Exploring Sudanese University EFL Learners' Pragmatic Competence

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Abstract- This study attempts to investigate Sudanese EFL students' discourse to appraise their nonverbal communication, expressive skills, topic maintenance, and their ability to abide by speech conventions during their social interaction. The subjects of the study comprise 40 fourth level students who are taking English as a major course at Kassala University. To collect the data for the present study, a questionnaire and a free discussion panel with the students were employed. Analysis showed that Sudanese EFL students did not experience any sort of problems with regard to nonverbal communication. They could speak clearly with varied and appropriate tone and volume. The study also showed that only a few students had the ability to develop the topic being discussed skillfully without repeating one point over and over again. This reveals students' linguistic weakness and their inability to verbally communicate their thought. The study concluded that the students never attempted to use figurative language which made it difficult to be certain whether the students could use metaphor properly or otherwise. To interact effectively within a particular discourse community, students should know that it is not sufficient to be skillful in nonverbal communication and ignore the role of language in this domain. Students should activate both nonverbal and verbal aspects of communication in order to effectively express their thoughts and feelings. It is the job of teachers to train their students in this respect.

Index Terms- pragmatic competence; communicative function; social interaction; language functions

I. INTRODUCTION

Purpura (2004) claims that language is primarily used to transmit information, to perform transactions, to establish and maintain social relations, to construct one's identity or to communicate one's intentions, attitudes or hypotheses. Kiesling and Paulston (2005) state that the interaction of language with social life is viewed as, first of all, a matter of human action, based on the knowledge that enables persons to use language. Many young people who are starting work life, as stated by Rowson (2007), lack this knowledge. Sperber and Wilson 1986/1995, 173) claim that language is an essential tool for the processing and memorizing of information. This entails that users of language depend on their cognitive abilities when they set to use language for different interpersonal purposes. Most of the teaching situations in the Sudanese classrooms still adopt the traditional approaches to language teaching and learning; the

communicative value of the linguistic forms is not considered. Much emphasis is put on the grammatical and lexical properties of the linguistic forms. How these forms can be used in a real communication is not considered. So, the ability to use language in order to express their intended meaning properly is one of the problems encountered by Sudanese university EFL learners. The students experience difficulties abiding by the socio-cultural rules of language use. Their ability to develop the language they have studied into a socially accepted discourse always remains under question.

II. BACKGROUND

Crystal (1985: 240) defined pragmatics as the study of language from the point of view of the users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction, and the effects their use of language has on the other participants in an act of communication." So as stated by Yule (1996) pragmatics deals with the relationship between linguistic forms and the users of these forms. This entails the ability to employ linguistic forms to perform particular language functions properly. According to Saville-Troike (2006), pragmatics can be defined as what a speaker must know in order to interpret and convey meaning in communication. Similarly, Kasper (1997) defined pragmatic competence as the knowledge of communicative action and the way to carry it out, and the ability to use language appropriately according to the context. Mey (2001) states that pragmatics studies the use of language in human communication as determined by the conditions of society. He holds that communication in society happens chiefly by means of language. However, the users of language, as social beings, communicate and use language on society's premises; society controls their access to the linguistic and communicative means. Pragmatics, as the study of the way humans use their language in communication, bases itself on a study of those premises and determines how they affect human language use. Leech (1983: 6) defines pragmatics as 'meaning in relation to speech situations'. This definition highlights language users' ability to use language for different communicative purposes in different situations. Zufferey (2010, 39) contend that pragmatic competence can be manifested in several acquisitional processes, namely, 1. The acquisition of communicative intents and the development of their linguistic expression, including the conduct of communication prior to the emergence of speech – that is by vocalizations and gestures. 2. The development of conversational

skills and the acquisition of rules that govern turn-taking, interruptions, back channeling, signaling topic relevance or topic shift and so on. 3. The development of control over the linguistic devices used to organize discourse in ways that are cohesive and genre specific. 4. Pragmatic learning processes that operate in children's entry into language, such as the acquisition of novel linguistic forms by pairing them with their inferred communicative function rather than their semantic meaning. 5. The acquisition of rules of politeness and other culturally determined rules for using speech. The notion of pragmatic competence and how it can developed should be one of the aims of the Ministry of Education in Sudan when devising the English language teaching programs.

III. METHOD

3-1- Participants

The participants in this study included 40 Sudanese EFL students who are taking English as their major at Kassala University. The students take courses in the English language, the English literature and linguistics. Theoretically, these courses must equip the students with the knowledge of English – the knowledge they need to be active future practitioners of English in Sudan. Practically, Sudanese researchers believe that the situation of English as a communicative tool in Sudan is deteriorating.

3-2- Instruments

Two tools were used to collect the data for this paper: a questionnaire and a free open discussion panel. Adopting two different tools is a guarantee of eliciting more comprehensive

and reliable data which could lead to reasonable and promising results.

3-3- The questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed to obtain information about how Sudanese university EFL learners appraise their own pragmatic competence. It evaluates the students' ability to develop the language they have studied into a socially accepted discourse. The questionnaire comprises four sections. Section one deals with students' competence in nonverbal communication. Section two involves students' expressive skills. The third section examines students' ability to develop certain topic into an effective piece of discourse. The fourth section evaluates and assesses students' ability to use English as determined by the discourse community of the users of English.

3-4- The Free Discussion Panel

The discussion represents an effective tool to elicit realistic and reliable data about participants' ability to appropriately interact verbally and nonverbally within a discourse community of the English language users. The data obtained from the discussion and the result of the questionnaire are expected to add to the validity and the truth condition of the data elicited for the current study.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In discussing the results of this study, statistical results of the tables (1,2,3) and the result obtained from the students' actual spoken performance were thoroughly examined.

Table (1) Students' Evaluation of their Nonverbal Communication

No	Item	Yes	No
1	I Look at the eyes of the person speaking with.	36	4
		90%	10%
2	I use facial expressions appropriate to content of words.	27	13
		67.5%	32.5%
3	I Understand the facial expressions of others and respond appropriately.	30	10
		75%	25%
4	I understand the emotions of others and respond appropriately.	33	17
		82.5%	17.5%
5	I recognize nonverbal cues and gestures (body language).	27	13
		67.5%	32.5%
6	I act at an age-appropriate level.	27	13
		67.5%	32.5%
7	I recognize the spatial relationships between people or objects and self; I stand the appropriate distances from others.	27	13
		67.5%	32.5%

The students assume that they do not experience any sort of problems with regard to the nonverbal communication. Their answers of the questionnaire assert this fact. Observing students while communicating, proves that they are true. The question of verbal communication seems not to bother the students; they can deal with this matter in such a way that can be accepted by the native and other speakers of English.

Table 1. Students' Expressive Skills

No	Item	Yes	No
8	I speak clearly.	24	16
		60%	40%
9	I speak with varied and appropriate tone and volume.	21	19
		52.5%	47.5%
10	I am able to accept another person's viewpoint.	30	10
		75%	25%
11	I do not keep repeating one topic, as if unaware of another's interest.	23	17
		57.5%	42.5%
12	I understand sarcasm.	28	12
		70%	30%
13	I understand and use metaphor appropriately.	22	18
		55%	45%
14	I let go of an argument, even if the other person does not agree.	22	18
		55%	45%
15	I understand others' state of mind and can respond to all sorts of inquiries.	20	20
		50%	50%

Most of the students assume that they are skillful talking about the so-called expressive skills. They maintain that they could speak clearly with varied and appropriate tone and volume. The students state that they can accept the view of others so that the communication in which they are involved can proceed smoothly. The students also claim that they do not keep repeating one topic while conversing. This does not appear to be true observing them communicating. Only a few students were able to develop the topic being discussed into a more fluent and effective discourse act. Most of the students keep repeating the same point again and again. This reflects their linguistic weakness. The students state that they can understand sarcasm. This also seems to be true; the students do not experience any problems recognizing this aspect of conversation. The students report that they can understand and use metaphor appropriately. But this does not seem to be true; the students rarely used figurative language during their conversation. So it is difficult to know whether the students could use metaphor during their conversation.

Table 2. Topic Maintenance

No	Item	Yes	No
16	I choose a topic appropriate to setting.	35	5
		87.5%	12.5%
17	I introduce and discuss topic clearly.	34	6
		85%	15%
18	I express relevant information and express it concisely.	25	15
		62.5%	37.5%
19	I maintain a topic in conversation.	28	12
		70%	30%
20	I change topic appropriately.	24	16
		60%	40%

21	I understand how to tailor conversations to audience – e.g. peers versus teachers.	25	15
		62.5%	37.5%

The students contend that they could properly maintain the topic they discuss. They also report that they are able to introduce and discuss a particular topic in a conversation appropriately. They can provide the right information they need for their communication. They can also discuss different topics in a conversation. Studying the students' actual conversation, makes it clear that only a few students possess the ability to introduce and discuss different topics fluently and smoothly. It is also apparent that the number of the students who could interact according to what is socially accepted and agreed upon is very limited.

Table 3. Speech Conventions

No	Item	Yes	No
22	I introduce myself appropriately to others.	35	5
		87.5%	12.5%
23	I use appropriate conversational pleasantries (greeting, apologies – response to others).	32	8
		80%	20%
24	I talk "to" people, not "at" them.	25	15
		62.5%	37.5%
25	I ask for help when needed.	35	5
		87.5%	12.5%
26	I initiate original (non-redundant) conversation.	22	18
		55%	45%

The students state that they introduce themselves appropriately to others; and that they can appropriately use conversational pleasantries (greeting, apologies – response to others). Taking students' actual conversation into account, one will discover that this is not true; most of the students failed to introduce themselves properly. It was also difficult for most of them to begin their speech the right way. Asking for help while conversing does not seem to be play any role in the continuum of the strategies students adopt during their communication. However, the students assumed that they seek for help when they were unable to proceed conversing. For this reason their conversation sometimes lacks coherence and unity and their content seems to be redundant.

figurative language which made it difficult to know if the students could use metaphor properly. The study showed that not all students could introduce and discuss certain topics more fluently and smoothly. It was difficult for them to begin interaction the right way. To interact effectively and properly within a particular discourse community, students should know that it is not sufficient to be skillful in nonverbal communication and ignore the role of language. Both nonverbal and verbal aspects of communication should be activated so that they can effectively express their thoughts and feelings. It is the job of teachers to train their students in this respect.

V. CONCLUSION

Analysis showed that Sudanese EFL students did not experience any sort of problems with regard to nonverbal communication. They could speak clearly with varied and appropriate tone and volume. But the linguistic value of the content of the message they conveyed was very low. The study also revealed that only a few students had the ability to develop the topic being discussed skillfully into an informative and comprehensible discourse. The respondents kept repeating one point over and over again which reflected their inability to verbally communicate their thought properly. Furthermore, results indicated that the students never attempted to use

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