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THE PROBLEMS OF LEARNING ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE FOR THE ASSIR
REGION OF SAUDI ARABIAN ENGLISH STUDENTS: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The present paper explores the problems of English Language and Literature boys and girls, who are enrolled in English course in the University of Bisha (UB) as well as King Khalid University (KKU) of the Assir region of Saudi Arabia. The research emphasizes on the problems of acquiring English language and literature as a whole for the students of graduate level. The survey is administered in multiple colleges of Assir region of Saudi Arabia and the questionnaire is consisted of open and closed questions to have both quantitative and qualitative information of what each participant attributes to the problems they face in learning English language and literature. The participants of the study are consisted of 200 randomly selected students; both, girls and boys, of "English Language and Translation" in the first semester (2015–2016). The data are analyzed using PARETO charts which display the relative frequency of quality-related problems in process or operation. Although the findings show many problems that the students face in learning English language and literature but the major ones will be discussed in the paper. This study is a humble effort to bring out the major barriers and problems that Saudi students face while learning English; it proposes remedial measures for the said barriers and problems. In this study, the researchers have tried to focus on the basic problems and learning atmosphere prevalent in Saudi English classrooms.

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INTRODUCTION

English, nowadays, is not merely a language but has become a requisite means of leading a successful life. Apart from an official language of the world, when it comes to job search or make career in any sector, English language appears to be the most indispensable requirement.

In this research we have focused on the problems of learning English language as well as literature for the Assir region of Saudi Arabia English students. We have also endeavored to find out the basic hindrance that the Saudi Arabia English students face not only in learning this language but also utilizing it in their everyday life.

For the research we have used PARETO principle for data analysis. It is a principle named after Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto, who, in 1906, found that 80% of consequences stem from 20% of the causes. It is also referred to as the "Pareto rule" or the "80/20 rule". With this theory we have strived to find out the basic causes for all the problems related to English language and literature that the English students both, boys and girls face in Saudi Arabia, especially the Assir region of Saudi Arabia. We will see further in this research that what are the consequences of late introduction of the language to the students? How lack of exposure in English language leads to the failure of learning the language and literature? Why the students have lack of imagination and the difficulty in understanding the literary language? Why English literature seems boring to English students? Why they lack reading and writing practice?

Objective of the Research

The purpose of this research is to find out the following problems and its remedies that the English students of the Assir region of Saudi Arabia face:

1. The problems in learning English language.
2. The problems in learning English literature.
3. To discover why they run lack of confidence related to English language.
4. To discover why they run lack of confidence related to English literature.
5. To find the reason why Arab English students don't possess a dream to become dramatist, novelist, poet or literary critic.
6. To find out the reason why they are scared of the English language and literature even after passing graduation.

Methodology

This research has been conducted in three different colleges of the two universities, viz, University of Bisha and the King Khalid University through a questionnaire offered to 200 students both, boys and girls, enrolled in different levels of English major. Data is collected quantitatively and qualitatively.

Findings of the Research: The finding is based on Pareto Principles of 80/20 rules.

Table 1.1 Reasons for the problems in learning English Language for boys and Girls

Causes	Symbols	Frequency	Weight	Cumulative Percentage
1- Lack of reading	A	1353	38	38
2- Lack of writing practice	B	1139	32	70
3- Late introduction of the language to the students	C	931	26	96
4- Lack of exposure in English language	D	132	3	99
5- Using outdated method (translation method) in learning language	E	39	1	100
		3594	100	100

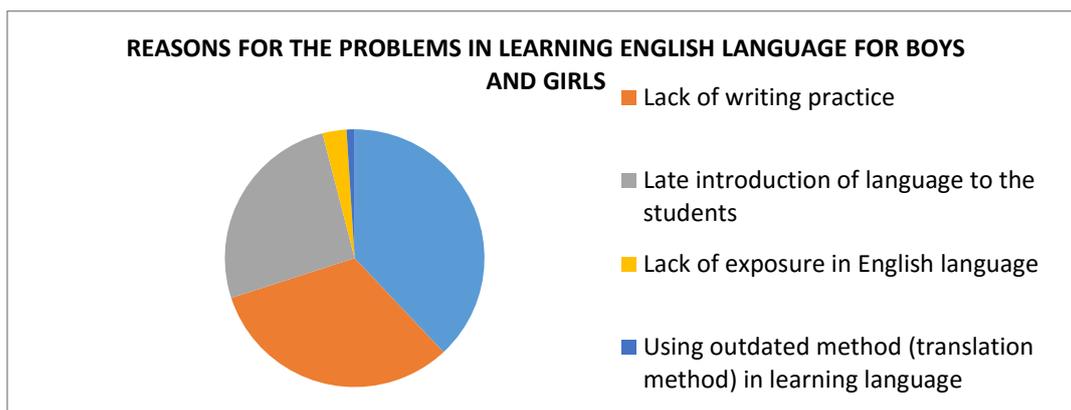
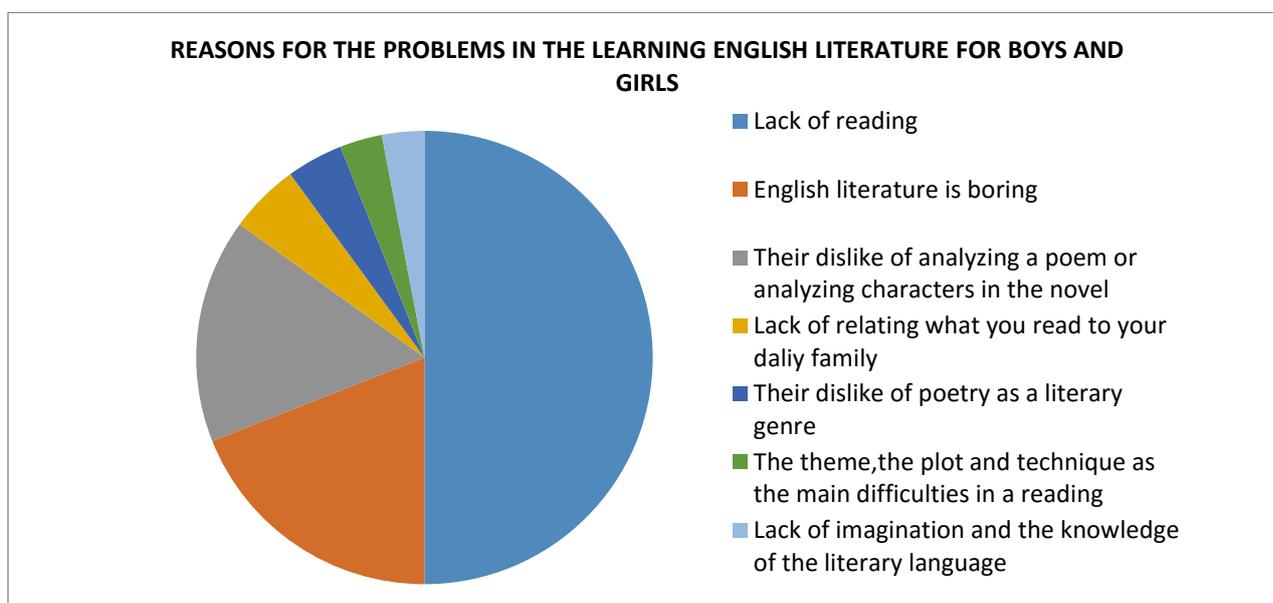


Table 2. Reasons for the problems in learning English Literature for boys and Girls

Table 2.2 Reasons for the problems in learning English Literature for boys and Girls

Causes	Symbols	Frequency	Weight	Cumulative Percentage
1- Lack of reading	A	244	50	50
2- English literature is boring	B	90	19	69
3- Their dislike of analyzing a poem or analyzing characters in the novel	C	77	16	85
4- Lack of relating what you read to your daily family.	D	22	5	90
5- Their dislike of poetry as a literary genre	E	20	4	94
6- the theme, the plot and technique as the main difficulties in reading a novel	F	16	3	97
7-Lack of imagination and the knowledge of the literary language.	G	16	3	100
		485	100	100



Literature Review

A number of studies have been conducted in which the researchers argue that many ESL students face difficulties in learning English language at various levels and with different skills (e.g. McCardle and Hoff, [15] Hoffman, [10]). Other examples are Abdul Haq (1982), Harrison, Prator and Tucker (1975), Abbad (1988) and Wahba (1998). But, we hardly come across with the researches that cite the problems that Arab students face in learning English literature. Al Shumaimeri (2003) opined that “Teachers have pointed out that students leave the secondary stage without the ability to carry out a short conversation”. This expression indicates that the students are not proficient in English language even after studying the subject for many years. Recently and with the spread of global English as an essential tool for communication, trade and worldwide exchange, more interest has been centered on the concerns, problems and needs of Arab learners studying English. The British Council seminar (Beirut, Lebanon, 2012) emphasized the need to study the specific linguistic and cultural requirements of learners in different regions in order to devise an appropriate curriculum that would cater for the specific needs of the learners. Collier [3], Klesmer [12] and Cummins [5] propose the interval of “at least 5 years of continued practice” to achieve a good level of appropriate academic proficiency in the second language. Academic proficiency is understood to cover writing skills, reading comprehension, knowledge of a range of vocabulary items including specific lexis and technical terms, and a developed

syntactic repertoire. Corder [4] argues that the range of writing skills required need to reflect agreement of content with context and the subject matter discussed. Halliday [8] proposes functional categorization of text components into the lexical field, comprising processes, participants and circumstance that relate to the subject matter. Ellis [6] argues that proficiency in reading comprehension is a prerequisite to writing competency.

Problems and Impediments that the English students of Assir region of Saudi Arabia have in Learning English Language: Arab learners face many problems in all the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing which lead the students' incomprehensible behavior. The students in the Assir region of Saudi Arabia learn English in their native country, where the native language is Arabic. The only way to learn English here is through formal instruction; that is, inside the classroom where the language teachers at school are native speakers of Arabic. English is not used in daily situation. Arabic is the language used everywhere. It is thus more difficult for the English students of this region to communicate in the target language in real life situations.

To shed light on the problems of Arab learners of English we have investigated lexical, syntactical, and phonological errors committed by the English students of the Assir region of Saudi Arabia. Our experience as teacher of English as a foreign language in the Bisha University of Saudi Arabia leads us to believe that the condition here is inauspicious because the children start learning English in grade four (primary class) which is very late. After that English language departments of university accept high school graduates without taking into consideration their proficiency level and whether or not they will be able to manage. Having insufficient knowledge of English language when they join university and opt English language and literature as their main subject then it appears like a monster to them. Because of this they commit mistakes in the basic things of the language. For example, they often do error in recognizing the difference between noun and noun phrase, verb and verb phrase, verb formation, tense, subject and verb agreement etc. We notice error in tense in five categories: tense sequence, tense substitutions, tense marker, deletion, and confusion of perfect tenses.

In an wide-scale study about the problems being faced by Arab students, Mukattash (1983) observed that these problems are categorized into two: First, most errors committed concerned with the gracious pronunciation, morphology, knowledge of the use of syntax, and spelling; Second, most Arab students have difficulty expressing themselves contentedly and competently either when faced with scholarly subjects or usual everyday issues. Most studies conducted by Mukattash (1983), Suleiman (1983), Zughoul (1983; 1987), and Ibrahim (1983) noted that Arab students' problems in learning English usually spring from the following reasons: a) school graduates have lack of information regarding the university or college they enrolled in; b) there is deficiency in the English language curricula offered by some schools and universities; c) dreadful teaching methodology; d) problems with proper language environments; and e) lack of personal impetus on the part of the students.

Since Arabic is from the Semitic language family, hence its grammar is very different from English which leads a large potential for errors of interference when Arab learners produce written or spoken English. They face problems in pronouncing consonants include the inability to produce the 'th' sounds in the word such as 'this' and 'thin', the swapping of /b/ and /p/ at the beginning of words, and the substitutions of /f/ for /v/. Consonant clusters such as in the words 'split', 'threw' or 'marks' also cause problems and often result in the speaker adding an extra vowel like, 'spilit', 'ithrew' or 'markes'.

Another important area of difficulty that the English students of Assir region of Saudi Arabia have is communication. They find it difficult to communicate freely in the target language. This happens due to the use of outdated methods of language teaching and learning environment, which is said to be unsuitable for learning a foreign language. This fact is exceptionally noticeable in the Assir region of Saudi Arabia because the formal language of communication is Arabic. In Saudi Arabia, since Saudis speak their native language at home and during their interaction with their friends, peers, and classmates, there is a bleak chance to learn English through day-to-day interaction. When the students here engage in authentic communicative situations, they often lack some of the vocabulary or language items they need to get their meaning across. As a result, they

cannot keep the interaction going for an extended period of time. Moreover, they feel obstructed expressing themselves comfortably and efficiently either when dealing with academic topics or common everyday topics. The students' major difficulty arises from the fact that they cannot use English language correctly and appropriately either in the classroom or outside it when they are required to do so. This means that the difficulty is related to the students' deficiencies in communicative competence and self-expression to achieve their communicative goals. This dissatisfaction with the performance of English students of Assir region of Saudi Arabia suggests a lack of fundamental standards in curriculum design, testing and oral communication skills, the development of productive skills, teaching/learning strategies at university level, etc. Apart from it, the English students here hardly get exposure to use their language skills outside the classrooms.

Activities which are conducted in schools colleges and universities of this region of the country are not language centered. It seems that students are taught English in Arabic. Although the students are very talented here, dexterous on learning as well as accepting challenges, but when it comes to English language they remain entangled in translating every word and expression from Arabic to English which deters them to be a good speaker as well as a good learner of this language.

The chart below clearly shows the ratio and the area of difficulty that students face in learning English language.

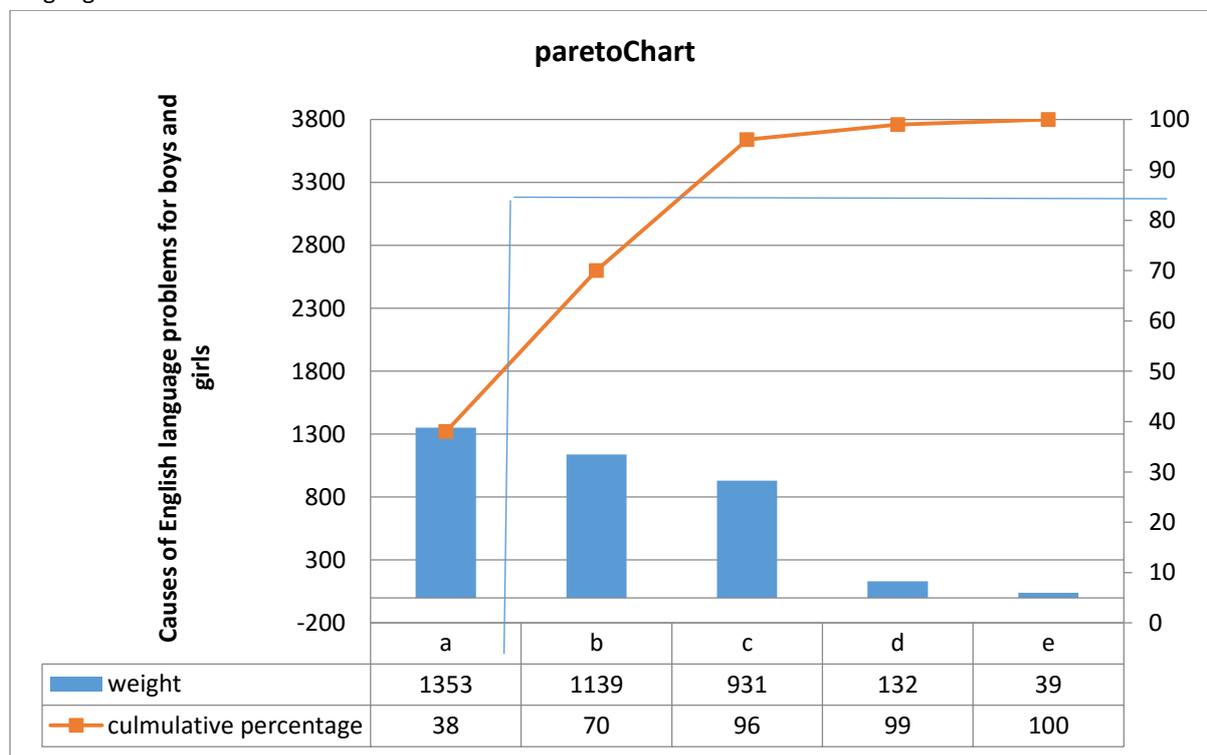


Fig. 2.1 Ratio of difficulty in learning English Language for boys and Girls

Solution of the Problems: In the Assir region of Saudi Arabia about one third of the bachelor degree courses are taught in Arabic in the faculty of Sciences, Arts and Education. These courses include Islamic Studies, Arabic, Social Studies, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Computer Science and Education. The condition would be better and helpful if such courses were taught in English rather than in Arabic. It is even more advisable to use English in teaching all the courses at high school as well as the university level. We are therefore, of the opinion that all university courses except Arabic language courses should be taught in English in order to improve the students' linguistic ability and communicative competence.

As we have perceived doing this research that the most noticeable problems which impede the progress of the English students of Assir region of Saudi Arabia are inadequate mastery of the four language skills, namely, listening, speaking, reading and writing. Thus in order to ameliorate and overcome these problems English language departments should offer solid language training. For language learners to use the

language more successfully, they should be involved in real life situation. But unfortunately, in the Assir region of Saudi Arabia English is used only as an academic subject, when it is taught in a school or at the university. As we know that like swimming and cycling, English or any other language cannot be acquired without practice. Regrettably, English language department graduates do not have enough practice in English; they use Arabic most of the time even after becoming English language teachers. They only use English when they encounter situations where they are obliged to use English as a medium of communication and, to tell the truth, this scarcely ever happens. As a result of this, we notice that, they don't even know the names of their subjects in English. For example, they call the subject "Translation" as "Tarjumah (ترجمة)", or "English Phonology" as "Englizia Al Sotiat (الإنجليزية الصوتيات)" or "Grammar" as "Qawa'ad (قواعد)" and so on. It clearly shows that the practice of English language is almost zero over here. We therefore, come to the conclusion that practice is very important for mastering any language. Thus, apart from academic institution students should be made practice English language in their everyday life and occurrences. They should be provided with reading materials based on general knowledge or interesting events. They should be involved in some word games in order to improve vocabulary skills. They should often be asked to write their opinion on any current topics. The teachers must use English language only in order to communicate with them.

Motivation also plays an important part in improving and developing the learners' language ability. They should be motivated to learn English instrumentally, that is, with the awareness of the utility of knowing English. Although there are some students who are cognizant of the importance of learning English language and aspiring to become a member of the English speech community but, unfortunately, they are in a minority here. There are many English majors who do not desire to be part of an English speaking community but they join the English language department just because it will be easier for them to get a job with a B.A in English than any other specialization. The purpose of education should be goal oriented. Students here must be impelled to learn English language in order to achieve a certain goal in life. When there is aspiration to achieve something in life then the mindset automatically becomes competitive and as soon as the students become competitive they put their all effort to accomplish their goals. Thus it is the responsibility of the teachers of schools, colleges and universities of the Assir region of Saudi Arabia to provide English atmosphere to the students in order to make them qualified for the language. Besides teaching and explaining the subjects in English, teachers must interact with them in English language. They must make their endeavor not only to teach the students in order to pass academic exams but to make them eligible to conquer the world.

Problems and Impediments that the English students of Assir region of Saudi Arabia have in Learning English Literature: Literature is a canon which consists of those works in language by which a community defines itself through the course of its history. The world literature reminds us stories, epics, sacred scriptures and classical works of the ancient and modern times. Basically literature is defined as the collection of written work of language through different periods and different cultures by authors and scholars. It teaches us how to live. It makes readers visit places, experience events, meet people, listen to them, feel their joys and sufferings. Literature mirrors the society and its mannerisms. English literature tells us about the history of the English speaking world. Because of Charles Dickens you can experience the Hard Times of the Victorian England without going through a detailed historical study. The fact-based education system, the fractured human relationships, the smoky polluted towns, the ill-effects of Industrial Revolution, the misery of laborers, the mercenary instincts of men and the flawed legal system of the land....this single book will give us an entire picture of the Victorian English Society. Wordsworth's poetry makes us feel his aesthetic pleasure on the sight of Daffodils and the tranquility of the song sung by a Solitary Reaper. Similarly, Eliot makes you pity the spiritual barrenness of the world that has turned into Wasteland. Wilfred Owen forces you to think about the Insensibility of the state and people who glorify wars. Literature is a storehouse of all knowledge and wisdom. But, unfortunately, the English students of the Assir region of Saudi Arabia study literature only as a subject to pass in exam; not as a medium to connect themselves with larger truth and ideas of the society.

According to the questionnaire done for the Assir region of Saudi Arabia students of the English departments in the Community College for boys of King Khalid University, Community College for boys of the University of Bisha and the College of Sciences and Arts for Girls of Bisha University we find that there are seven common problems as Pareto Analysis shows in learning literature, that: 1) There is lack of reading, 2) English literature seems boring to students, 3) Saudi Students dislike analyzing a poem or character in a novel, 4) They feel incompetent to find the connection between literature and life, 5) They dislike poetry as a literary genre, 6) The theme, the plot and techniques appear to be the difficult part in reading a novel, 7) There is lack of imagination and the knowledge of the literary language.

On the basis of our research and experience we believe that these problems can be discussed through two headlines: the educational environment and the genre itself.

The educational environment in Assir region is different from the other regions in Saudi Arabia. As mentioned above, in Saudi Arabia English language is introduced very late in school therefore English literature seems alien for the newcomers to the English department of the universities. Apart from it there are no private or international schools which have focus on developing interest in the English language and literature. Consequently, reading and listening to short stories or picturing a character in a literary work of art seems out of question for the English students. Moreover the Saudi students' families play a negative role in the educational environment. Because of being unaware of the importance of English literature, their main aim confines only towards paying attention to develop the four skills of the English language, namely, speaking, listening, writing and reading of their children. The families don't encourage the students to join English literary clubs or forums online. As a result, students run lack of interest and motivation in reading European literature in their spare time. According to parents' understanding it seems as if there is a relation between employment and the field of study. Here in Assir region, chances for joining jobs in the field of the English language are better than in the field of literary studies. Consequently, for the students of Saudi Arabia paying attention to literature seems futile and the dream of becoming a novelist, a dramatist, a critic of any work of art or a poet seems impractical.

Concerning the literary genre the main problem that Saudi students face is their view that English literature is a boring subject. According to our experience as lecturers in a college of Saudi Arabia there are many factors for such a feeling. First of all, they are not taught the history of English literature because of which they remain totally unaware of the social, political and cultural scenarios of different eras. Second, the length of the literary text like novel and drama make the students impatient and lead them to lose their focus. Third, in their curriculum they are prescribed to study novels and dramas of only one era, that is, pre-modern or modern era because of which even being English major students they don't know much about Geoffrey Chaucer, Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, John Dryden, Ben Johnson etc. Even after passing graduation, the literary terms like Metaphysical poets/conceit and stream of consciousness remains unfamiliar. Fourth, they are never given options to choose the text they want to study. Fifth, Due to the lack of familiarity with the cultural and social context of the literary text students remain deprived of participation and discussion. Sixth, due to the deficit knowledge of the writing styles like similes and metaphors and the extensive use of symbolism, poetry appears strenuous for students. Seventh, when they come across with some non-English vocabulary they feel themselves in a helpless situation. It becomes arduous for them to deal with strange borrowed words that cause them to give up. The last but not the least, syllabus in Saudi Arabia, apart from not including authors of different era, also doesn't include Muslim or Arab authors so that they may have interest and inclination towards literature. They totally depend on the summary of teachers and the electronic materials without even pondering to have self-study.

The chart below clearly shows the ratio and the area of difficulty that students face in learning English language.

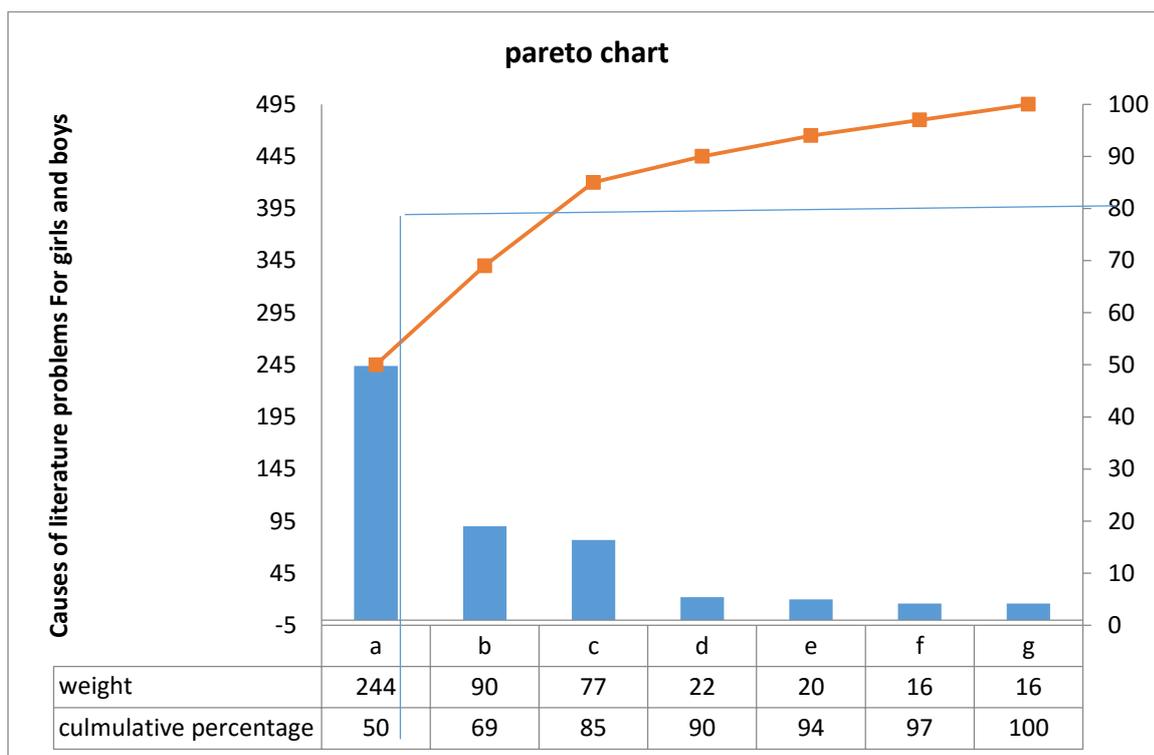


Fig. 2.2 Ratio of difficulty in learning English Literature for boys and Girls

Solution of the Problems: To solve these problems first of all we should try to inculcate the students the importance of learning literature in our daily life. English students should be made aware of the matter of fact that life and literature are not two separate or different things. A creative literature grows out of the realities of life and that life without a creative and constructive literature, has no inner significance. After the needs of daily life are satisfied, human being follows the lead of curiosity and explores the mysteries of life. The passion for knowledge, the desire to understand life and to make himself at home in the universe has perennial spring in human nature. By the side of the acquisitive instinct there exists the inquisitive instinct. As science is the record of some of the discoveries made in the course of the exploration; philosophy and literature record the expression of the inner self of man and his message to the universe. Teachers should try to make the English students understand those messages behind every literary work. All discoveries are expressions of man's intellectual pleasure and are covered by that inconclusive definition –

‘Literature is the comprehensive essence of the intellectual life of a nation’ – says Schiller.

To solve students' problems of English literature, according to our experience and research, we can use more visual aids such as LCDs, videos, TV, and films in teaching English literature. Using visual materials creates an atmosphere for students to become more engaged in the process of learning and appreciating English literature. Another recommendation is to focus on the importance of literature in daily life and its rule in progressing nations. Moreover it will be highly effective for English literature instructors if they include the teaching of culture when they are teaching literature. They should focus on cultural similarities and the differences to eradicate the gap between Arab and English cultures. Consequently, students become familiar with the social and cultural context of the text that he/ she studies. Furthermore, it is suggested to teach and add many literary works by local researchers and authors, such as Arab authors. Moreover, it would be highly positive for English literature students to engage in discussion by using their skills in paraphrasing, comparing and summarizing in order to develop fluency and overcome their negative feelings towards English literature. Besides, their participation will make them optimistic, more confident and have more self-esteem. Other than this if teaching is done with fun then learning would be more effortless and easy for students. For that, some activities should be conducted in which students are encouraged to participate in presenting any episodes of

the text as a skit or they should be given chance for self-expression by performing any act or the character of the novel or drama.

Literature deals with life but it is not an imitation of life, a mere copy of the real world. Man's entire life, including its joys and sorrows, miseries and comforts, tragedies and comedies, is reflected through literature. A nation that has no literature of its own, as a matter of fact, has no foundation – it may have a long history. In the modern age when man has become almost a prisoner of Science and has been reduced to a machine, it is the love of literature that makes his life once more beautiful and healthy. He can once again claim a higher and richer life which is inspired by a sublime ideal. A life, which is divorced from literature, is a mechanical life and not an ideal one. We, as teachers, should strive to rouse that love of literature in the heart of students. It's therefore, recommended that the ministry of education of Saudi Arabia adds some literary texts such as, short stories in the curriculum of the preparatory and secondary stages of school as a way of preparing Saudi students and developing their abilities on reading and analyzing a work of art. Besides, establishing English literary clubs in Assir schools and colleges will be a good chance for discovering the talented Saudi students who can be great famous novelists, dramatists or critics in the future.

Conclusion of the Research

Teaching of English is a crucial matter in Saudi Arabia. Being the medium of instruction, and an important tool of communication, English seems to be very important in a developing country like Saudi Arabia. There are many challenges that the teachers and the learners face in learning of English language and literature here. There are many factors that contribute to such learning challenges. In this case, the role of teachers as well as management is very essential. Teacher factor is always considered as very important as he/she is the one who is considered as the instrument of change. The issues which are directly related to pedagogy are more consequential than any other factors. We believe that by the end of the course students should be able to write English passage that are grammatically correct, properly punctuated, and effectively organized, and to understand and communicate using a variety of notions and linguistic functions based on everyday situations. They should be enabled to read and communicate spontaneously, effectively and confidently about a broad range of topics. Teachers of English should always advise learners to think in English when they write or speak in order to prevent literal translation strategy. Despite this, Arabic learners of English still translate literally from Arabic into English. Zughol (1991:53) suggests that the only way to minimize the use of this strategy is by "correction and explanation". Learners must therefore be corrected when they make such errors. We would like to numerate other conclusions as follows:

1. **Introduce English language from the Early Stages:** As of now, teaching of English language in Saudi Arabia is done from only the fourth grade while in advanced countries, it is taught right from the pupil's entry into play-way/Montessori stage. Talking about Saudi Arabia, it should be taught from the first grade since, as per many research studies, and especially the Critical Age Hypothesis, it has become clear that the second language acquisition works better in the earlier stages of life along with learning of the first language. A child acquires language as a natural instinct to learn.
2. **Introduce English literature from the secondary school:** English literature should be introduced to the students in school only so that when they join university with English major they are acquaintance with the literary work of art.
3. **Ensure and concentrate on quality not quantity:** Curriculum is a big problem that we face in our English teaching class rooms. The curricula are too fat and wide for teachers to cover and too much for students to handle. What we do now is concentrating on finishing the curricula in time and in whatever possible way regardless of any benefits we get from doing this. Simply, we need to reconsider our curricula putting in mind the quality that ensures achieving the goals not the quantity that is to be finished because the student will not be asked how many pages or units did he study but, instead, he will be judged on his/her use of the language and this is the only thing that matters; it is the qualitative aspect. But, unfortunately, what is being done now, as we witness, is the opposite.

4. **Attention should be paid to Evaluation Not Examination:**It may be understood very clearly that English is a language; it has to be dealt with in a way that suits its nature as a language; it may be taught like an art with its craft (or skill). The more natural we are in teaching English the more natural results shall we get. Studies have proven that the emotional state of the learner, either positive or negative, is reflected in the speed and quality of the learning process. Examinations are the unseen monsters most feared by the students. The only way they know of to be spared by it is by mugging up the syllabus just before the exam. While this may yield temporary result if any, the long term output can well be predicted to be failure. Instead of testing the students for skills that they may have learned especially for exams, they should be tested also for the practical skills, like, speaking and listening.
5. **English environment should be created in the class:**It has always been noticed that in Arab countries English language and literature are explained in Arabic which is the biggest hindrance in acquiring English language. The teachers must endeavor to create English environment by explaining the text in English. Besides, they should talk to the students also in English. We notice that apart from the class the students here use only Arabic language in order to communicate. Universities should make certain norms to use English language only in the English departments and if it is not followed then there should be some fine or small punishment just in order to make the students adhere to the English speaking practice outside the classrooms too. According to Mariani (1994):

"If we become more aware of certain language features, we stand a better chance of noticing these features in the language input we are exposed to. In other words, we may become more receptive to them, and can therefore hope to acquire them in an implicit way, and to gradually make them part of our active repertoire."(Mariani, 1994).

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