Section 2.4 outlines both the experience and challenges facing Saudi students, particularly females, while studying in countries with mixed-gender educational environments. Section 2.5 identifies the factors which contribute to those challenges. Section 2.6 gives a general view of some strategies/suggestions to overcome those challenges. Finally, Section 2.7 provides a summary of the literature review.

2.2 King Abdullah Scholarship Program

In 2005, King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz of Saudi Arabia started a national scholarship programme for Saudi students with various options to pursue education, from bachelors up to doctoral degrees in majors such as medicine, engineering, science, mathematics, or finance, while studying in one of 24 countries (Aldhahri, 2019; Alqudayri & Gounko, 2018; Denman & Hilal, 2011), and at some of the highest-ranking universities around the globe (Ministry of Higher Education, 2015). The main objective was to fulfil the academic and professional needs of Saudi Arabians in order to enable them to become future leaders who could compete on an international scale (Aldhahri, 2019; Alhazmi & Nyland, 2013). In addition, this would diversify their employment opportunities and increase the overall level of higher educational qualifications in Saudi Arabia (Denman & Hilal,

2011). This step is considered a milestone in the education history of Saudi Arabia (Ministry of Higher Education, 2015) that led to a significant increase in the number of Saudi students studying abroad (Aldhahri, 2019).

In addition, the KASP aimed to develop more understanding and cross-cultural awareness and is considered a significant effort to bridge the gap between Western culture and Arab culture (Denman & Hilal, 2011), especially after the terrorist attacks of 9/11, as these events caused a major barrier both between Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern countries, as well as between Saudi Arabia and the West (Aldhahri, 2019; Denman & Hilal, 2011). However, while it is clear that the Saudi Government has allocated significant resources to improving education, including enhanced student mobility, there are still significant challenges to overcome in cultural acceptance by, and conflicts of interest with, Western countries; one of them is the global stereotypical view of Saudi Arabia, as portrayed through Western media, as a kingdom which is conservative and highly protective of its cultural heritage and identity. As a supply-driven programme, KASP shared the many strengths and weaknesses of such programmes. During the Third Phase (2015–2019), the scholarship showed tighter linkages with the perceived future labour market needs as projected in the framework of Vision 2030 (Mughal, 2021). KASP has been pivotal in increasing the number of outbound Saudi female students. KASP offered a broader menu of curricular choices and a significantly improved and supportive academic environment to Saudi female students. The benefits of the programme to women are expected to greatly outweigh those to men. It is expected to contribute to the generation of a critical mass of highly skilled Saudi professional women. KASP is also expected to be a vehicle of feminisation of the workforce and diversification of the economy at the higher end of the skills spectrum (Mughal, 2021).

2.3 Saudi Students Studying in Arab Countries

Although the KASP scholarship programme offers a variety of options to study worldwide, most Saudi students prefer English-speaking countries like the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia. This might be attributed to these countries providing a good environment for Arabs and Muslims, recommendations from friends, good weather, reasonable cost of living, agreement between some Australian universities and Saudi universities, and simple and easy admission procedures (Alsulami, 2016). Furthermore, Saudi students have generally viewed American and British English as the standard English varieties and have not accepted other varieties of World English (Almegren, 2018).

However, Arab countries are still a significant option for Saudi students and rank as the second-highest choice, as they offer a similar lifestyle, religion, and language to that of Saudi Arabia (Ministry of Higher Education, 2012). As most nations of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are similar in culture to their home country, this makes it difficult for Saudi students to choose which country in that region to study in. However, Jordan and Egypt are common choices as their similar and, therefore, familiar educational systems are mostly taught in English (Denman & Hilal, 2011). Moreover, as the majority of the people in these countries are Muslims, there is no religious barrier or concern about racial profiling that could negatively affect their learning of English.

2.4 Saudi Students Studying Abroad in English-Speaking Countries

According to the Ministry of Higher Education (2012), the United States is the first preferred option for Saudi students, while Arab countries are the second option; the United Kingdom is the third preference followed by Canada and Australia. In Saudi Arabia, an extensive knowledge of teaching and learning English abroad is considered to be essential for Saudi students in order to raise their English language learning proficiency, especially in speaking (Alhmadi, 2014).

However, on the other hand, Blake (2006) has suggested that living in a different cultural environment may cause students to encounter language anxiety, a feeling of frustration, and helplessness. Yakunina et al. (2013) found that these negative feelings and behaviours are caused by acculturative stress as students attempt to adjust to the host culture. In addition, if international students enrol in university in a country that differs from their cultural and language background, they may also encounter new challenges according to the new educational systems, and the learning and teaching methods (Andrade, 2006; Hofstede, 1986; D. L. Shaw, 2010). Shehry (1989) found that social struggles, instability of finances, homesickness, as well as a struggle in speaking, writing, and dealing with universities, are all factors that place international students under major pressure.

2.4.1 Saudi Female Students' Experiences in English-Speaking Countries

According to "Open Doors Data" (2017), the United States is one of the favourite destinations for international students from over 200 countries, and Saudi Arabia is ranked as the fourth highest-ranking country which sends their international students to study there. Moreover, the number of female Saudi international students who are studying in the United States has significantly increased during the last decade ("Open Doors Data", 2017). This might be attributed to reasons such as their fathers being more willing to support them, due to their intention to return to Saudi Arabia after graduation and apply what they learned in the United States in their home country to create positive changes in their country (Arafah, 2020).

On the other hand, Dodt (2022) conducted qualitative interviews with 10 Saudi female students who have studied or are studying at George Washington University, which is a mixed gender university. This study concluded with several arguments: 1) Gender segregation provides spaces to empower women that would not necessarily exist if society was gender mixed; 2) The appropriate level of gender segregation in Saudi Arabia and the United States is defined by the individual, and when given the choice to gender segregate or gender mix, Saudi women differ in their experiences and preferences, even when returning to Saudi Arabia; 3) Gender segregation is an individual

phenomenon and cannot be understood as simply “wrong”, “right”, “oppressive”, or “empowering”. Women can empower themselves regardless of circumstances.

2.4.2 Challenges Facing Female Saudi Students in a Mixed-Gender Learning Environment

It should be noted that these female Saudi students who are studying overseas come from a society that excludes women from public activities and does not permit any interaction between females and males that are not from their family. Even when it comes to education, all Saudi students spend their study years in gender separated schools and environments (Hamdan, 2005). The most prominent difference that distinguishes Saudi Arabia from many other countries is strict gender segregation practised in most public areas including schools and universities. Saudi women are subjected to numerous restrictions affecting their daily life. One such restriction, known as the male guardian (*mahram*) policy, requires that a woman be accompanied by a man (father, brother, or husband) at all times, and particularly when travelling abroad to study in Western universities (Alqudayri & Gounko, 2018; Doumato & Posusney, 2003).

This makes the transition from the environment of gender segregation into a mixed-gender learning environment as one of the major challenges for female Saudi international students, as they have described this new experience as being at first 'strange', 'mysterious', and 'scary' (Alhazmi & Nyland, 2013). Therefore, this experience brings up unique challenges for female Saudi students that differ from those of other international female students.

Alqudayri and Gounko (2018) similarly found that the major difficulty facing female Saudi students in Australia is this transition from a gender-segregated environment to the mixed-gender, co-educational systems in the country they are studying. As a result, they may experience fear or stress in participating in a second language learning class, which in turn creates an obstacle that might prevent them from participating in conversations in class and learning the new language well enough to communicate with their classmates or other English speakers.

Moreover, a study conducted by Altamimi (2014) on Saudi female students in Canada who were transitioning through pre-academic English as a second language (ESL), indicated that all the female Saudi students lacked confidence, and had a fear of making a mistake, or being mistakenly understood, due to a high level of shyness. They also had serious difficulty dealing with males in their classes, especially Saudi men, as they were afraid of being judged by them because of their cultural background which places restrictions on women's behaviour. Thus, they had a fear of being excluded and rejected by their own culture if they took off their hijab, for example. Such nervousness as described above might significantly affect their speaking behaviour in the classroom (Alqefari, 2016).

2.5 Factors Contributing to the Challenges for Saudi Females while Studying in a Foreign Country

Shifting from a segregated home country to a mixed-gender environment in the host country comes with unique challenges for female Saudi students that could have a major role in the way their perceptions are formed both of their home and their host country (Sandekian et al., 2015). Factors which could play a significant role are discussed below.

2.5.1 Cultural Differences

Cultural identity corresponds to an individual's beliefs and is influenced by their cultural, historical, and religious background; it contains the transmitted traditions, beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge of previous generations (Alhazmi & Nyland, 2013; Berry, 2008; Jameson, 2007). According to Alqudayri and Gounko (2018), Saudi females encounter many psychological challenges based on their cultural background when enrolling in higher education in Saudi Arabia in general, and they continue to face those same psychological challenges even when enrolling abroad. Additionally, other cultural, social, and religious norms substantially affect Saudi women's perspectives on studying in Western countries (Alqefari, 2016).

An example of such a challenge is that of participation in individual rather than group assignments. Mahrous and Ahmed (2010) indicated that the educational and cultural system influences students in the Middle East, as, in their home countries, they are typically given assignments and activities

to complete as individuals rather than participating in groups. However, the common educational practice in Western countries is to get students to participate in assignments and work in a team. Therefore, this difference between their home cultural identity and their experience of cross-cultural contact may lower the educational performance of Saudi female students when studying in a foreign country.

According to Alhazmi and Nyland (2013), shifting from a teacher-centred education system in their educational journey back in their home country into a different educational approach in Canada, was considered a challenging situation for Saudi female students to adjust to. Frequently, students overseas are expected to be more independent and are given less direction by their teachers. On the other hand, the shift of paradigm in higher education worldwide from teacher-centred to student-focused education could provide students with the opportunity to take more responsibility for their own learning.

In addition, Altamimi (2014) found that Saudi females in the class were not used to co-educational classes and male teachers. She indicated that Saudi female students changed behaviour in the presence of males in their classrooms and preferred to remain silent. She explained that Saudi women do not usually interact with people outside the home or with unrelated males due to cultural norms. She also mentioned that female Saudi students who had never previously been abroad, or who started at an older age were more challenged by their conservative backgrounds, which could cause high anxiety levels when studying in a mixed-gender environment, especially with male teachers.

Altamimi (2014) also found that one of the major difficulties that Saudi women faced in the United States was the cultural challenge brought about by a conflict between their background culture in their home country, as a very conservative country, and the American culture, which is regarded as being more open and freer. In addition, she found that negative attitudes from classmates toward their Islamic culture or dress code may also have negatively influenced their language-learning involvement in class. As a result, Saudi female students preferred to communicate with each other

rather than foreigners. Moreover, she stated that social challenges were the hardest to overcome for Saudi female students in the United States, such as engaging and making friends with the American community. As a result, almost all the Saudi female students in the study had very limited friendships with Americans, because they found it hard to accept people who are different from them in regard to their societal background.

2.5.2 Language Barriers

For second language learners, learning how to speak is often considered more important than learning how to write or read (Jamshidnejad, 2011). He noted that students who do not participate and speak in language classes, from shyness or the fear of being laughed at, are less likely to improve the level of their speaking ability and their overall language learning in the future. Moreover, according to Tetzner (2006), students who do not participate orally in language classes have a more limited chance to practise their language skills; therefore, they take longer to become skilled at the language. On the other hand, the students who take risks and participate in speaking in language classes have a higher chance of learning the English language more quickly.

Many studies (e.g., Alhazmi & Nyland, 2013; Alshafi & Shin, 2017; Fallon et al., 2009; Hamad, 2012; Midgley, 2009) which have addressed the issues of Saudi international students have indicated that studying and practising academic English were some of the most significant challenges that Saudi international students faced, as a large number of these students faced struggles during any activity that required the confident use of language, such as presentations, discussions, writing papers, taking exams, and speaking to peers and professors in English. However, it must be pointed out that such obstacles are faced by both male and female students.

In further support of this claim, Lefdahl-Davis and Perrone-McGovern (2015) stated that language proficiency plays a major role in the acculturation of Saudi female students in the United States, as the adaptation of proficient Saudi students to this society is much easier than for those with insufficient English language skills. In further response to this, Aldhahr (2019) suggested that their level of English language ability played a significant role in Saudi female students' interactions

with their American neighbours. She stated that the possession of poor language skills decreased their chances of interacting appropriately with Americans.

In addition, Altamimi (2014) reported that most female Saudi students who participated in her study admitted that they spoke Arabic most of the time outside classes, and they used English only when really necessary. Moreover, they tended to make friends only with other Saudi female students or, in some cases, non-Saudi females who shared a similar cultural background and restrictions, and thus could understand their behaviour. In addition, she suggested that such sociocultural factors which defined their behaviours also limited their interaction in co-educational classes.

2.5.3 Gender Restrictions

Sex and gender are two terms often used synonymously in social science. However, sex is a biological trait (whether the person is male or female), while gender is usually described as either masculine or feminine (Griffiths & Soruç, 2020).

Gender role distinction in Saudi Arabia is mainly dictated by cultural and religious practices that enforce strict gender segregation (Altamimi, 2014). According to Alqudayri and Gounko (2018), gender separation is central to most Saudis' social, educational, economic, and political activities. It also contributes significantly to the formation of Saudi cultural identity. As a result of this tightly defined gender role, women in Saudi Arabian society are subject to many restrictions, including the need to avoid contact with men who are unrelated to them. They state that women in Saudi Arabia have fewer rights than men and play a minimal role in public life. Furthermore, Al-Asfour et al. (2017) found that Saudi Muslim women's commitment to family limited access to professional training and development opportunities, and lack of informal networks, mentoring systems, and organisational support, along with gender bias and male employees' failure to take women seriously, are important factors hindering these women's career advancement and participation in governmental roles.

Le Renard (2008) and Sallam (2013) further state that the central region of Saudi Arabia (including areas such as Al Qassim) is far more rigorous and conservative in enforcing gender segregation restrictions than the eastern provinces. Al Qassim is quite a distinct region regarding gender attitudes and learning, and the rural culture there is not an open one. Therefore, women from Qassim have very limited contact with foreigners.

Moreover, Hamdan (2005) and Sallam (2013) suggest that the role of women in Saudi Arabia is determined by culture rather than religious or tribal family traditions. For example, Kuwait and Bahrain are countries in the Gulf region that are primarily based on tribal organisation but do not culturally restrict women's participation in public life, unlike Saudi Arabia. From this, we can conclude that the status of women and the expected behaviour of women in Saudi Arabia are the results of the country's unique culture itself, regardless of any other geographically similar countries with the same religious background.

2.5.4 Religious Difference and Diversity

Islamic Studies/Science (*Oloom Addin* in Arabic) is considered to be a core part of the school curriculum throughout the Arab world (Zia, 2017, p. 261). Rights and obligations to oneself and others are perhaps the most important aspects of religious education. Although Quranic expressions can differ between different Islamic factions, the anti-Western sentiment currently associated with Islamic identity is more relevant to the politics of geopolitical intervention than to any particular religious' ideology (Zia, 2017, p. 263). Therefore, it is not feasible to look at Saudi society from an outsider's view. This means that both religious and cultural norms (not any political directions/classifications) shape Saudi Arabia's social practices. In fact, it is difficult to separate them from each other as they work together to create the unique characteristics of Saudi society (Altamimi, 2014). Therefore, in order to observe Saudi society more closely, a combined perspective should be considered.

For example, Alqefari (2016) discussed the difficulties of a particular group of Saudi Arabian female students studying English abroad. The participants in this study were very conservative and

came from the Qassim region, which is known for its strict interpretation of Islamic values, customs, and traditions. Thus, the participants had reservations about sharing their vision of reality as they did not feel comfortable discussing female-related matters in public and did not mix much at all with male classmates and male teachers.

2.5.5 Other Factors, e.g., the Islamic Dress Code

The issue of discrimination is another challenge Saudi female have faced in the United States, according to Aldhari (2019). Her participants noted that some Americans avoided talking to them or were rude to them because of their hijabs. This could be partly explained through the dual image of Muslim women as it has been portrayed to Western populations of today. On one hand, Muslim women's veils are seen as a controversial symbol in the West, which emphasises the differences and divisions between "Western" and "Muslim" values, a sign of backwardness that is in conflict with the progressive West. On the other hand, the various forms of the veil, ranging from *hijab* to *niqab* and *burqa*, represent Islam, a long-standing perceived security threat to the West.

However, Aldhari's (2019) participants were discriminated against only by people they met outside college and educational institutes. Those people seemed to be ordinary members of the public who lacked a high level of education. The participants noted that they never felt any impact from their wearing of the hijab and their Muslim identity when communicating with open-minded educated Americans. They also emphasised the vital role of people's exposure to diversity, believing that, while the hijab was a problem for the wearers in some areas of the United States, it was accepted in other parts because those people had been more exposed to people from different cultures.

Based on the ongoing discourse about the 'war on terror' in the West, the 'common popular knowledge' is that the veil, hijab, burqa, and headscarf ultimately mean oppression of women. Accordingly, in the New Zealand context, Soltani (2018) noted that veiled Muslim women have been framed in relation to their identity in a dichotomous manner, which is viewed either as oppressed or a threat to national identities across Western nations. That is, the practice of Islamic

veiling is examined in terms of the notion of religious freedom. Moreover, historically, veiling has been seen by Westerners as the ultimate symbol or tool of gender oppression in Islamic cultures or as being linked to political ideologies (Hirschmann, 1997).

As an example, Soltani (2018) described an occasion in Auckland when a Saudi female student was refused access to public transportation by a bus driver because of the Muslim hijab that covered her head and face. In this way, Muslim women's veils are seen as a controversial symbol in the West and such women are particularly misunderstood and disproportionately targeted.

Another factor that is considered a challenge for Saudi female international students is the influence of Islamophobia in some English language teaching classes. Islamophobia is a type of racism/discrimination against Muslims in terms of abuse, incitement, and intimidation both in the online and offline world. This is motivated by institutional, ideological, political, and religious hostility that transcends into structural and cultural racism which targets the symbols and markers of being a Muslim (Yaghi, 2019).

According to Yaghi and Ryan (2022), the fight against Islamophobia in ELT appears to be long overdue, especially given the evidence in many countries of a rise in anti-Muslim hostility over the last few years. They conducted a study on English language teaching classes in New Zealand in order to explore Muslim students' experiences of Islamophobic treatment. Women reported condescending interrogations of their Muslim lives and identities, and reported verbal aggression, whether in a joke by other classmates or teachers, or by making serious statements, such as referring to the uniform as a black curtain that resembles a garbage bag or indicating that the hijab obscures the mind from thinking.

Several incidents have shown the rise of Islamophobia following the September 11, 2001, attacks. Such events contribute to changes in public emotions and may influence their opinions of Muslims (Kolig, 2010). Moreover, Marginson (2012) described the challenges that Muslims face in New Zealand because of the common stereotype that Muslims are terrorists, or because of New Zealand's

broadly secular view that the hijab and niqab subjugate women, and the view that Muslim women's dress code makes them easy targets for victimisation. Overall, Saudi female students' religious challenges related to their hijab and Muslim identity were considered to be some of the main factors contributing to the difficulties faced by Saudi females when studying in a foreign country.

2.6 Strategies for Overcoming the Challenges of a Mixed-Gender Learning Environment

On the positive side, Aldhahri (2019) concluded that, for the Saudi students in her study, their experience of life in the United States had made them stronger, more independent, more responsible, and more confident. They had the opportunity to meet and communicate with people from all over the world who introduced them to different countries, languages, and cultures. She also found that there had been some beneficial aspects and effects on these students due to recent changes in Saudi Arabia (which were repeatedly mentioned by the participants), such as the empowerment of Saudi women who now have more freedom, have more equal employment opportunities, are stronger, and have more confidence. However, some of her participants believed that the changes Saudi Arabia is undergoing will have a greater impact on the experiences of female Saudi female students in the future, rather than on those currently studying in the United States. These reforms include, for example, the permission for women to drive cars and the inclusion of females in governmental roles.

In addition, according to Novera (2004), the role of foreign educational institutes in providing help to struggling Saudi students is considered very important. Some types of help might be offered in the form of creating workshops to emphasise inclusion and fitting in for mixed groups of Saudi and non-Saudi students. However, on the other hand, Al-Otaibi (2004) found that the Saudi female participants preferred to seek help from family or friends rather than from academic advisors, lecturers, classmates, or colleagues to solve their problems. This is supported by research conducted by Robinson (1992), who suggested that most students chose to seek advice from friends and relatives because they did not think that international student services staff would understand their

problems. Moreover, the husband was the preferred source for help. Female students felt more confident and sheltered in the presence of their husbands in a foreign environment because they were completely dependent on them for support, both financially and emotionally.

Altamimi (2014) also concluded that one strategy which might help female students to overcome these challenges is for teachers and university staff to better understand the role of the Saudi student male guardian (*mahram*), as well as the natural tendency for Saudi female students to socialise together, as this could serve as a protective function to help minimise potential culture shock. Normalising this idea can relieve a considerable burden placed upon Saudi students, rather than expecting them to constantly explain their culture and run the risk of feeling misunderstood.

2.6.1 Pre-Study Preparation of Saudi Female Students

Aldhahri (2019) recommended that in order for Saudi female students to have a good experience in the United States, they should consider the level of diversity when choosing the university, they plan to attend, so as to make sure it has a high percentage of international students and teachers from different backgrounds. This may reduce the awkwardness of wearing the hijab, for example, if the existence of hijabs in the same community is more usual, and it will give a more comforting feeling to the female Saudi students in that they are not the only individuals with different ways of dressing. She recommended that these Saudi students should try to take courage and join the American community to make friends and improve their English skills. She also suggested that, in order for Saudi women in higher education to have enjoyable experiences in the United States, American teachers and students should be trained to communicate with people of different cultures, especially Saudi Arabian female students, as they come from a sex-segregated educational system which would limit their class interaction with male students and teachers.

These cultural programmes for Saudi and non-Saudi students and teachers would help the Saudi female students overcome language and cultural barriers, strengthen community cohesion, make friends, and improve their English and communication skills. She also stated that to help Saudi female students overcome academic difficulties, English programmes could provide them with a

course of study that focused on academic preparation, including time management strategies, and study skills, such as reading, writing, taking notes, group discussions and projects, and presentations in order to prepare them gradually for the new educational environment, which may depend on a high level of participation and discussion.

To avoid the culture shock that many Saudi female first-year students experience at a foreign university, another key recommendation from this study by Aldhahri (2019) is that universities provide better support for new students to aid in their admission process (Denman & Hilal, 2011). In fact, Hellstén (2002) found that such international students expect to be "supported" by their host culture and university. This could include a gender-segregated environment upon arrival, although they acknowledge that this would be a logistical challenge (Denman & Hilal, 2011). Alqudayri and Gounko (2018) suggest that female Saudi students should receive additional preparation for mixed-gender courses. This could be done by setting up a hotline for Saudi women or encouraging them to join academic societies, which will certainly improve their social skills and language proficiency (Denman & Hilal, 2011).

2.6.2 Culture Normalisation

Altamimi (2014) recommends in her study that universities attended by female Saudi international students should acknowledge cultural differences in their curricula and activities and select their topics accordingly. They could organise discussions on the cultures of their international students, which might positively impact the students and embrace their diversity in an interesting way. However, such activities would need to be conducted with a great deal of respect and sensitivity. Other examples might include multi-cultural games, speaking up exercises, and outdoor activities. The main purpose of such suggestions is raising the class's awareness of the importance of diversity without creating any emotional or psychological harm or unintended marginalisation.

2.6.3 Selection of Special Mixed-Cultures Environment

Altamimi (2014) also recommends that ESL schools (and universities) could help Saudi female students adapt to their new educational environment, by selecting a suitable conversational partner

or group for each Saudi female. They should include non-Saudi females, so these groups could practise their speaking. This would create a mix of cultures and would also ensure that they all speak only English. She stated that this method would benefit all international students and would also encourage an exchange of cultural knowledge and values.

2.7 Summary of Literature Review

To sum up, Chapter 2 covered the theoretical background of the topic, with a simple literature search and review, using studies that are general, as well as a few studies that are oriented to Saudi female students as found in all the selected sources discussed in this chapter.

Thus, this literature review introduced the KASP scholarship and the significant increase in the number of Saudi Arabian international students choosing to pursue their academic careers outside their native country. It discussed the challenges of studying abroad in general, and then highlighted Saudi students' challenges when studying in Arab countries. Moreover, this study defined the particular demands of studying abroad in English-speaking countries, and the difficulties facing female Saudi students when studying in countries where mixed-gender environments are the norm. Finally, it represented the factors that contribute to those challenges and some proposed strategies to overcome those challenges.

Clearly, not all the studies in Chapter 2 matched the selection/inclusion criteria of this systematic review (e.g., Alhazmi & Nyland, 2013; Dorres & Scheuermann, 2007, Ward & Szabo, 2019; Yakunina et al., 2013), because of their appearance in the search engine, where it was found that they covered background on the same topic. However, all the SLR (Systematic Literature Review) studies were chosen according to the selection criteria. In addition, some studies from the SLR are mentioned in Chapter 2, because they covered the background of the topic and also appeared in the search results of the systematic literature review research process.

In addition, it should be noted that most of the studies reviewed above are geographically specified, such as in Australia, the U.S.A, and Canada, but this study aims to provide a more comprehensive

overview of ESL in a wider variety of foreign countries, with more wide-ranging recommendations for overseas students. Furthermore, the nationalities and identities of researchers in previous studies have included Arabs and members of other cultures and nationalities, both males and females, whereas the author of this study is an Arab female with Saudi nationality, who can offer a deeper understanding and awareness of the daily reality experienced by Saudi female scholars.

It is important to understand how the process of reviewing the chosen examples of literature on this topic, and the subsequent SLR and inclusion criteria, has been carried out. Therefore, Chapter 3 will discuss in more detail the SLR methodology and inclusion criteria and how they have been applied to this study.

CHAPTER 3: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the methodology for this research study. It outlines a systematic literature review (SLR) that discusses pre-selected qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies using a descriptive-analytical methodological approach and addresses the main research question combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches.

Literature reviews create the foundation for the response to academic questions, for they can summarise previous studies, test hypotheses and theories, and critically appraise the work done. Consequently, and due to the significance of the literature knowledge, they should follow a rigorous study design and a certain level of quality as they will represent similar literature which has previously been published (Okoli & Schabram, 2010). Systematic literature reviews can improve such reviews' quality, reliability, validity, and replicability (Keele, 2007).

This study will rely on the review of the previous seminal studies to define the challenges that are faced by Saudi female students while studying ESL abroad, by adopting the systematic literature review method used by Xiao and Watson (2019).

3.2 Research Approach

Qualitative research is distinguished by its methodologies, which provide, for example, the interpretation of themes or words rather than numbers as data for analysis, and by its research goals, which relate to understanding some aspect of social life (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015). Qualitative methods aim to understand the experiences and attitudes of the population of interest. These methods also aim to answer questions about the ‘what’, ‘how’, or ‘why’ of a phenomenon rather than ‘how many’ or ‘how much’, which are answered by quantitative methods. If the goal is to comprehend how a community or individuals within it perceive a particular issue, then qualitative methods are often the most appropriate ways to conduct the study (Baruch, 1999).

Mixed method designs however, can offer practical advantages in exploring complex research issues. For example, while qualitative data provide an in-depth understanding of survey responses, statistical analysis can provide a detailed evaluation of response trends (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2015).

In the case of systematic literature reviews, for example, they are usually conducted by researchers for various reasons, such as to describe the available knowledge on a current topic, identify effective implications and techniques, summarise existing evidence, identify gaps in the current literature, and provide a framework to position research endeavours and inform policy and decision making. Therefore, this type of combined methodological approach is suitable for this research study, since the literature contains quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods, and makes it possible to synthesise and summarise the findings and introduce purposeful recommendations.

3.3 Research Design

The current study employs a systematic literature review technique to research the challenges and difficulties Saudi females studying ESL abroad encounter, the variables contributing to these difficulties, and how they can overcome them. Although there have been a variety of studies that have discussed this matter, at the time of this study’s completion, there have been no published

systematic literature reviews that have discussed these challenges and how to overcome them. Therefore, this research method addresses the research questions (see Section 1.3 in Chapter 1 above) by choosing the best available related evidence from the literature, thus allowing the researcher to synthesise the findings of the selected studies and present them in a summarised form that can be a guide for future Saudi female international students. Of course, female students from similar backgrounds may also benefit from this exploration, as it will define the challenges they might face when they study abroad and give recommendations on how to overcome these difficulties, and therefore have the best international student experiences.

For these reasons, the study has been carried out to answer the following questions:

- What challenges do Saudi females face while studying ESL abroad in a mixed-gender environment?
- What other factors contribute to the challenges faced by Saudi females while learning English in a foreign country?
- How can Saudi females be helped to tackle or overcome these challenges?

When reviewing the literature, it was noticed that some studies were more oriented towards the difficulties, while other studies were focused more on the solutions and recommendations. Therefore, on one hand, the current study has adopted a systematic literature review technique to summarise and synthesise the challenges and difficulties of Saudi females studying abroad, along with the variables contributing to these difficulties, and how they can avoid and overcome them. On the other hand, this will introduce a study that other researchers can refer to and will present a set of recommendations that can be utilised by policy and decision makers in order to identify and act on these challenges.

This study relies on the review of previous seminal studies to define the challenges that are faced by Saudi female students while studying ESL abroad. Therefore, the systematic literature review method as used by Xiao and Watson (2019) was adopted, which includes the following steps:

defining the inclusion criteria, identifying the literature, screening for inclusion, assessing the quality and eligibility, and iterating the results. Although the techniques for conducting various types of literature reviews vary, they may be completed using the following eight steps: (1) formulating the problem; (2) designing and testing the review methodology; (3) conducting a literature search; (4) screening for inclusion; (5) assessing quality; (6) extracting data; (7) analysing and synthesising data; (8) reporting the findings (see Figure 1.1 above).

3.4 Method and Instrumentation

3.4.1 Search Strategy

After defining the research questions, appropriate keywords for the search strategy were chosen. Keele (2007) has recommended that keywords used for the search strategy should be derived from the research question(s). Researchers can divide the research questions into concept domains. For example, the main research question is: “What challenges do Saudi females face while studying ESL abroad in a mixed-gender environment?” Then, the domains are “challenges”, “Saudi females”, “ESL”, “abroad”, and “mixed-gender environment”.

Google Scholar was used in database searching, for it is an open-access database that archives journal articles and *grey literature*, such as conference proceedings, theses, and reports (Xiao & Watson, 2019), which made it particularly suitable for this research study as it provides a range of sources.

It was also possible to extend the literature search by using synonyms, abbreviations, alternative spellings, and related terms to the selected keywords (Korhonen et al., 2013; Rowley & Slack, 2004). Therefore, in addition to these keywords, a set of synonyms as well as spelling variations were chosen to cover the most appropriate number of related studies.

In addition, many search engines allow the use of Boolean operators in the search query. Boolean operators are *AND* and *OR* (Fink, 2019). Usually, *AND* is used to join the main keyword terms and *OR* to include synonyms (Britten et al., 2002). This method was used to combine each main

keyword with its synonym using the Boolean operator *OR*, and then to join each term to the final query box using the Boolean operator *AND*.

Based on these methods, a systematic literature search on Google Scholar was performed. According to the research questions, a set of keywords was chosen in the advanced search. The keywords were ‘Saudi Female Students’, ‘Mixed-gender’, ‘Challenges’, and ‘ESL’.

Afterwards, the synonyms and Boolean operators were added to the search strategy to finalise the search query on the Google Scholar search bar as follows:

("Saudi female students" OR "Female Saudi") AND ("Abroad" OR "Mixed-Gender" OR "Segregated") AND ("Challenges" OR " Difficulties") AND ("ESL" OR "English")

3.4.2 Inclusion Criteria

According to the research questions and design, the studies that were included in the systematic literature review were:

- A study that contained female Saudi students only.
- A description of the challenges of studying outside Saudi Arabia in an English-language country.
- A discussion of the challenges in the ESL learning environment.
- Research literature published in English that included research papers, book chapters or dissertations.
- The date of publication was not previous to the year 2000.

Any research that did not fulfil the inclusion criteria was excluded. In addition, studies with a combined sample of both Saudi male and female students were excluded.

3.4.3 Literature Search and Screening

After reviewing the titles of the results of the Google Scholar literature search in order to define the relevant studies that should be included in the scope of my study, 72 items were selected that

were relevant to the research questions. However, upon further screening the abstracts of these articles, 46 articles did not match the inclusion criteria and were rejected, while 26 articles were taken to the next step in order to appraise their quality and review their full texts.

Upon reviewing these 26 full-text articles, 18 more were excluded because they did not match the inclusion criteria, because, although they concerned the challenges that face Saudi Arabian female students abroad, they were not specific to mixed-gender ESL classes.

The final eight articles chosen matched the inclusion criteria and were selected for data extraction.

The titles and authors' names of the included articles are listed in Table 3.1 in chronological order:

Table 1

Author(s)' Names, Titles, and Publication Year of the Selected Studies

Authors	Title	Year
Altamimi	Challenges experienced by Saudi female students transitioning through Canadian pre-academic ESL	2014
Alqefari	Difficulties of Saudi Arabian female students studying English abroad	2016
Alghamdi	The experience of Saudi female students attending mixed gender ESL courses in Melbourne, Australia	2017
Alzouwain & Lincoln	Positioning of ESL Saudi women and challenges they face while learning English in the United States	2018
Song	“She needs to be shy!”: Gender, culture, and non-participation among Saudi Arabian female students	2019
Alsufyan	Norah in Ireland: The identity development of a Saudi woman during Study Abroad	2020
Song	Contesting and negotiating othering from within: a Saudi Arabian female student's gendered experiences in the US	2020
Alharbi	Female Saudi ESL learners' attitudes toward communication in mixed gender classes in the USA	2022

The included articles comprised reports on a variety of quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods studies, with a total of 130 Saudi female participants. There was one quantitative paper with 20

participants, five qualitative studies with 19 participants in total, and two mixed-methods studies with 91 participants between them.

The authors' names and details of their methods are listed in Table 3.2 below:

Table 2

Author(s) Names, Design Methods, and Number of Participants in each Selected Study

Authors	Method	Number of participants
Altamimi (2014)	Mixed	61
Alqefari (2016)	Mixed	30
Alghamdi (2017)	Qualitative	2
Alzouwain & Lincoln (2018)	Qualitative	5
Song (2019)	Qualitative	10
Alsufyan (2020)	Qualitative	1
Song (2020)	Qualitative	1
Alharbi (2022)	Quantitative	20

3.5 Positionality

The researcher/author of this study is a female Saudi international student and a mother of three children who chose to seek her future at Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand. As soon as I started ESL classes, I faced challenges with blending into the new environment and interacting with other students as a result of my Saudi Arabian background. However, later on in class, as I was taught by teachers that were aware of my Arab or Muslim background, the teachers started to spread awareness about my culture, which helped me blend in and be accepted by other students although I was the only student that wore a hijab in my class.

Furthermore, as I integrated more into the class, I felt I performed better in using my English-language skills. Such experiences inspired me to research the challenges that I and my fellow Saudi female international students faced, so that I could benefit from their experience and also put forward my recommendations and solutions in a manner that could benefit future students from my homeland.

3.6 Summary of Methodology

This chapter has discussed the methods used in this study, the steps needed to perform a systematic literature review, the search strategy, the literature screening process, and the researcher's own positionality. The following chapter will discuss the findings of the review.

CHAPTER 4: Findings and Discussion

4.1 Introduction

This chapter contains the findings from the reviewed articles after finalising the screening process of the systematic literature review and synthesising the findings that include both challenges and recommendations. The findings of the systematic review included different perspectives. Some studies discussed social structures and cultural norms for Saudi women in Saudi Arabia. Other studies were more focused on the challenging experiences facing Saudi females while studying abroad in a mixed-gender environment, whereas others focused on how to overcome these difficulties in the form of recommendations. Some recommendations are for the institutions that will welcome international ESL students in order to give them the best experience possible, and the others are suggestions for Saudi females who are planning to study abroad.

4.2 Main Findings of SLR

4.2.1 Social Structures and Cultural Norms for Saudi Women in Saudi Arabia

In order to understand many of the issues that are mentioned in this study, it is necessary to understand the nature of the life and societal culture of Saudi women in Saudi Arabia.

According to Alghamdi, (2017), in Saudi culture, the father is the focus of the family, and he is responsible for protecting it, making its important decisions, as well as its material needs. Therefore, it is easy for men to leave the house, interact with society, and mingle with others and thus acquire a higher level of education. If they obtain high academic grades, it means greater social status for them and a higher source of income for them and their families. As for women, since they are not required to support the family or influence its decisions, the opportunities for them to leave the home and interact with society are limited, as is the strong desire or prospect of obtaining higher levels of education. This is because their primary role is in the home and is linked to raising children and taking care of the household.

Recently, the position of Saudi females has begun to gradually change. This includes an increasing empowerment of Saudi women, who now have more freedom to acquire an education, equal self-employment opportunities, as well as demonstrating more self-confidence. Nowadays, many Saudi women are joining the workforce, selecting new professions which were previously unexplored, and in different organisational frameworks, they are proving to be equally competent to males even in higher ranks. Within this context, Saudi Arabia was labelled as one of the economies with the most progress towards gender equality since 2017 in the World Bank's Women, Business and The Law 2020 report. This report attributed the advancement to increases in freedom of movement and economic opportunities for women as a result of the reforms described above (Rizvi & Hussain, 2021).

4.2.2 Challenges Facing Saudi Females while Studying Abroad in a Mixed-Gender Environment

According to the data from the findings, three major themes emerged: psychological factors, sociocultural factors, and linguistic factors.

Regarding psychological factors, Altamimi and French (2018), using a mixed methods approach through questionnaires and interviews, surveyed 61 Saudi female student participants in Halifax, NS, Canada. The follow-up interviews were conducted with four students, two teachers, and two support staff (receptionists). Their findings showed that these Saudi female students faced psychological factors such as lack of motivation, lack of confidence, second language anxiety, shyness and introversion, embarrassment, fear of making mistakes or being misunderstood, and the fear of judgment by others.

Regarding sociocultural and linguistic factors, the impact of Saudi female students' native culture is so strong, that it hinders their communication in an environment where male classmates and teachers are present and may cause them to remain silent in the classroom. A very interesting point noticed in the Altamimi and French (2018) survey was that three of the interviewed students were

all from Onaizah (a neighbouring town of Buraidah). Buraidah is the capital city of the Qassim province and is under greater influence of cultural and religious restrictions set by the *Mutawa* (the religious Islamic Scholars). On the other hand, Onaizah is inhabited by people who are more exposed to interactions with the outside world. The participants of this study from Onaizah all showed less anxiety than the participants from Buraidah when studying abroad with male students (Elsayed, 2023). However, according to Alqefari (2016), anxiety as a result of studying with male classmates and being taught by male teachers was the greatest factor for her participants, affecting active class participation and creating more difficulties in learning English effectively.

In addition, as reported by Altamimi and French (2018), Saudi women are not expected to interact outside the home, or with males who are not within their extended family. Therefore, even if they are pursuing an English education overseas, Saudi women socialize only with Saudi women, which limits their opportunity to practise speaking the language with either more experienced students or native English speakers. In addition, other sociocultural factors also impose limits on Saudi female students in ESL classrooms, for example, their need to have a male guardian (*mahram*), and the sudden shift to a mixed-gender learning environment and male teachers (Altamimi, 2014). The marital status of Saudi female students was also found to be a challenging factor, as married participants seemed more inhibited and concerned about the attendance in their classes of males, especially Saudi males, than the single participants, because the married female students had a greater fear of being either judged or labelled negatively by these Saudi males (Alghamdi, 2017). Being married adds even more challenges for Saudi females, as the responsibility for childcare, housekeeping, and spousal care results in an inevitable lack of adequate time for study (Alzouwain & Lincoln, 2018).

Moreover, while Saudi females face such unique challenges as those discussed above, they still have to face the other difficulties that are common for foreigners studying abroad, such as financial demands, time management, and personal issues, such as homesickness, as well as possible concerns about political and social instability in their home countries (Alzouwain & Lincoln, 2018).

When it comes to foreigners studying foreign languages abroad, the new language itself always forms a challenge. Linguistic factors also constitute a challenge for Saudi female students in the areas of grammatical understanding, vocabulary knowledge, and correct pronunciation (Elsayed, 2023). Moreover, linguistic factors could have an influence on each other and impede communication. For example, vocabulary knowledge plays a critical role in the second language listening comprehension process.

In a mixed-methods research study conducted by Alghamdi (2017), a quantitative questionnaire consisting of 38 items in five sections found that the female Saudi student participants referred to their English language proficiency as the main obstacle to their successful progress; hence, participants with a low level of communicative competence reported difficulties in their adaptation, and participants with higher skills noted smoother and faster adaptation to the new society.

Alghamdi (2017) also stated that beginner Saudi ESL learners preferred to learn in single-gender classes due to cultural norms. This might affect their rate of language acquisition (Alharbi, 2022). Participants in Alghamdi's (2017) study reported experiencing challenges because of their limited language skills, stating that English proficiency is a significant barrier for them, as they feared being either misunderstood or misinterpreted.

4.2.3 Strategies and Ways to Overcome the Challenges

There are two significant strategies discovered in the findings which can overcome the challenges that Saudi female students face (see Section 2.6): one of them is for ESL instructors and related institutes, and the second is for future Saudi female students planning to study abroad.

Strategies for ESL Instructors and Related Institutes. ESL educators and administrators should acknowledge the potential protective functions of the *mahram* (male guardian) and the tendency of female Saudi students to associate with their own culture. They could accept the need for the male guardian to accompany the female, but also have them encourage the women to speak on their own behalf, as this will minimize the amount of culture shock (Altamimi & French, 2018). This can be achieved through ESL instructors keeping male guardians informed about the need for their wards to adapt to various cultures by accompanying them, for example, to attend international conferences and presentations to make them more familiar with English speaking situations. Furthermore, although the diversity of backgrounds in an ESL classroom can create challenges, ESL teachers should try to incorporate aspects of these different cultures, particularly their more sensitive aspects. In this way, ESL teachers can do more to tailor their teaching strategies to all students in their classrooms and ensure there is a comfortable learning atmosphere. Therefore, it is highly recommended that ESL colleges or institutes hold short workshops for ESL teachers to identify challenges that Saudi students may face in relation to their gender. For example, university staff and international student services at the institutions could organise a cultural orientation programme that provides information about critical aspects of different cultures (Elyas & Al Grigri, 2014). International student services could also provide such students with a mentor/counsellor for academic and social issues (Alghamdi, 2017). This could enhance Saudi women's confidence in their ability to help themselves without the need for anyone else or their male guardian.

In addition, ESL schools (and universities) can help Saudi female students by finding a partner or chat group for all Saudi women, including non-Arab women. This will benefit all individuals. It will also encourage the exchange of knowledge and cultural values (Altamimi & French, 2018).

Strategies for Current and Future Female Saudi Arabian Students. Female Saudi students should make an effort to advance their English before travelling to the host country and beginning their academic career. By increasing awareness of and familiarity with the fundamental facets of the host country's culture, it is possible to achieve both effective cooperation and adaptation (Alghamdi, 2017). Therefore, it is recommended that the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education and the King Abdullah Scholarship Program organise seminars for Saudi women before they leave the country. As students become more familiar with English and Western cultures, they may also become more comfortable attending mixed gender courses.

4.3 Answering the Research Questions

This study has been carried out to answer three questions: What challenges do Saudi females face while studying abroad in a mixed-gender environment? What other factors contribute to the challenges faced by Saudi females while learning in a foreign country? How can Saudi females be helped to tackle or overcome these challenges?

To build an answer to these research questions, it was necessary to delve deeply into a wide variety of studies and extract findings and experiences from them, in addition to bringing in the relevant observations and analysing them in the appropriate framework. Accordingly, in response to the first question, the findings showed that the main challenges facing Saudi females in a mixed-sex environment were lack of confidence, second language anxiety, shyness and introversion, embarrassment, fear of making mistakes or being misunderstood, and the fear of judgment by others. Other challenges that have been uncovered are those related to teachers and the educational institution system that hosts Saudi females wishing to pursue an ESL education. Furthermore, in response to the second question, the factors which contributed to the difficulties faced by Saudi females while learning in a foreign country were cultural differences, language barriers, gender restrictions, religious difference and diversity, and other factors such as the Islamic dress code. In a strange country, Saudi female students bear the burden of studying ESL in addition to family affairs, and their individual difficulties. All of these negative factors can frustrate the resolve of

Saudi females to pursue their education outside their country, but the personality of an ambitious individual is characterised by the investigation of solutions and overcoming obstacles. Therefore, in response to the third question, there were some strategies outlined for Saudi females that would help them to tackle or overcome these challenges such as pre-study preparation, culture normalisation for their instructors and classmates, and their selection of a mixed-culture educational environment.

CHAPTER 5: Recommendations

5.1 Introduction

This chapter suggests ways to overcome the challenges outlined above which face Saudi females when studying abroad in a mixed-gender environment. Moreover, the participants in the selected systematic literature review have provided ESL instructors, higher education institutions (e.g., universities), and future Saudi students with some recommendations to consider. These recommendations are designed to create a more receptive environment for Saudi female students to study ESL and to prepare them to have a better experience. Their challenges may also be faced by other female students in a similar environment. In addition, the researcher offers her own critical suggestions.

5.2 Recommendations of SLR Participants to Overcome the Challenges

5.2.1 For ESL Instructors and Higher Education Institutions

Participants in the studies included in the systematic literature review have suggested higher education institutions (universities) and their instructors to take the following into account in order to address the difficulties Saudi women face when studying abroad in a mixed-gender environment:

- Encourage female Saudi students to practise English and participate in cultural events (Alzouwain & Lincoln, 2018).
- Understand better international students' cultural and social needs, especially those of Arab women (Aldhahri, 2019).
- Encourage female students to participate more in classrooms, by guiding them into extra reading and assignments or listening to academic experts, such as those who discuss Western learning and teaching environments and their related interactive classroom scenarios (Alghamdi, 2017).
- Encourage female students to overcome their fears and participate more in classroom discussions (Alzouwain & Lincoln, 2018).

- Provide better support for foreign universities to enhance the recruitment process for new students, especially those with different cultures, in order to lessen the culture shock experienced by many Saudi first year students (Alqefari, 2016).

5.2.2 For Future Saudi Students Planning to Study Abroad

Participants in the selected systematic literature review have provided some recommendations for general international students and Saudi women, as well as other women students who speak Arabic. They are mainly aimed at improving their English proficiency in several ways, including:

- Practising reading and listening, by reading English newspapers, books, and stories, and watching English TV shows, and listening to the news
- Enrolling in an English course before studying abroad
- Setting priorities and working on time management
- Practising speaking English with a native English speaker
- Working on completing assigned homework daily as scheduled
- Practising speaking English even if mistakes are made
- Finding English-speaking friends and conversation partners to practise English with regularly
- Building their self-confidence

5.3 Critical Recommendations of the Researcher to Overcome the Challenges

As knowing the problem is considered half the solution, identifying and defining the challenges constitutes an essential part of this study. This approach should be adopted to influence the course of events and identify the correct actions to move forward in the topic being studied.

Accordingly, a set of specific, measurable, achievable solutions has been proposed to overcome the considerable challenges that have been outlined in this study. Recommendations are specifically formulated for Saudi females and their acquisition of English. It is possible that women from other countries with conditions like those in this study could also benefit from these proposals.

Recommendations are ranked based on priority. Each recommendation is detailed with action, lead, resources, timescale, and critical success factors.

5.3.1 Create Pre-Travel Workshops for Saudi Females to Assure their Readiness to Live and Interact in a Foreign Environment

- **Action:** Design an integrated workshop and schedule regular sessions for delegates travelling abroad with Saudi females.
- **Lead:** The relevant department in a ministry, university, or school.
- **Resources:**
 - Multi-cultural content experiences that are documented and rotated in different institutes worldwide and on global platforms.
 - Previously conducted studies on the same topic.
- **Timescale:** Within six months of starting the implementation of the project.
- **Critical success factors:**
 - Numbers of females interested in going through these workshops.
 - Pre- and post-session measurements of females' understanding, comprehension, comfort, and adaptation to studying ESL abroad.
 - The implementation effect of these workshops on Saudi females' study abroad experience.

5.3.2 Start Training Sessions for ESL Teachers and Institutes' Administration and Teaching Staff

- **Action:** Design a course of training to be provided for ESL teachers and apply it as a condition to teach.
- **Lead:** Head and Boards of the ESL institutes that accept foreigners to study.
- **Resources:**
 - The already-existing training for teachers before being certified to teach.
 - The accountability of the institute in assigning only teachers ready for such positions and experiences.
- **Timescale:** International universities and ESL institutes' Boards and administrations should guide to do this training within six months of starting the implementation of the project.
- **Critical success factors:**
 - The cooperation and acceptance of the ESL teachers in the institute.
 - The reports of the progress of Saudi females in their ESL classes.

5.3.3 Create Awareness Campaigns on Social Differences and the Special Characteristics of Saudi Females

- **Action:** Raise awareness.
- **Lead:** The female students who are sent to study ESL in a foreign country.
- **Resources:**
 - Women empowerment social campaigns that happen globally and locally.
 - Access to local and international institutes such as King's University in Saudi Arabia, and ESL institutes abroad.
- **Timescale:** Within three months of starting the implementation of the project. Therefore, the awareness is worked on and raised before the training and workshops are conducted.
- **Critical success factors:**

- Engage public interest with the purpose of raising their awareness, through directing public interest and Saudi social media towards the importance of the empowerment of Saudi women and educating them in a mixed-gender environment.
- Questionnaires in females' schools and universities.

CHAPTER 6: Conclusion

This study, drawing upon SLR (Systematic Literature Review) methodology, aimed to provide more insights into the different challenges Saudi females face while studying ESL abroad in a mixed-gender environment, the reasons behind these challenges and obstacles, and finally how they can be overcome. The importance of this study stems from the fact that acquiring education abroad has become imperative for all peoples of the world, especially for the young. However, women still face obstacles in some regions of the world. Saudi Arabia is an example, and this is due to the characteristics of Saudi society, which separate males and females in all areas of life, especially in learning and teaching, thus, creating a clear challenge when mixing genders for study purposes. These challenges include lack of confidence, second language anxiety, shyness and introversion, embarrassment, fear of making mistakes or being misunderstood, and the fear of judgment by others. Furthermore, among the factors which contribute to the challenges faced by Saudi females while learning in a foreign country are cultural differences, language barriers, gender restrictions, religious difference and diversity, and other factors such as the Islamic dress code. However, some strategies are suggested to tackle or overcome these challenges, such as pre-study preparation of Saudi female students, culture normalisation, and the selection of special mixed-culture environments.

The main contribution of this study lies in the importance of both the target sample and the subject being studied, as it focuses on the impact of the highlighted challenges on the educational performance and English language proficiency of Saudi female students when studying ESL abroad. Furthermore, this study has shed light on the unique societal features in the Kingdom of

Saudi Arabia that limit the ability of Saudi female students when studying ESL in foreign countries. Perhaps the most important strength/contribution is that the research is related to females, because they play a significant role in platforms such as UNESCO that promote gender equality (www.unesco.org) and give women and girls of all countries chances for studying, travelling, employment, leadership, and finance (Rizvi & Hussain, 2021).

On the other hand, the findings of this study have some limitations. One of them includes the lack of many studies directly related to this topic, which prompted the researcher to review all related studies to get the necessary answers to the research questions. Furthermore, the systematic review methodology of this study may include risks of bias, such as selection bias of the reviewed articles, inadequate blinding that limits their quality (i.e., the assessor should be unaware of the study author's name, institution, sponsorship, journal, etc.) (Morissette et al., 2011), attrition bias, and selective outcome reporting, as well as inconsistency that includes statistical heterogeneity (i.e., genuine differences underlying the results of the studies (Higgins et al., 2003)). Another important consideration is publication bias. It is often preferable to publish studies which have demonstrated statistically significant results, even though studies with results that do not do so may still be relevant, and thus important to the findings of a systematic review. In addition, the selection of studies, choice of relevant outcomes, methods of analysis, interpretation of heterogeneity and generalisation, application of results, and proper search methods are also identified as the likely main limitations of the selected studies.

Despite these limitations, this study has some important implications for Saudi Arabia. While most other countries are attempting to improve their educational systems to meet the necessities and characteristics of an era that is characterized by globalization and mass communication, Saudi Arabia is also taking a big leap towards major transformation in all fields including education under the vision of 2030. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2020, p. 119) acknowledges that:

"Saudi Arabia has embarked upon an unprecedented reform agenda known as Vision 2030, which aims to create a dynamic, diverse and sustainable economy. To meet the demands of a 21st century, knowledge-based labour market, Saudi Arabia must develop a highly skilled population, which puts education at the centre of Vision 2030. "

Therefore, the Saudi Government incentives for attending overseas schools are further supported by the transition to higher-quality private education, with the National Centre for Privatization aiming to privatize some Saudi schools and increase private enrolment to 25% by 2030. The Saudi Government is taking steps to reduce public expenditure on education while concurrently increasing the role of the private sector. Learning outcomes in Saudi Arabia could be enhanced via core public-private partnerships in education, which include the construction and maintenance of new public schools by private partners and the transfer of operational and financial responsibility of some public schools to private companies. Furthermore, by 2030, the capital of Riyadh is looking to attract leading global companies, educators and schools (AlJuhani, 2021). One of the largest challenges has been to resolve the debate over whether to maintain or remove gender segregation in order to expand women's empowerment. In other words, whoever is best qualified will take the lead in any employment or educational project regardless of their gender.

However, the idea of having female students in a leadership position is novel to Saudi society as classrooms are still single gendered. Saudi female students' first experience with co-education is usually at an undergraduate level in medical majors or after winning a scholarship to study outside the borders of Saudi Arabia. Recent research has shown that there is immense pressure from reformers and intellectuals in Saudi Arabia who not only want to change the content of the curriculum and the way in which it is taught, but also to support and expand coeducation. It is believed that developing further the ESL methods used in higher education and supporting coeducation would improve the educational system and prepare both female and male graduates to compete with their global peers (AlJuhani, 2021).

However, up to now, there has not been any investigation that examines the correlation of language proficiency among Saudi ESL female students and the implementation of a coeducational system in Saudi universities. This coeducational experience could be expected to build their confidence to communicate and negotiate with their peers of opposite gender, and as a result, enhance their English language development and proficiency. This could be carried out through future studies in the Saudi Arabian context.

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