Language Teaching & Learning Problems
At the Iraqi University Level: Image & Reality

Asst. Prof. Nejat Al-Juboury *   **Lecturer Amira Ibadi Karim** *

Date of Acceptance 27/3/2005

Abstract

This paper aims at considering second language learning and teaching problems facing higher education in Iraq. The study is limited to the department of English at the College of Education for Women. There are three sections. The first reveals the changing climates that have affected language learning in Iraq. The second deals with teachers' and students' attitudes towards learning and teaching English. The third specifics the major problems and suggests some solutions.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper which is written primarily for educationists and teachers is to consider in depth second language learning and teaching problems facing higher education in Iraq. The major problems in second language learning and teaching can be summarized as follows: (1) Learning is not meaningful to many students, (2) Levels in many language classes have remained low and (3) Many students in academic situations have not developed functional language skills.

Iraqi universities seem to have been satisfied with a marginal role providing the society with inefficient graduates and low academic standards. In addition, the higher education system has not been able to cope with the new developments in English language learning where the shift is towards developing communication skills.

The present study describes a different approach to classroom research. Rather than attempting to test hypotheses, the researchers focus their attention on observing what happens in the classroom and the environment around the teachers and students to generate hypotheses based on their observations. The aim is to clarify rather than to compare and test as in the case of traditional empirical research. Observers have been interested in the three aspects of classroom instruction: (1) the student, (2) the teacher, and (3) the method of teaching.

The study, which will be limited to English language learning and teaching in the Department of English language at the College of Education for Women, consists of three sections. The first one starts with the changing climates that have affected language learning and teaching in Iraq. The second section reveals teachers' and students' attitudes to the current English language learning and teaching situations. The third section deals with the different approaches to language learning,

* English Dept. – College of Education for Women – Baghdad University.

specifies the major learning problems faced by Iraqi university students and suggests some solutions.

Section 1
Serious Problems
1.1 Understanding Change

The purpose of this section is to put into perspective the changing climates that have affected language learning so that teachers may better comprehend the forces that influence their profession. The historical facts included are presented by the researchers only as a necessary basis for the clarification of the various cause-and-effect relationships that have determined the course of second language learning and teaching in Iraq.

During the last twenty-five years, Iraq has been involved in three disastrous wars. The first was against Iran and lasted eight long years. The second and the third were against the United States and its allies. As a result, Iraqis' lives were jolted by rising inflation, sudden recession, enormous fiscal deficits, illegal immigrants, and the ever-lasting threat of a new attack. In addition, changing attitudes towards study, work, marriage, family, country began to undermine the bases upon which the traditional Iraqi society has been founded.

In reaction to the disastrous situation taking place around Iraqis, there was a continuing decline of public confidence in the country's political, educational, economic and social institutions and processes. During these years, the country experienced various national and international problems, some of which were mentioned above. Additional problems on the home front such as lack of water, electricity and medical care, air and water pollution, fuel shortage, serious and unknown diseases, poverty and unemployment, all led to an ever-increasing number of crises.

People responded to these situations of constant insecurity, fear, frustration, and even death in a variety of ways. For many the answer was to flee out of the country. Whereas, many young people, especially after the last war in 2003, took advantage of the permissiveness of contemporary society to adopt a lifestyle free from the fetters that had restricted the actions of their parents and grandparents. They turned to alcohol, drugs and sex for escape. Still, others turned away from the societal concerns and were more interested in material possessions for themselves than in righting the ills of society.

These changes have affected everyone in fundamental ways that can never be ignored. They have, in fact, touched the hearts and minds of all members of society and caused them to call for reforms.

1.2 Trends in the Schools and Universities

The educational system of that period was no exception. Such apparent trends and practices in education as the following were the direct outgrowths of the major movements in society in general:

1. Rejection of earlier values.
2. Student lack of interest in curriculum
3. Lack of course books and resources
4. Competency–based education
5. Emphasis on passing examinations rather than learning the language
6. Little learning and low academic standards.
7. Absenteeism reaching high levels
8. Emphasis on quantity rather than quality

These trends resulted in marked changes in student behaviour. For example, a strong reaction against requirements of any kind was a basic

part of the typical student attitude. Discipline deteriorated in many schools and colleges, and many students took their studies less seriously. Students, in the last two decades, did not only lack interest or motivation in their study, but they also were afraid of graduation which would lead them long years of army service for men or staying at home for women. The exertion of the authority on teachers was to help students pass examinations because of the environmental events and the difficult situations students and their families experienced.

1.3 Academic Achievement

It can be said that two basic changes occurred during these years that drastically reduced the necessity of and the importance attached to education. The first one is related to students. Inflation in the number of graduates and the high marks they got tended to reduce in the long run the correlation between level of education and income. The other one is related to teachers. Attracting and retaining competent teachers continued to be a major problem.

1.3.1. The Student

Concerning the first point, a subtle shift of focus from academic achievement to nonacademic concerns continued during the last two decades. Academic achievement began to decline. Engineers became taxi-drivers in order to earn their living. Doctors quitted their careers in hospitals and worked in business for the same reason. Certificates were put on shelves especially when those graduates were unable to get work in their homeland and were prohibited from travelling abroad to look for jobs with good salaries.

It seems that this is not a local problem. Many knowledgeable individuals and educators have criticized what they view as the anti-intellectual, anti-academic atmosphere of schools and universities in the world. Such a situation had a similar one at a time in America after World War II. The President of the University of Michigan remarks on this similar situation by saying:

'The idea that actual achievement is the key to a student's progress through the educational system seems to be forgotten. We have told a generation of students that intellectual achievement is unrelated to their progress through our school systems. Social adjustment, individual realization, group consciousness, etc. are currently valued as highly as achievement is. We have, in the end, exploited our students and fooled ourselves'. (Shapiro, 1983:14)

Lazerson (1986: 41) summarizes the academic situation of schools as follows: 'Individuals are allowed to do their own thing, but little learning is expected from this arrangement'. Thomson (1984:5), on the other hand, emphasizes the importance of high level of learning, and contends that the connection between the level and quality of one's education and one's future is assuming a position of utmost importance in this modern world. A first-class society is dependent upon a first-class school system. But this axiom is not given any consideration in our situation. Unfortunately, this correlation is rarely achieved in the Iraqi universities.

1.3.2 The Teacher

As for teachers, the first issue that compounds teachers' difficulties in the universities was that within the educational institutions during that period, there was a much greater

emphasis on student rights, voice and opinions than was true on teachers'. In fact, students' complaints of teachers and their teaching were cared for and taken into much more consideration than that of teachers'. Educationists know this philosophy of government influence on education.

The second issue was that teachers were caught in the middle of opposing pressures pulling and pushing them in different directions. Some accused them of being authoritarian, inhumane, and indifferent to students' circumstances. Others contended that a crisis indeed existed in classrooms with teachers giving assignments, demanding research papers, giving difficult examinations and awarding low marks. Actually, Bunting (1973:14) defends teachers by saying: 'It is the teachers who make the school.'

The third issue is that university teachers were outside the circle of educational conferences, symposiums held abroad, which would definitely improve their current status and develop heir teaching methods.

The last issue was that during the depression years, which have not actually ended until now, retaining efficient instructors has become a great problem. Many of them preferred to retire, resign or even quit their jobs because they found it impossible to face the rising cost of living, imprisonment, death threat. and the like. Others, many of whom were highly qualified and held the highest degrees in different fields of study emigrated illegally to the neighboring countries for a better living, peace and respect, leaving their families behind. Some survived, many suffered from homesickness or illness, and others passed away. A Ministry of Higher Education spokesman in Al-Sabaah newspaper (Issue 403, 2004) announced that more than 1600

university teachers left the country owing to threat, kidnapping or killing processes. He also added that over 75 university teachers were murdered. Dr. Tahir Khalaf Al-Baka, the Minister of Higher Education himself warns that there are 13250 university teachers in the Iraqi universities who are in real danger because of such criminal offences, Al-Sabaah newspaper (Issue No:416, 2004). In addition, education in Iraq is really facing a real catastrophe if these processes of killing or kidnapping teachers by criminal gangs continue which may lead to suspending the march of education, and construction.

Losing efficient teachers who were graduated from the best British and American universities has affected university education enormously because those who have taken their places are young, inexperienced new comers who had pursued their studies inside the country and have not had the chance to study abroad.

1.4 Trends in English Language Learning in Iraq

1.4.1 Among the unwelcome effects of wars and the drastic changes in life, comprehensive policies of admission to colleges were adopted, thereby universities opened their doors not only to a large population of students than they have ever had, but also to a wider range of students than could any college had probably ever admitted or thought of admitting.

Consequently, as entrance and graduation requirements were dropped at the university level, enrollment in the English language departments increased. In 1985 when the College of Education for Women was first established, the new comers to the English language department were 24, By 2004, 120 Freshwomen were admitted in the English language department. Interest in the study of a

second language has increased and enrollments have grown rapidly. In 1997 evening classes started at the college of education for women and the number of the newcomers was 65. Then it rapidly grew and doubled. In the year, 2004 the freshwomen were 100 and the whole number of language students in four years was 350. It is stunning to realize that this sudden interest in ELT is not for an educational goal, but for a financial one, i.e. private teaching as most school learners are weak at English.

1.4.2 The study of the English language in Iraq has generally been affected not only by dislike or distrust for all things foreign, but also by the consequences of the British attitudes against the Arabs and their role in the establishment of Israel in Palestine and eventually by the wars of the last two decades.

Beginning in the 40's, 50's and 60's of the last century, the English language had gained a foothold in the curriculum of many colleges. In addition, almost the whole curricula of some colleges like that of medicine, engineering and sciences were in the English language, as many of the lecturers were foreigners.

However, in reaction to the oppressive attitudes of the West against the Arabs, the official and public mood changed. There was an urge to translate the textbooks into Arabic and a tiring effort was required to carry out this goal which occurred in the 70's. As a result, acquiring a second language was reduced to the minimum. This was accompanied by a new legislation that minimized scholarships to foreign countries. What came next was the dreadful embargo which prohibited students from pursuing their higher studies in countries like America or Britain. All this had caused a great collapse of plans, hopes and real education

1.4.3 In response to the changes of circumstances that came about after the war of 2003 which opened the doors for developments in education, opportunities of pursuing one's studies abroad or even travelling abroad for business, or mere interest in the study of the English language, flourished. Many departments like history, geography, Arabic language and Religious studies have now requirements that language courses be offered for two years or more. However, the growth of evening classes at the universities has also provided students with a good opportunity for learning a second language, i.e., English.

1.5 To conclude this section, it can be said that although the future is still dark and many people in the field of second language education are discouraged, the light is rising that is to lead the way and to brighten the prospects of second-language learning in Iraq.

Section 2
Data Collection Tools

2.1 In the light of the discussion set out in section 1 of this paper, it is now necessary to enhance this research paper with students' and teachers' attitudes to the current English language learning situation, as well as to seek empirical evidence from the students scores in the final examinations before proposing any change or presenting any suggestions.

1. For a start, two questionnaires were conducted, one for students and the other for teachers. The students' questionnaire aims at:

A- clarifying the statement adopted in this study which claims that academic standards of college students are getting lower and that there is little learning.

B- helping to develop more effective attitudes towards learning a second language.

The teachers' questionnaire aims at revealing the teachers variables which affect their performances.

2. Secondly, the third year final examination records of the students under study were examined. Two skills were chosen for this purpose: speaking and writing via conversation and essay writing subjects. The results are illustrated in Table (2) and (3).

3. Thirdly, the final examination records of the sample in their last, fourth year were examined to assess their achievement level via their scores as this is the end of the road. The results are shown in Table (4).

2.2 The questionnaires

1. A students' questionnaire of (15) items was conducted to (130) fourth-year students in April 2004 (see Appendix I). The day classes were (80) students and the evening classes were (50). The questions concentrated on students' estimation of their abilities in the language skills especially the productive skills of speaking and writing, the minimum studying hours per day, their attitudes towards the textbooks, the teacher's explanation of the material, and teachers' use of audio-visual aids. The questions also focus on the relationship between their academic study and future career, growth of personality, cooperation with other universities, in addition to the six weeks of teaching training, opportunities of communicating in English outside the classroom and finally non-class activities. The students' answers were interpreted statistically and in percentage as shown in table (1)

2. A teachers' questionnaire of (14) items was also conducted in May 2004 (see Appendix 2). The staff members of the English language department were

(19), so the sample was (19). The acade000mic status of the staff is as follows: (1) Professor (4) Assistant professors (6) Instructors (8) Assistant-instructors

The questions in this questionnaire included some personal details concerning field of specialization, academic degree, teaching years, number of in-service training courses taken, and subjects taught. There were also some questions on participations in conferences, scientific achievements, and the techniques followed in teaching. The main purpose is to display their status which may shed some light on the deficiency of the teaching process that is occurring. The answers are shown in table (2).

Table 1: Students' Responses

Item No.	Area of Investigation	Scores in Percentage
1	speaking ability	63.3
2	writing ability	64.4
3	relevance of textbooks	58.6
4	teachers' explanation and cooperation	59.6
5	use of audio-visual aids	50.9
6	correlation between academic subjects & future career	72.7
7	personality growth & university life	75.7
8	non-class communication activities	52
9	participations in other universities activities	33
10	teaching training period	75
11	developing abilities while teaching	74.6
12	using English outside the classroom	46.8
13	students' efforts in developing abilities	67.3
14	department's effort in raising the standards	65.7
15	studying hours per day	20

2.3 Discussion of the students' Responses

The responses given to items 1 and 2 showed that the students had not succeeded in assessing precisely their real achievement. On the contrary they had a high opinion of themselves. A survey of the third year final examination records of the same sample revealed quite different results. The results of the final year examinations of two courses chosen to check both speaking and writing skills of the sample revealed that their actual achievement was much below what they assumed (see tables 2 & 3).

Concerning textbooks, teachers' work, and teaching aids, students did not seem quite satisfied. As for non-class activities or participation in other universities activities, the responses showed unfulfilled willingness.

Some of the important results of studying at the university involve the development of acceptable social behaviours and interests. These favourable attitudes towards other students, the learning tasks and the university life will certainly facilitate the students' attainment of worthwhile educational goals and desirable objectives. These goals did seem to be achieved to a certain extent.

The other issue that students found fruitful was the teaching practice period which usually lasts for six weeks. Working as student-teachers helps to provide students with an ample chance to enhance their language abilities, self confidence, and better understanding of their future career.

Here again, the students seemed to draw an untruthful picture of their actual efforts in developing their linguistic abilities. Two thirds of the students contended that they made a good effort to develop their abilities. However, the studying hours of 80% of them was nil during the year, but when examinations approach they gave all their time and care to pass them.

Final examination Results

To have a clear picture of the sample's real abilities in the second language, the researchers studied and analyzed the final examination scores of the sample in two main subjects, i.e., speaking and writing. These results were given below. These marks showed the sample's level in their third year.

Table 2
The Sample's Actual Ranks in the Final examination in Speaking Skill

Ranks	Day classes	Evening classes
Excellent	6	1
V. good	10	5
Good	12	8
Fair	14	8
Pass	30	23
Fail	8	5
Total	80	50

Table 3
The Samples' Actual Ranks in the Final Examination in Writing Skill

Ranks	Day classes	Evening classes
Excellent	0	0
V. good	1	1
Good	4	6
Fair	29	16
Pass	43	24
Fail	3	3
Total	80	50

Tables (2) and (3) above show the real achievement of the sample in two essential subjects to language teachers, i.e., speaking and writing. The reasons behind choosing these two academic subjects and skills are:

1. They both reflect the sequential development of the four communication skills.

2. They both present the move from a concentration on pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary to meaning and communication.

3. They both reflect the change of interest from microlinguistics to macrolinguistics, taxonomy and breaking down language into linguistic bits into integration and building up into whole.

2.4 Discussion of third-year results

Concerning the skill of speaking, (37.5%) of the sample got a pass mark in oral communication. In other words, one third of the sample scored between 59 – 50 out of one hundred in the final examination of this subject. On the other hand only (7.5%) of the same sample were excellent. Concerning the evening classes, the results were even worse. Those who had scored between 59-50 are (46%) of the sample, almost half; whereas only one seemed to be fluent.

The results of the second subject, i.e., writing, were not promising, either. Actually the table shows more disastrous rates than those of speaking. 53% of the students had got 'pass' which means that there scores were between 59-50 out of 100. The evening classes were not better. 48% of the sample had passed, i.e., between 59-50. None was excellent.

The previous results revealed very obviously the real standards of the students. Almost half of them lacked the oral fluency needed in their future careers. In addition 90% of the whole sample gained 'fair' or 'pass' mark in writing. This result shows clearly that students failed in this essential skill, either. This result also corroborates the statement of this study which claims that students at the department of English are inefficient and bad communicators.

2.5 Discussion of fourth-year results

The distribution of the sample's ranks in their fourth and last year according to their scores in the final examinations, confirms the view that the students seem to be satisfied with having a marginal level. 45% of the day sample had just managed to pass the examinations or be helped to do so. 40% of the sample was a little better gaining scores between 69-60 out of one hundred.

The evening classes gained almost the same distribution. 40% got scores between 69-60. 42% got lower than that, i.e., between 59-50 scores.

As for the high ranks in the morning classes, 1.25% was excellent, 5% very good and 8.75% good. The evening classes were lower,

Again, the results shown in Table (4) below verify the hypothesis adopted in this study as they reveal the low attainment level of the sample.

Table 4
Distribution of the Samples' Ranks In their' Fourth Year Examinations

Ranks	Day Classes	Evening Classes
Excellent	1	0
Very good	4	1
Good	7	8
Fair	32	20
Pass	36	21
Total	80	50

2.6 Summary of Teachers' Responses

The information exhibited in Table (5) below is summarized as follows:

1. 78.9% of the staff members have a Master degree, whereas only 11.1% a Doctorate degree. All higher studies were taken place in Iraq except one.

2. 36.8% of the staff members have less than five-year experience of teaching, 15.78% less than 10 years', 21% less than 15 years' and only 26% twenty years' or more.

3. 52.6% have not had the opportunities to renew knowledge or information by taking any course whether inside the country or abroad during the teaching years, 15.8% have taken two courses, 26.3% three course and only 5.3% ten courses. Only 33.3% of the courses were abroad in Jordan and Britain.

4. 26.3% of the sample participate in conferences inside the country and abroad. The total number of research papers accomplished so far is 70.

5. The minimum teaching hours per teacher in the morning and evening classes are 50 and the number of subjects taught in one term is between three - four.

6. The use of audio- visual aids, libraries, labs, computers and internet seems rare.

7. The major teaching technique applied is teacher-centred where the teacher either introduces the lecture by himself / herself or by asking a number of questions about it. Modern techniques where the focus is on students do not seem popular as only 10% of the responses favour modern techniques as problem solving or group work.

8. All the sample agrees that taking in-service training courses is a must. The desired fields are: new techniques in ELT, testing, translation, speaking skill and grammar.

9. The sample agrees that students are in need of more teaching hours in the language elements, i.e., pronunciation, dictation, and grammar as well as in the communicative skills as speaking and writing

Table 5
Teachers' Responses to Their Questionnaire

1. Field of specialization	No.of teachers	
Linguistics	10	
Literature	8	
Methodology	1	

2. Certificate	No..of teachers	Country
Ph.D	4	Iraq
M.A	14	Iraq
M.Ed	1	Iraq

3. Number of teaching years	
less than 5 Yrs	7
less than 10 Yrs	3
less than 15	4
20 Yrs and more	5

4 Number and places of in-service training courses		Places
Nil	10	Iraq
2 Courses	3	Jordan
4 Courses	5	Britain
10 Courses	1	

5 Number of participations in scientific conferences	
Number of participants	5
Inside Iraq	21
Abroad	8

6. Number of research paper or other publications accomplished so far	70

7. Types of participation in other institutions as cooperation between the university and society.
1. teaching 2. translation 3. language advisor

8.Minimum teaching hours per week: 50Hrs

9. Resources available for use	
Audio- visual aids	none
Library facility	rarely
Computer and Internet	very rarely
Language laboratory hours	rarely

10. Teaching techniques	Percentage of occurrence
1. Teacher presenting the material	50%
2. Students presenting the material	40%
3. Presenting the material by discussion	10%

4. Using group work technique	10%
5. Using problem solving technique	10%
6. Having a lesson in a setting related to the material in discussion	5%
7. Asking for research papers	20%
8. Applying new techniques in teaching	42%
11. Non-class activities	30%
12. Teachers' need for in-service training courses	100%

13. **The desired fields:**
   New techniques in ELT
   Testing
   Translation
   Speaking Skill
   Grammar

14. **The courses that students need most in teachers' view are:**
   Spoken English
   Grammar
   Dictation
   Pronunciation
   Composition and essay writing
   Fast reading

2.7 Comments on the Teachers' Questionnaire Responses

Language teachers have a vital role in language learning/teaching process as they establish goals, adopt textbooks, develop curricula, prepare lesson plans, conduct classes, set standards, and evaluate students' achievement. Most students do not have the knowledge, motivation or discipline to succeed without the teacher. However, the following teacher variables are among those that affect teachers' performances most:

Standards:

A high standard is most essential at college level. Students tend to achieve at their highest possible level only when highly qualified teachers set standards that require them to do well in the course; whereas teachers who are low encourage students to put forth minimum effort. Unfortunately the sample's teaching experience as well as their higher studies inside the country has scarcely provided them with the high standard required for teaching at the university.

Knowledge of Subject

Second-language teachers should definitely know the language they are teaching, be able to speak it well and be knowledgeable about its culture. They should be familiar with the latest developments in teaching second language. The sample's linguistic abilities and skills are still not mature enough for university level because of their limited experience. University language teachers do need to pursue their higher studies and have their master and doctorate degrees from countries like Britain or America as it was common in the seventies and eighties of last century to ensure proficiency.

Diligence

Teaching to those who have never taught may not seem exhausting, but it is. Effective teaching requires a tremendous amount of time, energy and diligence. The teachers' responses in the questionnaire reveal the great number of teaching hours which exhausts them. Undoubtedly teachers will be unwilling to do so if their salaries suffice them. Consequently, if the tendency is to have fruitful education, then the Ministry of Higher Education has to raise the teachers' standard of living, in order to direct their efforts and time to their work to achieve better education.

In service training courses

The last vital issue is the enrollment of university language teachers in courses abroad, in countries like Britain or America where the English language is the mother tongue. Such courses will definitely compensate for their past study inside their country. In addition, taking courses abroad will also familiarisé them with the most modern

techniques in ELT, and give them a chance to communicate and cooperate with teachers in similar situations. Moreover such a chance will help to expose them to the latest technology in language teaching/learning.

Section Three
Seeking Solutions

3.1 This section introduces the different approaches to language learning. It focuses on the recent one which, the researchers think, may offer solutions or strategies for the learning problems faced by both teachers and students in the university.

3.2 The unusually large number of theories and approaches with which second language teachers are currently confronted may bewilder them but it can on the other hand open their eyes to new possibilities and stimulate them to experiment with innovative techniques and activities. However, over the years, learning theorists have proposed different approaches to learning and each seems to reflect the orientation of the times in which it originated. These can be summarized as follows:

1. The traditional one and during the days of **faculty psychology**, theorists think of the mind as a muscle. The more it was exercised the greater its capabilities and the larger its assets. Hence, to increase mental strength was to exercise the mind with complicated tasks. The learning activities recommended in language learning were memorization, translation and the like.

2. **Behaviorist psychologists** refused to consider any role for the brain in learning other than as some type of mechanical connection between a stimulus and a response. This model of learning is extremely directed, and mechanical. It merely depends on repetition and recycling. By memorizing and performing pattern

drills the chances of producing mistakes are minimized.

3. **Cognitive psychologists** tend to think of the brain as an active, participating component in the learning process. They view learning as an internal, mentalistic process. The activities compatible with this approach engage learners in communication and require the use of such communicative processes as information sharing, negotiation of meaning, task-work and interaction.

The last approach to learning, which flourished in the 70's and 80's of the last century, continues and is seen in the huge range of course books and other teaching resources based on its principles. But surprisingly, this approach to language learning has not been adopted in Iraq until recently. In 2002, the first book of the new series named Rafidain was published and put into use.

Given below is a summary of this view and the way it looks at the brain and how it is compared to a computer, receiving the learned information, storing it and then recalling it. It is hoped that adopting this approach in language teaching and learning at the university may cause the desired effect teachers seek in developing and mastering language skills.

3.3 The Brain and the Computer

It is quite interesting to think of the brain as an information processor. The brain is thus computer-like, but also a self-directed thinking and feeling information processor with unique capabilities far beyond that of present-day computers (Chastain:1988:38)

This last view and the most recent one concerning learning has been to compare the mind to a computer. The mind is now viewed as an information processor just like a computer. However, the mind has many unique

features that current computers do not, including that it is a feeling, thinking information processor that is largely self-directed.

In Chastain's opinion (ibid) 'the mind is neither a sponge absorbing information nor a connection to be conditioned by external forces, but an active processor of information.' He also emphasizes that 'learning is never passive'. Wittrock (1980:398) stresses the active nature of the learning processes by saying: 'The research on the brain and its cognitive processes emphasizes the generative nature of learning and the reciprocal interplay between environmental events and the learner's generative cognitive processes'. Bransford (1979: 154) contends that learners have to learn to formulate and to test hypotheses in order to learn. In his opinion the most important task in learning is **learning to learn.**

Undoubtedly, second-language students cannot learn unless their attention is focused on the material to be learnt. Learning theorists have proposed a model of attention of three phases (Chastain, ibid):

First: Learners must arouse their attention and focus on the task.

Second: They must activate their attention so as to make a response.

Third: They must keep their brain in an activated state until the learning task is completed.

In fact, several types of information processes are involved in learning. First, the brain must receive the new information. Second, it selects the significant elements. Third, it stores the chosen information in memory. Fourth, it records the selected material for future use (Wittrock, 1980:399).

Ultimately, the value of learning correlates directly with the amount of learned information that is stored in memory and the proportion of the material that the student can recall. In fact, unless students can store, retrain, and recall information, they have not really learnt it. Chastain (1988:39) stresses these processes as being a crucial factor in developing language skills. Anderson (1980: XV) supports the central importance of memory in learning by saying 'the most troublesome problem teachers face is ensuring long-term retention'. Learning theorists divide memory into two types:

1. **Short-term memory** is limited, conscious memory that individuals use to work with newly received or recalled information.

2. **Long-term memory** refers to the aspect of memory in which information is stored for longer periods of time and for future use.

Where do Iraqi students stand among these views cited by the aforementioned theorists?

First, Iraqi students lack attention as their minds are involved with a variety of distractions starting with their late arrival because of road blockage, the hearing of explosions now and then, kidnapping, and the unsafe journey home. Second, teachers find it extremely difficult to activate their attention or arouse their interest as they have lost motivation probably because they are pretty sure that finding a job after graduation is uncertain or that tomorrow may never come. Thirdly and consequently, storing the information in their minds seems completely impossible.

However, life must go on and it is our duty to make it go despite every thing. Theorists, like Chastain (1988), Anderson (1980), Hunt (1982) and McDonough (1981) present a number of crucial factors that seem to affect recall and retention of information which language teachers, especially Iraqis

need to consider thoroughly. The following are the major ones.

3.4 Factors affecting retention of information

1. The material needs to be organized and there should be adequate amount and type of practice to achieve long-term retention.
2. For the longest retention and greatest ease in retrieval, new information must be associated with previous existing knowledge.
3. Frequent occurrence of the information learned is needed.
4. Meaningful information is kept longer and recalled easier than material that is not understood by the learner.
5. Emotionally charged material produces long-lasting memories than those no feelings are attached.
6. The learner's purpose in acquiring the new information is a major factor contributing to retention and recall.
7. Other important factors include content, the learner's ability, the quantity and the difficulty level of the task involved.

In short, theorists are telling teachers that learning materials and tasks should be meaningful and that students must be active participants in the learning process. For learning to be meaningful, students must have adequate past knowledge to comprehend what they are to learn, new material must be relatable to the students' cognitive network, and students must incorporate new knowledge into their existing information system and store it in long-term memory for future use when communicating with others.

In other words if language teachers want to maximize students' achievement they have to take into consideration the following major problems cited by (Chastain, 1988:49), and make sure that their approaches and teaching techniques solve these problems.

1. How to ensure that the students continue to be active participants in communication activities.
2. How to ensure that they store their learned knowledge and skills in long term memory.
3. How to ensure that students learn language for the purpose of communication.
4. How to ensure that students can activate the language they have learned to create or to recreate a massage.

3.5 Improving learning

Second-language teacher's principal objective and task is to make class material meaningful. Yellin (1983: 37) goes far beyond the normal range of achieving meaningful learning and recommends that teachers view learning in terms of the whole person, including physical, emotional and cognitive states. He decries the predominance of the narrow focus of instruction in most educational curricula and urges teachers to follow the lead of athletes who have managed to continue to improve performance by means of holistic technique.

This view goes with what the educational goals always call for. Rivers (1980:116) states that humanistic educations especially at colleges should not only develop students' cognitive knowledge and skills of the course but also their affective needs which include feeling, interests, attitudes and opinions. The researchers strongly agree with Rivers and they feel that college students are in great need for this second goal of college education. Students do need to be given opportunities for expressing their feeling freely, for sharing values and viewpoints with others including teachers, and for developing a better

understanding of other's feeling, opinions, and needs. Emphasis on cognitive knowledge and academic information are not the ultimate aim of real education.

3.6 Learning problems

Second-language students' lack of interest in curricula and their little learning and low achievement are mainly due to comprehension problems or/and cognitive problems. Actually there are various ways of solving students' comprehension. If the students do not have the necessary background, teachers can introduce them to the subject in such a way that they have the necessary background by the time they undertake the learning task. For example, if students are to read a literary text without having the necessary familiarity with the culture to comprehend the story, the teacher should provide an introductory explanation of the related cultural factors prior to assigning the reading.

If the students, on the other hand have a cognitive problem, teachers should provide them with guides of how they should approach the learning task. Wittrock (1980:371) suggests two sample learning activities that encourage learning in a meaningful manner. First, he suggests using the learned words by college students in a sentence to increase their retention. Second, he suggests writing a summary sentence at the end of each paragraph while reading a story. This will improve their comprehension of the story and their memory of the events in the story.

3.7 Cognitive problems

The researchers believe that the most important cognitive problem is that college students lack the appropriate selection of which content is important and which is not, which learning strategies are effective and which are

not, and what should be remembered and what may be ignored.

The second cognitive problem is that they lack comprehension while performing a task.

Wagner and Sternberg (1984: 192) recommend that students follow a system called **MURDER**, which is an information-processing approach to reading. In this acronym, 'M' is getting oneself into the *mood* to study. 'U' is the goal of reading for *understanding*. 'R' is to *recall* content without looking the answers up in the text. 'D' is to *digest* the material by amplifying it. 'E' is using self-checking strategies to *expand* knowledge, and 'R' is to *review* mistakes as related exercises and activities are completed.

3.8 Unproductive common strategies

It has been noticed that second language students at this department often employ strategies that help them produce the correct answer for a drill or exercise but that do not correspond at all to learning the language. For example rather than considering the entire sentence, they look for the cue word that enables them to give the correct verb form.

Another common unproductive in-class strategy is to wait until called on to prepare an answer for the question. In most situations, students depend entirely on keys to exercises. In literature, summaries of the stories and handouts in the form of questions and answers on the chief characters, events and opinions, as well as notes written by students of previous years, generally replace the studying of the original books. These handouts are studied and memorized by students only for the examinations. Consequently, there is grade inflation and decline in the standards which reflect lowered expectations and eventually lead to

graduating inefficient teachers who are incapable of communication.

Recently, students show lack of interest in their studies and a serious attitude begins to spread among college students which is to skip a lecture when the teacher gives an assignment or asks for some homework, or when the students have a test the next day. Thus, for the sake of the next day test, they sacrifice the lectures of the previous day. As a result, what they study will not last long in the mind, so neither short-term memory nor long-term one will receive or recall any information after a couple of days or a week.

3.9 Other problems

In addition to the comprehension problems and cognitive problems teachers need to realize that students' weaknesses and low achievement are not always due to low cognitive abilities or to factors over which the learner exercises control. Students may have various critical problems that teachers need to understand and help to solve.

Some students may not be doing well in the course because the approach is not the most effective for students. Then, the teacher has to adjust his approach, particularly when we realize that more than one third of the teachers at the department of English at the college of Education are new graduates. Secondly, students may not have been given the time to rehearse and elaborate the material in their short-term memory prior to storage. Then, teachers need to give students efficient time to do this before assessing their achievement or assigning a test.

In addition, students may have certain emotional and daily problems that are so many in our circumstances. In this case, teachers need to develop an understanding of their feeling and emotional states. They may give the students a second or even a third chance to improve their achievement. Students may have some motivational problems, for example, home pressure like housework, looking after one or more young brothers or sisters, and the like. Teachers can stimulate more confidence and more positive attitudes that should result in the better activation on the part of the student

However, students may have real cognitive problems for example they may not listen successfully to lectures, or they may not have the needed self-discipline to listen during the course of the lecture, or they may not possess either the necessary background knowledge or the needed strategies to comprehend, organize and store the information presented in the lecture. All these problems require patience and understanding on the part of the teacher.

3.10 Teachers' role

It is useful to say that the purpose of education is student intellectual growth. Basically, teachers' first responsibility entails intellectual development. However, in recent years students' personal and social growths have received increased attention. Teachers' second responsibility is to help students achieve a feeling of self-worth, success and acceptance in society.

To help students overcome their problems teachers should be aware of students' affective reactions and make them aware that they are concerned about their feeling.

They should make it clear to the students that they want them to prepare, participate and succeed in all class activities.

They should emphasize that making mistakes is a normal aspect of the learning process and that one can learn from one's mistakes.

They should sequence the materials in such a way that students are always

prepared to perform the next task in the lesson plan successfully.

Finally they should strive to eliminate all unfavourable conditions such as confusion, screaming, reproaching, threatening, and unproductive lulls in class.

3.11 Conclusions and Suggestions

The following are some solutions for the many problems facing college language students. They are not given in any order chosen. All are important. The purpose behind listing them is to help language teachers **consider** them rather than to attempt to find answers to solve them:

- **Reasonable goals**

Second language teachers should choose realizable goals that meet students' needs. What do teachers reasonably expect students to learn to do in the typical classroom situation? What do students need to learn?

Sometimes teachers seem to lose touch with reality regarding what is possible in classroom situations. Conflict and frustration are certain to arise when teachers think only of producing bilinguals and students thinking only of satisfying a requirement by memorizing handouts prepared by some teachers or good students in literature and keys to exercises in grammar and comprehension to pass an exam. Teachers can choose activities that will enable students to develop communicative experience. There are nowadays a large number of books that are really interesting and useful, such as Headways, by John and Liz Soars, Projects by Tom Hutchinson (1987) and Breakthrough by Richards and Long (1977). All are courses in communicative practice.

- **Meaning**

Meaning should be the centre of classroom activities. How can second language teachers increase and maximize the use of language as a system of creating and recreating meaning-carrying messages?

Raimes (1983:539) maintains that teachers have paid little attention to real communication and to language as making meaning. Classroom second-language activities generally do not have any communicative context, purpose or focus. Instead both teachers and students spend their time concentrating on discrete elements of language usage or subject matter.

Teachers then should decrease the amount of time spent in classroom working with grammar and correcting errors in pronunciation and increase the amount of time communicating in the language.

- **Attitudes and emotion**

Maximum interest, participation and achievement are what teachers need to promote. How can teachers promote positive attitudes, emotions and feelings towards themselves, the class, and the language?

Teachers should encourage students to speak and interact with others in the class. Students must be willing to listen to others and to express their own thoughts and feelings.

- **Meaningful learning**

Students should comprehend what they are doing and why. How can teachers ensure that their students understand the material of the course linguistically and communicatively? McDonough (1981:73) emphasizes the teacher's role of helping 'the student to discover strategies for organizing his knowledge into meaningful hierarchies'. Anderson (1980: XVI) and Ausubel (1978:98) support this view of the importance of

organization of meaningful material into the students' current information network readily available for retrieval.

Among the useful books on comprehension that the researchers recommend are: Byrne, Donn's Functional Comprehension (1985), Davies and Whitney's Reasons for Reading (1979), Grellet's Developing Reading Skills (1988) and Jolly" Writing Tasks (1984).

- **Students' abilities**

Good learners are those who know how to learn. Wenden (1985:7) has noted that many enter the classroom completely unaware that they can observe, evaluate and change their own cognitive behaviour. However, one of the goals of instruction should be to develop inner-directed learning. Gaies (1983:190) suggests placing on students the responsibilities for negotiating with the teacher the input they need to comprehend the material. Students often seek to conceal their lack of comprehension from the teacher rather than indicating whether or not they understand.

Students should learn to develop personal learning strategies that are effective for them and their capabilities rather than memorizing the material. Wenden (ibid) recommended the following strategies:

1. to focus on the important aspects of the material to be learned,
2. to comprehend input,
3. to store for future use what have been learned,
4. to develop communication using the learned material.

- **Classroom activities**

Classroom activities should involve the students in the creation and recreation of meaning through language. Chastain (1988 :142) states that they should spend as much time as possible

converting either language to thoughts or thoughts to language. McDonough (1981:73) questions the common practice in second language classrooms in which teachers ask questions to students and students answer them . In his opinion, that is testing not teaching . One way to alleviate this problem is to limit the number of display questions asked and to increase the number of referential questions. Thus focus is on meaning rather than a display of memorized knowledge. Another way which the researchers have found useful is to involve the students in asking questions which they found obscure. This causes the students to activate their cognitive knowledge. Classroom activities are to be designed to focus on completing tasks that are mediated through language or involve negotiation of information and information sharing. (Richards and Rodgers: 2001: 165)

Littewood (1981:166) distinguishes between 'functional communication activities' and 'social interaction activities' as major activity types in communicative language teaching. The former include such tasks as learners comparing sets of pictures and noting similarities and differences; discovering missing features in a map or pictures; giving instructions; and solving problems from shared clues. The latter, i.e., social interaction activities, include conversation and discussion sessions, role playing, simulation, debates, and the like.

- **Participation**

A maximum number of students should be participating in communicative activities for a maximum amount of class time. How can teachers increase the amount of communicative practice students should have?

One answer is to establish a supportive classroom climate in which students feel free to participate. A second kind of

cooperative learning is to have the class divided into small groups to promote communication activities. These groups are sometimes called jigsaw groups. Each group member receives a different piece of information. Students, then, have to synthesize the information through discussion to supply the missing information-gap during interaction with partners.

• Machine-assisted Instruction

Computers, internets and video discs can play a great role in the development of second-language learning. Their successful use depends on (1) the teachers' ability to incorporate the software into the basic course structure, (2) the students' willingness to work with these machines and (3) the types of software available.

It is beyond doubt that the materials have to be relevant to the students' needs and interests, and they have to be at a suitable level of difficulty. Areas of second-language learning that seem suitable for computer programming are vocabulary learning and practice, grammar learning, culture and reading.

Another exciting technological advance is the use of satellite dishes to receive television programs in the second language. Students of the language can either watch the programs alive, or teachers can make and edit copies of programs for future use in their classes. Several colleges and institutes are now using this new technology to bring the real world of the second language into their classes. Most channels have nowadays programs on teaching English like English for Tomorrow,

There are also books like VIDEO ENGLISH, a series of six books, published by the British Council in 1989, accompanied by video cassettes and designed to extend and enhance the use of video English in the classroom and can also be used at home for self-

access work. There is also Cambridge Practice Tests for IELTS (self-study) by CUP 1999. This is appropriate for students wishing to improve their language skills on their own. It also contains answer keys.

• Intensive courses

Second language intensive courses for college students are a must. In these courses students may meet two hours three or four days a week. This will make a great difference in their mastery of the second language they are learning. These courses may be given in summer, or in the mid-year holidays. Students should remember that education is not synonymous with entertainment. The purpose of education is growth intellectually and socially.

Appendix 1
Fourth-Year Students' Questionnaire

Dear Student,

The following questionnaire aims at diagnosing weaknesses of the students at mastering the English language in the English language department. You are kindly asked to answer each item by encircling the most appropriate option v. good, good, fair or poor.

Thank you for your cooperation.

The Items
1. How is your speaking ability?   V.good   Good   Fair   Poor
2. How is your writing ability?   V.good   Good   Fair   Poor
3. How do you find the textbooks used?   V.good   Good   Fair   Poor
4. How do you find the teachers' ability in explaining the material?   V.good   Good   Fair   Poor
5. How do you estimate the teachers' use of audio-visual aids?   V.good   Good   Fair   Poor
6. How do you estimate the relationship between the academic subjects and future career?   V.good   Good   Fair   Poor
7. How do you estimate university life and personality growth?   V.good   Good   Fair   Poor
8. How do you estimate non-class

activities in developing your ability
in communication?
  V.good   Good   Fair   Poor

9. How is your participation in cultural
activities with other universities or
institutions?
  V.good   Good   Fair   Poor

10. How was your teaching practicing period?
  V.good   Good   Fair   Poor

11. Has it developed your language abilities?
  V.good   Good   Fair   Poor

12. How do you estimate your communication
in English outside the classroom?
  V.good   Good   Fair   Poor

13. How do you estimate your studying efforts?
  V.good   Good   Fair   Poor

14. What do you think of the department's
effort in raising students' standards?
  V.good   Good   Fair   Poor

15. How many hours do you spend in studying
a day ? Encircle the most suitable letter.
  A. 0ne   B. Two   C. Three   D. More

Appendix 2
Teachers' Questionnaire

Dear colleagues,

For better understanding of the pedagogical
situation at the college level, the researchers
kindly request you to complete the
questionnaire below which forms part of a
research paper concerning the current situation
of learning and teaching English in the Iraqi
universities. Thanks in advance.

     The researchers
     Nejat Al-Juboury
     Amira Kareem

Please either tick the correct choice or give a
short answer as required.

Personal Details
1. Field of specialization: Linguistics
                   Literature
                   Methodology

2. Certificate   Year   Country
   Ph.D
   M. A
   M. Ed

3. Number of years of teaching

4. Number and places of training courses
....

5. Number of participations in scientific
conferences
  A. Inside Iraq.........B. Abroad............

6. Number of research papers or other
publications accomplished so far ....

7. Participation in other state institutions as
part of cooperation between the university
and society.
   Kind
1. Teaching   2. Translation
3. Essay writing   4. Language advisor
5. Others

8. Teaching hours per week   ....

9.   Resources available for use
     Audio- visual aids   non/ sufficient/not s.
     Library facility
     Computer and Internet
     Language lab hours

10. The techniques used in teaching
1. Presenting the material by yourself ....
2. Letting the students present the
material and you comment on it   ....
3. Presenting the material by asking
and commenting on the answers   ....
4. Encouraging group work   ....
5. Enhancing thinking and self expressing
by using problem solving technique.......
6. Accompanying your students to a setting
related to the material in discussion
Never.....Sometimes.....Many times......
7. Taking them to the library to show
them books available in their field
of study, the reference books , and
how to the full use of the library. ....
None......sometimes.........regularly......
8. Asking students to prepare research
papers for discussion.
Always......sometimes........never......
9. Refreshing your knowledge with new
techniques and application
Sometimes.......Regularly......Never......

11. The non-class activities are
     Available and sufficient   ......
     Available but not sufficient   ......
     Not available at all   ......

12. Are you in need for in-service
training courses? ......

13 What training courses would like to take? ....,.........,.........,.........,.........,..........
14 The courses that need more time to be mastered in your view point are ....,.........,.........,.........,..........

Bibliography

Al-Sabaah newspaper (2004) Issue No:403 on 3rd of November, 2004.

Al-Sabaah newspaper (2004). Issue No: 416 on the 24th November 2004.

Anderson, J. (1980). Cognitive Psychology and Its Implications. San Francisco: W.H. Freeman.

Ausubel, D. (1978) Educational Psychology: A cognitive View. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Brandsford, J.(1979) Human Cognition: Learning, Understanding, and Remembering. Belmont, Ca., Wadsworth Publishing Company.

Bunting, J. (1973) 'CEDO'S Approach to Problems of Innovation In Education', Seminar on Problems of Innovation in Education.

Chastain, K. (1988). Developing Second-Language Skills. HBJ. USA

Gaies, S. (1983) 'Learner Feedback: An Exploratory Study of Its Role in the Second Language Classroom'. In H. W. Seliger and A.H. Long (Eds.) Classroom Oriented Research in SL Acquisition. Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, pp. 190-212. Held at the Centre for Educational Development Overseas. London. 12-30th March 1973.

Hunt, M. (1980) The Universe Within. New York. Simon and Schuster.

Hutchinson, T. (1987) Project English 1,2 &3. OUP

John & Liz Soars (1989) Headway.OUP.

Lazerson, M. (1986) 'Review of 'A Study of High Schools" Harvard Education Review.56

Littlewood, W. (1981) Communicative Language Teaching. CUP

McDonough , S. ((1981). Psychology in Foreign Language Teaching. London: George Allen and Unwin.

Raimes, A. (1983) 'Tradition and Revolution in ESL Teaching'. TESOL Quarterly, 17: 535-49

Richards, J. and M. Long (1977) Breakthrough 1,2,&3 ., OUP

Richards, J and T. Rodgers (2001) Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching 2nd Ed. CUP.

Rivers , W. (1980) Teaching Foreign Language Skills 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Shapiro, H. (1983). 'Are Schools for Learning?' Education Digest,59:1315

Thomson,S. (1984) 'America Discovers Its Schools: Why Now? Is The Boost Transitory?' NASSP Bulletin, 68:1-5.

Wagner, R. and R., Sternberg (1984) 'Alternative Conceptions of Intelligence and Their Implications for Education'. Review of Educational Research, 54:179-223.

Wenden, D. (1985) 'Learner Strategies'. TESOL Newsletter, 19:1, 4-5, 7

Wittrock, M. (1980). 'Learning and the Brain.' In Wittrock (Ed.), The Brain and Psychology. New York: Academic Press, pp. 371-403.

Yellin,D. (1983). 'Left Brain, Right Brain, Super Brain: the Holistic Model.' Reading World, 23:36-44

مشاكل تعليم وتعلم اللغة الأنكليزية
في المرحلة الجامعية في العراق: الصورة والواقع

نجاة الجبوري   اميرة عبادي كريم
قسم اللغة الانكليزية – كلية التربية للبنات – جامعة بغداد

ملخص البحث

يهدف البحث الموسوم (مشاكل تعليم و تعلم اللغة الأنكليزية في المرحلة الجامعية في العراق : الصورة والواقع) الى عرض المستوى الحقيقي لطالبات قسم اللغة الأنكليزية واسباب ضعفهم ويعزو ذلك الى الضـروف التي مر بها العراق وتاثير ذلك على عملية التعلم و التعليم ويبحث الجزء الثاني من البحث في موقف الطلبة و التدريسيين من اللغة وطرق تدريسها اما الجزء الثالث فيتطرق الى اهم المشاكل التي تواجه الطالب الجـامعي و كذلك الأستاذ و يقدم بعض المقترحات لتجاوزها