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Factors Affecting English Skills Development among Kuwaiti Students

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Absract

Objectives: This study investigates factors affecting English language development among Kuwaiti college students. It contributes to the under-researched area of language learning in Muslim-majority countries by providing a theoretical framework for improving English language pedagogy in Kuwait. By enhancing Kuwaiti college students' English proficiency, this approach has the potential to strengthen the country's integration into the globalised world. **Method:** We determined the students' English proficiency using the Cambridge Assessment English. We also administered a survey to identify the factors influencing students' English language proficiency and conducted a pedagogical experiment. **Results:** The results revealed motivational, cultural, religious, gender-based, educational process quality, and cognitive dissonance factors. **Conclusion:** Integrating English with STEM subjects and using technology-based approaches significantly improved students' English language skills.

Keywords: Language education; Language proficiency; Education quality; English skills; Kuwait.

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Introduction

This study aims to explore the factors that influence the development of English language skills among Kuwaiti college students, contributing to the existing literature on education in Muslim countries. The research seeks to establish a theoretical foundation for enhancing the pedagogical process and educational quality in Kuwait, ultimately improving English proficiency levels among Kuwaitis and facilitating the country's effective integration into the global arena.

Kuwait intends to become a leading cultural and economic center by 2035 (ESCWA, 2016), by digitising education and the economy to speed up knowledge exchange and enable informed decision-making. Digitisation is transforming education (Landa et al., 2021), from a process of transfer or experience and knowledge from the older to the younger generation, to one of helping young people foresee and meet the needs of the future.

With digitisation and globalisation, intercultural connections in Kuwait are expanding (Bultseva & Lebedeva, 2021), requiring in turn more proficiency in English, the global lingua franca, and an education system that integrates English in all subjects.

Kuwait has a bilingual education system, with both Arabic and English being taught from an early age. The widespread use of English can be attributed to the fact that it is integrated into the curriculum and is often the medium of instruction for various subjects, especially in higher education and private schools. This might explain why English is the second-most used language in the country.

When comparing Kuwait to other countries in the Middle East, its ranking of 7 out of 12 suggests that it falls within the middle range for English proficiency in the region. This ranking could be influenced by various factors, such as regional language policies, educational systems, and cultural attitudes towards English (Education First, 2022). Kuwaitis mostly speak Kuwaiti Arabic, followed by English, which also functions as a lingua franca among expatriates and between them and natives. English is a compulsory course in the school curriculum. Most Kuwaiti universities use English, in particular in disciplines like medicine and engineering.

This study identifies the main drivers for sustainable development of Kuwaiti college students' English language skills, considering the features and quality of Kuwait's educational institutions, the local culture, and the students' personal characteristics. It contributes to the field of educational linguistics, a term formulated by Bernard Spolsky in the 1970s (Bigelow & Ennser-Kananen, 2015).

Our study focuses on the factors that can affect English skills development among Kuwaiti college students. While this list is not exhaustive, these factors, as far as this research is concerned, can generally be categorised into:

- 1 - Individual factors such as motivation, learning styles and strategies, cognitive abilities, and prior exposure to English.
- 2 - Educational factors such as quality of instruction, curriculum design, class size, and availability of resources.
- 3 - Sociocultural factors such as attitude towards English, parental support, and social environment.
- 4 - Linguistic factors such as interference from the native language, and Arabic-English language transfer.

Addressing these factors through appropriate educational policies, teaching methods, and support can help improve English skills development among Kuwaiti college students. However, few studies have examined the problems involved in enhancing English language skills in Kuwait. Studies have argued that the religious and cultural environment, in particular Islam and Sharia law, has a sequestering influence on the study of English (Dashti et al., 2021). For instance, *ādāb al-islām* (etiquette of Islam) requires clarity in communication, and prescribes avoiding the use of foreign words that may be incomprehensible to an interlocutor (Dashti et al., 2021).

Language is not only a means of communication but also a component of one's cultural identity. Daily use of foreign languages directly impacts a person's thinking, provoking new identity formation (Liao et al., 2018; Stein-Smith, 2018). In studying a foreign language, literature, history, or culture,

Muslim etiquette (i.e. moral hygiene) recommends avoiding elements that have a detrimental effect on the Muslim identity, morality, and attitude (Dashti et al., 2021). Therefore, some students use English only in class or for homework, completely eliminating the possibility of communication outside the classroom as an additional route for the development of their English skills (Dashti et al., 2021; Jailani et al., 2020). Thus, we set Hypothesis 1: Muslim communities have a collective responsibility to study foreign languages. It is possible to overcome the deterrent effect of religion on Kuwaiti students studying English by focusing on this point in education. Thus, we set Hypothesis 2: Students' cultural assimilation is greatly enhanced by educational institutions, and they are less likely to have religious bias against English as a result. In some contexts, students with strong religious beliefs may feel that learning English is a threat to their religious or cultural identity. They may perceive English as a language associated with Western values, secularism, or cultural imperialism, which could create a sense of hostility towards the language.

A significant gender gap is common to Islamic countries, especially vis-à-vis women's economic and political activity. In Kuwait, the Gender Gap Index in education was 0.997 in 2021 (World Economic Forum, 2021). The indicator value tends to 1, which shows that there are practically no gender differences in education. The literacy rates in women is 1.8 percentage points lower than that in men, and the enrolment rates in primary, secondary, and higher education are 7.9, 4.2, and 40.3 percentage points higher among girls when compared to boys (World Economic Forum, 2021). Therefore, learning English becomes less motivating (Hypothesis 3), and language competency is negatively impacted by gender factors (Hypothesis 4).

Thus, the active introduction of content and language integrated learning into the educational process can increase the level of English proficiency among students. Unlike most studies (Hu et al., 2021; Jailani et al., 2020) that have examined the effect of integrated English teaching with specialised disciplines, studying Islamic culture and religion in conjunction with English can have a positive synergistic effect (Hypothesis 5).

Status of English in Kuwait

Kuwait, a small, oil-rich country located in the Arabian Peninsula, relies heavily on its oil-based economy, international commerce, and global ties, making English a crucial lingua franca. The significance of English in Kuwait lies in its ability to enable communication between Kuwaitis and the global community. Furthermore, the extensive use of English in the realms of business, academia, and media renders it an indispensable skill for Kuwaitis navigating the increasingly globalised world (Hayat & AlBader 2022).

The widespread use of English in Kuwait is bolstered by the presence of expatriates hailing from English-speaking nations, who contribute to the country's workforce and community. Interaction with native English speakers offers an extra dimension to English language learning, fostering an ESL setting in which learners can refine and improve their skills.

Although English is widely used and acknowledged in Kuwait, obstacles remain in promoting successful English language learning. These challenges encompass, namely, oversized classrooms, a shortage of qualified instructors, and inadequate resources. Furthermore, cultural and religious elements might also impact the extent to which English is accepted and incorporated into daily life (cf. AlFadley & Qasem, 2020). Yet, English is heavily used among Kuwaitis (Alenezi, 2022).

In Kuwait, English functions as a Foreign Language (EFL) and as a Second Language (ESL), given its significance in the nation's educational system, economic activities, and global connections. As Kuwait maintains its engagement with the international community and grapples with the intricacies of globalisation, the prominence of English as a second language is expected to rise. Addressing the challenges related to English language learning and enhancing educational approaches will be vital to equip Kuwaitis with the necessary skills to excel in a progressively interconnected world.

Both EFL and ESL pertain to the learning of English by non-native speakers. EFL generally refers to studying English in a non-English speaking country, whereas ESL involves learning English in an English-speaking setting.

In Kuwait, English can be regarded as both EFL and ESL since it is taught in a non-English speaking country while also becoming increasingly integrated into diverse aspects of Kuwaiti society. (Alenezi, 2022; Almutairi, 2021; Alnwaieem et al., 2021; Al Othman & Shuqair 2013; Alsafran et al., 2020).

Different approaches can be taken to tackle how English behaves in its non-native contexts. Al-Qenaie and Bin Naser (2023), for instance, extensively discuss the status of English in Kuwait through its linguistic landscape; while Alajlan and al-Qenaie (forthcoming) see it through narratives of university students. On the one hand, English may take several classifications according to its functions and usages- as a World English or a Post-Colonial English, for example (Edwards, 2014; Gries et al, 2018; Kirpatrick, 2007, 2017; Schneider, 2007). On the other hand, Crystal (2012) views English as a global language with a nuanced perspective. He recognises its widespread use due to historical, economic, and sociopolitical reasons, and acknowledges its importance in international communication. Using Moag's (1992) classification, one would classify English in Kuwait as an indigenised variety of English, while adopting Kachru's (1985) model, which divides Englishes around the world into three concentric circles, Kuwait could lucidly fall into its Outer Circle (see Alajlan and al-Qenaie; Alenezi, 2022).

Consequently, the role of English in Kuwait, as perceived by both professionals and users, is quite complex. Echoing Alenezi's (2022) study, the researchers posit that English is used and operates as a second language (ESL) within the Kuwaiti context.

Research questions

The research questions that the researchers are interested in cover a wide range of factors that may influence English skills development among Kuwaiti students, including educational, socio-economic, cultural, individual, and external influences. They aim to explore the complex interactions between these factors and their impact on English language learning in the Kuwaiti context. However, our main interest is to answer the following question: What factors contribute to the varying levels of English proficiency among Kuwaiti college students?

Materials and Methods

The research methodology comprised three stages:

- 1 - Students' English language proficiency at Kuwaiti vocational colleges was evaluated using the approach employed by the Cambridge Assessment of English (CAE) (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2021).
- 2 - A survey helped determine factors influencing students' English language proficiency. We identified latent variables as represented in the hypothesis to understand their potential impact on students' English proficiency levels. Linear regression analysis was employed to examine the effects of these latent variables (factors) on students' English proficiency.
- 3 - We conducted a pedagogical experiment to gauge the efficacy of content and language integrated learning, as well as innovative educational technologies.

English language skills include verbal and cogitative actions at such a degree of development that they can be performed automatically. They include listening, reading, writing, and speaking (Considine, 2018). The main difference between the levels of English proficiency lies not in knowledge, but in practical communication skills, the use of various expressions to formulate the same idea, and listening comprehension of speech. While assessing the development of competencies and factors influencing them, we evaluated all four skills to determine English proficiency levels of Kuwaiti college students.

Assessment of the Students' English Proficiency Level

The study was conducted with college students from the following government and private colleges in Kuwait: Colleges of the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training (government) and Kuwait Technical College (private). The sample comprised 1595 students, all citizens of Kuwait, professing Islam. The sample excluded students in English philology and linguistics, in order to avoid an overestimated level of English proficiency given their specialised training. They were sophomores and juniors (19-21 years old).

The first stage was conducted in May–June 2018. It involved English language teachers who prepare students for the CAE (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2021) or who are certified at a level not lower than B2 and know the exam procedure. Using the CAE methodology (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2021), participants' initial level of proficiency was checked.

Factors Influencing the Level of Development of English Language Skills

The second stage was conducted alongside the first, to determine the factors influencing the development of students' competencies in the English classroom. Students were asked to answer the survey questions (Appendix A; Table A1), based on the systematisation of factors that regulate the development of English language skills in educational institutions (Akbari, 2016; Dashti et al., 2021; Elmayantie, 2015). The survey items were analysed on a scale ranging from 0 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha was determined using Statistica 12.0 to prove the reliability of the survey and ensure its representativeness. It was 0.83, within the range of 0.7–0.9, and attested to the reliability of the survey, and the absence of a functional relationship among the indicators. Participation in the survey and determination of the level of development of English skills was carried out on a voluntary basis. All the respondents' identities were kept confidential and only the general, non-personalised results were used. The sample size ($n=1595$) was sufficient and representative (Taherdoost, 2017). Each college, located in a different geographic location, was represented by a different number of students.

Derived from the obtained results, a representative sample was generated for the purpose of statistical analysis and modeling. Utilising this sample, along with the scores pertaining to the manifestation degree of indicators influencing the English language proficiency (derived from survey questions), a factor analysis was executed employing the principal component method within the Statistica 12.0 software. This analysis facilitated the identification of factors contributing to the development of students' English language skills. In order to ascertain the number of factors, the Kaiser criterion was implemented. The factor composition was determined based on the factor

loadings between the indicators (i.e., the survey scores) and the factors. It is essential to note that significant factor loadings should be at least $|0.7|$, as stipulated by Menke (2018).

Using factors, as opposed to indicators, made it possible to assess the subject comprehensively and obtain necessary integral values of the factors used in modelling. The integral values of the factors were determined using Statistica 12.0 through an additive convolution of the standardised values of the scores for the survey questions, given their weight coefficients, the calculation of which is based on factor loadings. The representativeness of factor analysis was evidenced by the number of observations (i.e., 1595), exceeding the number of variables by 63.8 times. The cumulative percentage of variance of the selected factors was 83%, which exceeded the threshold of 80% (Menke, 2018).

The influence of the factors on English proficiency was evaluated through regression models constructed in the EViews 10 program. The English proficiency level indicator (standardised values according to the results) was used as a dependent variable in the model. The integral values of factors affecting the level of development of English language skills among college students were used as independent variables. The empirical and critical values of the F-criterion were 54.74–96.36 and 2.38–3.86, respectively. The empirical and critical t-test values were $|2.85|$ – $|5.37|$ and 1.96–1.97, respectively (Cunningham et al., 2013). The model is as follows (Luu et al., 2021; Menke, 2018):

$$Comp = k_1 \times \sum_{i=1}^n w_{i1} \times V_i + k_2 \times \sum_{i=1}^n w_{i2} \times V_i + \dots + k_m \times \sum_{i=1}^n w_{im} \times V_i,$$

where *Comp* is the standardised value of English proficiency; *km* is the regression coefficient of the factor *m*, which affects the students' level of English proficiency; *wim* is factor loading between the *i*-th indicator (score for the corresponding survey question) and factor *m*; *V_i* is the standardised value of the *i*-th indicator (score for the survey question); *n* is the number of indicators (survey questions), based on which the factor analysis was conducted.

The representativeness of the regression analysis performed was evidenced by the normal distribution of the initial data and residuals of the models (Normality Test Prob> 0.05), the accuracy of the type of model chosen (Ramsey Test Prob> 0.05), and the adequacy of the sample (IHS, 2021). The number of observations was at least 94 times higher than the number of independent variables in models for assessing the level of development of English language skills (Jenkins and Quintana-Ascencio, 2020).

Evaluating Content and Language Integrated Learning and Innovative Technologies in Enhancing English Proficiency

First, the sample was divided into six groups (five groups with 266 students and one with 265) based on the students' English proficiency levels before the experiment. The groups were created to conduct three experiments with experimental and reference groups (Nahaev & Hrynova, 2020). The study design for the given experiments can be described as a quasi-experimental design with multiple interventions. The study consists of three separate experiments conducted between September 2018 and June 2019, each evaluating a specific aspect of English language learning:

Experiment 1: Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in STEM subjects.

- Intervention: Teaching STEM subjects (physics, chemistry, mathematics, etc.) in English.
- Comparison: Students were previously taught these subjects in Arabic.
- Objective: Assess the effectiveness of CLIL in improving English language proficiency and subject comprehension through STEM subjects.

Experiment 2: Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) in Arab-Muslim culture and Islamic religion

- Intervention: Teaching Arab-Muslim culture and Islamic religion in English.
- Comparison: No direct comparison group is mentioned, but it can be assumed that the standard practice would involve teaching these subjects in Arabic.

- Objective: Assess the effectiveness of CLIL in improving English language proficiency and subject comprehension through culturally relevant content.

Experiment 3: Innovative Educational Technologies

- Intervention: Using innovative educational technologies to teach English.
- Comparison: Reference groups learning English without any change in teaching technologies (traditional methods).
- Objective: Evaluate the effectiveness of innovative educational technologies in improving English language proficiency.

The practical basis for Experiment 1 was the introduction of English alongside Arabic to study STEM subjects (physics, chemistry, algebra, geometry, and astronomy), which prior to the experiment had been taught exclusively in Arabic. Students learned the terminology, concepts, processes, and laws in Arabic and English, and used subject terminology in their English lessons as well.

Teaching did not undergo any change in the second experiment. Academic disciplines were still taught in Arabic. There were changes in the way lessons were taught in English. Texts on culture and religion were used. These texts covered Divine Commandments and prohibitions, Sharia, religious precepts, and the cultures of both Kuwait and other Islamic countries. In these classes, students discussed the features and key values of Islamic culture, the values it glorifies; issues in non-formal cultural education in Kuwait; cultural diplomacy and heritage; and traditions, among other areas, all in English.

The third experiment was conducted to apply game techniques (plot or situational, role-playing, intellectual, competitive, etc., including computer games in English) and visualisation methods in teaching English.

After the pedagogical experiments, the development of English proficiency was reassessed among all students in the sample, regardless of whether they were in the experimental or reference groups in June 2019. The procedure was identical to that used in the initial assessment. From the

first assessment until the end of the pedagogical experiment, the respondents were told not to take additional English courses or travel abroad, as doing so could affect the results of the pedagogical experiment significantly. The effectiveness of the pedagogical experiment was examined by comparing the English proficiency between the experimental and reference groups through the t-criterion.

Procedure

By applying the student's t-test for independent samples, we identified three distinct levels in the development of the motivational factor: low [0.22; 0.58], medium [0.62; 0.73], and high [0.84; 1.13]. After building regression models using the Chow test, we differentiated the strength of the factors' influence on English proficiency based on motivation levels. The regression models varied in weight ratios for independent variables but shared the same composition of factors that affected the development of students' English language abilities. The student's t-test did not enable us to isolate levels where other factors' values exhibited statistically significant differences. This is because, compared to motivation, factors representing national and cultural features and issues within the education system are less reliant on the student's individuality.

Results

The findings corroborated the current national statistics (Education First, 2022). Out of the total, 31.2% of the students demonstrated an A2 English proficiency level. They used English for communication purposes, such as during travel and addressing daily issues. However, their vocabulary was restricted, and they were only familiar with fundamental concepts. They frequently made errors in writing and lacked knowledge of tense usage rules. Regarding auditory abilities, their listening skills were notably weak.

A total of 66.6% of the students spoke English at the B1 level, which allowed them to build logically and grammatically accurate speech on the topics studied. They made a number of mistakes in their speech and writing,

especially when it came to new topics. A total of 2.2% of the students spoke English at the B2 level, which allowed them to communicate without difficulty with native speakers on any topic and to express and substantiate their points of view. The average score for English proficiency based on the initial assessment (May–June 2018) was 143. Appendix A presents significant factor loadings between the survey indicators and the selected factors.

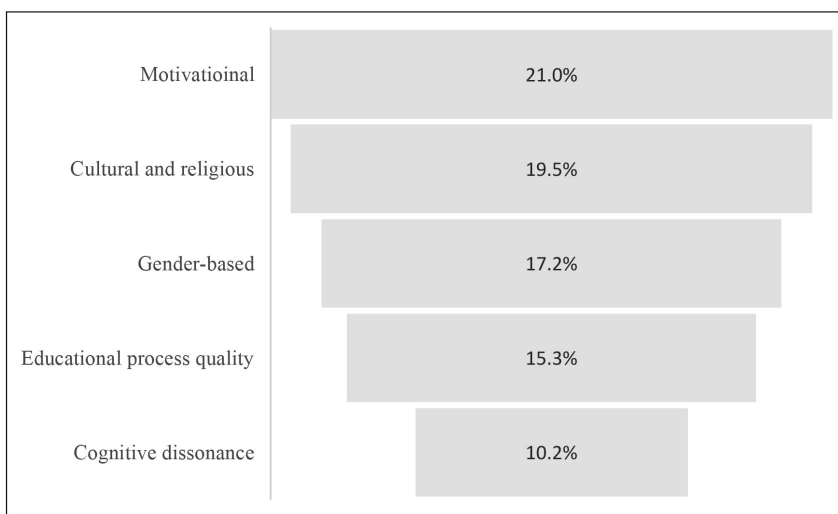


Figure 1:

Variance in the factors affecting the English proficiency of Kuwaiti college students

The most significant variance 21.0% had a motivational factor. It determined the desire to learn English and develop oneself and one's thinking, the opportunity to enjoy learning foreign languages, the interest in gaining new knowledge and experiences, and additional perspectives, opportunities, and a higher position in society and at work, among others.

The cultural and religious factor determined 19.5% of the variance. It described the obstacles to learning English owing to the country's cultural and religious characteristics: unwillingness to differ from society, significant power distance, the need to avoid the use of foreign terms that may be

incomprehensible to an interlocutor, and the loss of Muslim identity and morality. Among the prospects for studying English within this framework, the students' interest in studying religion in English and the possibility of spreading knowledge of Islam among English-speaking nationalities were considered.

The gender factor describes the influence of gender on the possibility of learning foreign languages. The factor was included given that there is some gender discrimination when it comes to opportunities to learn a foreign language, and this can cause some reluctance in learning English. In addition, gender discrimination can lead to unfair criticism and to some extent bullying toward learning a foreign language. The variance was 17.2%.

The educational process quality factor assessed the prospects for enhancing English proficiency owing to changes in educational technologies; increase in both student involvement in the educational process and English teachers' competence; and changes in the methods of assessing and monitoring students' knowledge. The factor, the variance of which was 15.3%, includes satisfaction with the level of English language teaching in college; the teacher's ability to interest the audience; and the use of modern and effective educational technologies in the learning process.

The cognitive dissonance (individual factor) factor characterised the internal imbalance experienced by a student, caused, on the one hand, by the desire to learn English and the benefits for one's professional career, and on the other hand, by the fear of being rejected by society, harming one's native culture, and violating one's religious norms. The factor variance was 10.2%.

The structure explains the factors that affected the students' level of English proficiency. To assess the nature and level of their influence on the development of their English skills, linear regression models were built (Table 1).

Table 1

Linear regression models for assessing the impact of factors on the development of Kuwaiti college students' English language skills.

Independent variable	Regression coefficient	t-Statistic	p-value	Independent variable	Regression coefficient
Low- and medium-motivation model				High-motivation model	
Dependent variable: Comp;				Dependent variable: Comp;	
number of observations: 1205;				number of observations: 379;	
F-statistic: 85.74; Ramsey Test Prob: 0.82				F-statistic: 96.36; Ramsey Test Prob: 0.74	
Cult	-0.54	-4.95	0.00	Cult	-0.59
Motiv	0.37	3.19	0.00	Motiv	0.42
Qual	0.22	2.98	0.01	Qual	0.25
Dis	-0.36	-3.16	0.00	Dis	-0.18
Free term	0.73	-	-	Free term	0.56
Dependent variable: Motiv; number of observations: 1584;					
F-statistic: 54.74; Ramsey Test Prob: 0.93					
Gend	-0.13	-2.85	0.01	Free term	0.72

Note: Comp – the specified value of the indicator of the English proficiency level; Cult – the cultural and religious factor value; Motiv – the motivational factor value; Qual – the educational process quality factor value; Dis – the cognitive dissonance factor value; Gend – the gender factor value; t-Statistic – the empirical value of student's t-test; F-statistic – the empirical value of Fisher's F-test; Ramsey Test Prob – the value of the probability indicator according to the Ramsey criterion.

The models paved the way for the conclusion that the cultural and religious factor had a significant sequestering effect on the level of English proficiency. The main reasons for the reluctance to learn English include the need to avoid the use of foreign terms that may be incomprehensible to the interlocutor and the risk of losing one's Muslim identity, morality, and attitude (factor loadings are 0.89 and 0.93, respectively, Appendix A; Table A1). Indicators such as the interest in studying Islam in English, considering

the study of the English language an opportunity to spread knowledge on their religion to other nations, had negative values of factor loadings (-0.90 and -0.81, respectively; Appendix A; Table A1).

The motivational factor is also important. The empirical values of the t-criterion for this factor were 1.6 to 2.5 times higher than the critical ones. Increased motivation stimulates English learning and enhances English proficiency. The integral values of the motivational factor differ significantly between male and female respondents. For women, the value of this factor is on average 2.5 times lower than that for men. This is statistically significant at $p = 0.05$ (Cunningham et al., 2013).

Linear regression models statistically demonstrated the significant negative effect of cognitive dissonance (individual factor) on English proficiency among Kuwaiti college students. This is more significant at low and medium levels of motivation when an increase in the integral value of the cognitive dissonance factor by 1% provokes a decrease in English proficiency by 2.2%. With a high level of motivation, an increase in the integral value of the cognitive dissonance factor by 1% provokes a decrease in English proficiency by 1.1%.

Together with the destabilising influence of the cognitive dissonance factor, there is the respondents' opinion, according to which the study of the English language can act as an opportunity to spread knowledge on their religion in English-speaking countries. The average score for this was 2.9 points (Appendix B; Table B1). To verify this opinion and its applicability in practice, and to assess the effectiveness of the use of modern technologies among Kuwaiti students in learning English, a pedagogical experiment was conducted. Table 2 shows the results.

Table 2

The results of a pedagogical experiment on the reorganisation of the English language teaching process in Kuwaiti colleges to improve effectiveness.

Initial level	Integration of language and STEM disciplines		Integration of language, and Islamic culture and religion		Use of innovative educational technologies	
	EXP	CON	EXP	CON	EXP	CON
English proficiency						
143	148	144	155	144	150	143
<i>Statistical differences in English proficiency</i>						
t-Statistic	1.98		2.19		2.01	

Note: EXP – experimental group; CON–reference group; t-Statistic – empirical value of students’ t-test between two samples.

All three experiments were effective. The English proficiency while integrating language learning with STEM disciplines was 1.03 times higher in the experimental group when compared to the reference one. Compared to the other two models, the integrated language and STEM disciplines model assumed more foreign language learning hours. The reason was that English was used in various STEM subjects, such as studying business in English, as well as foreign language classes. Despite this, the effect is less significant when compared to the other experimental models. The most noticeable effect emerged in integrating English with teaching about Islamic culture and religion. This integration resulted in a 1.08 times increase in English proficiency. Growth was ensured by reducing the negative influence of the cultural and religious and cognitive dissonance factors, and increasing the motivational factors. In the third experiment, the English proficiency of the experimental group was 1.05 times higher than that of the reference group. The changes took place because of the growth of the educational process quality and motivational factors. Differences in the English proficiency across the three experiments were statistically significant at $p=0.05$, which indicates the effectiveness of the proposed models.

In the Kuwaiti context, educators predominantly employed conventional

methodologies and technologies for English language instruction. The survey findings revealed several noteworthy aspects: a statistically significant positive association between the quality of the educational process, encompassing educational technologies and teacher competence, and students' English proficiency levels; suboptimal ratings from respondents regarding their satisfaction with English language instruction in college, with an average score of 2.4 out of a maximum of 5; the teacher's capacity to engage the audience, scoring 2.0 points; the implementation of contemporary educational technologies, garnering 1.1 points; and the perceived efficacy of these technologies, receiving 1.0 points (refer to Appendix B; Table B1 for further details).

Discussion

The research results indicate that the English proficiency levels of students in the study are in line with national statistics. The majority of students had A2 or B1 proficiency levels, with only a small percentage possessing B2 proficiency. Several factors were found to influence the students' English proficiency, including motivation, cultural and religious factors, gender, educational process quality, and cognitive dissonance.

Motivation was found to be the most significant factor, with higher motivation levels positively impacting English learning. Cultural and religious factors were found to have a sequestering effect on English proficiency, mainly due to the reluctance to use foreign terms and the risk of losing one's Muslim identity.

Cognitive dissonance had a significant negative effect on English proficiency, particularly at low and medium levels of motivation. The study revealed that the integration of English language learning with STEM disciplines, Islamic culture, and religion, or the improvement of the educational process quality resulted in increased English proficiency among the students. These experimental models were found to be effective and statistically significant.

The findings supported the overall viewpoint of researchers who investigated the unique aspects of the educational system and students'

cognitive characteristics in Islamic countries. In contrast to other scholars who justified their opinions with logical deductions (Akbari, 2016), our study empirically verified the impact of cultural and religious factors on English proficiency among Kuwaiti college students. We provided evidence for the inhibitory effect of avoiding foreign words (in English) outside college on English proficiency, confirming Hypothesis 1. Students saw the development of English language skills outside college as a threat to their Muslim identity. Internal conflicts, such as fear of learning English, concerns about betraying their country, compromising their Muslim identity and values, being criticised as “Westernised,” and being perceived as losing their nationality, hindered English language learning.

The survey findings also highlighted the importance of educational process quality and the need for improvement in English language instruction, teacher engagement, and the implementation of contemporary educational technologies.

Various factors were found to influence English skills development among Kuwaiti EFL students, including teaching methods, curriculum design, learning environment, motivation, and cultural influences. Engaging teaching methods and a well-designed curriculum that emphasises communicative competence and includes authentic material are vital for students’ progress. The learning environment, class size, teacher qualifications, and available resources also significantly impact students’ success. Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, as well as cultural factors, shape students’ attitudes and beliefs about English learning, potentially creating barriers to language development. Addressing these factors comprehensively is crucial for fostering an effective and supportive learning experience for Kuwaiti EFL learners.

Our empirical assessments proved the validity of Hypothesis 2. The results obtained reflect a paradox, as public expenditure on education in Kuwait is constantly increasing and has significantly exceeded that in several European countries (in Kuwait in 2020, expenditure amounted to 6.6% of the GDP). However, Kuwait ranks only 114 in the world in terms of educational quality. If we examine closely state expenditures on education, we can

better understand this paradox. A major reason for Kuwait's high education expenditures is its high income earning teachers, both at college and university levels, and the high cost of maintenance and labor. Moreover, this rather high budget also covers university monthly allowances for over 80,000 students at both public and private universities in Kuwait. In this system which fosters the teaching of foreign languages as a core subject in schools, the expenditure on salaries and operational costs is minimally considered in the improvement of quality parameters. Consequently, we have empirically confirmed that educational technologies used in Kuwaiti English language education system are ineffective at present, and the lack of qualified teachers is one of the most key factors in low English proficiency in Kuwait.

Teachers in Kuwait focus on traditional technologies and methods of English, and use the grammar-translation teaching method (Elmayantie, 2015), which uses two languages as the medium of instruction (García & Woodley, 2015). Language proficiency includes proficiency in grammar and vocabulary. The grammar-translation teaching method considers these two components. The following principle is applied: "It does not matter what you say; it is important how you say it." The essence of this method lies in correct pronunciation and sentence construction. Naturally, this method implies the students' initial knowledge of the English language – and this is important. Traditional teaching methods can be ineffective should Sharia prove to significantly influence students' daily life. Teachers have to be creative in their teaching methods in the educational process or the situation can only worsen.

Along with the cultural and religious factor and the low quality of the educational process in teaching a foreign language, gender is also decisive in the development of English language skills among college students (Hypothesis 4), which, alongside ineffective pedagogical methods, leads to the lack of motivation (Hypothesis 3), especially for female students. Gender discrimination in learning English, in the implementation of acquired knowledge, in the form of unfair criticism, and gender-based bullying, can reduce the level of motivation and hinder learning.

Goal-setting and one's attitude toward it lie at the heart of motivation.

Learning a foreign language is a vital necessity, the basis of personal well-being and future prospects for one's own realisation (Fanany, 2018). It is related to external motivation. In some non-Muslim cultures, a foreign language teacher, more than a teacher of any other subject, must actively intervene in the emotional sphere of a lesson and ensure, if possible, the emergence of favorable emotional states. This involves working with the students' intrinsic motivation. The effectiveness of pedagogical methods, teacher qualifications, creativity, and innovativeness will determine the development of students' English language skills. The main motive for learning the language is the students' internal motivation.

A sustainable accompanying motivation that contributes toward the development of English language skills must be formed. As the pedagogical experiment showed, the integration of content and language can be expedient and effective. This pedagogical technology allows one to study English within the framework of a communicative approach: together with the teacher, students deal with new grammar and words, work on the four basic skills (speaking, listening, writing, and reading), and improve pronunciation.

External motivation draws students' attention to the final result. It is important to build the learning process in such a way that you can sense the progress made toward achieving your goal at each stage. To enhance the influence of broad social motivation, one should use a variety of sources of information showing the value of mastering a foreign language (cinema/dialogue/films/books on specialised subjects, etc.); and engage in conversation to practice: "How many languages are there on the planet and what religions are there?", "Who are polyglots?", "What language is one of the most widespread in the world and in religion?", "Muslims' contacts with Foreigners", "English Words in Islam", etc.

Every foreign language teacher knows the critical challenge of sustaining students' intrinsic motivation towards the subject. Students may lose interest if they fail to recognise the subject's relevance and potential applications. Course structure must effectively demonstrate the subject's significance within the educational process. The success of content and language integrated learning

in overcoming cultural and religious barriers in developing English proficiency among Kuwaiti college students relies on the teacher's subject knowledge, methodological skills, expertise, and ability to connect with students while remaining engaging and reflective. A teacher must be educated, creative, and captivating; possess knowledge of Islam; and adhere to Sharia principles. This poses a challenge for Kuwait, as its education system largely depends on expatriate teachers. Kuwaitis often hold teaching positions at lower levels of education, particularly in primary schools. To address this, it is crucial to continuously develop educational programs that enhance their qualifications and provide specialised training to meet the modern labor market's demands. This approach preserves the country's culture and traditions while introducing innovative pedagogical methods for English language skill development.

Conclusions

This study identified the factors that determine the development of English language skills among Kuwaiti college students. The findings enhance the extant literature on education in Muslim countries. They create a theoretical basis for improving the pedagogical process and increasing the quality of education in Kuwait, while also enhancing the English proficiency levels among Kuwaitis, thus creating the potential for the effective integration of the country into the global arena.

The hypotheses were empirically substantiated. The indisputable advantage of the method adopted to test the hypotheses is that English language skills are acquired alongside the influence of other factors that determine the level of competence development in real time, regardless of the researcher's preferences. That is, this approach lends objectivity to the results and draws on reliable information.

The current study is not exhaustive, but is the first to investigate the effect of cultural and religious factors in understanding English language skills development in Kuwait through statistical analysis. Development factors were not investigated in the context of all the competence elements of the English language skills: reading, writing, listening, and communication, due to the fact that the leading factor is the cultural and religious one, which equally affects

the students' motivation in Muslim countries. Also, we did not study the development of skills and effective pedagogical methods for learning English in the context of students' internal and external motivation, which would significantly expand the research scope. But these issues require a separate fundamental study and will be further analysed within the research topic. Hopefully, more research will be conducted to cover other English language skills in Muslim countries, in particular Kuwait and the wider Gulf States, in order to better understand what affects students' skills and motivation.

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العوامل المؤثرة في تنمية مهارات اللغة الإنجليزية لدى الطلاب الكويتيين

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الملخص

الأهداف: تتناول هذه الدراسة العوامل المؤثرة في تنمية مهارات اللغة الإنجليزية لدى طلاب الكليات الكويتيين. وتبرز نتائج البحث الأدبيات المتعلقة بالتعليم في البلدان الإسلامية، مما يخلق أساساً نظرياً لتحسين العملية التربوية وجودة التعليم في الكويت مع تعزيز مستويات إتقان اللغة الإنجليزية بين الكويتيين. وهذا يخلق إمكانية الاندماج الفعال للبلد في الساحة العالمية. **المنهج:** تم تحديد مستوى إتقان الطلاب للغة الإنجليزية باستخدام منهجية كيمبرج لتقييم اللغة الإنجليزية. واستخدمنا أيضاً أداتان هما: استبياناً لتحديد العوامل التي تؤثر على إتقان اللغة الإنجليزية لدى الطلاب، بالإضافة إلى بعض التجارب التربوية. **النتائج:** كشفت النتائج عن تأثير العوامل التحفيزية والثقافية والدينية والجنسانية وجودة العملية التعليمية والتأخر المعرفي. **الخاتمة:** تتمثل خلاصة الدراسة في التوصية بدمج تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية مع تخصصات العلوم والتكنولوجيا والهندسة والرياضيات (STEM) واستخدام تقنيات تعليمية مبتكرة لما له من أثر إيجابي على إتقان اللغة الإنجليزية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تعليم اللغات الأجنبية، الكفاءة اللغوية، جودة التعليم، مهارات اللغة الإنجليزية، الكويت.

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