

# Investigating ELT Practices in Saudi Arabian Universities: Methods & Approaches in the Context

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**Abstract:** The current study is an effort to investigate English Language Teaching practices and the efficacy of ELT methods & approaches as well as their potential impediments faced by teachers in Saudi Arabia. The research design makes methodological triangulation using both qualitative (interview) and quantitative (questionnaire) methods. 50 teachers of Preparatory Year Program (PYP) / English Language Institute (ELI) of 5 universities of Saudi Arabia were selected to elicit their perceptions using a questionnaire consisting of 10 questions on Likert's 5 scale (1 Strongly Disagree, 2 Disagree, 3 Can't Say, 4 Agree, 5 Strongly Agree). Semi-structured interviews, containing 4 questions were also conducted with 20 teachers for a detailed understanding of the relevant research area. The data analysis reveals that there are various impediments infesting methods & approaches and thereby hampering the process of language learning and teaching. In the end, this study imperatively offers some remedial measures and suggestions to address the situation.

**Keywords:** EFL, ELI, ELT practices, Methods & Approaches, PYP

## 1. Introduction

Methods and approaches play a vital role in the successful implementation of any teaching program. The success of any academic program largely depends upon how teachers implement it in the real classroom while teaching. Teachers adopt different ways of teaching in the classroom as per the requirement of students, which can be categorized under different heads like methods, approaches and techniques. So while teaching EFL, a teacher uses a lot of methods, techniques and styles. The practice of using different techniques is called methodology. There are several methods of teaching that a teacher uses in his/ her classroom. Students of different levels need different methods. Beginners need different methods of teaching compared to students who have been learning EFL for a long time. The teaching of English has the largest number of different methodologies. Moreover, methodologies have also kept changing over the years. Some methods have become fashionable, whereas others have become outdated (Ansari 2012). It is obligatory for teachers to experiment innovative methods, approaches and techniques in the classroom so that students may be benefitted with innovative teaching methodology. Ansari (2012) has rightly stated:

There is a number of methodologies for teaching of English. These methodologies keep on changing with the passage of time. For someone, a method of teaching may be fashionable while for other the same may be out of date. So it is up to the teacher to choose a methodology of teaching according to the need of his students. The main aim of a teacher should be to develop the linguistic knowledge of his students. (p. 520)

The efficacy of ELT is highly dependent on ELT practices. Methods & Approaches of teaching is one of the core areas of ELT practices, which affect the outcome of language teaching. Methods & approaches in teaching the language are critically linked to the desired level of language proficiency. The present research endeavors to review and analyze the current ELT methods and approaches employed by teachers in various universities of Saudi Arabia. It also analyzes the perceptions of teachers vis-à-vis suitable and effective methods & approaches, and offer suggestions to enhance language proficiency in the universities of Saudi Arabia.

## 2. Research Objectives

This research intends to:

1. Review and analyze ELT methods and approaches as practiced in Saudi

Universities.

2. Analyze the effectiveness of ELT methods and techniques as perceived by teachers.

3. Offer suggestions to improve teaching methods & approaches to enhance language proficiency.

### 3. Literature Review

Methods and approaches play a very important part in delivering the contents of a particular course. Even the best materials cannot yield desired results in the absence of appropriate methods and approaches. There have been various methods and approaches being used in academic circles of Saudi Arabian universities. Unfortunately, ELT practices in the context of methods and approaches have not been very successful in Saudi Arabia. As a result, there has been a negative impact on the proficiency level of the students. A majority of students do not acquire the desired level of proficiency in any of the four skills, which is a matter of great concern.

Methods of teaching in Saudi Arabia need proper attention. Usually, innovative methods and techniques are not part of ELT classrooms in Saudi Arabia. Grammar translation method is widely used in the classrooms. It is one of the reasons that students are unable to speak even a few sentences in the target language. To improve the situation, L1 should be strictly discouraged even amongst the teaching community in the institutions as students learn the most by looking at people and situations around them (Al-Nasser 2015).

Fareh (2010) throws light on some of the challenges of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) programmes in the Arab world. He particularly mentions that the teachers of English are not properly trained as far as teaching methodology is concerned. He further mentions that activities carried out in schools, colleges and universities are not student-centred. (qtd. in Al-Nasser 2015) Khan (2011) conducted a study to find out the difficulties faced by the students in Saudi Arabia in learning English. He primarily focused on two approaches adopted by the teachers teaching English - Translation Method and CALT (Communicative Approach to Language Teaching). However, he also said that bilingual approach could also be adopted as an alternate strategy. Khan (2011) said that although there is sound planning, purposive curriculum, suitable textbooks, qualified teachers and effective administration yet teaching and learning process of English language is not so enthusiastic (as cited in Al-Nasser 2015).

A growing body of research (Grami, 2010; Rehman & Alhaisoni, 2013) believes that EFL teachers in Saudi Arabia follow traditional teaching methods due to which students' English proficiency level is very low. In this study, there were a number of teachers who favored correcting all written errors and many oral errors, and were not only intolerant towards students' errors but also believed that feedback must be immediately provided in written mistakes. (as cited in Raja, Albasher & Farid, 2015)

Deckert (2004), Li (1998), and Rababah (2003) attribute students' incapability to achieve communicative goals using English to the methods of language teaching and the learning environment. In other words, learners' weaknesses reflect to a certain degree teachers' poor practices and methodologies in language classes. Regarding the Saudi context, Al-Hazmi (2003) argues that many teachers in Saudi Arabia, whether locals or non-locals, are not qualified enough to meet the demands of EFL classroom. They lack exposure to innovative methods and techniques to language teaching. (as cited in Alnooh 2015)

Teachers usually follow traditional methods and approaches to teach in the classroom, which hardly engages learners in classroom activities. In the teacher-centered method, learners are not engaged and are considered very passive in nature. Students are on the receiving end and enjoy only little or no chance to stand up and ask questions (as cited in Alnooh 2015).

That is why there is immediate need to introduce student-centred approach to the classrooms by teachers. Cannon and Newble (2000) define the student-centred approach as “ways of thinking about teaching and learning that emphasise student responsibility and activity in learning rather than content or what the teachers are doing”. (as cited in Alnooh 2015, p. 21).

The teacher in this method acts as a guide or mentor who organizes the act, synthesizes the students’ responses and stimulates further learning. In this way the teacher is responsible for conducting a multi-way give-and-take exchange of information, rather than the one-way communication that forms the basis of teacher-centred learning (Kain, 2003).

The literature suggests that teachers' lack of effective teaching methodologies is a prime reason for students' poor communicative competence and other language related issues as discussed above in Saudi Arabia. However, the present researchers feel, based on their personal experiences of teaching in Saudi Arabia, that no one method and approach in its purest form can be successfully implemented in Saudi Arabia. Rather, it is recommended to use eclectic approach in the classroom, i.e. to pick up all the positive and useful aspects of every method and approach and implement them in the classroom as per the needs of students and the context of teaching.

#### **4. Context of the Study**

This research covers five universities catering to different zones of Saudi Arabia i.e. King Saud University (KSU), Riyadh; King Abdulaziz University (KAU), Jeddah; Jizan University (JU), Jizan; King Khalid University (KKU), Abha; and Najran University (NU), Najran. The study was conducted in the Preparatory Year Programs (PYP) / English Language Institutes (ELI) of the above mentioned universities. The current study was conducted in the second semester of the academic year 2016-2017 in the PYP’s / ELI’s of the above mentioned universities. In the first semester, the four basic language skills like listening, speaking, reading and writing are taught to the students as courses of Level 1. The students who successfully complete the semester are promoted to Level 2. In the second semester i.e. Level 2, learners are taught more advanced English language courses like general English (integrated skills) and technical writing. The present study was conducted on Level 2 so that the efficacy of ELT practices in the context of methods & approaches can be analyzed in terms of linguistic proficiency of the students. For this purpose, the current study analyzes teachers’ ELT methods & approaches based on their feedback and expert opinions vis-à-vis its impact on the linguistic proficiency of the students. The present study also provides some suggestions on how to improve teaching methods & approaches to enhance language proficiency.

#### **5. Research Methodology**

The current study makes methodological triangulation by employing both qualitative method i.e. interviews, and quantitative method i.e. questionnaire survey. The application of methodological triangulation potentially strengthens the quality of research in terms of reliability and validity of the study, and also confirms the emerging findings. Cohen et al. (2005) define methodological

triangulation as use of two or more methods of data collection to study the same phenomena. The current study employs this method to analyze and improve teachers' ELT methods & approaches to enhance English proficiency and to yield maximum pedagogic output in the universities of Saudi Arabia.

### **5.1 Pilot Study**

The questionnaire was piloted by eight ELT teachers teaching English courses for more than five years. The opinion and feedback of these teachers were crucial in modifying some items. The questionnaire was also given to six Assistant Professors and Associate Professors to scrutinize its quality and validity. Accordingly, items in the questionnaire were deleted, added or modified in line with their suggestions so that content validity can be ensured. Following the same process, the interview questions were also discussed with the ELT teachers and accordingly adequate modifications were implemented.

### **5.2 Participants**

Fifty teachers of the PYP / ELI of five universities of Saudi (as mentioned above) were selected to elicit teachers' expert opinion and feedback about their use of various methods & approaches and its efficacy vis-à-vis the English proficiency of students. These teachers were involved in teaching various courses of ELT in the above mentioned universities. In addition, interviews were also conducted with twenty teachers, teaching in the same five universities, who come from different English backgrounds i.e. EFL, ESL, Native. The interviews were semi-structured with four questions catering to the relevant research area. These interviews were utilized to exhaustively explore the research area and acquire an in-depth and thorough understanding of the information provided by the experienced participants.

### **5.3 Tools**

The questionnaire was used as a means to elicit teachers' expert feedback and perceptions on various aspects of their use of methods & approaches and its efficacy vis-à-vis the linguistic proficiency of students (Appendix A). The questionnaire was designed with ten questions and the Likert scale of agreement was used, ranging from 1 means 'Strongly Disagree', 2 'Disagree', 3 'Can't Say', 4 'Agree', 5 'Strongly Agree'. Moreover, semi-structured interviews (Appendix B) were also utilized to comprehensively explore the research area and acquire an in-depth understanding of the feedback and perceptions of the teachers. Twenty teachers were interviewed designing four questions catering to the research area of the current study.

## 6. Data Analysis and Findings

This section presents an overview of the questionnaire survey and interview questions along with the findings of this study. For convenience, the data analysis has been divided into two parts. The first part contains a quantitative analysis on the responses of the questionnaire survey, and the second part presents qualitative theoretical analysis of the interviews.

### 6.1 Analysis of Teachers' Questionnaire

**Q1: You take into account the emotional and psychological needs of learners.**

From the responses to the question 1 (Figure 1), it can be noted that 70% of the respondents agree that they take into account the emotional and psychological needs of learners. 20% of the respondents strongly agree with the question statement, while 10% of the respondents decided not to comment.

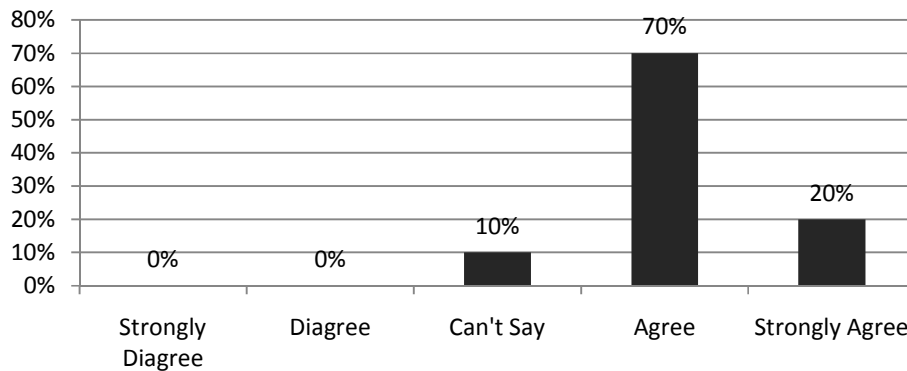
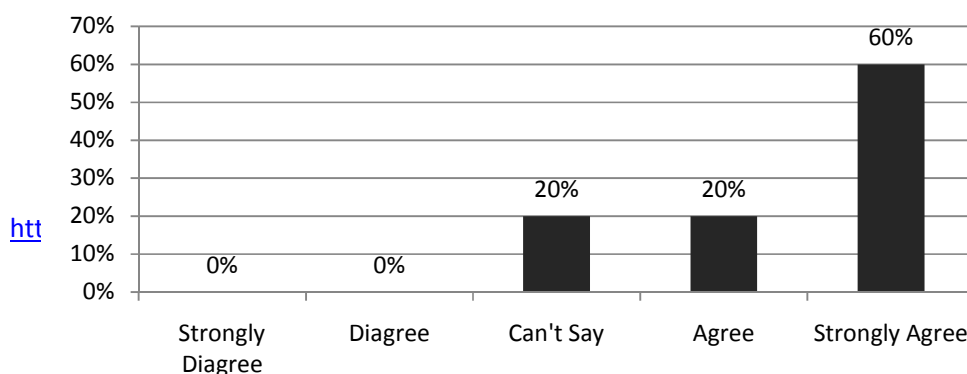


Figure 1: Percentage responses of teachers for question 1

**Q2: EFL classrooms should be more fun and interactive.**

From the responses to the question 2 (Figure 2), it can be seen that 60% of the respondents agree that EFL classrooms should be more fun and interactive. 20% of the respondents strongly agree with the question statement, while the other 20% of the respondents choose the option 'can't say'.



[htt](#)

Figure 2: Percentage responses of teachers for question 2

**Q3: You use interesting methods to teach, like language games, role plays etc.**

From the responses to the question 3 (Figure 3), it can be extracted that 50% of the respondents agree that they use interesting methods to teach, like language games, role plays etc. Another 30% of the respondents 'strongly agree' to the statement. It is interesting to note that 10% of the respondents disagree with the statement while 10% of the respondents decided not to comment.

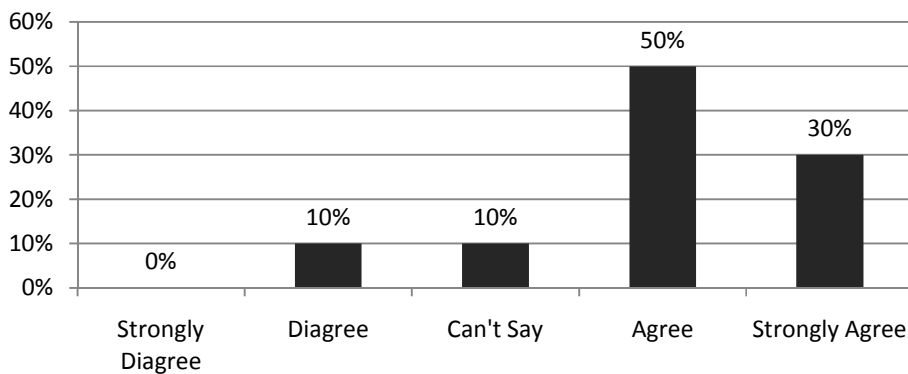


Figure 3: Percentage responses of teachers for question 3

**Q4: Using some amount of L1 is effective for students in the EFL classroom.**

From the responses to the question 4 (Figure 4), it can be noted that 40% of the respondents agree that using some amount of L1 is effective for students in the EFL classroom. Another 10% strongly agree with the statement. But 20% of the respondents disagree and another 10% strongly disagree. 20% of the respondents decided not to comment. Thus, it can be concluded that the perceptions of the teachers are somewhat divided in this area.

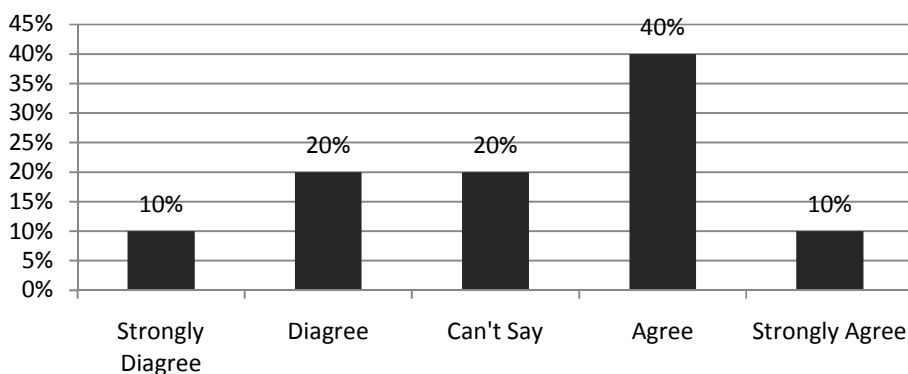


Figure 4: Percentage responses of teachers for question 4

**Q5: You are sensitive to learners' feelings and emotions in your ELT****methodology.**

From the responses to the question 5 (Figure 5), it can be derived that an overwhelming 80% of the respondents agree that they are sensitive to learners' feelings and emotions in their ELT methodology. Another 10% strongly agree with the question statement, while 10% of the respondents choose the option 'can't say'.

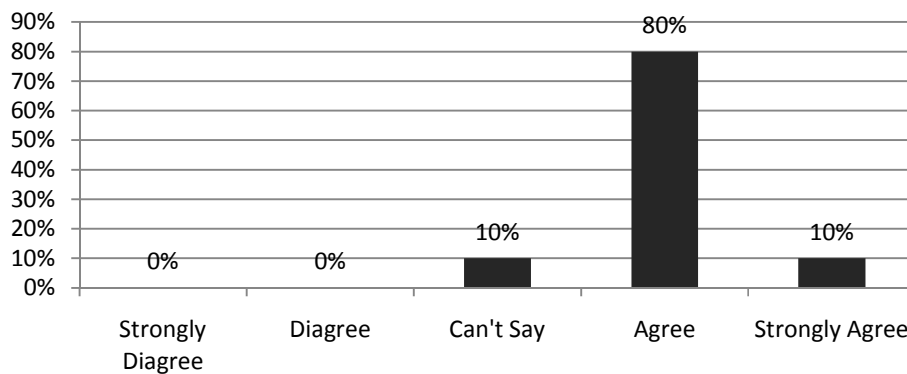


Figure 5: Percentage responses of teachers for question 5

**Q6: What is your frequency of using technology (language teaching aids) in ELT classroom? (Scale: 1.Never 2.Rarely 3.Occasionally 4.Frequently 5.Always)**

From the responses to the question 6 (Figure 6), it is interesting to note that a majority of 60% of the respondents 'occasionally' use language teaching aids in the ELT classroom. 20% of the respondents report that they 'frequently' use technology while 10% says that they 'always' use technology in the ELT classroom. 10% of the respondents were honest enough to admit that they 'rarely' use language teaching aids. It is imperative that this is an area of concern.

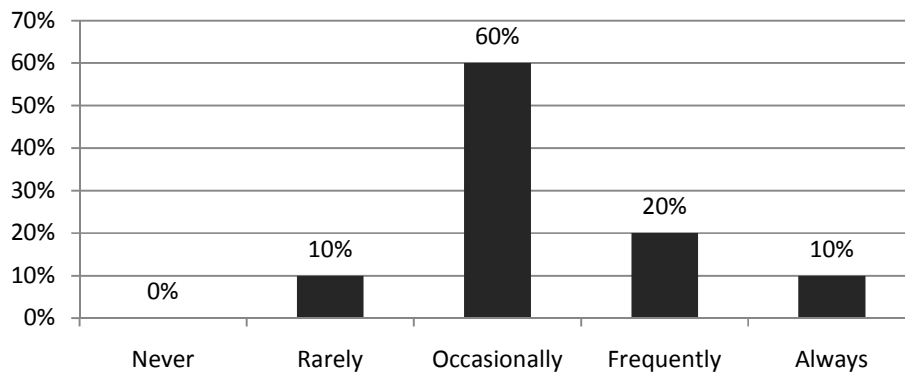




Figure 6: Percentage responses of teachers for question 6

**Q7: ELT should be learner-centric rather than teacher-centric.**

From the responses to the question 7 (Figure 7), it can be seen that an overwhelming 80% of the respondents agree that ELT should be learner-centric rather than teacher-centric. Another 10% 'strongly agree' with the question statement while 10% of the respondents decided not to comment.

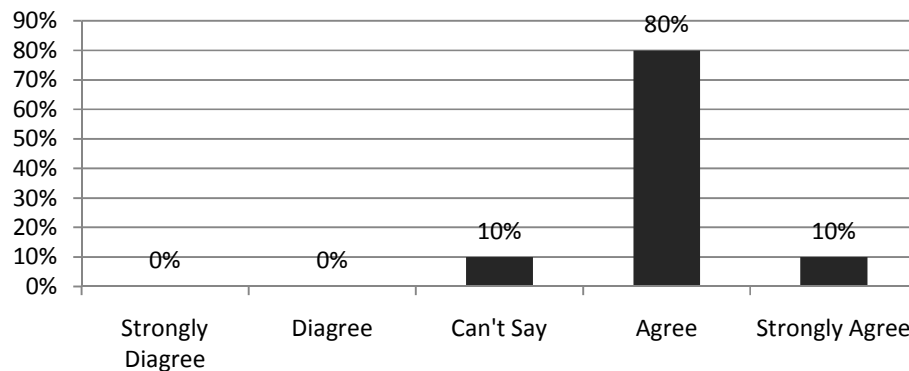


Figure 7: Percentage responses of teachers for question 7

**Q8: The length of the syllabus hampers teaching methods & approaches in**

***Saudi Arabian universities.***

From the responses to the question 8 (Figure 8), it can be noted that 50% of the respondents 'agree' that the length of the syllabus hampers teaching methods & approaches in Saudi Arabian universities. Another 10% 'strongly agree' on this question statement. However, 30% of the respondents 'disagree' with this perception, while 10% of the respondents choose the option 'can't say'. It would be rational to derive that the syllabuses of the Saudi Arabian universities need to be reviewed.

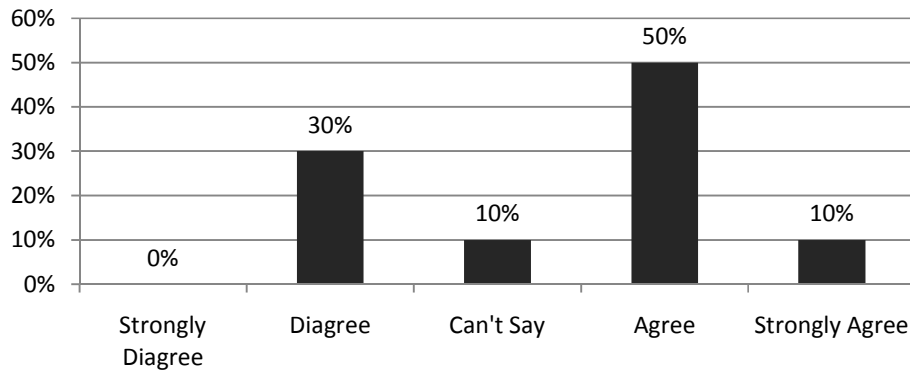


Figure 8: Percentage responses of teachers for question 8

***Q9: Your methodology involves conducting class quizzes/test to assess the progress of students.***

From the responses to the question 9 (Figure 9), it can be noted that 50% of the respondents 'agree' that their methodology involves conducting class quizzes/test to assess the progress of students. Another 20% of the respondents 'strongly agree' on this, while 20% of the respondents decided not to comment. However, it is interesting to note that 10% of the respondents 'disagree' with the question statement.

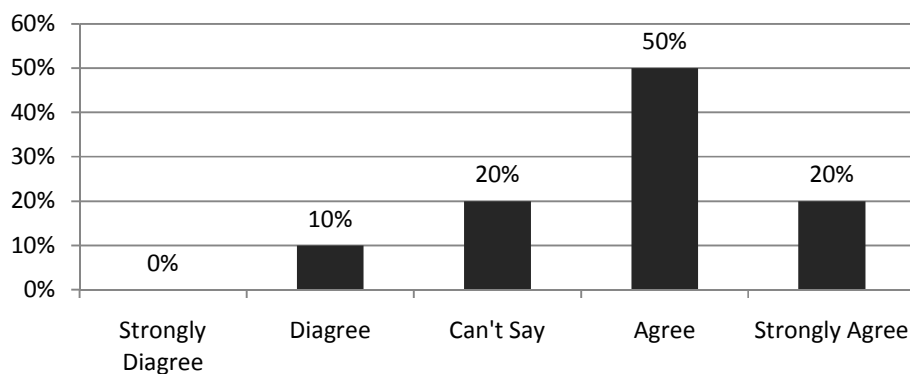


Figure 9: Percentage responses of teachers for question 9

***Q10: Lack of adequate teacher-training programs hampers teaching methods & approaches in Saudi universities.***

From the responses to the question 10 (Figure 10), it can be seen that an overwhelming 60% of the respondents 'agree' that lack of adequate teacher-training programs hampers teaching

methods & approaches in Saudi universities. Another 20% of the respondents 'strongly agree' with the question statement, while 20% of the respondents choose the option 'can't say'.

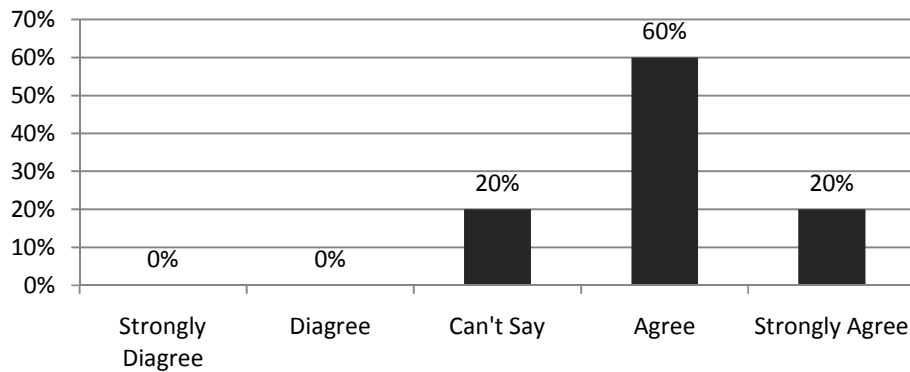


Figure 10: Percentage responses of teachers for question 10

## 6.2 Analysis of Interviews

The interviews were designed with four questions which were conducted with 20 ELT teachers teaching at the PYP/ ELI of the five major universities of Saudi Arabia mentioned earlier. These interviews provided the researchers with an in-depth and detailed understanding of the practices and perceptions of teachers. The researchers asked questions regarding basic and pragmatic areas of teaching methods & approaches in the context of Saudi Arabia. The analyses of the theoretical interviews are provided below.

### *Q1: Can you elaborate on your teaching methods / approaches in the classroom. Justify its appropriateness.*

The first interview question inquired about the methods & approaches employed by teachers in the classroom. In response to it, five teachers overtly accepted use of the 'Direct Method' in the ELT classroom. One common reason given by teachers for using this method was that it was effective and motivating for students. Some other teachers make use of the CLT Method in their classrooms. They are convinced that this method is the most interactive and learner-centered. Some Arabic proficient teachers make significant use of the Grammar Translation Method. They are of the view that this method helps the students in understanding and learning the concepts fast and easily. An interesting observation was that there were six teachers who have concluded

that, “there cannot be one method for teaching language”. Consequently, they employ the ‘Eclectic Approach’ in their classrooms.

***Q2: What is the efficacy of using interesting and innovative methods of teaching like language games, group discussion, role plays etc?***

The second question in the interview inquired about the effect of using interesting and innovative methods of teaching like language games, group discussion, role plays etc. In response to this question, overwhelming majority of teachers accepted that these innovative methods are very effective in language learning. Most of the teachers reported to have employed these methods in their classrooms. According to them, it helps to ‘motivate and sustain interest’ among the students ‘especially in an EFL scenario’. However, most of the teachers confessed that the constraints of teaching a ‘fixed and lengthy syllabus’ leaves them with hardly any time or scope for these ‘time consuming’ practices. The focus of the authorities are on ‘completing the textbook/syllabus’. Consequently, the teachers are forced to ‘finish the prescribed syllabus’ in a time bound manner i.e. one semester. Therefore, it minimizes the application of these innovative / communicative activities. A few teachers were honest enough to accept that they could never apply these innovative methods because of the constraints mentioned above.

***Q3: What is your opinion on the impact of technology on ELT methods & approaches in Saudi universities?***

This third question asked the teachers’ opinion on the impact of technology on ELT methods & approaches in Saudi universities. In response to this question, almost all the teachers are unanimous on the immensely effective and positive impact of technology on ELT methods. They opined that state-of-the-art language labs etc. have significantly facilitated language learning & teaching. Many of them have claimed that the results have improved after the blending of IT/CALL and ELT. However, it is interesting to note that some of the teachers are concerned about the limitations and negative effects of technology on Saudi students. There were four teachers who opined that technology is a distraction in the context of Saudi students and adversely affects the process of language learning & teaching. According to them ‘it does not improve the standards of language proficiency among students but serves as a distraction in the classroom’.

***Q4: Elucidate on some of the major impediments that impact teaching methods & approaches in Saudi universities.***

The fourth and final interview question asked the teachers about the main impediments that impact teaching methods & approaches. In response to this question, there were several

impediments confessed by teachers that hampers teaching methods & approaches. A common hurdle suggested by almost all teachers is the lack of motivation for language learning among students. Another complaint by teachers is the low standard of English proficiency in schools, thereby making their teaching process extremely challenging at the university level. Yet another obstacle is the lack of target language environment. Exposure to English is negligible thereby minimizing learning opportunities for Saudi students. Al Nasser (2015) has rightly stated, "Teaching has to be in the real world by full exposure. For that, students should be taught by creating real-life situations that provide opportunity for language use. Wherever possible teaching should be extended beyond the classroom and the necessity of knowing English proven to the de motivated learners"(p. 1613).

Teachers also confessed the fact that the use of obsolete methods, by some teachers, like the Grammar Translation Method, Lecture Method etc. adversely affects the teaching & learning process. The 'lengthy prescribed syllabus' minimizes teachers' scope for interesting and innovative methods & approaches. The focus to 'complete the syllabus', hardly leaves any time or scope for meaningful classroom activities and communicative practices. The teachers also have issues with the lack of adequate teacher training programs in the universities of Saudi Arabia. They reiterated that language teaching is an evolving process. Therefore, there is a necessity to get opportunities to update knowledge and skills. Inexperienced teachers are even more hampered by this lack of adequate teacher training programs.

## 7. Conclusion and Suggestions

Based on the findings of the questionnaire survey and the interviews, it can be derived that methods & approaches play a very crucial role in the process of teaching & learning of English language. However, there are many impediments infesting methods & approaches thereby hampering the process of language learning and teaching in the universities of Saudi Arabia. Therefore, it is imperative to recommend ways and measures to rectify and improve the situation.

The first and the foremost suggestion is to devise ways to enhance the motivation level of the students. Language games, role-plays, group discussions and other classroom activities can enhance and sustain the motivation level of the students. There should be a focus on finding ways to raise teachers' awareness of their motivating practices.

Teachers should be aware of the emotional and psychological needs of students. The anxieties of learning a foreign language can be minimized by psychological conditioning of students including creating a friendly rapport with them and encouraging positive classroom behaviors.

Dull and boring classrooms can easily demotivate students. Therefore, classrooms should be more fun and interactive thereby engaging students to be an active part of the learning process.

Using some amount of L1 in the EFL classroom can be crucial for students. It can be judiciously but minimally employed for concept translation especially for entry level students in Saudi universities.

Use of outdated methods by some teachers like the Grammar Translation Method, Lecture Method etc. should be totally discarded. Presently, English language teaching methodologies have focused on the importance of giving learners opportunities to communicate (Ellis, 2008).

The lengthy syllabuses can be judiciously curtailed to allow teachers more time and scope to employ interesting and innovative classroom activities. The focus should be on linguistic competence and not to 'complete the syllabus'.

ELT methodology and approach should be more learner-centric rather than teacher-centric. Students should be provided with maximum opportunities to communicate, and should be actively engaged in the language learning process.

There should be a continuous assessment of the progress of students. Apart from examinations, they should be given homework, assignments, class quizzes etc. frequently and at regular intervals which would assess their progress more comprehensively.

Data from this study reveal that an overwhelming majority of teachers complain about the lack of adequate teacher training programs in the universities of Saudi Arabia. Teacher training programs provide a platform for teachers to update methods, skills and knowledge making them aware of the best practices in the field of ELT worldwide. Novice teachers are even more hampered by this lack of teacher training programs. Thus, this study would suggest that there should be adequate and comprehensive teacher training programs across all universities of Saudi Arabia, that too at regular intervals. Al Nasser (2015) has rightly stated:

Pre-service and in-service training of teachers will make the teaching effective and learning smooth and interesting. In this connection, we may quote Britten (cited in Murdoch, 1994) who states that novice teachers must be fully equipped through proper training. They must be trained in using audio-visual aids, and introducing grammatical structures, asking questions and handling students' responses, apart from using teaching dialogues, organizing group work activities and other innovative devices. (p. 1614)

In conclusion, this study provides numerous suggestions to improve teaching methods & approaches, which would thereby yield maximum pedagogic output and enhance the teaching & learning outcomes in the universities of Saudi Arabia. The researchers believe that the findings and suggestions of this study, if implemented in its proper perspective, can rectify the impediments and thereby can make a vital contribution in enhancing the linguistic outcome of the Saudi universities. Finally, it is also imperative to suggest that teaching in general, and language teaching in particular is an evolving process. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the teachers to update themselves with the best practices of ELT worldwide. Al Nasser (2015) has rightly suggested in this regard:

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. (p. 1617)

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**Appendix A - Questionnaire for Teachers**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address \_\_\_\_\_

Your job/position \_\_\_\_\_ Teaching experience

University/Institution  
\_\_\_\_\_Scale: 1. Strongly Agree  
Disagree

2. Agree

3. Disagree

4. Strongly

1. You take into account the emotional and psychological needs of learners.

1 2 3 4 

2. EFL classrooms should be more fun and interactive.

1 2 3 4 

3. You use interesting methods to teach, like language games, role plays etc.

1 2 3 4 

4. Using some amount of L1 is effective for students in the EFL classroom.

1 2 3 4 

5. You are sensitive to learners' feelings and emotions in your ELT methodology.

1 2 3 4 

6. What is your frequency of using technology (language teaching aids) in the ELT classroom?

1. Never 2. Seldom 3. Sometimes 4. Often 

7. ELT should be learner-centric rather than teacher-centric.

1 2 3 4

8. The length of the syllabus hampers teaching methods & approaches in Saudi Arabian universities.

1 ○

2 ○

3 ○

4 ○

9. Your methodology involves conducting class quizzes/test to assess the progress of students.

1 ○

2 ○

3 ○

4 ○

10. Lack of adequate teacher-training programs hampers teaching methods & approaches in Saudi universities.

1 ○

2 ○

3 ○

4 ○

### **Appendix B – INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. Can you elaborate on your teaching methods / approaches in the classroom. Justify its appropriateness.

2. What is the efficacy of using interesting and innovative methods of teaching like language games, group discussion, role plays etc.?

3. What is your opinion on the impact of technology on ELT methods & approaches in Saudi universities?

4. Elucidate on some of the major impediments that impact teaching methods & approaches in Saudi universities.