The choice of a research topic tends to be determined by several factors. This is particularly true in my case. The following factors constitute the raison d'être of the present study:

My first encounter with Saudi Arab students was at Saudi Aramco. My teaching experience with them had left me with several intriguing questions. My keen observation on the existing ELT situation and close interaction with Saudi Students has further motivated me to study the nature of problems and various other concerns in the teaching-learning system in Saudi Arabia. Arabic is the basic means of communication and it is a self-contained language i.e. a language that has its own writing system and an old tradition of literature. Though the kingdom has realized the potential of English as a global means of communication and as an international language, there is a general fear that English might outdo Arabic.

This fact can be seen in the government policy towards the teaching of the English. First the language is not taught in the primary school. It is only taught in the intermediate school. But Arabic is taught from the primary school with great focus by dividing it into three segments-- grammar, orthography and literature-- each having a separate teacher. The English books used in the intermediate school are slightly too ambitious; Students who have never even had an official contact with the English alphabet are made to do exercises that involve dictation, crossword puzzles, sentence and paragraph constructions which is as absurd as trying to teach a toddler how to fly. I used to find the situation quite challenging and sometimes even fruitless.

More so, there is hardly any room for a teacher's creativity or innovation; one must restrict oneself to the demands of the teacher's book which tells them how to spend every single minute of their stay in the classroom. While in the class there may be many incidents of cultural shock, a foreign teacher like me may hit a raw spot unwittingly.
once asked a student to tell me his parents' names as part of a practice exercise in the book. To my consternation he flared up in rage. I then knew that it was a taboo to ask someone his mother's name and a greater taboo for him to mention it in public. Just as women are shielded from the public glare even in pictures and books, their names are also supposed to be in purdah of some sort.

Moreover, one thing I have come to realize about teaching in Saudi Arabia is that a teacher's excellence is not so much his qualification or his teaching expertise but his ability to control the rather naughty and haughty Saudi student. I was once told by my supervisor that for all he cared I should keep the students calm even if I shouldn't say anything in the class! Throughout my teaching life I have never encountered students more apathetic and playful than the Saudi students. They are adventurous and hate to be under any structured setting. Success in the classroom is not so much measured by the understanding of the students but in the teacher's ability to control the students. A teacher in this vein must be stern, strong and have a stentorian voice capable of jarring any trouble maker into calm. In other words, it is not so much the brain that matters but the brawn a teacher is made of. I have seen cases where during exams, teachers with sparing and thin build are not put on supervision and the strongly built ones are those chosen for that purpose. In short a student is not afraid of you because you are a teacher but because perhaps he feels that he can not beat you in a fight.

If a teacher is not made of steel then he must be an infectious fun box. Their love for fun is incredible so the teacher must try to create equilibrium between theatrics and academics. I remember how I managed to teach my first year intermediate students certain active verbs. I had to literally sing, walk, run, box, and shout to let them understand the verbs. The Arabs have one of the greatest senses of humor I have ever come across. This is evident in their jokes and cartoons which are rib-cracking and very intelligent.

To the Saudi student, examination is not a means to an end but an end in itself. They view examinations as the reason for education. The moment they take an exam in certain subjects they throw away the text books or rip the pages because as far as they are
concerned the books are then useless. During parents/ teachers meetings, the former only want to hear that their wards are excellent and that is all even if they know that it is the converse. Anything other than that is not important to them. Because of the prominence of grades in their scheme of things, exam season is a do or die affair. All of the teachers will be up on their toes to make sure that things go smoothly. While in the classroom an exam supervisor must have the eyes of an owl and the vigilance of an Alsatian to keep away the repressively mischievous students from cheating.

However, the students are quite polite outside the four walls of the school, and excellent in extra-curricular activities. I always marvel at how very young children barely out of the cradle can reel off poetry that they composed themselves. Even if you cannot understand Arabic you can not mistake the rhythm and rhyme in the couplets. Beside poetry which is a national art the students are also very good in drama. I believe if the English syllabus would be designed taking into cognizance their love of humor and poetry and with unconventional out-door teaching activities; the students would certainly excel in learning the language.

One thing again that stands unique with the Arabs is their unstinting hospitality; they are very accommodating and revel in lavish entertainment of their guests. As a newcomer you would have a lot of dinner invitations from your colleagues and acquaintances. Such invitations are especially made for non-Arab English teachers. The hosts use this opportunity to practise their English with you. When I came I thought initially that the Arabs were quite over-friendly because they always wanted to chat to you but later I realized that many were simply using this as a way of practising their English. Schools also organize dinner parties outside the town in desert resorts or beaches. As normal you would have the opportunity to intermingle socially and much more freely with all the teachers outside the nerve-breaking school environment. You would have a copious fill of the piquant Arab coffee accompanied with their sweet dates as starters before you get down to the main course. The main fare is mostly a dish called ‘kabsa’, cooked rice seasoned with local condiments and a roast sheep in its ensemble. You will sit in a circle and partake of the meal using your hands.
This close encounter with Saudi learners has led me to undertake research related to their oral proficiency. There are certain problems that one commonly encounters at all levels of Saudi learners. First of all, I noticed that phonemic differences are not clearly defined (e.g., short /i/ and long /i:/; voiced and unvoiced consonants /p/ and /b/, /t/ and /d/). Secondly, the third person singular and plural "s" or "es" is not produced, nor "ed" regular endings. Next, intonation patterns are flat and dull. Then word stress is ignored and therefore whole utterances sound robotic and monotonous. Simple and continuous aspects are very often confused. This gives rise to "I swimming three times a week" or "they are not here, they eat their lunch now, teacher". Verb tenses are often omitted, with a tendency to speak in the infinitive, especially for future plans and arrangements. (e.g., I go next week end). Auxiliary verbs, prepositions and pronouns are often omitted altogether. Verb and noun forms are often confused. Complex sentences are rarely attempted. Discourse markers are rarely attempted. English prosodic features are not attempted. Therefore features such as pausing and hesitations (well, eln, yeah, you know, etc) are lacking or Arabic equivalents (yaaani, inshallah,) are used sounding strange to an English ear. Comprehension of the written word and spoken word is usually synonymous with having "learned" it. Students do not consider production and experimentation as a means towards interiorizing and therefore effectively learning new lexical items. Active vocabulary is very limited. Basic question forms (is, are, do, does, can) have not been properly assimilated or omitted. Students make no attempt at comprehension of spoken utterances beyond the very familiar. A lot of prompting and assistance is required from the interlocutor even with familiar situations.

These observations have impelled me to undertake research in this area. Although, initially, I was keener on working on a topic related to ESP, I thought it would be more fruitful and practically feasible to work on a topic based on my teaching experience with Saudi Arab students and their learning problems.