Teachers’ English Language Training Programmes in Saudi Arabia for Achieving Sustainability in Education

Muneer Hezam Alqahtani 1,* and Ibrahim A. Albidewi 2

1 Department of Curriculum and Instruction, College of Education, King Faisal University, Al-Ahsa 31982, Saudi Arabia
2 Information Systems Department, College of Computers and Information Technology, King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah 21589, Saudi Arabia
* Correspondence: mhalqahtani@kfu.edu.sa; Tel.: +966-599-415-822

Abstract: Achieving sustainability is a major objective of Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030. This study investigates one Ministry of Education initiative to achieve sustainability through the establishment of its Optimum Utilisation of Teaching Staff Programme (OUTSP). The study focuses in particular on the OUTSP’s two-term English Language Programme (ELP). First, it details the ELP’s modules; then, it analyses the overall results for 170 of the 431 candidates who joined the programme, before going on to examine the results of a sample group of 56 of those 170 candidates in more detail. Microsoft Excel data analysis tools were used to analyse the data. The results show that the candidates generally scored high marks in both terms. The analysis of the sampled group suggests that the noticeably higher marks gained in the second term could be explained by the fact that the candidates were all experienced teachers. The study concludes that the ELP benefits teachers who are willing to move away from their specialist areas or who simply wish to advance their knowledge. Finally, the study recommends that future iterations of the ELP should be spread over three terms rather than two. We also recommend providing more incentives to encourage more candidates to join the ELP.

Keywords: sustainability; English language; teacher training; Saudi Arabia; teacher experience; Saudi 2030 Vision; Ministry of Education

1. Introduction
1.1. Saudi Vision 2030 and Sustainability

In 2014, the sharp drop in oil prices affected oil-producing countries around the world and, in the case of Saudi Arabia, resulted in the country registering a budget deficit of nearly USD100 billion in 2015 [1]. The major reduction in oil revenues not only prompted the government to decrease public expenditure by 26% [1] but also brought a realisation that relying overly on oil revenue as the country’s main source of income was neither sustainable nor desirable. Consequently, the country sought to diversify its sources of income and move away from its reliance on oil revenues to “create a more diverse and sustainable economy” [2].

As a result, in April 2016, Saudi Arabia launched its ambitious Vision 2030 (the Vision). The main objective of this strategic framework is to transform “the country’s economy and society from their traditional reliance on oil revenue to a more diverse economy and a society that is willing to engage with the rest of the world with open attitudes” [3] p. 560. The Vision is based on three pillars: A vibrant society, a thriving economy and an ambitious nation. These complementary pillars are designed to transform the Kingdom’s economy and achieve its Vision of a sustainable future. The first pillar overlaps with the second pillar since a thriving economy is “vital to achieving the Vision and a strong
foundation for economic prosperity” [2]. Given the economic prosperity that results from creating a vibrant society and a thriving economy can only be achieved when “an effective, transparent, accountable, enabling and high-performing government”, the main goal of the third pillar is to create an ambitious nation [2]. Sustainability therefore sits at the heart of the Vision, since achieving economic prosperity requires a sustainable economy that does not rely on finite resources such as fossil fuels [4]. For this reason, the government of Saudi Arabia has adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). “Under those goals, there are more targets, which are further divided into indicators. In order for sustainable development to be achieved, three main elements need to be integrated, namely: economic growth, social inclusion, and protection of the environment” [5]. The Vision has founded 11 realisation programmes, with 8 of these focusing particularly on creating a sustainable economy. These eight programmes are designed to ensure sustainability through the Public Investment Fund Programme, Fiscal Sustainability Programme, Human Capability Development Programme, National Transformation Programme, Privatisation Programme, Financial Sector Development Programme and National Industrial Development and Logistics Programme. The fact that 8 of the Vision’s 11 programmes focus on creating a sustainable economy demonstrates not only the priority that Saudi Arabia is giving to diversifying the country’s income but also the fact that all its government sectors are committed to working to achieve this goal.

The Ministry of Education is one such sector. In order to contribute towards the achievement of economic sustainability in the educational sector, the Ministry has developed ways to diversify through innovative funding sources and improve the Ministry’s financial efficiency. For example, the Ministry reduced the number of school teachers from one teacher for every 9 pupils to one teacher for every 17 pupils in 2020 [6], a decrease of 48%. In addition, the Ministry of Education has been working to introduce new subjects into universities and colleges of education that are needed for the labour market such as fashion, culinary skills [7] and filmmaking [8] with the aim of attracting students and prospective teachers towards these courses and away from more traditional subjects (e.g., Islamic studies, Arabic, geography and history). Furthermore, in order to redeploy current teachers whose specialist subjects are no longer desirable or needed for the labour market, the Ministry has established the Optimum Utilisation of Teaching Staff Programme (OUTSP). This programme provides teachers with retraining in an attempt to “expand vocational training to secure the labour market’s needs” [5].

1.2. The Research Problem

In recent years, the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia has been revising the national curriculum for public education. It has, for example, introduced new subjects such as music [9], critical thinking and digital skills, and it has begun to introduce English-language teaching into primary schools for young learners [10]. However, introducing these subjects into schools has become problematic because of the limited number of specialist teachers who are qualified to teach these subjects. For example, only approximately 33,000 language teachers teach English at both intermediate and secondary schools [3]. With the recent introduction of English into the primary school curriculum, the demand for English teachers has grown rapidly. As a temporary solution to this shortage, many school administrations have assigned the teaching of these newly introduced subjects to non-specialised teachers. Nevertheless, this solution lacks efficiency in a number of areas: First, the number of these non-specialised teachers is still too small to meet the demand; secondly, there is a lack of teaching quality since these teachers are non-specialists; and third, the measure is an unsustainable solution because it is a temporary fix [11]. At the same time, there is an oversupply of teachers in subjects such as Islamic studies, Arabic, geography and history—subjects that are now being reduced in the national curriculum. The move away from these subjects means that these teachers will become underemployed.

To address these issues, the Ministry of Education founded the OUTSP in November 2021 to provide the current teachers of Islamic studies, Arabic, geography and history with
the necessary training to prepare them to teach the newly introduced subjects. The actual training does not take place at the Ministry of Education itself. Rather, it takes place in Saudi state universities around the country under the supervision and guidance of the Ministry of Education. There are two benefits to delegating training tasks to universities. First, doing so allows the OUTSP to accommodate as many candidates as possible without reaching a maximum number. Secondly, the programme allows candidates to attend their nearest university and eliminates the need to travel long distances to receive centralised training.

The OUTSP consists of 10 programmes designed to prepare current teachers to teach 10 different subjects. These are the Digital Skills Programme, the English Language for Primary Schools Programme, the Sciences Programme, the Mathematics Programme, the Physical Education and Self-defence Programme, the Critical Thinking Programme, the Life Skills Programme, the Arts Programme, the Management Programme and the Marketing Programme. This paper focuses on the English Language for Primary Schools Programme.

Having provided background to the Ministry of Education’s initiative to achieve sustainability in education through the establishment of the OUTSP programmes, this article now sets out to investigate the efficacy of the English Language for Primary Schools Programme in achieving that goal. In order to do so, it starts by providing detailed descriptions of the course structure and the candidates who enrolled in it. Secondly, the article poses two research questions and discusses the methodology used to collect and analyse the data in order to answer these research questions. Next, the article goes on to analyse some of the ELP’s initial results to then discuss them in light of the research objectives. Finally, conclusions are drawn, and recommendations are made.

2. The English Language for Primary Schools Programme

The purpose of the English Language for Primary School Programme (ELP) is to prepare current teachers of Islamic studies, Arabic, geography and history to teach English to primary school pupils [11]. To meet the programme’s requirement, candidates must pass an interview and possess the equivalent of an A2 level in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Initially, 431 candidates (273 males and 158 females) enrolled in the ELP [11]. They come from different age groups and were distributed across 23 universities around Saudi Arabia.

2.1. The Course Structure

The ELP consists of 36 h distributed across two academic terms. The first term consists of 18 h where candidates take intensive language modules that cover the four skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing, as well as grammatical structure. The second term focuses on subject-related modules such as English-language teaching methods, language assessment, language teaching for young learners and a practicum. The next section provides an outline of each module.

2.1.1. The First Term

Candidates in the first term take three modules: Grammatical structure, listening and speaking and reading and writing. The grammatical structure module is intended for upper beginners. It focuses on the understanding and practice of how the basic structures of English are constructed grammatically. Terminology is minimised in this course in favour of an intuitive appreciation of the mechanics of sentence building through optimal practice. The module’s main objectives are to enable the candidates to develop an intuitive understanding of the grammatical concepts underlying English sentence structure building; to be able to break up the constituent parts of an English sentence for the sake of establishing its meaning; and to demonstrate the ability to produce grammatically correct sentences of English in both writing and speaking.

The second module—speaking and listening—has two main parts. The first part aims to develop the candidates’ listening and speaking skills. Using a critical thinking learning strategy, candidates study eight units. Each unit consists of three components.
The first component—Focus on the Topic—introduces students to the unifying theme of the listening sections. The Focus on Listening focuses on understanding two contrasting listening selections, while the Focus on Speaking emphasises the development of productive skills for speaking and includes sections on grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, functional language and an extended speaking task. While following the same format and organisation, the second part of the module enables the students to practise and use higher-level speaking, listening, and critical thinking skills. This module’s main objectives are to enable the candidates to predict the content of a reading, identify main ideas, listen for details, elicit information not explicit in the listening, interpret a speaker’s tone, feelings and attitude, listen for word stress, relate listening to personal values, place main ideas in sequential order, identify supporting details, evaluate a student’s presentation, rank personal preferences and, finally, arrange events in chronological order.

The first term’s third and last module deals with two major language skills, namely reading and writing. The reading part focuses on different reading aptitudes to elicit textual meaning through the use of different reading strategies, including skimming, scanning and contextual inferencing. Texts related to the humanities and social sciences serve as the background material for the writing component. Here, emphasis is placed on the practice of writing at sentence, paragraph and text levels. The module’s main objectives are to enable the candidates to understand an English text of average difficulty; develop aptitudes to infer textual meaning from context; identify the text’s main idea and subideas; write grammatically correct simple, compound and complex sentences using different reading strategies and skills while reading; develop a paragraph in a cohesive and coherent way; elaborate an outline for an essay; and, finally, write short narratives and descriptive essays.

2.1.2. The Second Term

The second term of the ELP programme consists of 18 h. During these, the candidates cover a further six modules: Advanced language skills; English-language teaching methodology for primary lower levels; English-language teaching methodology for primary upper levels; English teaching methods; language assessment approaches and methods; and a teaching practicum.

The advanced language skills module provides students with more advanced practice in English language skills. It includes reading, writing, listening and speaking in addition to a minor grammar submodule. The module aims to enable the candidates to understand texts of intermediate to advanced difficulty; describe aspects of personal and everyday life in both oral and written form; interpret short and simple connected texts on familiar topics; and use English sentences with a relative degree of complexity, i.e., those involving multiple clausal structures.

The second module covers the English-language teaching methodology for primary lower levels. It focuses on practical methods of language teaching, specifically the four macro skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking and the rationale behind lesson staging/scaffolding when presenting these skills. Candidates are introduced to techniques for teaching vocabulary, pronunciation and form and also learn how to design effective tasks and practice situations. The module looks at strategies for checking meaning and correcting errors. Students are encouraged to adopt a critical and reflective approach to practice through peer teaching and develop an informed view of teaching and of learners. By the end of this module, candidates will be able to apply all the teaching approaches taught and learned earlier; teach the assigned courses for primary levels; identify the appropriate teaching approaches for each lesson; and design appropriate learning and assessment tasks for their learners.

In the third module—the English-language teaching methodology for primary upper levels—candidates are introduced to techniques for teaching the four language skills and language components and learn how to design appropriate lesson materials. By the end of this module, candidates will be able to apply all the teaching approaches taught and
learned earlier; teach the assigned courses for higher levels; know about the best practical teaching methods for every lesson; and design interactive learning tasks.

The ELP’s fourth module—English teaching methods—focuses on teaching methods and how to use them to teach English as a second language. This module aims to help candidates to reflect on the most effective approaches to English language teaching and help them to adopt the approach that best suits their classes and setting. By the end of this module, candidates will be able to develop flexible thinking; understand the importance of shifting their approaches to suit new settings and their pupils’ levels; provide candidates with the required knowledge to explain and convey their lesson objectives easily and professionally; establish ongoing and open communication between learners and teachers; and provide a high-quality learners-preparation programme. Further, candidates will be able to prepare their teaching materials in advance and use them effectively. They will also learn how to create teacher–student interaction and establish the characteristics of effective teaching and teaching methods.

The fifth module deals with language assessment approaches and methods. This module introduces students to the techniques and principles of language assessment and attempts to link teaching theories and approaches to language assessment by providing them with a basic understanding of different language teaching methods. By the end of this module, learners will be able to recognise and develop an understanding of different language assessment methods, relate the teaching theories and approaches to language assessment, distinguish between the different types of tests, test techniques and qualities and demonstrate knowledge of skills testing and test development.

The sixth and final module in the ELP is the teaching practicum. In this practical course, candidates are expected to utilise the knowledge and skills learned in the core education and English major courses within an actual school setting. This module emphasises the application of the diverse instructional techniques, procedures, assessments and school policies necessary for successful classroom teaching. Throughout the course, trainees will demonstrate competence in teaching, lesson planning, assessment and other teaching tasks. Trainees will be guided and mentored by an in-school teacher and an academic supervisor through weekly visits designed to guide them in the construction of course content, pedagogy and execution. By the end of this module, candidates will be able to do the following: Demonstrate adequate competency in basic language skills and subject matter knowledge and their application in a school environment; apply the various learned teaching approaches suited to each pupil’s individual differences; employ the various teaching resources available in the school environment to achieve learning goals; and finally, exhibit professionalism, collaboration and classroom management.

Having established the importance of the OUTSP in helping Saudi Arabia to reach its major goal of sustainable development through the implementation of Vision 2030, this paper seeks to investigate the extent to which the ELP in particular has been successful in achieving this objective. This study therefore attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent has the ELP been successful in preparing teachers of Islamic studies, Arabic, history and geography to become qualified English teachers?
2. Has the ELP been successful in accomplishing the OUTSP’s objectives of achieving sustainability as a part of the Saudi Vision 2030?

3. Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative research method to answer the proposed research questions. At the time of data collection, the exam results for just 170 of the 431 candidates who had joined the ELF were available for analysis. We therefore selected a random sample of 56 of those 170 candidates and analysed the grades they had achieved on each module in detail.
3.1. Data Collection

We first contacted the Ministry of Education with a request to provide the available results for all 431 ELP candidates. However, as already noted, only 170 results were ready to view at that time. Furthermore, the Ministry data did not contain the detailed results for each module that we wanted to analyse and so we contacted colleagues who were able to provide the more detailed results we required. These approaches resulted in our receiving the full grades for 56 ELF candidates.

3.2. Data Analysis

We used Microsoft Excel to analyse the data for the study. This software, which has become popular in social sciences due to its powerful statistical tools [12], provided an accurate calculation of the candidates’ final results and their overall grades for each module.

4. Results

This section focuses on the final results that the candidates achieved during the ELP’s two terms. Section 4.1 presents the results obtained on the following language skills modules: Grammatical structure, listening and speaking and reading and writing in the first term, while Section 4.2 focuses on the other six modules that the candidates took in the second term.

4.1. First Term

As shown in Table 1 and Figure 1 below, 20 candidates scored an A+ in the grammatical structure module; 10 candidates scored an A, 8 scored B+, B and C+, respectively, and just 2 candidates scored a C grade.

| Grades and Grade Definition | Number of Candidates Achieving Each Grade |
|----------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| A+ (95–100%)               | 20                                       |
| A (90–94%)                 | 10                                       |
| B+ (85–89%)                | 8                                        |
| B (80–85%)                 | 8                                        |
| C+ (75–79%)                | 8                                        |
| C (70–74%)                 | 2                                        |
| Total                      | 56                                       |

Figure 1. Percentage of Candidates Achieving Each Grade on the Grammatical Structure Module.
Table 2 and Figure 2 below show the scores for the listening and speaking module.

### Table 2. Candidates’ Scores on the Listening and Speaking Module.

| Grades and Grade Definition | Number of Candidates Achieving Each Grade |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| A+ (95–100%)                | 14                                       |
| A (90–94%)                  | 10                                       |
| B+ (85–89%)                 | 14                                       |
| B (80–85%)                  | 8                                        |
| C+ (75–79%)                 | 6                                        |
| C (70–74%)                  | 4                                        |
| Total                       | 56                                       |

![Listening and Speaking (N=56)](image)

**Figure 2.** Percentage of Candidates Achieving Each Grade on the Listening and Speaking Module.

Finally, as shown in Table 3 and Figure 3 below, 7 candidates achieved an A+ in the reading and writing module; 21 achieved an A grade; 4 candidates scored a B grade and 11, 9, and 4 candidates scored B, C+ and C, respectively.

### Table 3. Candidates’ Scores on the Reading and Writing Module.

| Grades and Grade Definition | Number of Candidates Achieving Each Grade |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| A+ (95–100%)                | 7                                        |
| A (90–94%)                  | 21                                       |
| B+ (85–89%)                 | 4                                        |
| B (80–85%)                  | 11                                       |
| C+ (75–79%)                 | 9                                        |
| C (70–74%)                  | 4                                        |
| Total                       | 56                                       |

#### 4.2. Second Term

Candidates’ advanced language skills were tested in the second term. Here, as shown in Table 4 and Figure 4 below, 10 candidates scored A+, 5 scored A, 18 scored B+, and 14 scored B, whilst the remaining 6 and 3 candidates scored C+ and C, respectively.
Table 4. Candidates’ Scores on the Advanced Language Skills Module.

| Grades and Grade Definition | Number of Candidates Achieving Each Grade |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| A+ (95–100%)                | 10                                       |
| A (90–94%)                  | 5                                        |
| B+ (85–89%)                 | 18                                       |
| B (80–85%)                  | 14                                       |
| C+ (75–79%)                 | 6                                        |
| C (70–74%)                  | 3                                        |
| Total                       | 56                                       |

Figure 3. Percentage of Candidates Achieving Each Grade on the Reading and Writing Module.

Figure 4. Percentage of Candidates Achieving Each Grade on the Advanced Language Skills Module.
As indicated in Table 5 and Figure 5, the candidates achieved noticeably higher grades in the language assessment module. In total, 28 candidates scored either an A+ or an A grade; 8 and 5 candidates scored B+ and B, respectively, whereas just 3 and 5 scored C+ and C, respectively.

Table 5. Candidates’ Scores on the Language Assessment Module.

| Grades and Grade Definition | Number of Candidates Achieving Each Grade |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| A+ (95–100%)                | 16                                       |
| A (90–94%)                  | 22                                       |
| B+ (85–89%)                 | 8                                        |
| B (80–85%)                  | 5                                        |
| C+ (75–79%)                 | 3                                        |
| C (70–74%)                  | 2                                        |
| Total                       | 56                                       |

The language teaching method module also received some of the highest grades. Here, as shown in Table 6 and Figure 6 below, 36 candidates scored A+ and A, respectively, 8 candidates scored B+ and B, respectively, and 2 candidates each scored either a C+ or C grade.

Table 6. Candidates’ Scores on the Language Teaching Method Module.

| Grades and Grade Definition | Number of Candidates Achieving Each Grade |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| A+ (95–100%)                | 20                                       |
| A (90–94%)                  | 16                                       |
| B+ (85–89%)                 | 8                                        |
| B (80–85%)                  | 8                                        |
| C+ (75–79%)                 | 2                                        |
| C (70–74%)                  | 2                                        |
| Total                       | 56                                       |
Figure 6. Percentage of Candidates Achieving Each Grade on the Language Teaching Methods Module.

However, regarding the scores for the English-language teaching methodology for primary upper levels and English-language teaching methodology for primary lower levels modules, the scores differed. On the language teaching methodology for primary upper levels, as shown in Table 7 and Figure 7 below, 32 of the 56 candidates achieved scores in the A, B+ and B range, with the highest number (20) achieving a B+. Far fewer candidates scored an A+ (6), while 2 achieved a C grade.

Table 7. Candidates’ Scores on the English-Language Teaching Methodology for Primary Upper Levels Module.

| Grades and Grade Definition | Number of Candidates Achieving Each Grade |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| A+ (95–100%)                | 20                                        |
| A (90–94%)                  | 12                                        |
| B+ (85–89%)                 | 20                                        |
| B (80–85%)                  | 12                                        |
| C+ (75–79%)                 | 4                                         |
| C (70–74%)                  | 2                                         |
| Total                       | 56                                        |

In contrast, the candidates scored noticeably higher grades in the English-language teaching methodology for the primary lower levels module, with 37 candidates scoring A+ and A, respectively, 15 scoring B+, and a total of just 4 achieving B, C+ and C, respectively. As shown in Table 8 and Figure 8 below.

Table 8. Candidates’ Scores on the English-Language Teaching Methodology for Primary Lower Levels Module.

| Grades and Grade Definition | Number of Candidates Achieving Each Grade |
|-----------------------------|-------------------------------------------|
| A+ (95–100%)                | 12                                        |
| A (90–94%)                  | 25                                        |
| B+ (85–89%)                 | 15                                        |
| B (80–85%)                  | 1                                         |
| C+ (75–79%)                 | 2                                         |
| C (70–74%)                  | 1                                         |
| Total                       | 56                                        |
Finally, the teaching practicum module received the highest grades of all. Twenty-seven candidates scored A+, whilst twenty-nine scored A. None of the candidates in the sample received a lower score. As shown in Table 9 and Figure 9 below.
Table 9. Candidates’ Scores on the Teaching Practicum Module.

| Grades and Grade Definition | Number of Candidates Achieving Each Grade |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| A+ (95–100%)                | 27                                       |
| A (90–94%)                  | 29                                       |
| B+ (85–89%)                 | 0                                        |
| B (80–85%)                  | 0                                        |
| C+ (75–79%)                 | 0                                        |
| C (70–74%)                  | 0                                        |
| Total                       | 56                                       |

Figure 9. Percentage of Candidates Achieving Each Grade on the Teaching Practicum Module.

Regarding the final result for all 170 candidates who participated in the ELF, it can be seen that 90 candidates completed the course with distinction, while 80 completed it with merit. When it comes to the results for this study’s sample group of 56 candidates, these showed that more than half (53%) scored distinction (90–100%) whilst the other 47% scored merit (80–90%) (see Table 10 and Figure 10).

Table 10. Final Grades Awarded to the 170 ELF Candidates and to the Sample Group of 56.

| Final Grades and Grade Definition | Number of Candidates Achieving Each Grade | Sample Group Numbers |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Distinction (90–100%)            | 90                                       | 56                   |
| Merit (80–90%)                   | 80                                       |                      |
| Total                            | 170                                      |                      |
5. Discussion
5.1. First Term

Arabic-speaking learners of English usually find learning English grammar challenging because of the differences between Arabic and English [13]. Particularly, Arabic-speaking learners of English find the usage of the verbs *to be*, *to have* and *to do* confusing because there is no similar usage in Arabic [14]. Further, Arabic-speaking learners of English find the present perfect tense challenging because of the lack of a similar form in Arabic [15]. However, the study’s results show that the Arabic-speaking ELF candidates were able to score high grades in the grammatical structure module, despite the fact that the module covered common challenges such as these. Their success in this module seems to be the result of the intensive training and high attention paid to the most challenging aspects of English grammar in this module. The candidates studied the grammatical structure module for 6 h per week in the classroom and 12 weeks outside of it. Despite the challenges that most Arabic-speaking learners of English encounter, the amount of time allocated to intensive grammar practice seems to have resulted in so many candidates’ being able to score A+, A and B+ (see Table 1 and Figure 1).

When it comes to the skills of listening and speaking, Arabic-speaking learners of English face a number of challenges due to the difference between the sound systems in both Arabic and English. For example, mid-front vowels such as /e/ or /ɛ/ do not exist in Arabic. Consequently, words such as ‘sex’ and ‘pen’ would be pronounced as ‘six’ and ‘pin’ by Arab learners [16].

The same issue may emerge with consonants. For instance, since the plosive voiceless sound /p/ and the fricative voiced sound /v/ do not exist in Arabic [17], many Arabic-speaking learners replace them with the nearest alternatives in Arabic. Therefore, they voice the /p/ sounds as /b/ and devoice the sound /v/ to be /f/. Such issues are likely to affect both the speaking and listening skills of Arabic-speaking learners. However, as a result of the intensive listening and speaking practice that the candidates were taking throughout the first term, the sampled candidates scored relatively highly in the listening and speaking module. As with the grammatical structure module, the participants studied this module for 6 h per week in the classroom. The importance of providing such intensive
practice is evident in the study of [18] who point out that “When important skills like listening and speaking are neglected and not assessed at all, the students’ motivation towards them decreases and by the time [sic] the importance of such skills may gradually diminish” (p. 5). Therefore, the intensive practice of both speaking and listening in the classroom enabled the candidates to overcome many of the phonetic and pronunciation challenges that many Arabic-speaking learners experience.

Along with the use of grammar and speaking and listening skills, the skills of reading and writing pose a challenge for many Arabic-speaking learners of English because Arabic and English have vastly different alphabets and writing styles. The influence of Arabic as a first language tends to impact many learners when learning to read and write in English [19–21]. For example, words in Arabic tend to be shorter than in English, typically less than six characters [22], which “suggests the number of letters needed to be stored for accurate word recognition and production in Arabic is more limited than in English” [23]. Moreover, both reading and writing in English receive little attention in many Arab countries [24]. In fact, Fender [25] argues that Arabic-speaking learners are weak at reading and writing even in their first language because the language they are learning in the classroom is different from the language that they speak at home [26]. However, due to the intensive practice the candidates in this study engaged in in the reading and writing module, they scored high marks. After studying the challenges that Arabic-speaking learners experience when learning writing, Abu Rass [27] concluded that intensive and guided practice should be emphasised to enhance their level. She points out that

“Arab students in EFL writing classes should be given ample opportunities for practice in and outside the classroom in order to be acquainted with the style of English for writing essays appropriately using the right expressions, cohesively unifying their thoughts besides considering the audience. In addition, adopting techniques like contrastive and error analysis, different approaches as the process and the free writing approaches would help these learners overcome their difficulties in writing and start producing better writing samples” [27].

All of the techniques mentioned above were used throughout the reading and writing module during the first term in order to enable candidates to reach the desired level and achieve high marks in the exam. The high results that have been achieved in the modules that deal with linguistic skills therefore demonstrate how the ELP has moved a step closer to accomplishing its goal of equipping nonspecialist teachers with the necessary linguistic skills to become English-language teachers. Moreover, the results also show that their retraining contributes to the broader goal of the OUTSP to utilise their skills to achieve sustainability in education, in line with the Vision’s aims.

5.2. Second Term

In addition to the advanced language skills module, the second term focused primarily on pedagogical modules that concentrated on teaching methodology and language assessment. Noticeably, the candidates scored high marks that ranged from B+ to A+ in most of these modules. The reason for this high achievement relates to the years of experience that the candidates had already acquired throughout their teaching careers. They were not recent graduates but rather experienced teachers. Their level of experience is also evident in the marks that they scored in the teaching practicum module where, without exception, they all scored either an A+ or A. The influence of teachers’ experience on their teaching method and, subsequently, the positive influence it has on their students has been investigated by many studies (e.g., Akomolafe, 2001, as cited in [28–30]. An earlier study conducted by Schuler (1984, as cited in [28] revealed that teachers with years of experience did significantly better than their newly graduated counterparts. More recently, in their report on teaching experience and effectiveness, [31] pointed out that “teachers do continue to improve in their effectiveness as they gain experience in the teaching profession. We find that teaching experience is, on average, positively associated with student achievement gains throughout a teacher’s career”. Therefore, Adeyemi [28] calls for governments to
encourage teachers to remain in their professions by “providing them with more incentives and better promotional prospects” [28]. As the results of our study show, the teaching experience of the candidates played a role in their ability to score high marks in the pedagogical modules in the second term. Overall, 53% of the candidates in the sample group graduated with distinction (90–100%) and 47% graduated with merit (80–90%).

Similar to the results in the first term, the candidates scored high results in the pedagogical modules in the second term; this achievement is attributed to their years of teaching experience. Therefore, combining the linguistic skills that the candidates acquired in the first term with their teaching experience as demonstrated in the second term shows a positive indication that the ELP has been effective in achieving the broader goal of the OUTSP. Although the OUTSP is still in its early stages, having been implemented only in early 2022, thus making it difficult to determine its precise efficacy at this stage, the ELP results show that utilising the skills of nonspecialist teachers and providing them with the opportunity to reorient their skills and experience towards subjects other than their specialist subjects does appear to be a move in the right direction towards achieving sustainability in education.

6. Conclusions

The study has highlighted the achievements of a sample of candidates in the English Language Programme, which forms part of the Optimum Utilisation of Teaching Staff Programme in Saudi Arabia. The study has highlighted the achievements of a sample of 56 candidates who joined the programme and analysed their grades on each module in detail. Two conclusions can be drawn from this study. First, by initiating the OUTSP, the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia seems to be on the right track in playing its role in achieving sustainability, which is a major goal of the Saudi Vision 2030. Our study demonstrates that making the most of experienced teachers teaching obsolete subjects by providing them with the proper training to teach new subjects such as English is beneficial for achieving the Kingdom’s larger goal of achieving sustainability in education. Secondly, the high grades that the candidates in this study graduated with indicate that teachers are willing to acquire new knowledge and teach subjects that differ from their specialisms. Therefore, the OUTSP programmes, and the ELP in particular, are proving to be beneficial both for upskilling teachers who are willing to change their subjects or for developing those who are simply wishing to acquire new knowledge.

7. Recommendations

Finally, two recommendations can be drawn from this study. First, since Saudi Arabia has implemented the three-term system in schools and state universities, the Ministry of Education could break the ELP’s current second term, which consists of six modules, into two parts, i.e., three modules in the second term and three modules in the third term. In this way, the overall nine modules in the ELP could be spread equally across three terms, each with three modules. Adopting this recommendation would result in potential candidates experiencing less stress, as studying six modules in the second term is very demanding. Secondly, more incentives could be offered to those who join the ELP. For example, candidates could be assigned fewer working hours and a lighter teaching load, in order to give them the opportunity to practise their English online or more time to do their homework. Making such changes would be a positive step in encouraging more teachers to upskill and therefore meet Vision 2030’s goal of building sustainability into Saudi Arabia’s educational system more quickly.

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