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## An Assessment of the University Preparatory Program (UPP) at Ahfad University for Women (2017 – 2018)

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### ABSTRACT:

Although the first- year students at Ahfad University for Women (AUW) study long course in general English language, they still have problems when they move to Freshman Year. This study was conducted to investigate some of the problems encountered by the UPP student and to find out the reasons behind these problems. To investigate that, three tools were used to collect data for the study. There were two tests for the UPP students, a questionnaire for the UPP teachers and a classroom observation checklist. The main findings were: The UPP syllabus covers all aspects that develop the four English skills. Majority of the UPP students think that the UPP course is not important, because it doesn't carry credit hours. The student who doesn't attend regularly realizes that there is no penalty. Most of the UPP students have problems in listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar and incorrect pronunciation. Some recommendations are: The placement test should assess the real level of the students. Placing students with the same level is one of the factors that make the course achieve its purposes. Teachers should deal seriously with the absentees.

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**Keywords:** University Preparatory Program, general English Language, English Language skills, freshman

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### Introduction

The UPP course at Ahfad University for Women (AUW) started in 1995 and continues to be developed since then. At the beginning it didn't cover all skills. The series of *skills in English* started in 2007. There was a separate book for each skill and there were 3 levels, which means students used to study 3 levels for each skill. At present, there are two levels. Each one contains two books with ten units for each one, which cover all English skills. The first level contains Building Skills 1 and 2. These two books should develop the students' level from beginner to intermediate. Whereas, the second level contains Developing Skills 1 and 2 which should develop the students' level from intermediate to strong upper intermediate. There is a plan to promote the students from one level to the next through 3 tests and student's profile for each book. These tests are supposed to take place after each 3 units.

Students of the UPP course at AUW are classified into groups according to the result of the placement test of each a student. Some of them start from Building Skill 1 while the others start from Building Skill 2. The number of the students in each group is between 30 and 35. They must be from different schools. Only the one who has IELTS or study 12 classes in English will be exempted from this course.

There are many purposes of the UPP course. The main purpose is to develop the four English skills of the students. It also increases their required academic vocabulary. Furthermore, it enriches the students' general knowledge that relates to their studies at AUW as well as helps them to communicate in English. All those together prepare the students for studying in English in an excellent way without any difficulties in their different specializations.

The paper at hand is set to investigate the problems faced by UPP students in English language and to identify the main reasons behind these problems, and to understand whether the course has achieved its purpose or not.

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### Literature review

The University Preparatory Program (UPP), as is commonly called pre-session course, is different from one university to another in the definition, contents and period.

First of all, some universities define the UPP as a designed course for students who have graduated from High School but who lack certain academic qualifications particularly in English language. While in the others, it is a program for anyone who wants to get ready to enter a university. It is designed for those who have never been to a university or have not studied for a long period of time. In some universities, there are no conditions for entry into the UPP course. For example, the UPP in American University of Beirut (AUB) is a strength English Language program that provides undergraduate students with the opportunity to become successful students and to take control of their own learning under the guidance of their instructors. Meanwhile, in Alfaisal University it's the beginning of a new path in the student's academic life and regards the bridge to the bright future. Secondly, the contents of the UPP program are also different from universities to another. Some of them only focus on developing English language. While the others add some subjects to English language according to the needs and specializations of the students at those universities, for example, study skills, science, math, talents and computer skills. Thirdly, the period of the UPP Program is different one university to another. In some universities it is normally a one semester program comprised of a maximum of four appropriate academic preparatory courses. While in the others it lasts one academic year with different courses, such as general English language, science, developing talent skills and using computer as well.

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### Importance of the UPP course

The importance of the UPP course comes from that, majority of the students who completed High Secondary Schools have academic problems, particularly in English language, which cause difficulties at the university. The UPP program will help the students to improve their skills in English language (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), communication, using computer, numeracy, literacy and research. The program aims to give students the requirements to become successful university students, so they will come away from the program with the confidence to go on to further university study. Ch. L. Eisgruber, "2010, P. 83" said: *"The UPP program helps high-achieving students from low-income backgrounds gain greater access to a college education—and to a brighter future. This innovative program does exceptional work in motivating talented students and preparing them for the opportunities and challenges of college. By empowering these students to earn college degrees and follow their dreams, UPP makes a huge contribution to our society."*

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### Levels of the UPP course

The levels of the UPP course differ from some universities to another. Most of the universities divide it into two levels. Some divide it into three levels, while others divide it into four levels. For example, the American University of Beirut divides this course into three levels: The first one is the beginning level. It is designed for students who have little or no knowledge of English. It provides the students with basic of the four English skills. In addition to that the students will be expected to master basic grammar and acquire vocabulary as well to start conversation. The second one is called intermediate level. It is designed for the UPP students who completed the first level with limited language skills but can initiate conversations and read/write several paragraphs. Furthermore, they acquire linguistics and communicative competence. By the end of this level, the students are expected to be more fluent in spoken and written English language. The third one is called advanced level. This course is designed for upper-intermediate UPP students who can communicate well in both oral and writing. It enhances their skills in all areas of language acquisition, such as read various texts, give oral presentations, receive cultural orientation, and practice their academic writing and basic research skills.

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### Methods

In this study, descriptive and analytical statistical methods were adopted. To collect data for the study, the researcher used three tools. The first tool was two tests for the UPP students. The first test was a listening test. It was designed to assess their listening skill, vocabulary, sounds and symbols. The second test was a reading and writing test. It was designed to assess their reading comprehension, grammar and writing skills. In addition to that, a questionnaire was designed for English language teachers of the UPP course. It was conducted to discover additional problematic areas as well to find out some of the reasons behind these problems. Moreover, a classroom observation checklist was used to identify more problematic areas encountered by the UPP students as well as to focus on the students' responses during the lessons.

All these research tools were obtained and conducted to address objectives of the research and to see whether the UPP course achieves its purpose or not.

A total number of 139 students participated in this study. Those were chosen conveniently and were divided into groups of thirty or more per the class. The students come from different nationalities, but they study together. Some of English teachers who teach at the UPP course (males and females) also participated in this study.

## Study results and discussion

The data obtained from this study was analyzed and the results were tabulated and discussed. To evaluate data of the study, different techniques were used in the analysis including Statistical Package for Social Studies (SPSS), Alpha Cornbach and Pearson Coefficient Factor.

### Results of the tests

The two tests were the first tool used to collect data of the study. The first test was a test for listening and speaking that designed to assess the students' listening, vocabulary, symbols and sounds. The second test was a test for assessing reading and writing that designed to measure the students' reading comprehension, spelling, writing and punctuation marks in addition to grammar.

*Table (1) the statistical analysis results of the listening question*

Number	Mini	Maxi	Frequency		Percentage	Mean	Std. Deviation
139	0	10	Failure	95	68.3	3.89	2.410
			Succeeded	44	31.7		
			Total	139	100		

This table shows the statistical analysis results and percentages of the listening question. This question was out of 10 marks. The minimum mark was achieved by some students was 0, and the maximum mark was 10. The number of the failure was 95 students, which represents 68.3% while 44 students got more than 5 and that represents 31.7 %. The mean is 3.89. The standard deviation is 2.410. So, from these statistical results it was found that most of the UPP students have problems in listening.

*Table (2) the results of the vocabulary question*

Number	Mini	Maxi	Frequency		Percentage	Mean	Std. Deviation
139	0	10	Failure	84	60.4	2.36	1.668
			Succeed	55	39.6		
			Total	139	100		

This table shows the T-test results and percentages of the vocabulary question. This question was out of 10 marks. The minimum mark was achieved by some students was 0, whereas the maximum mark was 10. The number of the students who got less than 5 marks was 84 which represents 60.4 % while 55 students got more than 5 and represents 39.6%. So, from these results it appears that most of the UPP students have problems in vocabulary.

*Table (3) the results of the sounds and symbols question*

Number	Mini	Maxi	Frequency		Percentage	Mean	Std. Deviation
139	0	8	Failure	117	84.2	2.92	2.064
			Succeeded	22	15.8		
			Total	139	100		

This table shows the statistical analysis results and percentages of the sounds and symbols question. This question was out of 10 marks. The minimum mark was achieved by some students was 0, and the maximum mark was 8. The number of the failure was 117 students, which represents 84.2 %. While 22 students got more than 5 and that represents 15.8 %. So, from these statistical results it was found that nearly all the UPP students have problems in sounds and symbols.

**Table (4) the results of the reading question**

Number	Mini	Maxi	Frequency		Percentage	Mean	Std. Deviation
139	0	10	Succeeded	94	67.6	6.05	2.660
			Failure	45	32.4		
			Total	139	100		

This table shows the T-test results and percentages of the reading comprehensions question. This question was out of 10 marks. The minimum mark was achieved by some students was 0, whereas the maximum mark was 10. The number of the students who got more than 5 marks was 94 which represent 67.6 % while 45 students got less than 5 and that represents 32.4 %. So, from these results it appears that most of the UPP students have no problems in reading comprehensions.

**Table (5) the results for the grammar question**

Number	Mini	Maxi	Frequency		Percentage	Mean	Std. Deviation
139	0	10	Failure	85	61.2	4.22	3.624
			Succeeded	54	38.8		
			Total	139	100		

This table shows the T-test results and percentages of the grammar question. This question was out of 10 marks. The minimum mark was achieved by some students was 0, while the maximum mark was 10. The number of the failure students was 85, which represents 61.2 % while 54 students got pass and that represents 38.8 %. Therefore, from this statistical analysis it was found that most of the UPP students have problems in grammar.

**Table (6) the results for the writing question**

Number	Mini	Maxi	Frequency		Percentage	Mean	Std. Deviation
139	0	10	Failure	103	74.1	3.42	2.963
			Succeeded	36	25.9		
			Total	139	100		

This table shows the statistical analysis results and percentages of the writing question. This question was out of 10 marks. The minimum mark was achieved by some students was 0, while the maximum mark was 10. The number of the failure was 103 students, which represents 74.1 % while 36 students got more than 5 and that represents 25.9 %. Therefore, from these results it was found that majority of the UPP students have problems in academic writing.

## Results of the teachers' questionnaire

The questionnaire was the second tool used to support data of the study. The aim of this questionnaire was to find out views of the UPP teachers about the problems faced by UPP students as well as to find out the reasons behind these problems.

The total samples of the questionnaire were 32 samples from the UPP teachers (male and female). All of them were English teachers at Ahfad University for Women (AUW).

Likert 5-point scale was used to show responses of the participants. In scoring the participants' answers, five points were given to strongly agree, four points were given to agree, three points to neutral, two points to disagree and one point to strongly disagree. The questionnaire was divided into four dimensions. They are: Importance and role of the UPP course and syllabus, the role of the UPP Students, the role of the tests and UPP teachers in these problems and some problematic areas of the UPP course.

**Table (7) importance and role of the UPP course and syllabus**

Items	SDA		D		Nut		A		SA	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1- The UPP course is very important and essential for the students join Ahfad University for Women.	0	0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	32	100
2- The UPP syllabus covers all aspects that develop the four English skills.	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	22	68.7	10	31.3
3- There is a gap between Building and Developing skills, so majority of the students find difficulties when they come to Developing.	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	22	68.7	10	31.3
4- The syllabus focuses in a large way on the sounds and stress syllable which cause a real problem for all the UPP students.	0	0.0	0	0.0	5	15.6	12	37.5	15	46.9

This table shows the frequencies and percentages of opinions of the UPP teachers at AUW toward the first dimension which is (Importance and role of the UPP course and syllabus).

From the results of this dimension, it was found that 100 % of the total participants agreed that the UPP course is very important and essential for the students who join Ahfad University for Women. All of them agreed that the UPP syllabus covers all aspects that develop the four English skills. They also agreed that there is a gap between Building and Developing skills, so majority of the students find difficulties when they come to Developing. While 84.4 % of the participants agreed that the UPP syllabus focuses in a large way on the sounds and stress syllable which cause a real problem for all the UPP students.

**Table (8) the role of the UPP students**

Items	SDA		D		Nut		A		SA	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
5- Majority of the students think that the UPP course is not important because it's not included in the certificates. (doesn't carry credit hours)	0	0	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	32	100
6- Most of the UPP students are not keen to attend all the lectures.	0	0.0	2	6.3	0	0.0	5	15.6	25	78.1
7- The student who doesn't attend regularly realizes that there is no penalty.	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	12	37.5	20	62.5
8- Majority of the UPP students are not keen to get much benefit from the course.	0	0.0	2	6.3	0	0.0	5	15.6	25	62.5

This table shows the frequencies and percentages of the participants toward the second dimension which is (the role of the UPP students).

From the results of this dimension, it was found that 100 % of the total participants agreed that majority of the students think that the UPP course is not important because it's not included in the certificates.(doesn't carry credit hours). 93.7 % of them agreed that most of the UPP students are not keen to attend all the lectures. They all agreed that the student who doesn't attend regularly realizes that there is no penalty. Whereas, 93.7 % of the participants agreed that majority of the UPP students are not keen to get much benefit from the course.

**Table (9) the role of the tests and UPP teachers**

Items	SDA		D		Nut		A		SA	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
9- The placement test doesn't assess the real level of the students.	0	0	0	0.0	7	21.8	10	31.3	15	46.9
10- A test after each 3 units doesn't assess the real level of the students.	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	12	37.5	20	62.5
11- Some of teachers are not keen to follow the lessons' plan in the teacher's book.	5	15.6	0	0.0	7	21.8	10	31.3	10	31.3
12- Some of the teachers are very weak in dealing with the continuous absence of some students.	0	0.0	5	15.6	0	0.0	17	53.1	10	31.3

This table shows the frequencies and percentages of the UPP teachers toward the third dimension which is (the role of the tests and UPP teachers).

From the results of this dimension, it was found that 100 % of the participants agreed that a test after each 3 units doesn't assess the real level of the students. 78.2 % of them agreed that the placement test doesn't assess the real level of the students. 62.6 % agreed that some of teachers are not keen to follow the lessons' plan in the teacher's book. While, 84.4 % of the participants agreed that some of the teachers are very weak in dealing with the continuous absence of some students.

**Table (10) some of problematic areas of the UPP course**

Items	SDA		D		Nut		A		SA	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
13- Placing students with clear differences in their levels in one group makes the course boring for some students.	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	12	37.5	20	62.5
14- Most of the students have problems in reading texts.	0	0.0	5	15.6	0	0.0	7	21.9	20	62.5
15- Majority of them find difficulties in understanding while reading.	0	0.0	7	21.8	0	0.0	10	31.3	15	46.9
16- Most of the UPP students find difficulties in understanding when the teacher only uses English language.	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	6.3	30	93.7
17- Nearly all the UPP students find difficulties in differentiating between the symbols and sounds of the letters.	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	12	37.5	20	62.5
18- Most of the students find difficulties in reading vowel letters when two or more come together.	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	17	53.1	15	46.9
19- Some of them have problems in reading words with silent letters.	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	17	53.1	15	46.9
20- Majority of the students don't pay attention to punctuation marks while reading and writing English texts.	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	12	37.5	20	62.5
21- Majority of the students find difficulties in correct pronunciation.	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	7	21.9	25	78.1
22- Most of the UPP students have problems in listening.	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	6.3	30	93.7
23- Majority of the students have problems in writing.	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	7	21.9	25	78.1
24- Majority of the students have problems in speaking.	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	12	37.5	20	62.5
25- Using Arabic language during the lesson is one of hinders that face the UPP course.	0	0.0	2	6.3	0	0.0	0	0.0	30	93.7

This table shows the frequencies and percentages of the UPP teachers at AUW toward the fourth dimension which is (Some of problematic areas of the UPP course).

From the results of this dimension, it was found that all of the participants agreed that placing students with clear differences in their levels in one group makes the course boring to some students. 93.7 % of the participants strongly agreed that using Arabic language during the lesson is one of hinders that face the UPP course. Nearly all of the UPP students find difficulties in differentiating between the symbols and sounds of the letters. Most of the UPP students find difficulties in understanding when the teacher only uses English language. Majority of the UPP students have problems in listening and speaking, reading and writing, silent letters, correct pronunciation, punctuation marks while reading and writing English texts.

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## The classroom observation checklist results

The classroom observation checklist was the third tool used for collecting data of the study. It consisted of 9 points with 5 options ranging from (All) to (few). It was designed to observe the students' responses during the lessons as well as to discover additional problematic areas.

After the statistical analysis to the 9 points of the classroom observation checklist the results showed that most of the UPP students have problems in grammar, listening, speaking, reading, in correct pronunciation and their responses were very weak when the teacher asked them about the previous lessons. Some of them also suffer from lack of vocabulary as well as when the teacher only uses English language. In addition to that, some of them were not keen to do the tasks were required from them whether inside the class or at home.

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## Conclusions

The study found out the main following findings:

1. The UPP course is very important and essential for the students who join Ahfad University for Women.
2. All of the participants agreed that the UPP syllabus covers all aspects that develop the four English skills.
3. Majority of the UPP students think that the UPP course is not important because it's not included in the certificates. (It doesn't carry credit hours).
4. All of the participants agreed that the student who doesn't attend regularly realizes that there is no penalty.
5. Majority of the UPP students are not keen to get much benefit from the course.
6. All of the participants agreed that a test after each 3 units doesn't assess the real level of the students.
7. 78.2 % of the participants agreed that the placement test doesn't assess the real level of the students.
8. 84.4 % of the participants agreed that some of the teachers are very weak in dealing with the continuous absence of some students.
9. All of the participants agreed that placing students with clear differences in their levels in one group makes the course boring for some students.
10. Most of the students have problems in reading texts.
11. The results of the tests and questionnaire proved that nearly all the UPP students find difficulties in differentiating between the symbols and sounds of the letters.
12. Majority of the students don't pay attention to punctuation marks while reading and writing English texts.
13. Most of the UPP students have problems in listening and speaking.
14. Majority of the students have problems in academic writing.
15. Most of the UPP students have problems in grammar.
16. Most of them suffer from lack of vocabulary.

From the results of the statistical analysis was found that the UPP course at Ahfad University for Women didn't achieve its purposes for the year 2017 – 2018.

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## Recommendations

1. The placement test should assess the real level of the students.
2. Placing students with the same level, in one group, is one of the factors that make the course achieve its purposes.
3. Teachers should be stress with continuous absentees.
4. Teachers should follow the teacher book plan.
5. Teachers must encourage the students about the importance of this course as well as punctuality.
6. The administrators should include this course in credit hours.
7. The student who doesn't pass any book should repeat it.

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