



# An intensive blended-learning English course in KSA

Saudi-Arabia Technical and Vocational Training Corporation (TVTC). Reporting dates from February to June 2021

## Introduction

Not only Frank Smith, a Canadian psycholinguist, believes in the power of language learning and the opportunities that stem from that. The Saudi-Arabia Technical and Vocational Training Corporation (TVTC) also seeks to broaden the horizons of the Saudi community and foreign individuals within the country. **They have made it their mission to foster positive language learning through differentiated activities and the employment of well-trained and skilled educators.** TVTC's goal is to diversify the distribution of economic activity through the acquisition of English as a foreign language.

For their English learning programs, TVTC reached out to Robotel's local partner, Assrooh. Robotel is a Canadian company focused on digital language teaching and digital language content. This new collaboration was designed to make English language learning accessible in thirteen TVTC branches across Saudi Arabia. Due to the global Covid-19 pandemic, TVTC had to find a solution that made distance teaching and learning possible.

The SmartClass Teaching Platform is a language teaching platform that allows teachers to assign activities to students instead of having students fill out worksheets or use multiple platforms to submit work. TVTC chose Robotel's own comprehensive SmartClass English curriculum with over 2500 digital activities. While it is possible for teachers to create their own activities within the platform, TVTC chose only to use the already existing activities to guarantee the same learning experience for every student across the different classes and branches.



## Student and teacher profile

The students during the first session, which ran between February and June 2021, were 17 years or older, with most of them having a technology background or technical majors. The primary motivation for students was to become equipped with adequate language skills to prosper their working and social environment, both locally and internationally.

Ninety-four teachers were responsible for the different groups of learners. Thanks to the SmartClass by Robotel software, it was possible for Assrooh to hire native English speakers from all over the world.



**"One language sets you in a corridor for life. Two languages open every door along the way."  
- Frank Smith**



“The pedagogical mentors at Robotel did an extensive curriculum mapping to help place the curriculum ...”

### Support for the teachers and students

The onboarding team from Robotel trained the 6 language coordinators and the project manager from Assrooh on “using the SmartClass Teaching Platform and the digital activities of the English curriculum. Each language coordinator then oversaw 15-20 teachers throughout the session. The pedagogical mentors at Robotel did an extensive curriculum mapping to help pace the curriculum and assist teachers. Furthermore, the software development team from Robotel worked hand in hand with Assrooh to ensure that the platform was running smoothly and helped resolve any technical issues that arose in the first couple of weeks. The coordinators at Assrooh then trained 94 teachers and educators. Robotel also provided a series of training videos for teachers, so they could look up specific topics and find the answers to the most commonly asked questions. Two team members at Robotel also hosted three webinar training sessions for teachers and coordinators. Throughout the sessions over the next four months, the onboarding, service, and development team from Robotel were on stand-by to answer any questions that teachers and coordinators had and help find solutions to technical issues, such as a few hiccups with the software, and low server speed. Most cases were resolved within the first couple of weeks.



### Set up of placement, lessons, and expectations

1. Before students could start, they had to take a **30-minute placement test**. The dynamic placement test uses questions devised, written, and maintained by telc, the EU's leading language testing specialist.
2. Based on their initial **CEFR level** (A 1, A2, or B1), students were then grouped into groups of the same level and assigned to teachers.
3. Every teacher would spend about **4 hours per day (five days a week)** in live sessions with their students, using Microsoft Teams. During those sessions, teachers would teach grammar and vocabulary, answer questions, and assign activities in the SmartClass Teaching Platform.
4. Students were expected to spend **an additional 3 hours per day** working asynchronously in the SmartClass Teaching Platform. The system automatically graded fifty percent of all activities from the English curriculum series, so teachers had time to focus on correcting open-ended speaking and writing activities. Unfortunately, not all teachers took advantage of the openended writing activities. Due to the remote-learning set-up, students only had limited capabilities to work on grouping and pairing activities with one another.

After the first half of the semester, all students were moved to the next level without looking at their progress or conducting a mid-term exam. At the end of the second half, students were expected to participate in an exit exam with another placement test.

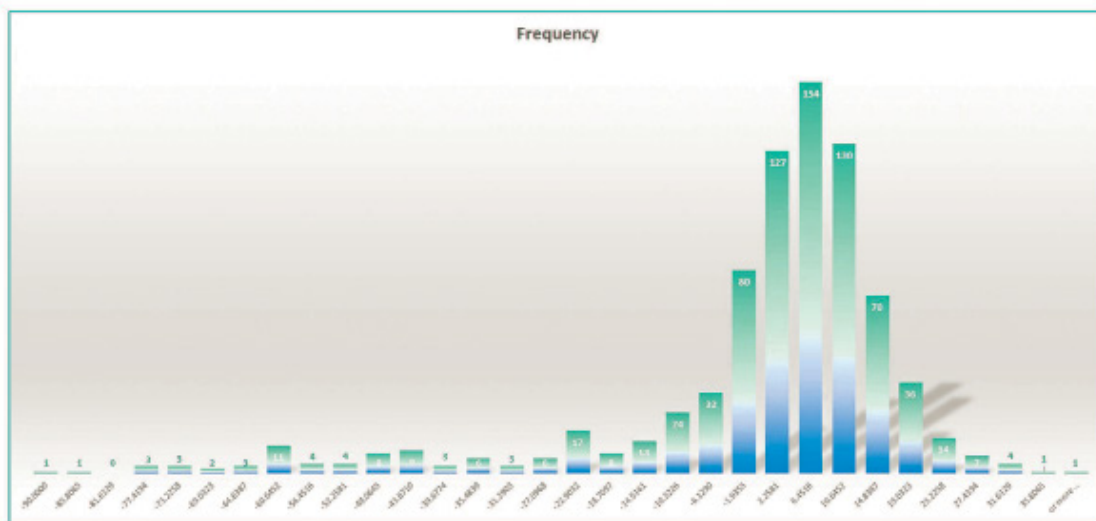
“The average student improved by more than one CEFR level within one session.”



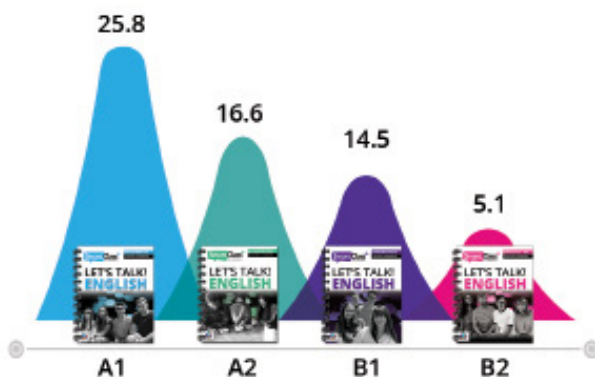
## Looking at the results

In order to find correlations, patterns and to draw real conclusions, a few steps had to be taken to clean up the data. Students that did not complete both the pre-and post-test were excluded from the analysis. As there is no final grade or certificate at the end of these TVTC courses, not all students were motivated to complete the post-session test. Furthermore, students that had negative progress (going down in multiple CEFR levels between pre-and post-test) and students that did not complete a total of 5 hours/session were excluded from the analysis. That brought the total number of **students used in the data analysis to 786**.

1. The **average improvement was a 22.9 point increase** between pre and post-assessment. The standard deviation was 20, which means that 95% of the values are between 2.9 and 42.9. A 20 point increase is equal to one CEFR level. **This means that the average student advanced by at least one CEFR level during this four-month session.** Proper use of the platform improved performance significantly (for comparison: students that spent 5 hours or less on the platform only improved by 13 points.)
2. In the following graphic, you can see the correlation between the average grade for all exercises and the average of the last 20 activities. It shows that most students' average grades improved between the start and the end of the semester.



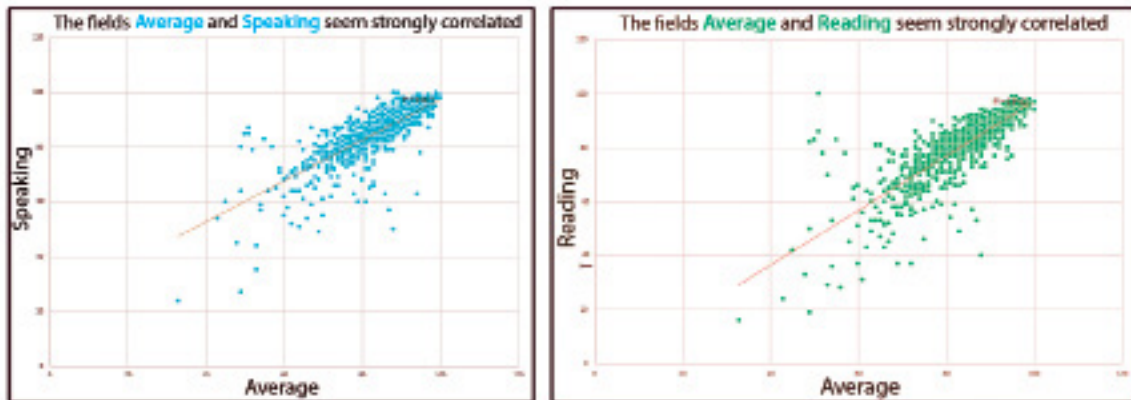
3. Looking at a level analysis, you can see that the average increase in the placement test DPT (Dynamic Placement Test) score decreases as the starting level in the CEFR scale increases. The average improvement for students starting in **A1 was 25.8 points**, in **A2 the improvement was 16.6 points**, in **B1 it was 14.5 points** and in **B2 it was 5.1 points**.



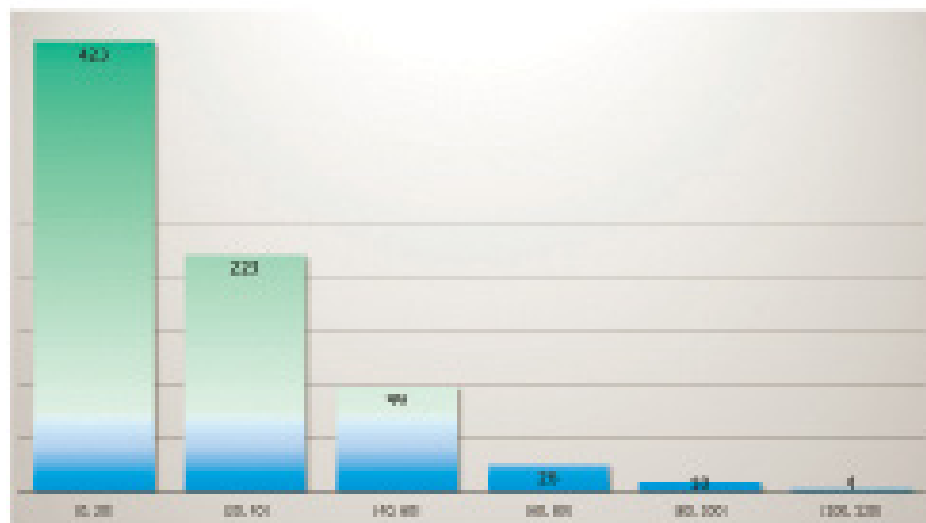
**Meaning:** Students who start in a lower CEFR level are more likely to move up multiple levels, while students that had prior knowledge didn't improve as much. Learning the language basics and going from no knowledge (AO) to basic knowledge (A 1 / A2) is easier than improving the fine details that differentiate elementary learners (A2) from advanced users of a language (B1/B2). It's even harder to reach a proficient/native-like level (C level).



4. In these two graphs, you can see a strong correlation (higher than 0.60) between the average score of a student and the score in speaking and reading activities. So **students that did better in speaking and reading activities were more likely to have an overall better score** than those that didn't do as well in reading/speaking activities. This is especially interesting because the dynamic placement test used for the pre-and post-assessment does not have a speaking portion at all.



5. The graphic below shows the number of students for each interval of 20 points (1 CEFR level=20 points). For example, about 220 students (28%) improved by 1-2 levels, and about 100 students (13%) improved by 2-3 levels.



## Conclusion

Not every student had the same teacher, and the remote-learning environment wasn't as ideal as an in-person approach; however, **the average student that participated in this 4-month session at TVTC made immense progress and advanced by more than one CEFR level in a short amount of time.** In addition, proper use of the SmartClass Teaching Platform resulted in a more than 22 point increase between pre-and post-test. While it was generally more challenging for students to increase their English proficiency level if they had prior knowledge, they still improved their skills significantly. About 13% of all students even enhanced by 2-3 levels total during this 4-month session.

Using the SmartClass Teaching Platform and English curriculum helps students develop and enhance their language skills across all four language domains, preparing them for work, leisure, travel, and life in an English-speaking environment.



With over 10,000 installations worldwide, SmartClass is a leader in language teaching technology. Let **Nicolette, project manager** for Assrooh Athakiyah and TVTC in Saudi Arabia, tell you **why SmartClass is the solution for your school** and institution.

### 1. What do you like best about the SmartClass Teaching Platform?

We love the **various ways in which SmartClass can be used**, both inside and outside of the virtual classroom. In particular, activities similar to those that are used in class during a teaching moment, or to **gauge student understanding** of a particular language skill or topic can then be assigned to students to work on autonomously. More so, teachers are able to **track the progress** and understanding of their students, as well as **provide meaningful feedback** to students via the platform itself. Students are then able to individually **reflect on their progress** and performance and become more self-aware, possibly identifying the language areas they wish to put more time and effort into with a view to improving as their engagement with SmartClass progresses.

### 2. How has SmartClass changed and improved your teachers' language teaching?

SmartClass has given our teachers **access to a significant number of activities** and topics of interest across varying levels of English proficiency and with respect to **key productive and receptive skills** incorporating key vocab and grammar concepts alike. The structure and design of the platform has allowed teachers to conduct **meaningful and insightful lessons**, without the need to limit their session to teaching a single skill. Incidentally, this has also **inspired teachers** to introduce other useful and creative resources, games, and class discussion topics that relate to the core SmartClass material, and those that they have identified as suiting their students' needs.

**In addition to the e-platform, teachers have access to the comprehensive teacher guide**, which allows them to **prepare for more challenging teaching segments** (such as grammar) and have a holistic view of current and upcoming chapters that their students will encounter over the weeks. Backed by these resources, teachers who have really engaged with SmartClass as a key teaching tool (for themselves) and as a key learning tool (for their students) have proved to be **more confident in their teaching, gaining the trust of their students accordingly**. Needless to say, this allows for an **efficient and productive teaching and learning environment** overall.

### 3. What do your students enjoy most and how do they benefit from your use of SmartClass?

Students enjoy and appreciate the relevant and interesting topics from the material they encounter in a single semester (i.e., our students are exposed to both their placement level material and material from one level higher). They **enjoy speaking about topics in relation to their own lives and experiences** (since speaking is a key focus in our course). However, they also tend to enjoy supplementary activities such as reading.



This also **keeps them engaged and many are motivated to challenge themselves**, especially when volunteering to read a paragraph of a text to practice/showcase their pronunciation and fluency and/or answer questions about a text to show their understanding when amongst their peers.

#### 4. Why did you decide to start using SmartClass over other digital platforms and curricula?

SmartClass, to us, is an **incredible teaching and learning tool**, in that native English facilitators from various countries and walks of life are able to use it in line with their discretion and varying teaching styles, yet assist students across the country (with varying degrees of English proficiency levels) in obtaining a **standardized set of language objectives** aligned with our course.

#### 5. How has our English Curriculum changed and improved your students' language learning?

As mentioned, one of the main aims of our course is to **help students improve their speaking / communicative English**. For this reason, many of our weekly assessments are internal **speaking tasks** that we have based on grammar, vocab, and general topics from each level, and which are more or less in line with each SmartClass chapter being taught as the weeks progress.

The SmartClass English Curriculum has allowed us to do this with ease, especially because our students also have an interactive platform to practice outside the virtual classroom (e.g., **pronunciation and recording activities** that they are assigned for homework on SmartClass). In this way, they appear **more confident with various language and grammar concepts** that are relevant to the content and speaking assessments that they encounter each week.

#### 6. Why would you recommend the SmartClass Teaching Platform and Curricula to other schools and institutions?

It is **cost-effective, versatile, and well-suited to our online program**, yet we are confident that it would **work just as well in a face-to-face / blended learning environment**. It consists of well-thought-out features such as admin permissions to assign activities as and when teachers would like students to supplement content taught on a particular day/in a particular week. It allows for tracking of progress and performance in a simplified manner, **consolidating all key data by means of a single usage report**.

#### 7. In what way has your use of SmartClass improved your institution/school?

It has allowed us to **conduct our remote intensive English course with ease**, serving as a reliable/trustworthy key resource on which all our classes, supplementary teaching material, and assessments are based. It has further allowed us to **track teacher and student progress** alike to ensure that we **keep improving in all aspects**. In addition, we enjoyed working with a wonderful, expert team at Robotel, who have offered continuous support and insight since we first implemented SmartClass in 2021.