

Communication Problems among Sudanese EFL University Learners

Ali Ahmed Osman Zakaria

Department of English language & Linguistics, University of Kassala, Sudan, Qassim University Saudi Arabia

Abstract- The study probes into Sudanese EFL university learners communication habits to explore the nature of the problem they experience when communicating. To achieve the aim of the study, the researcher employed the analytic descriptive approach. The subjects of the study consisted of 70 Sudanese EFL students drawn from Faculty of Arts at Alneelain University. Two tools were employed for data collection: a questionnaire and an audio-recorded interview with the students. Results showed that the students knew what effective communication entails; proper negotiation of meaning through well constructed message. Result also showed that the students could understand the message addressed to them but they experienced difficulties responding properly. The students reported that the problem they faced in this respect was due to their limited knowledge about the target language and lack of confidence. Furthermore, result proved that the environment in which the students learn and practise English did not encourage the students to develop their communicative abilities. English does not have any communicative functions in the students' community. That is why the students have very poor communication strategies and in turn they fail to express their thoughts clearly and concisely.

Index Terms- oral communication, communication skills, communicative function, communication strategies

I. INTRODUCTION

The ability to communicate effectively represents one of the factors that are highly recommended for obtaining a good job. Those people who are good communicators in English will succeed in achieving the tasks assigned to them properly. Pauline Rowson (2007) reports that many young people in particular are starting working life not knowing how to talk to their colleagues let alone customers and bosses, and many would rather use e-mail than pick up a telephone. People are forgetting how to talk, how to listen and how to pick up on subtle nuances of body language; this can lead to failed relationships and misunderstandings both in our social and our working lives. Sudanese students in many instances fail to make proper use of English. Using English to achieve certain communicative purposes is not that easy process for most of them. However, they are expected to possess a considerable knowledge about how to communicate so that they can contribute to the development of their local communities in different fields. Good communication skills maintains success and prosperity in workplace. Pauline holds that when things go wrong in a company, a friendship, a personal relationship, communication or

rather lack of it or misinterpreting it, is often at the heart of the problem. Improving your communication skills can bring huge rewards; it can help you to win more contracts and sales, gain promotion, manage your organization or your team more effectively, find friendship, even love.

II. BACKGROUND

Sage (2006) states that communication is a complicated process that demands putting together information from many sources, and expressing thoughts with clarity and relevant content, according to established conventions, and an awareness of our conduct through the reactions of others to what we say and do. For Harryman, Kresheck, and Nicolosi, (1996) communication is any means by which an individual relates experiences, ideas, knowledge, and feelings to another. Communication can be expressed through both speech and gestures. Pauline Rowson (2007) assumes that people can communicate whether that is by speech, written word, sign language, Braille, body language, grunts, or simply the movement of the eyes if everything else is lost to us. Being able to communicate in some form is a great gift and one that we take for granted. Lani Arredondo (2007) hypothesizes that solutions to many unnecessary and serious problems lie in improving our ability to interact with others—in communicating more effectively. To manage well, you must communicate well.

Many of the previous studies highlight the importance of communication and the strategies for the development of the students' communication skills. Kamonpan Boonkit (2010), for example, claimed that building up confidence in speaking to an audience is a factor that strengthens speaking performance. The tasks based on speaking for special communication in a variety of situations designed a particular course can also help participants to prepare for speaking, and once each speaking task is well-prepared, this preparation becomes an effective strategy to minimize anxiety, and thus maximize speaking confidence. Şaziye Yaman, et al. (2013) stated that Turkish EFL students used negotiation for meaning, compensatory, and getting the gist strategies in communication. They also found that female students used communication strategies more than males and advanced level students. Fadila Rehaiem (2012) reported that the teachers are considered as the basic element in promoting the learners' communicative abilities in using a foreign language. Indeed, she discovered that EFL learners need more assistance from their teachers in order to be proficient in their communication process. Samira Al Hosni (2014) assumed that the main speaking difficulties encountered by students are linguistic difficulties, mother tongue use, and inhibition. Students

are unable to speak in English because they lack the necessary vocabulary items and grammar structures. They also lack sentence formation skills, which leads them to resort to their mother tongue. Students also think that the mistakes they make in front of their classmates are very embarrassing. Accordingly, they prefer not to take part in any communicative event. Thanyalak Oradee (2012) hypothesized that teachers should construct a variation of English speaking activities which motivate the students to learn. Communicative activities such as discussion, problem solving, and role-playing can be effective for the language classroom in Thai context. Other important factors to be recognized in the use of these activities are the order or sequence in which they are graded. Breaking the students into small groups will lead to better success and achievement in learning foreign languages. Vahid Norouzi Larsari (2011) argued that for the insufficient authentic resources and the need to use the target language, EFL learners generally encounter difficulties developing their communicative competence.

not surprising since English does not have any communicative functions in the Sudanese community. That is, English is not used by the students in their natural communication. They exercise English only in school and university as part of educational requirements.

3- 2- Instruments

For collecting the data of this paper two tools were used: a questionnaire and an audio-recorded interview. Using a variety of tools for collecting research data, provides a good means of getting a comprehensive view on the responses of the respondents. The interview helps the researcher to observe what cannot be revealed by the students' questionnaire. So, to have different tools for data collection means adopting a procedure through which the researcher can get a comprehensible data which yield reasonable results.

3-3- The Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed to obtain information about how Sudanese EFL university learners appraise and assess their ability to engage into a fruitful communication event. It was also designed to make the students be aware of the knowledge required for good and effective communication. The questionnaire represents a tool to illicit information about respondents' ability to understand and respond properly to any communicative event. The questionnaire consists of four sections. The first section is about students' knowledge of good communication. The second section tackles the role of the learning environment in enhancing students' communication skills. Section three deals with the factors negatively influence students' ability to communicate. The fourth section involves the style and strategies adopted by the students when communicating.

3- 4- The Audio-recorded Interview

The interview was conducted with the participants to compare and contrast the facts about students' ability to communicate different kinds of meaning. It was conducted to be certain that the data used for the paper is more reliable and realistic. So the main reason behind the interview is to observe how the students communicate. This step is taken to help the researcher notice what cannot be seen through the analysis of the students' questionnaire.

III. METHODOLOGY

3-1- Participants

The participants in this study included 70 Sudanese EFL students who are taking English as their major at Alneelain university. The students at Alneelain university are from all parts of Sudan. This entails that the students in this university can be taken as a sample for the Sudanese EFL University learners' community. The students are supposed to have a considerable knowledge of English which enables them to express different functions of language. Students are also believed to demonstrate an awareness of the communicative use of English. This helps them play a very important role in the promotion of the fields which require the knowledge of English in their working life. Moreover, the students are expected to play an influential role in the development of the local communities where they live which eventually leads to the development of the country as a whole. The education which the subjects of the study received in English should make it easy for them to be good practitioners of English in the Sudan. But many of the students who have taken English in their university study are not able to make an effective use of English. This lets many researchers become frustrated and assume that research which depends on the data retrieved from the performance of these students will deem to failure. This is

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4- 1- Students' Knowledge of Good Communication

No	Item	Yeas	No	Median
1	I know that good communication entails expressing one's thoughts clearly and effectively.	90%	10%	1
		63	7	

2	I have the ability to understand all the messages addressed to me during any communicative event.	52.3%	47.7%	3
		37	33	
3	Limited knowledge of English is one of the problems I encounter when communicating.	51.1%	48.9%	3
		36	34	
4	I ignore many of the conventions and norms of language use.	51.1%	48.9%	3
		36	34	
5	I do not experience any problem developing my oral communication abilities.	35.6%	64.4%	4
		25	45	
6	The education that I receive gives much importance to the communicative use of language.	44.4%	55.6%	4
		31	39	
7	My learning syllabus incorporates activities which help me develop my communicative competence.	25.6%	74.4%	4
		18	52	

Most of the students agree that good communication means negotiating one's thoughts more clearly and effectively. The students also claim that they have the ability to understand the messages addressed to them when communicating. But they experience great difficulties during oral communication. Their knowledge of the target language is limited which causes difficulties for the students making the right rhetorical choices to express their thoughts. They ignore the socio-cultural rules and conventions that they should abide by when communicating. The subjects of the study assume that it is not easy for them to raise

an awareness of how to develop their communication abilities. The education the students receive does not put much emphasis on the communicative use of language. That is, the learning syllabus does not contribute to the development of the students' oral communication abilities. This coincides with the results obtained from the interview conducted with the students. It was obvious that the students experience great problems expressing their thoughts and making themselves understood during the interview.

4- 2- The role of the Learning Environment in Enhancing Students' Communication Skills

No	Item	Yeas	No	Median
8	My teacher comments negatively on the mistakes I make during speaking sessions.	60%	40%	2
		42	28	
9	My colleagues comment on the mistakes I make during oral communication.	50%	50%	3
		35	35	
10	My teacher encourages me to develop my communicative competence.	31.1%	68.9%	4
		22	48	
11	I cooperate with my colleagues in order to develop my communicative skills.	71.1%	28.9%	1
		50	20	
12	The community in which I live fosters and enhances my speaking abilities.	38.9%	61.1%	4

		27	43	
--	--	----	----	--

The environment where the students learn and practise their English does not play any influential role in the development of the students communication abilities. The students maintain that their teachers negatively comment on their poor performance. Their colleagues also negatively comment on the mistake they make when communicating. This in turn, makes the students fear making mistakes which eventually leads them not to take part in any activity. In any learning situation it is known that the role of the teacher is to increase the students opportunities to learn properly. However, the respondents claim that their teachers do not encourage them to develop their communicative competence. The community also does not play any important role in

encouraging the students to develop and improve their communication abilities. This is not surprising since English does not have any communicative function in the students' local community. Analyzing the interview conducted with the students also revealed that the students possess poor communication skills. Some of the students found it very difficult to express what they feel. Part of the respondents refused to take part in the interview asserting that they did not know what to say or how to express their thoughts to others. This makes it obvious that the community does not play any influential role in developing students' communication abilities.

4- 3- Factors Negatively Influence Students' Communicative Abilities

No	Item	Yeas	No	Median
13	I do worry about the mistakes I commit when speaking.	57.7%	42.3%	3
		40	30	
14	I Fear speaking English in public; therefore I encounter difficulties when communicating.	58.9%	41.1%	3
		41	29	
15	I am afraid that my colleagues laugh at me when I make mistakes while conversing in English.	65.6%	34.4%	2
		46	24	

There are some psychological factors which hinder the students from performing well in the instances of their oral communication. The students state that they worry about the mistakes they commit during communication sessions. They also show that they fear speaking English in public. Furthermore, the students are afraid that when they make mistakes their peer will laugh at them. Being as such, the students might not attempt to

exploit their cognitive abilities in order to engage into an effective and meaningful learning process. The result of the interview showed that the students lack the necessary confidence to be involved in a real and natural communication. It takes much time and great effort to push some of the subjects of the study to talk.

4- 4- The Style and Strategies Adopted by the Students when Communicating

No	Item	Yeas	No	Median
16	I can make correct and effective word choice for the content of my message.	47.7%	52.3%	4
		33	37	
17	I consider the function of the grammatical structures of the message I wish to convey.	44.4%	55.6%	4

		31	39	
18	I engage into group work and discussion to develop my communication skills.	12.3%	87.7%	4
		9	61	
19	I often practise English with my colleagues in the university.	47.7%	52.3%	4
		33	37	
20	I practise my English whenever I get the opportunity.	31.1%	68.9%	4
		22	48	
21	I consider the relation that holds between me and the other participants in any communicative event.	32.3%	67.7%	4
		23	47	
22	I have ability to correct myself when I feel that my message is not appropriate.	25.6%	74.4%	4
		18	52	
23	I adopt different styles while speaking to make my message more effective and comprehensible.	30%	70%	4
		21	49	

The students have problems selecting the appropriate and the right content for the message they wish to communicate. If the students consider the functions of the structures they use in their oral performance, they will manage to adopt an effective style in their communication. Unfortunately, the students never consider the communicative value of the structures they employ when communicating. This might be due to the gaps in their linguistic repertoire. They are not so proficient to the extent that they can retrieve a variety of grammatical structures in order to construct the message they wish to convey. No attempts are made from the part of the students to engage into group work or discussion so that they can improve their communication skills. They do not use English for their natural communication which makes it difficult for them to improve their oral competence. The students also do not have the strategies that enable them to consider the sort of the relationship that holds between the participants. As such, the students ignore the fact that the nature of the relationship between the parties involved in any communicative event determines the paths and the end product of this event. Students report that they lack the strategies that enable them to correct themselves if their message is not appropriate while communicating. Furthermore, the students maintain that they adopt no particular style or strategy during their oral communication. The performance of the students during the interview was very poor. This supports the claim they made that they are not aware of any effective strategies or styles that facilitate communication process. But a few students performed well and they expressed themselves without any apparent difficulty; they spoke clearly and concisely.

V. CONCLUSION

Results show that the students know what effective communication implies: negotiation of meaning in a more proper and effective way. Result also shows that the students can

understand the message addressed to them. But their limited knowledge about the target language and lack of confidence make oral communication a great problem for them. The environment in which the students learn and practise English does not encourage or motivate the students to develop their communicative competence. English does not have any communicative functions in the students' community. Furthermore, result reveals that the students possess very poor communication strategies which makes it difficult for them to express their thoughts clearly and concisely. Syllabus designers should incorporate the activities that develop students' abilities to communicate when devising any learning programme. Teachers also should consider the needs of the students during their teaching process. As for the students, they need to be more motivated and prepared to engage in a more serious and effective process of learning.

REFERENCES

- [1] Al Hosni, S. (2014) Speaking Difficulties Encountered by Young EFL Learners International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature (IJSELL) Volume 2, Issue 6, June 2014, PP 22-30
- [2] Arredondo, L. (2007) Communicate Effectively: 24 Lessons for Day-to-Day Business Success Mc Graw-Hill
- [3] Boonkit K (2010) Enhancing the development of speaking skills for non-native speakers of English Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences 2 (2010) 1305–1309.
- [4] Harryman, E., Kresheck, J., & Nicolosi, L. (1996). Terminology of Communication Disorders. Williams & Wilkins, Media, Pennsylvania. Robbins, S. (1991). Management. Prentice Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey
- [5] Norouzi, V. (2011) Computer Mediated Communication: The Use of CMC to Promote Learners' Communicative Competence The Criterion: An International Journal in English ISSN 0976-8165
- [6] Oradee, T. (2012) Developing Speaking Skills Using Three Communicative Activities (Discussion, Problem-Solving, and Role- Playing) International Journal of Social Science and Humanity, Vol. 2, No. 6, November 2012

- [7] Reheiem, F. (2012) The Teachers' Role in Enhancing EFL Learners' Communicative Abilities A Case Study of the First Year LMD Students of English at Mohamed Kheider University of Biskra Algeria.
- [8] Rowson, P. (2005) Communicating with More Confidence. Hampshire, England.
- [9] Sage, R. (2006) Supporting Language and Communication: A Guide for School Support Staff Paul Cuapman: California.
- [10] Yaman, Ş.; Irgin, P. & Kavasoğlu, M. (2013) Communication Strategies: Implications for EFL University Students
- [11] Zakaria, Ali.; & Mugaddam, A. (2013) Exploring Sudanese EFL University Learners' Discourse Competence. Indonesian EFL Journal, Vol. 1(1) January 2015 ISSN 2252-7427

AUTHORS

First Author – Ali Ahmed Osman Zakaria, Department of English language & Linguistics, University of Kassala, Sudan, Qassim University Saudi Arabia E-mail: haddad_31970@hotmail.com