



p-ISSN: 1652 - 7189

e-ISSN: 1658 - 7472

Issue No.: 20 ... Muharram 1441 H – September 2019

Albaha University Journal of Human Sciences

Periodical - Academic - Refereed

Published by Albaha University

017 7223212 دار المنار للطباعة

Email: buj@bu.edu.sa

<https://portal.bu.edu.sa/ar/web/bujhs>



المملكة العربية السعودية

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رصد (النشر الإلكتروني): ١٦٥٢-٧٤٧٢

رصد: ١٦٥٢-٧١٨٩

العدد العشرون ... مجرم ١٤٤١ هـ - سبتمبر ٢٠١٩ م

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ص. ب: 1988

هاتف: 00966 17 7250341 / 00966 17 7274411

تحويلة: 1314

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الموقع الإلكتروني: https://portal.bu.edu.sa/ar/web/bujhs

Comparison of the Student-Teacher Ratio in the Primary Schools of Saudi Arabia with Other Countries in the Context of Second Language Acquisition: 2007-2015

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Abstract:

The aim of this paper is to first compare the student-teacher ratios of primary schools in Saudi Arabia with other countries in the context of second language acquisition (SLA), and secondly, compare the findings with that of other countries where English is the native language, English as a foreign language (EFL), or English as a second language (ESL). A critical review of literature related to student-teacher ratio concerning language acquisition has been done. Generally, a ratio of 15 is indicated as desirable in a number of research works. However, its validity needs to be verified across different learning environments. Upon accepting the desirable ratio of 15, the available UNESCO data on student-teacher ratios of 79 countries was compared with that of Saudi Arabia for the period of 2007-2015. Saudi Arabia's ratio of 10.97 compared well with the ratio of most of the developed countries. EFL and high-income status of Saudi Arabia with the country's low ratio are highly favourable to achieve high English language competency by the majority of its population. This is vital to reach the country's goals towards its Vision 2030. Some lines of future works, not specifically limited to the case of Saudi Arabia, have been indicated. Likewise, some limitations of this work have been stated.

Keywords: Saudi Elementary Education, Primary School, English Language Learning, Class Size, Student-Teacher Ratio.

مقارنة نسب أعداد معلمي المرحلة الابتدائية إلى أعداد الطلاب بالمملكة العربية السعودية ومقارنتها مع دول

أخرى في سياق اكتساب اللغة الثانية: دراسة للأعوام ٢٠١٥/٢٠٠٧

د. عبد العزيز بن مشبب الشهراني

أستاذ اللغويات التطبيقية المساعد بقسم اللغة الإنجليزية

كلية الآداب والعلوم الإنسانية بجامعة الباحة

الملخص:

تهدف هذه الدراسة في المقام الأول إلى مقارنة نسبة أعداد المعلمين إلى الطلاب بالمدارس الابتدائية بالمملكة العربية السعودية مع تلك النتائج الواردة عن بلدان أخرى وذلك فيما يخص اكتساب اللغة الثانية، ثم مقارنة هذه النتائج مع النتائج الخاصة بدول أخرى تتعامل مع اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أساسية، أو كلغة ثانية، أو كلغة أجنبية، وتمت في هذه الدراسة المراجعة النقدية للأدبيات والدراسات السابقة، وكان الإجماع في كثير من هذه الدراسات على أن النسبة العددية ممثلة بالرقم: ١٥ تمثل العدد والنسبة المثالية لنسبة المعلم الواحد إلى عدد الطلاب، ومع ذلك فإن مصداقية هذه النسبة بحاجة إلى تثبت أكثر وذلك بتعريضها إلى بيانات تعلم مختلفة، وبناءً على قبول هذه النسبة، فقد تم جمع البيانات المنشورة من قبل اليونسكو (UNESCO) والمتعلقة بنسبة أعداد المعلمين إلى الطلاب في ٧٩ دولة، ومن ثم مقارنة هذه الأرقام بالبيانات الخاصة بالمملكة العربية السعودية في الفترة ما بين الأعوام ٢٠٠٧ - ٢٠١٥. أما فيما يخص النسبة الواردة عن المملكة العربية السعودية فقد كانت: ١٠,٩٧ وهي نسبة جيدة مقارنة بكثير من الدول الصناعية المتقدمة. وفي ضوء الدخل العالي للمملكة العربية السعودية، وتعاملها مع اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية إضافة إلى النسبة المنخفضة لعدد المعلمين إلى الطلاب في المملكة العربية السعودية، نجد أن هذه العوامل ككل تصب في مصلحة إتقان أغلبية السكان للغة الإنجليزية بصورة جيدة. مثل هذا الأمر، سيشكل أهمية عالية للوصول إلى أهداف رؤية المملكة العربية السعودية ٢٠٣٠. وتم ذكر بعض من التوصيات الخاصة بالدراسات المستقبلية والتي قد تكون موضع دراسة سواء في السياق السعودي أو غيره. كذلك تمت الإشارة إلى حدود هذه الدراسة البحثية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المدارس الابتدائية بالمملكة العربية السعودية؛ المدارس الابتدائية؛ تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية؛ حجم الفصل الدراسي؛ نسبة

أعداد المعلمين إلى الطلاب.

Introduction

Student-teacher ratio indicates the relationship between the number of students in the learning context and the number of full-time equivalent teachers who are involved in the same setting. Since the denominator is always 1, the ratio can be expressed in absolute numbers. Thus, a ratio of 10 means 10:1, 10 students per one full time equivalent of teachers. The full time equivalent (FTE) is counted as: one full time teacher equals 1, two part-time teachers are arguably equivalent to one full time teacher. There is no categorisation within part-time teachers, as accounting for the exact teaching hours, and converting that number to full time equivalency complicates the issue. The context may be one school (all, primary, secondary, public or private), college, university, a district, state or country. It can be expanded to global regions, countries, funding, socio-economic status, culture and other variables. Some of these points are discussed in Edglossary (2013).

The aim of this paper is to first compare the student-teacher ratios of primary schools in Saudi Arabia with other countries in the context of (SLA), and secondly, compare the findings to countries where English is the native language, (EFL), or (ESL) contexts.

1.1. Theoretical Basis

There is much debate on the issue of class size versus cost of education regarding student performance. Noting this point, Wang (2014) analysed this issue in detail. Instructional design and teaching style may be an important factor here. Inadequate and poor quality of interactions of teachers with students may be a matter of concern in the case of large classrooms. Research evidence on the relationship between class size and performance is mixed. Although the general trend is in favour of lower ratios (as discussed in section 2.1), there is at least one meta-analytical review by Slavin (1990) showing that student performance is independent of class size at least in post-secondary education. It is assumed that students at this level have higher learning capabilities than students in primary schools. Thus, the class-size performance relationship might be determined by many factors. Some of these factors are discussed in the following review of the literature. Accordingly, learning theory assumes higher efficiency of teaching and learning in smaller classes, which may not hold true always.

2. Literature Review

Available literature on student-teacher ratios related to some general aspects of language acquisition and specifically related to various types of second language learning, was reviewed. Google scholar was the main search engine among other scholarly academic search facilities. The first five pages of Google Scholar were searched preferring any time first and repeated for latest papers preferring recent years. A total of 30 usable papers were obtained. These are discussed below.

2.1 Class size and performance

According to Glass (1992), smaller class sizes (lower student-teacher ratio) can enhance student performance achievements, facilitates adaptation of learning programmes to individual learner needs; the students are interested in learning more and better teacher morale. In smaller classes, there is a chance to increase individual's attention by teachers and students who would attend the classes better. Although these observations were general, they are also arguably and equally true for ESL/EFL classes.

Disparities in access to small schools and small classes (low student-teacher ratio) are increasing the disparities in performances of white and non-white minority students in the USA. Based on these observations, Darling-Hammond (2004) recommends a number of steps for equalisation of funding and opportunities in all the states of the USA.

In a study of elementary second grade school students, Vaughn, et al. (2003), observed that the smaller the grouping of students is, (narrower student-teacher ratio), the more effective the reading skill's outcomes were in terms of phoneme segmentation, fluency, and comprehension during the intervention and in the follow up for 4-5 weeks after intervention. Student-teacher ratios of 1:1 and 3:1 were better than 1:10. However, even the widest ratio was well within the desirable ratio. Hence, the results may not be applicable to general situations when there is a need to reduce the

numbers from ratios of 35 or higher. On the other hand, as was shown in the section dealing with the theoretical basis (Slavin, 1990), there are contradictory findings as well.

2.2 Student-Teacher ratios in general

As early as 1969, Asher (1969) observed that less than one in thirty of the Americans appointed to foreign countries know how to speak the local language. He cited the opinion of numerous experts to revise the curriculum of second language as per Berlitz School or the Defence Language Institute. However, he ascribed the effectiveness of these schools to student-teacher ratio as one factor. The ratios were 1 in Berlitz and 8 in Defence school. The usual ratio in other schools was 25.

High student-teacher ratios inhibit assisted learning. Effective assisted learning is characterised by the teachers' knowledge of the characteristics and the needs of each student and using this information in teaching them. These observations were made by Tharp and Gallimore (1991) in the context of teachers assisting the learners through instructional conversations in second language learning situations.

Effect of class size (large 125 and small 25) on online Spanish language learning experiences of students and teachers in a higher education context was evaluated by Russell and Curtis (2013). Surveying the students and teachers was conducted. The students of large classes were less satisfied with their learning experience. Large classroom sizes affected the extent and quality of interactions amongst the students, and between the students and their instructors. The ability of the teachers to create a positive environment for learning was lower in large classrooms, leading to an underutilisation of the teacher's expertise.

2.3 English Language Learners (ELL) and student-teacher ratios

English language learners prefer to go to public schools that have low standardised test scores. These schools have poor student achievements not only in English, but in other languages too. Almost all of them have high student-teacher ratio with a high level of poor student enrolments. In schools, where ELL students are in large proportions, their isolation into separate groups (thus reducing student-teacher ratio of general and ELL classrooms) improved the ELL student performance in English as well as in other subjects. These findings were obtained by Fry (2008) in an analysis of a national level data.

While analysing and discussing various data and research evidence, García, Jensen, and Scribner (2009) observed that low student-teacher ratio is more favourable for ELL of language minority students in the USA. In the USA, providing adequate English language skills to language minority students is democratically imperative; about 20% of its population belong to this category.

Student-teacher ratio was a predictor of disproportionality among English language learners only in the case of emotionally disturbed students, according to the data obtained by Sullivan (2011). The author was investigating the disproportionality in the identification and placement of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special schools.

Interventions based on small groups of three to six participating students and low student-teacher ratio, and explicit phonics-based instruction showed significant improvements in reading skills of the first grade students in a US study by Kamps and Greenwood (2005). Both experimental and comparison schools contained ELL students in their student population.

In their study, Brooks, Adams, and Morita-Mullaney (2010) noted that the effectiveness of ELL teaching is low because only 325 teachers were certified to teach the 46,417 ELLs in Indiana schools, resulting in an effective student-teacher ratio of 143 students to one licensed ELL teacher. In the context of competency differences between ELL and native English speaking students, this wide student-teacher ratio becomes a serious issue. Other problems related to the treatment of ELL teacher by school management and various school factors were also discussed.

No significant differences between small groups and one-to-one teaching was noted in oral reading fluency of the struggling ELL second grader students in a US study by Ross and Begeny (2015).

Class size, particularly, affected pacing and attention of the students (Garcia, 2016). In this qualitative study in a middle school setting, there were eight teachers with their number of students varying from 22 to 38. There were 5-15% ELL students among these students.

In a Chinese secondary school, with student-teacher ratio of 3 for ELL learning, the preferred corrective feedbacks on written assignments was evaluated by Li and He (2017). Indirect corrective feedback was used by most teachers and was most preferred by both students and teachers. Why a written feedback is significant when there were only three students per teacher is not clear.

In her paper, Conteh-Morgan (2002) cited Helms (1995) that a small student-teacher ratio, partnered with the teachers' enthusiasm, patience, warm reception and personalised acceptance and concern for each student is the ideal environment for ESL learning.

Interventions to reduce the student-teacher ratio from the normal 21-25 to 12-15 in ESL environments improved the reading performance of the students, but mediated by classroom events in the first results of SAGE programme in Wisconsin presented by Molnar, et al. (1999).

An exploratory study was undertaken by Harfitt (2012) using case studies, interviews with the students and classroom observations in 8th and 9th grades of four Hong Kong secondary schools. The study concluded that the reduction of classroom sizes (from conventional student-teacher ratio of 38-41 to the ratio of 21-25) aided to facilitate the removal of English language learning anxiety of a number of Chinese students, and resulted in more positive learning experiences. It was noticed that smaller classroom sizes encouraged stronger security perceptions in classrooms. It also weakened negative perceptions about peers and teachers and their classrooms. Smaller classes also increased the students' confidence for participation in learning English.

Online learning component in blended English learning environment is not bound by student-teacher ratio of traditional classrooms. This factor led Horn and Staker (2011) to suggest the eradication of rules limiting classroom sizes and student-teacher ratio by all states, which would also remove the geographical boundaries.

The negative impact of the large classroom sizes of 40-59 students on the ESL learning context in Kenyan schools was expressed by the schools' teachers and principals, in a study using multiple methods by Ndethiu, Masingila, Miheso-O'Connor, Khatete, and Heath (2017).

In Saudi Arabia, English has an official status as the primary foreign language. Veerappan, Yusof, and Aris (2013) explained the distinction between ESL and EFL. Commonly, English is spoken and used as a second language (ESL) in countries which were either British or American colonies (e.g., India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, and Singapore, Philippines, Nigeria, Pakistan, South Africa and the like). Other countries, which were not colonised by either the British or Americans, commonly, do not have English institutionalised as a second language; in these countries, English is a foreign language or EFL. This definition has also been used to classify countries and EFL or ESL in the data analysis. English is mandatory to be taught as a second language in the Saudi public and private schools. English is taught in the primary, intermediate and secondary school levels. The average student-teacher ratio is 20:1 for the entire schools and a teacher is responsible for 150-200 students. These observations were made by Al-Seghayer (2014). However, in another paper by Alghamdi and Saud (2013) the interview participant teachers commented about the high student-teacher ratio of 40-50 per class in small classrooms as a saliently negative aspect affecting the efficiency of EFL practices in the country.

Alsaudi (2015) noted wide variations in definitions of class sizes. Small sizes of 38 (Scheck, Kinicki, & Webster, 1994), not more than 30 (Gibbs, Lucas, & Simonite, 1996), 8-15 (Nye, Hedges, & Konstantopoulos, 2000) and 15 (Finn & Achilles, 1999) have been proposed as definitions. For regular classes 22 (Finn & Achilles, 1999) and for large classes, 70 (Gibbs, Lucas, and Simonite 1996) have also been proposed. The average class size in Saudi public schools, which teach English as EFL, was 45, and it was 20 in private schools. However, these estimates may not be conclusively reliable.

2.4 Can language teaching policy dependent upon student- teacher ratios?

Slavin (1990) pointed out that the size requirement depends on teaching goals. If the goal is only knowledge transmission, the teacher only needs to give a complete knowledge about the topic in a logical manner. This is achieved by an effective lecture, for which class size may not be a matter of concern. If the goal was relevant to deeper and critical understanding of the topic, smaller classes are more effective. The lecture will contain many different angles of the topic, even including research elements. In larger classes, evaluation occurs through examinations. In smaller classes, it is an ongoing process throughout the duration of the course.

2.5. Saudi Vision 2030 and English education

Details of a national Vision 2030 were announced by the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman on 25 April 2016 (Saudi Gazette, 2016). Reduction from dependence on oil, economic diversification, and development of public sectors in education, health, infrastructure, tourism and recreation are the main goals. The activities consist of reinforcing economic and investment activities, increasing non-oil industry trade between countries through goods and consumer products, and increasing government spending on the military, manufacturing equipment and ammunition. All these require enhancement of Saudi skills substantially to match the levels of developed countries. Modern methods of education, especially to acquire high levels of English language skills and training are some of the main routes to implement this shift.

2.6 Relationship of language teaching policy with student-teacher ratio in Saudi Arabia

English language skills are needed for dealing with international components of national economic development and for communications with the non-Arab countries. In the present Saudi education system, English is introduced as a second language at the primary school level. Large number of children are expected to enrol in primary schools at this level every year. Hence, class sizes are essentially large especially in public schools. The primary level children can be taught only English at the basic levels of knowledge and skills. So, the classes are lectures by the teacher. Basic knowledge can be lectured to large classes (Wang, 2014). Hence, instructing basic English language skills to large population of children as the first step of skill enhancement. Arguably, this method might be compatible with the learning theory discussed above which could contribute to the achievement of the goal of Vision 2030.

2.7 Study rationale

Most works were done in the ELL context of the USA. ELL can be considered as a similar term to ESL or EFL, as acquisition of the English language competency is necessary for all of those who are living in the USA, but are not native English speakers. There were a couple of works related to the context of Saudi Arabia (Al-Seghayer, 2014; Alghamdi & Saud, 2013).

It is clear from the above review of literature that small classes and lower student-teacher ratio facilitate the language acquisition process of students in schools. This conclusion is applicable to the primary, intermediate and secondary schools. There is a general agreement on 15 or less as the optimal student-teacher ratio for effective teaching and learning in different language acquisition contexts.

There are no studies which compare countries with respect to their student-teacher ratio in the context of second language acquisition. This is the gap that this research has aimed to address.

3. Methodology

No separate data for student-teacher ratios of language acquisition in different countries was available. Therefore, it was assumed that, and under the general school contexts, the country's means of the student-teacher ratio was also applicable to language acquisition/learning contexts. Only the primary school data was the focus of this paper. Hence, only such data was collected.

This is a primary research in which the secondary data was collected from UNESCO (Brown & Rodgers, 2002). Student-teacher ratios of different countries were compiled on student and teacher populations. Continuous data for Saudi Arabia was available only from 2007-2015. For comparison, the continuous data on student-teacher ratios of another 79 countries were available for 2007-2015. Descriptive statistics and t-test comparing Saudi Arabia with each country was done.

The mean pupil to teacher ratio was calculated using the whole year data from 2007-2015 for each of the countries. Summary statistics (e.g., mean) were calculated for each country and for the income groups associated with each country.

A one sample t-test is a suitable technique to test the mean of a variable significantly differs from a specified mean (Katz, 2011). The specified mean in this content is the mean pupil to teacher ratio for Saudi Arabia. This technique was utilised to compare the mean pupil to teacher ratios of all countries in the sample with Saudi Arabia. A commonly used .05 level of significance was used as the criteria for statistical significance (Katz, 2011)

The results of the data analysis are presented and discussed in the results section.

4. Findings

The descriptive statistics of all countries and their comparisons with Saudi Arabia (last three columns) are given in Table 1 (Appendix). The languages of countries have been given as per the following criteria-

The website Info Please (2017) gives the languages spoken in most countries of the world. The languages spoken in all countries were obtained from this website.

In classifying for languages, where English is spoken, the language is acquired as a native language and other participants learn it as ELL. Where the language learning category is given as English, ELL is implied for non-English speaking communities in these countries. In the case of other countries, where English is used as one of the spoken languages and/or business/government and other daily uses, the language is learned as a second language and hence, ESL contexts. In the case of the remaining countries, English is not a part of any official language usages anywhere in these countries. In that case, if someone learns English, it is a foreign language, hence EFL contexts.

The t-test showed significant differences between the mean ratio for most countries and Saudi Arabia; the mean difference between Saudi Arabia, Austria, Brunei Darussalam, Latvia and Qatar was not significant. There were no abnormal patterns in the time series data for the various countries, which could vitiate the results.

However, the mean values, given in Table 3, show significantly higher student-teacher ratio for EFL and ESL countries compared to native (ELL) countries, while the difference between EFL & ESL means and that of ELL was not significant.

Table 3
Mean student-teacher ratio of native (ELL), EFL and ESL categories of countries.

Country Category	Mean
Native (ELL)	19.78
EFL	23.80
ESL	22.51
Saudi Arabia	10.97

The literature review indicated a student-teacher ratio of 15 as desirable for an effective learning setting. By means of this criterion, the number of countries, which are within the ratio of 15, are given in Table 4.

Table 4
Number of countries which are within the desirable student-teacher ratio of 15 or less than 15.

Country Category	Total Number	Number of Countries with Student-Teacher Ratio <15
Native (ELL)	8	3
EFL	48	14
ESL	24	9

Native (ELL) and ESL have similar proportion of countries with ratio lower than 15 and were higher than that of EFL. However, the small number of Native (ELL) samples limits the validity of this conclusion. Hence, this is only an indication of a trend.

It appears that other factors such as the size of the population and its density, and the inhabited region of the total land of the country determine the student enrolment and thus, affect the indicated ratio. Highly populated states with more land area under human occupation with higher density

have a higher ratio. Countries that have lower population densities due to large areas under deserts and marshes seem to have a lower ratio. Direct evidence for this will be difficult from such a small study.

However, the data obtained in this study shows the effect of the economic category of the country. The data was classified into income groups of the nations as given by the UNESCO database. The descriptive statistics of this analysis are presented in Table 5.

Table 5
Average Pupil to Teacher Ratio - 2007 to 2015 by Country Income Group.

Income Group	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Low income	12	31.22	76.06	46.50	13.22
Lower middle income	19	15.94	47.69	26.18	8.86
Upper middle income	24	9.26	32.92	19.06	5.80
High income	25	8.79	20.41	13.12	2.81
Saudi Arabia	High income	10.54	11.43	10.97	0.29

Interestingly, sample sizes rise up with the increased income status of the countries. It might be related to better reporting from the higher income category of countries for all the years of the study period. Minimum, maximum and mean and standard deviations of ratio decreased with the increasing national income levels. It cannot be said whether there were any sample size effects on the values. Saudi Arabia lies under the high-income group as per the UNESCO standards. This may mean, with better educational infrastructure and facilities, lower population size and density, high-income group countries are able to achieve the desirable student-teacher ratio through lower student enrolment in their large number of schools.

Within the high-income group, Saudi Arabia's mean value of 10.97 was compared well with the ratio of other countries. Table 6 gives the mean student-teacher ratio of other high-income group countries.

Table 6
Comparison of Mean Student-Teacher Ratio of Saudi Arabia with the Means of other High Income Group Countries.

Country	Mean Student-Teacher Ratio
Andorra	9.82
Austria	11.13
Belgium	11.17
Brunei Darussalam	11.36
Cyprus	14.07
Finland	13.86
Germany	12.53
Hong Kong SAR, China	15.20
Hungary	10.53
Japan	17.55
Korea, Republic	20.41
Kuwait	8.79
Latvia	11.15
Lithuania	12.77
Macao SAR, China	16.04
Poland	10.03
Portugal	11.76
Qatar	11.12
Saudi Arabia	10.97
Seychelles	13.02
Slovak Republic	15.40
Spain	12.71
St. Kitts and Nevis	14.70
United Kingdom	17.80
U S A	14.08

Out of 25 high-income countries in the sample, four countries, Andorra, Hungary, Kuwait and Poland, had lower ratio than that of Saudi Arabia and all of them significantly differed from Saudi Arabia. Only six out of the 25 high-income group countries had ratio higher than the desirable ratio, 15.

5. Discussion

The review of literature indicated a student-teacher ratio of 15 (Finn & Achilles, 1999; Nye, Hedges, & Konstantopoulos, 2000) as desirable for effective SLA. Advantages of small class sizes were identified in various research works (Garcia, 2016). The better control of the class, individual attention, better interaction with the students, removal of second language learning anxiety, better corrective feedbacks and better teaching efficiency contribute to better outcomes of language acquisition (Harfitt, 2012; Glass, 1992). Although one-to-one teaching was tried, it is only more effective than slightly higher ratio when handling individual learning disabilities or emotionally disturbed students (Ross & Begeny, 2015).

Given these advantages, public schools with higher ratio are preferred especially by parents of poor background as private schools are costlier. However, even when the class sizes are high, the effect of small classes can be achieved by dividing them into convenient groups. Very few schools seem to have attempted to apply this method (Vaughn, et al., 2003). Higher enrolment in public schools is a common feature in most developing countries and so is the case with Saudi Arabia.

Lack of qualified teachers to teach the second language may be a serious problem. The available teachers are required to handle large classes and more courses. Thus, the shortage of qualified teachers would become an influential factor for a higher ratio and lower effectiveness of SLA (Brooks, Adams, & Morita-Mullaney, 2010). Inadequacies of English language teaching skills and the need to train ESL teachers at all levels in Saudi Arabia were stressed by Al-Seghayer (2014).

One barrier to decrease the ratio is the high amount of resources required for such a low ratio. To run the school profitably, enrolment of the students needs to be high. That means more teachers, more classrooms and more learning materials. If the school does not have sufficient resources, it is likely to retain a high ratio. One good solution for inadequate resources being a barrier to decrease the ratio is to implement E-learning as a blended learning system. The students will attend high ratio classes; but they work on their lessons at home using internet technology, supplementing classroom lectures (Brooks, Adams, & Morita-Mullaney, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2004). This attempt does not seem to have been trialled in Saudi Arabia.

In the Saudi context, the usual ratio reported for all schools, whether primary, intermediate or secondary, was 20. There are some schools in Saudi where 40-50 students are crammed into small classrooms. For example, Al-Seghayer (2014) has cited that public schools in Saudi seem to have a high ratio around 45. This issue seriously disturbs the effectiveness of language learning and outcomes. The reported data related to the ratio of 20 may not be very reliable.

Although the literature review showed the tendency of higher ratio than the desirable 15 in Saudi Arabia, the UNESCO database showed the mean ratio of primary schools over the period of 2007-2015 to be only 10.97. No data was available to examine whether the lower ratio for primary schools increases through intermediate to high schools, so that the overall ratio of all schools is 45 in Saudi Arabia. In that case, the ratio of high schools, presumably, ought to be rather high.

Considering the mean ratio of Native (ELL), EFL and ESL countries, the ratio of Saudi Arabia (10.97) was much lower than the means for the Native (ELL), EFL and ESL countries. Due to the cultural factors, some parents hesitate to send their children to study at the so-called "international schools". Thus, the student enrolment could be lower than other similar countries. On the other hand, the Islamic religious schools are bound to have high ratio as the religion endorses every Muslim in the country to attend such schools. It is not clear whether these schools are included in the ratio calculations of the reported high ratios.

Saudi Arabia is an EFL country. The mean of the student-teacher ratio of Saudi Arabia is less than the desirable 15. There were 13 more countries in the category of EFL nations. EFL countries outnumbered English Native (ELL) countries and ESL countries. The majority of ESL nations

were former British colonies and they were using English besides their native languages for business and other communication purposes. Some of them even recognised English as a second official language. Unfortunately, many of these countries, like India for example, had to be excluded, as continuous data for the period of study, 2007-2015, was not available. Saudi Arabia was not colonised by any western country and the question of the country being an ESL one does not necessarily arise. However, competency in the acquisition of the English language is given a prime importance as a secondary language to Arabic as was mentioned in the works related to the country. Therefore, English is widely taught as an EFL.

Being in the high-income group means, Saudi Arabia is equated with developed countries such as the USA, UK etc. The high-income group also means there is no problem of resources. If there is a strong political will, and appropriate policies and strategies are implemented efficiently, the country can achieve what it desires. The Vision 2030 released in 2016 (Rashad, 2016) has several ambitious educational competency targets, in which increasing effectiveness of English education is a major component, and it is possible with the country's low student-teacher ratio.

Among the high-income group, the student-teacher ratio of Saudi Arabia is lower than that of most countries. Only four countries, Andorra, Hungary, Kuwait and Poland, ratio were lower than that of Saudi Arabia. There is no apparent reason why the ratio for these four countries are lower than Saudi. This is something that future research can explore. Six out of 25 high-income countries had their ratio higher than the desirable 15.

It should be noted that, the number 15 is not sacrosanct or absolute. It is not even certain whether the declared desirable number is valid across all second language learning environments of all countries. It also may not mean that the lower the ratio is, the higher the effectiveness theory holds within it an indefinite truth. There could be a ratio below which SLA is not effective. Some experimental findings using different ratio showed no significant difference between one-to-one ratio (of 1) and a ratio of 3 or 5. Only limited ratios were tested in these works. So, an optimum ratio could not be obtained from these works.

6. Implications of the Findings for English Language Teaching

The findings obtained from the analysis of the secondary quantitative data reiterate the advantages of low student-teacher ratio. Although the ratio is only 10.97 for primary schools in Saudi Arabia, the reported overall ratio of 45 indicates much higher ratios at higher levels of education (intermediate and high school levels.) This means that, Saudi Arabia needs to focus on reducing the ratios to below 15 at higher school levels.

Saudi Arabia is in the process of implementing its Vision 2030 (Saudi Gazette, 2016), which has certain elements that focus on enhancing the knowledge competence of its citizens. This move can only be achieved by enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of the education system, especially its EFL module. The increased number of qualified teachers and the availability of resources are two components of the required actions in this regard. Lack of both factors are barriers of reducing student-teacher ratios to 15 as well. Hence, implementing the Saudi Vision 2030 to achieve the targets of increasing the number of qualified teachers and providing adequate budgetary support for funds and other resources, especially in high school and higher levels, can help to achieve the double targets of lowering student-teacher ratios to 15 and enhancing the knowledge competence. Reducing the ratio to 15, will increase the efficiency and effectiveness of education. Some of the best practices of successful countries can be adapted for use in Saudi Arabia.

The beneficial effects of Saudi strategies reducing the ratio to 15 should prompt other countries with higher ratios to adapt the Saudi practices to their contexts. Thus, a Saudi model will evolve and can guide other countries in increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of their educational processes.

7. Conclusion

There is arguably enough evidence that lower student-teacher ratio contributes to better SLA in any country. A desirable ratio of 15 has been proposed. However, its validity across several second

language environments needs to be verified in future research. It is also not known how low the ratio can be below 15. Factors related to these ratios are yet to be researched well.

There is a lack of systematic information on student-teacher ratio and factors influencing them in any given country, and in the Saudi context as well. An added dimension, to the case of Saudi Arabia, may be its strong Islamic character that might have some effects on the student enrolment and ratio.

From the analysis of UNESCO data, Saudi Arabia seems to have already one of the lowest mean student-teacher ratio in its primary schools. It is not certain whether the ratio is applicable to its SLA environments too. As an EFL and high-income country, Saudi Arabia is well positioned to enhance the effectiveness of the EFL learning and acquisition of English language competency by learners maintaining or even increasing the ratio to 15.

The need for further works in some related areas have been indicated in the above discussions. Some studies on the relationship of demographic factors, geographical distribution and percentage of human habitat areas with student enrolment and its impact on the ratio is one area of future research. Effect of cultural and religious factors on the student enrolment and ratio is another aspect for future research. How exactly the availability of resources can affect student intake, appointment of teachers, infrastructure and learning materials needs to be investigated well.

Most importantly, there is a need to collect reliable data on a number of students and teachers in each school each year; an integration of these data at various levels adds up to the country's level. These data can also be reported to UNESCO so that the data can be accessed by researchers.

Saudi Arabia had continuous data only from 2007 to 2015. Many other important countries could not be included because they did not have such data. This has limited the samples to 80 countries.

The non-availability of ratio data, specifically on SLA, imposed assumptions, which may not be particularly valid. There was severe dearth of data on important variables related to the ratio in the case of Saudi Arabia, which limited the scope of comparison with other countries only on student-teacher ratio. Other variables affecting it could not be compared.

Another area of research is to look for the validity of the two Saudi research studies mentioned previously (Al-Seghayer, 2014; Alsauidi, 2015) and validate them against the UNESCO's report, as they appear contradictory. If the UNESCO report is assumed correct and the two studies are valid, then it is likely that the teachers and the students are not well-distributed in the country. Saudi Arabia must operate its full potential resources in order to reach its reported ratio and make it reflected in reality rather than in numbers and reports. It is advised that the Ministry of Education should take a note about this to contribute to the Saudi Vision 2030.

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APPENDIX

Table 1

Average Pupil to Teacher Ratio - 2007 to 2015 and statistical significance of each country in comparison with Saudi Arabia.

Country Name	Learning Language Category	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD	T	df	Sig.
Algeria	Other, EFL	23.00	23.93	23.36	0.3	117.245	7	<.001
Andorra	Other, EFL	9.33	10.33	9.82	0.36	-9.074	7	<.001
Austria	Other, EFL	10.70	11.86	11.13	0.44	1.012	7	0.345
Azerbaijan	Other, EFL	11.04	12.62	11.61	0.57	3.156	7	0.016
Belarus	Other, EFL	14.91	16.48	15.39	0.56	22.435	7	<.001
Belgium	Other, EFL	11.03	11.24	11.17	0.06	8.856	7	<.001
Belize	English (official)	21.56	22.88	22.35	0.43	74.053	7	<.001
Brazil	Other- ESL	20.52	23.86	21.96	1.16	26.801	7	<.001
Brunei Darussalam	Malay, ESL	10.15	12.67	11.36	0.98	1.112	7	0.303
Bulgaria	Other, EFL	15.94	17.73	17.13	0.71	24.589	7	<.001
Burkina Faso	Other, EFL	44.50	52.69	48.67	2.81	37.91	7	<.001
Cabo Verde	Other, EFL	22.60	24.86	23.57	0.78	45.824	7	<.001
Cambodia	Other, ESL	44.63	50.88	47.69	1.98	52.557	7	<.001
China	Other, EFL	16.23	17.68	17	0.47	36.557	7	<.001
Colombia	Other-EFL	24.29	29.52	27.28	2.19	21.045	7	<.001
Congo, Dem. Rep.	Other, EFL	34.75	39.02	37.02	1.41	52.28	7	<.001
Cuba	Other, EFL	9.06	9.65	9.26	0.26	-18.733	7	<.001
Cyprus	Other, ESL	13.39	15.63	14.07	0.77	11.331	7	<.001
Dominica	English	14.25	17.32	15.88	0.97	14.242	7	<.001
Dominican Republic	Other, EFL	19.62	25.53	23.42	2.22	15.842	7	<.001
Eritrea	Other, EFL	37.96	47.87	42.1	3.41	25.846	7	<.001
Finland	Other, EFL	13.20	15.03	13.86	0.61	13.446	7	<.001
Germany	Other, EFL	11.58	13.63	12.53	0.8	5.491	7	0.001
Guatemala	Other, EFL	22.98	30.45	26.65	2.61	16.997	7	<.001
Guinea	Other, EFL	42.19	45.59	44.1	1.07	87.844	7	<.001
Hong Kong SAR, China	Other, ESL	13.85	16.94	15.2	1.15	10.372	7	<.001
Hungary	Other, EFL	10.06	11.24	10.53	0.33	-3.788	7	0.007
Indonesia	Other, ESL	16.09	20.69	18.56	1.54	13.973	7	<.001
Japan	Other, ESL	16.45	18.49	17.55	0.74	25.178	7	<.001
Kazakhstan	Other, EFL	16.19	16.86	16.46	0.21	72.258	7	<.001
Korea, Rep.	Other, ESL	16.50	25.59	20.41	3.39	7.865	7	<.001
Kuwait	Other, ESL	8.38	9.61	8.79	0.4	-15.546	7	<.001
Kyrgyz Republic	Other, EFL	23.90	25.31	24.43	0.47	80.28	7	<.001
Lao PDR	Other, ESL	25.16	30.49	27.91	2.03	23.651	7	<.001
Latvia	Other, EFL	10.45	11.88	11.15	0.4	1.227	7	0.26
Lebanon	Other, ESL	12.05	14.34	13.69	0.94	8.208	7	<.001
Lesotho	English	32.63	37.20	34.14	1.45	45.263	7	<.001
Lithuania	Other, EFL	12.41	13.26	12.77	0.29	17.837	7	<.001
Macao SAR, China	Other, EFL	13.70	20.35	16.04	2.43	5.909	7	0.001
Madagascar	Other, EFL	39.77	48.73	43.97	3.53	26.465	7	<.001
Malawi	Other, EFL	69.15	80.68	76.06	3.86	47.702	7	<.001
Malaysia	Other, ESL	11.41	14.98	12.84	1.27	4.16	7	0.004
Maldives	Other, ESL	11.19	14.52	12.38	1.09	3.648	7	0.008
Mauritania	Other, EFL	34.38	42.51	38.14	2.64	29.087	7	<.001
Mauritius	English	18.73	21.66	20.76	1.06	26.167	7	<.001
Mexico	Other, EFL	27.41	28.15	27.94	0.26	186.561	7	<.001
Moldova	Other, EFL	15.32	16.81	15.94	0.5	28.244	7	<.001
Mongolia	Other, EFL	27.21	31.60	29.53	1.6	32.854	7	<.001
Morocco	Other, EFL	25.67	27.38	26.33	0.54	80.256	7	<.001
Mozambique	Other, EFL	54.83	64.80	58.57	4.25	31.645	7	<.001
Nepal	Other, ESL	23.93	40.02	31.22	5.68	10.076	7	<.001
Niger	Other, EFL	35.75	40.72	38.46	1.65	47.129	7	<.001
Pakistan	Other, ESL	39.69	46.52	41.38	2.28	37.67	7	<.001
Panama	Other, ESL	21.99	24.54	23.23	0.9	38.459	7	<.001
Peru	Other, EFL	17.66	21.79	19.63	1.36	17.976	7	<.001
Poland	Other, EFL	9.32	10.64	10.03	0.41	-6.493	7	<.001
Portugal	Other, EFL	10.83	13.41	11.76	0.89	2.508	7	0.041
Qatar	Other, ESL	9.60	12.50	11.12	0.95	0.442	7	0.672
Rwanda	Other, ESL	58.09	69.29	63.17	4.83	30.598	7	<.001
Saudi Arabia	Other, EFL	10.54	11.43	10.97	0.29	-	-	-
Senegal	Other, EFL	31.59	36.44	33.43	1.66	38.262	7	<.001
Serbia	Other, EFL	15.16	17.04	16.02	0.63	22.641	7	<.001
Seychelles	Other, ESL	12.47	13.82	13.02	0.47	12.343	7	<.001
Slovak Republic	Other, EFL	14.94	16.61	15.4	0.54	23.051	7	<.001
South Africa	Other, ESL	32.03	33.60	32.92	0.53	117.384	7	<.001

Country Name	Learning Language Category	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD	T	df	Sig.
Spain	Other, EFL	12.40	13.32	12.71	0.34	14.313	7	<.001
Sri Lanka	Other, ESL	23.15	24.43	23.78	0.38	95.078	7	<.001
St. Kitts and Nevis	English	13.06	16.59	14.7	1.19	8.89	7	<.001
St. Lucia	English	14.22	22.73	18.55	2.74	7.825	7	<.001
Suriname	Other, ESL	13.23	15.99	14.37	0.98	9.787	7	<.001
Tajikistan	Other, EFL	21.61	25.18	23.01	1.03	33.02	7	<.001
Togo	Other, EFL	39.14	43.51	41.17	1.21	70.436	7	<.001
Tonga	Other, ESL	21.11	25.75	24.1	1.7	21.862	7	<.001
Tunisia	Other, EFL	16.54	18.15	17.25	0.46	38.912	7	<.001
Ukraine	Other, EFL	15.58	16.89	16.09	0.46	31.786	7	<.001
United Kingdom	English	17.24	18.44	17.8	0.5	38.627	7	<.001
United States	English	13.59	14.54	14.08	0.38	22.995	7	<.001
Uzbekistan	Other, EFL	14.97	18.24	16.89	1.28	13.051	7	<.001
Vietnam	Other, ESL	18.88	20.44	19.61	0.48	51.045	7	<.001
West Bank and Gaza	Other, EFL	23.59	30.08	26.53	2.51	17.569	7	<.001

In Table 2 (Appendix), we classify the countries into native, EFL, ESL categories to examine whether there are any differential patterns among the three groups. Definite trend is not visible from the country-wise data.



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ردمك (النشر الإلكتروني): ٧٤٧٢-١٦٥٢

ردمك: ٧١٨٩-١٦٥٢

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