
‘GOOD TEACHER, BAD TEACHER’- INVESTIGATING GOSSIP IN A WOMEN’S COLLEGE IN KUWAIT

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ABSTRACT: *This paper investigated how and why female students at the English Department (TED) of the College of Basic Education in Kuwait frequently engage in evaluative discourse about their professors. The study also revealed key aspects on how evaluative information about professors is circulated and processed by students through different mediums, like social media, an online student forum, graffiti on classroom tabletops, and so on. Utilizing sociolinguistic quantitative analysis, we gauged the frequency of using evaluative adjectives and how it affected the strength or validity of students’ judgments over professors and their teaching performances. Our findings indicated that there was a strong emphasis by students on course grades rather than knowledge or the learning experience resulting from attending college. In order to graduate with high grades students exert substantial efforts into choosing their preferred professor for a certain course. These efforts manifest themselves through gathering background information about professors to establish who according to them is a ‘bad teacher’ and who is a ‘good teacher’.*

KEYWORDS: *Women’s college, students, professors, evaluative talk, gossip.*

INTRODUCTION

THE SOCIO-CULTURAL ASPECTS PROMPTING EVALUATIVE DISCOURSE

The Kuwaiti culture tends to have an evaluative nature; this is due to the societal omnipresence of subjective judgments. It is, therefore, not uncommon to see people leisurely sitting in a coffee shop over a weekend watching passersby making comments about people’s appearances (Algharabali 2011). This socio-cultural notion of subjective evaluation can sometimes permeates into all aspects of the Kuwaiti lifestyle, including academic institutions, as is the case in the English Department (TED) at the College of Basic Education (CBE) being explored in the present study. Being an all-girls institution with a majority of female faculty members seems to suggest a setting where engaging in evaluative talk is highly likely (Although see discussions by Coates 2004; Cameron 2007 and Coates and Cameron 1989 who argue that men too engage in gossiping especially in all-male contexts). In fact, according to the observations of the researchers involved in this study: verbal evaluation and gossip carried out by both professors and students about other professors are typical non-academic interactional practices that take place regularly in TED. This promoted the researches to pursue this issue and conduct the present study. These practices have significant influences and outcomes on both professors and students. It is worth noting here that throughout this study, we link evaluative discourse to the notion of gossip because these two types of behavior seem to have similar features and outcomes of gossip talk. This point will be addressed in more details further on.

THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT

TED in CBE was established in February 2002. It offers a nationally recognized program focusing on a diverse set of research and teaching interests within the language, arts and education. The program is designed to prepare students and develop their instructional abilities to eventually become teachers of English in Kuwait's primary schools following their graduation from TED.

The number of students in the department is approximately 4000 female students. TED offers a four-year program which leads to a BA in English education and in turn equips students to be English teachers in the primary stage in public schools.

It is also worth adding a valid point with regards to the social status of the students in TED. Many of them are married and have domestic responsibilities as wives and mothers. Also, some students come from socially conservative families. This is why the choice of teaching as a profession is suitable for many students on all levels, especially since public schools are gender-segregated. Should a student decide to pursue a career in teaching, a guaranteed job awaits her upon graduation. Additionally, some students are already employed and have been sent to CBE by their institutions on scholarships, which in their case could mean being overworked and therefore stressed-out. Thus, for these two groups of students (which represent a large majority), concentrating merely on grades is their sole vocation at college and, as such, the process of learning itself becomes visibly marginalized for them. In fact, to many of them, their presence at the college is linked to achieving a high GPA; otherwise they risk losing their grants.

THE ACADEMIC ASPECTS PROMPTING EVALUATIVE DISCOURSE

Neither professors nor students seem to be able to separate the professional and academic nature of the college context from the evaluative nature of the Kuwaiti culture itself. For most students, engaging in evaluative discourse about professors seems to be their life-support system during their academic years at TED (See Dunbar's discussion on gossip, 1996: 78-79).

Evaluative information on any given professor is usually "processed" through two typical channels. A group of students spreads it and another group seeks it. This behavior takes place all throughout the students' college years. In light of this circulation of evaluative information, students are able to predict what to expect when attending classes with a certain professor in terms of: required course effort, academic difficulty of exams, and the type of final course grade that a student is likely to receive. A very large number of students considers the final grade to be the most important end goal (¹See discussion on grades and grade inflation in Cote and Allahar, 2011: 55-57). Coincidentally, the grade-obsessed students do not usually attend college in order to "learn" as much as being there merely to receive a credential, which securely sends them into the workforce (Cote and Allahar 2011). From this perspective then, putting effort into uncovering facts about potential professors becomes a student's highest priority, thus enabling them to predict which professor is most likely to request the least academic requirements or workload.

However, this is not the whole picture. It is in fact more complicated than merely the final course grade being the ultimate goal. For one thing, the concept of the grade itself is commonly

sabotaged by external influences, such as outside connections linked to students requesting grade augmentation. The grade factor is also subjected to internal influences such as grade inflation and grade negotiation between student and professor (Cote and Allahar, 2011: 104-108). Another reason is that many professors have increased the imbalance in power and authority engulfing their relationship with their students. This imbalance is probably based on some professors' preconceived ideas that many of the students in TED are underachievers academically and should, therefore, be alienated in class and evaluated harshly on their performance.

Accordingly, from the student's point of view the question, 'who is going to be teaching me this semester?' matters a great deal. The professors themselves are well aware that students need to promote and protect their existence as students during the four years timeframe spent in the CBE. As a result, most professors reinforce the circulation and processing of evaluative information about other professors by taking part in gossip talk with students. However, for the present study the focus will remain mostly on how students evaluate professors (an area which is extensively studied, see review by Wachtel 1998; also see McPherson 2006). This study, therefore, explores the nature of student evaluative discourse about professors on two levels: 1) features and patterns of this type of evaluative discourse, 2) its purpose and its outcomes on both students (its tendency to affect performance) and professors.

METHODOLOGY

In the present study we employ sociolinguistic and ethnographic methods in order to answer the following questions: 1) Why do students regularly engage in evaluative talk about their professors? 2) What are some of the important features of such talk? 3) What purpose does evaluative talk serve?

The sensitive relationship between students and professors in terms of status, and the fact that evaluative talk is perceived by some professors as engaging in malicious gossip and defaming judgments, are two reasons that necessitate special attention paid to selecting data collection methods. That is to say, gathering information through interviews (a common method in studies linked to discourse analysis and ethnography of communication, see Cameron 2001, and Johnstone 2002) was utilized minimally and with caution to protect the students' identities while allowing for more freedom of expression through other methods. A similar written method to oral interviews was therefore introduced in the form of 'Express Yourself Postcards' in which students anonymously wrote the negative and positive perceptions they had of their professors. This method will be further discussed below.

The sample of students chosen for the present study consists of 200 female students from different college years, attending 4 different subjects, and taught by 3 different professors (who are also the researchers conducting this study). The data collection methods were administered at intervals during a period of 6 months (5 days per week, 5 hours per day) in which the 3 professors involved also observed students' behavior in terms of engaging in evaluative talk about professors. During the data collection period, students were told that this study is part of a series of studies aimed at helping students and professors challenge stereotypical perceptions they (as members) have about various facets of the college community. Additionally, the aim behind these studies is to help bring down the barrier representing rigid social status differences between professors and students. In order to enhance our possibilities of collecting the most appropriate and significant sample of data for our study, a pilot questionnaire was set up.

THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The pilot questionnaire, which was filled out anonymously by students, consisted of 5 questions in total. Three of the questions were put in as prompts and the other 2 questions were considered main components in the data collection methods of the present study. One of the main questions – question number 2, see Appendix 2 – was targeted towards finding out what students perceive as the most fundamental aspects of their college experience. This experience essentially revolves around aspects, such as the learning experience, the professor as the agent imparting knowledge, the academic challenges faced by students, and so on. Although this question presented great potential as a variable with multi-coverage representation, the format of the question seemed to have presented a challenge for some students. The reason is that it asked students to rate in ascending order of importance 8 different facets of the college experience. Generally, however, this question did yield significant data as will be shown in the analysis in Section 3.0 and discussion in Section 4.0, below.

The second main question – question number 5, see Appendix 2 – used the same rating format as the question discussed above but had fewer variables and hence was simpler to answer. This question dealt with locating the most resourceful college context in which evaluative talk takes place. This question was also reinforced with information gathered from a limited number of brief interviews conducted with students about the contexts where verbally evaluative discourse takes place. Yet, even with the few limitations that were noted from the questionnaire, an inventive idea surfaced as a result; namely that the students need to air out their perceptions “anonymously” in writing, hence the idea of the postcards.

THE POSTCARD

Inspired by Frank Warren’s (2005) idea for a community art project in which he conducted postcards filled anonymously by strangers who revealed provocative and profound secrets, fears, regrets about their lives, we distributed to students Express Yourself Postcards. The postcards had a cartoon figure image that was in alignment with our context of study (see Appendix 2). The other side of the postcard had been designed like a typical postcard, with a smiley face printed in the area where the stamp is usually located, and the comment: ‘Say what you like about your professor’ printed on the top center of the postcard.

These features were built into the context of the postcard for several reasons: to make it less formal than the questionnaire and thus more appealing which in turn would facilitate freedom of expression. The idea behind the postcard, we believed, could also widen the scope for students to focus on their particular experiences while allowing for language flexibility – since teachers announced to students upon distributing the cards that they may write in Arabic (the students’ mother tongue), English, or both. Fortunately, the students’ reactions to the postcards were quite favorable.

DATA ANALYSIS

FINDINGS FROM THE QUESTIONNAIRE

Students were required to respond to the 8-item question (mentioned in Section 2.1) by grading their priorities on a scale from 1 to 8 – 1 being the most important and 8 the least important. In each questionnaire response, the items marked from one to four were categorized as

significantly high and items marked five to eight were considered significantly low. Since the research is interested mainly in the students' preferences and priorities with regard to their choice of the professor to study with, only the items marked from one to four were counted while items marked from five to eight were disregarded. That is to say, for each item in the question being examined, the researchers were interested in the percentage of students who chose it as a high priority and preference. The chart below shows the percentages of students' priorities and preferences for each item.

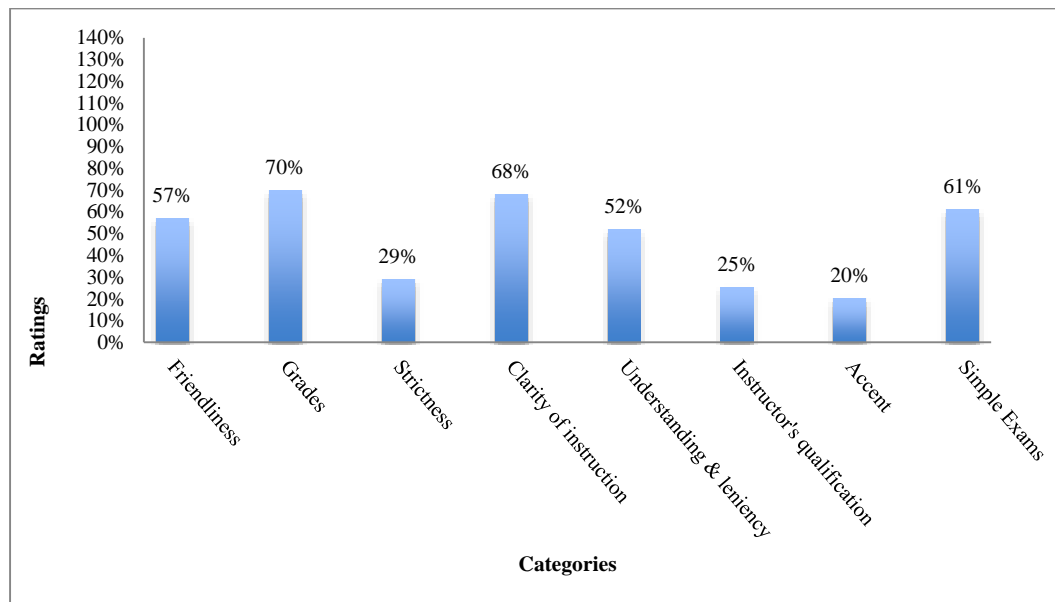


Figure 1: This chart shows the students' academic priorities and preferences at TED.

As the chart in figure 1 shows, the highest percentage of students prioritized a group of three items which seem to logically correspond to each other. These items are: 'grades' (prioritized by 70%), 'clarity of instruction' (prioritized by 68%) and 'simple exam' (prioritized by 61%). A reading into these results tells us that students' anticipation of earning high grades is contingent upon clear delivery of the content of the course followed by simple and unchallenging tests. The students' priority in their choice of the instructor seems to revolve around easy attainment of good grades without their abilities as students being taxed or challenged. Equally important is the idea that students seem not to be interested in any academic gains, such as knowledge and improvement of their thinking skills.

Next follows a group comprising two items which also seem to logically flow from each other and connect with the first group discussed above. These two items are: the 'instructor's lack of friendliness' (prioritized by 57%) and 'his/her understanding of students' circumstances' (prioritized by 52%). Again, results here suggest that students' main concern is with factors peripheral to the learning experience. The majority of students prioritized grades and undemanding tests which explains their drive behind their pickiness for certain professors. As such, they would naturally capitalize on "easy" professors who are less demanding.

The lowest percentages of students prioritized the last group of three items that mainly address the instructor's academic background and his/her knowledge of the course. In other words, students seem to marginalize prospects for learnability in their preference for the instructor.

These items are: the ‘instructor's strictness in imposing rigorous classroom standards’ (prioritized by 29%), the ‘instructor's qualifications and knowledgeability about the subject he/she teaches’ (prioritized by 25%) and the ‘orientation of the instructor's English accent’ (prioritized by 20%). Of these three items, the first two are strongly indicative of preferences peripheral to the learning experience when it comes to the choice of the professor.

FINDINGS FROM THE POSTCARD

As mentioned earlier in Section 2.2, the approach of collecting the students’ written perceptions through postcards proved to be quite popular among students. The adjectival nature of the data found in postcards enabled us to undergo a two-pronged analysis, consisting of quantitative and qualitative methods. For the former method, it was necessary to categorize adjectives into 3 types based on students’ expectations of the attributes that define a good teacher: fair grading, high teaching competency and leniency. In turn, the adjectival categories then necessitated being quantified to examine their frequency of usage in postcards. For the latter qualitative method (which we will tackle first in this discussion), the analysis hinged on revealing the nature of students’ perceptions of their professors and the manifestations of these perceptions through the evaluative rhetoric found in postcards.

In total, 200 postcards were examined to find out the kind of attributes students assign to their professors in TED at the CBE. It was necessary to categorize these evaluative adjectives in a table in order to look for patterns that can help identify the purpose behind their usage as positive and negative attributes of professors while also investigating the usefulness and purpose behind them.

The postcards shed light on the expectations, aspirations, as well as fears of students with regards to their choices of courses and professors. What is considered a “good” versus “bad” teacher will, to a great extent, rely on the student’s background experiences and the type of motivation behind her enrollment in the department and CBE at large.

In the opinions and expressions students offered, some describe all professors in a general sense, while others focused on one or two attributes in particular. Some compared “good” professors with “bad” professors, while others expressed their expectations of a good professor and a successful and productive classroom lessons. The postcards, therefore, offered students an online forum to freely engage in evaluative feedback of their professors and voice their opinions.

The following anecdotes are examples that capture students’ frustrations at the unfairness of some professors towards them. Extract 1, is an example of a student complaining about the way the professor treats them in class. She focused on the student-teacher relationship and specifically points to the lack of respect and encouragement by this professor towards students¹.

Extract 1

“From the first class he told us (students) that we have limited knowledge & most of us are not qualified to be in TED. He dealt with us kind of badly plus he didn’t cover much of the curriculum because he thinks that we can’t handle more”.

¹All postcard extracts were translated into English in close approximation of the students’ flow of thoughts.

Extract 2

“I am a student in my third year, when I first entered the college they told me about a bad professor and coincidentally I took a class with him he used to tell us things like you are all “rubbish” and that our class was like a “zoo”. As we’re freshmen students, I immediately started hating my major. FYI, he gave the whole class an “F” except the best student he gave her a “B” I think you know him”.

Extract 2 above narrows down the student’s experience to two negative incidents, the first of her classmates and her being labeled as ‘rubbish’ and ‘zoo’. The second was that most of the students were given a very low grade ‘F’ by this professor.

Extract 3

“Dr. X doesn’t know how to explain the content. In fact, he doesn’t explain much of the content and he treats us as if we were M.A. level, students. Most of the time he makes us explain concepts that we ourselves don’t understand.”

Extract 3 above touches on the professor’s incompetency in teaching and as such the lack of any learning outcomes. The three extracts are representative of the three main concerns by students, which are visibly present in the postcards (and addressed in the questionnaire, in Section 3.1): ‘friendliness of professor towards students’, ‘grading’ and ‘clarity of instruction’.

The table below shows positive and negative attributes that students have assigned to their professors and pinpoints the major concerns of students with regard to the teaching method or professors’ academic competence, learnability, and the flexibility of the professor’s character. Since the most important dimensions considered by students were “grades”, “professor competency”, and “authoritarian leniency”; the adjectives are classified into academic and non-academic – the last category relies on more human aspects of the student/professor relationship.

	Academic	Non-academic	Generic
Positive	Interesting (32) Fair (13) Encouraging (11) Clear (11) Inspiring (4) Intelligent (2)	Kind (53) Respectful (18) Considerate (16) Flexible (4)	Good (41) [Brilliant-Lovely-Cute-Pretty-Special-Beautiful-Wonderful-Delightful-Amazing-Awesome-Adorable-Great] (53) Best (25) Perfect (6)
Negative	Difficult-Strict (26) Unfair (14) Unclear (2) Careless (2)	Emotional [Moody-Angry-Crazy] (15) Disrespectful (6) Unkind (5) Arrogant (4) Frustrating (3) Serious (3) Uncooperative (2) Boring (2)	Bad (15)

Table 1: Adjectival classifications (the figures between brackets represent frequency of usage).

Table 1 above, shows the different adjectival categories and their frequency of usage by students in the Express Yourself postcards. The category ‘academic’ addresses the professional side of the professor in terms of fair assessment, clarity of teaching, competence and

background knowledge, and motivation and inspiration. The category ‘non-academic’, on the other hand, reveals the characters of the professors as individuals. It is, therefore, more personal and probably more subjective than the academic category.

Interestingly, the students capitalized on the non-academic characteristics of their professors more than the academic qualifications. For instance, the attribute ‘kind’ occurred 53 times as a favorable adjective followed by ‘respectful’ 18 times, ‘considerate’ 16 times, and finally ‘flexible’ or ‘comfortable’ 4 times. In terms of the adjectives linked to academic characteristics, adjectives such as ‘interesting’ which occurred the most at 32 times followed by ‘fair’ 13 times, ‘encouraging’ 11 times, ‘clear’ 11 times, ‘inspiring’ 4 times and ending with ‘intelligent’ 2 times. The generic positive adjectives also scored high as shown in the table above.

On the other hand, in terms of the negative attributes linked to rigidity, students chose adjectives, such as ‘difficult’ or ‘strict’ 26 times. According to students the rigidity here is congruent with academic facets of teaching: curriculum, teaching process, and grading. Also, there was a concurrent mention of the adjective ‘unfair’ 14 times in correlation to grading. However, in terms of the non-academic traits, the most mentioned attributes are the ones concerned with emotions like ‘moody, angry and crazy’. Incidentally, it is important to keep in mind when analyzing the adjectival types used by students in the present study that the adjectives are in English and that English is the students’ second language. This explains the slight distortions in meaning when students use some adjectives. Moreover, although most of the feedback was in English, some were translated from Arabic. By the same token, the language barrier played a role in students’ excessive use of generic adjectives such as “adorable, great, good, bad, etc.”, mainly because they may be more common and easier to recall.

OTHER FINDINGS

Other data were analyzed to assist in complete the picture in relation to how students perceive their professors and their priorities as students in this educational institution. We were able to make use of other already available sources of data in two contexts: 1) archival information in the form of specific questions and answers about professors and subjects, set up in an online forum for students, 2) a few instances of classroom tabletop graffiti which show caricatures and humorous comments drawn by students about their professors, and 3) three short interviews with students on the question of access to different sources of evaluative information that students seek about professors. In light of what has already been revealed through the questionnaire and the Express Yourself Postcards we were able to find similar patterns of expression in other sources of data.

The popular group Al Mustaquilla, a student union group, has set up an online, up-to-date forum in which students have compiled a list of questions and answers, all presented in the form of positive and negative traits of each professor in TED. The evaluative information in this forum is based on gossip or evaluative talk gained through personal experiences or through stories attained from experienced students. Extract 4 below illustrates an example of a typical episode of such interrogatory/evaluative discussion:

Extract 4

1 **Fatoom:** Hi girls.

2 I'm an English major and just received my schedule,
 3 which seems to be preset with the following teachers
 4 and subjects: "conversation" with Maha Ali², "reading"
 5 with Zaid Khalil, and "basic writing" with Ahmed
 6 Mousa.
 7 I'm especially worried about Ahmed Mousa because
 8 the girls warned me about him.
 9 How do you guys evaluate the teachers I mentioned
 10 above? And, can I change my schedule and choose
 11 other professors? And, finally, why is everyone so
 12 scared of Ahmed Mousa? No one has praised him!

Extract 5

1 **Hanoof:** Hello dear ☺
 2 Welcome to TED.
 3 Yeah, the schedule is always preset for first year
 4 students.
 5 Maha Ali, allows students to relax in class, but she's
 6 really strict in grading so you're going to have to work
 7 very hard during her course. Her motto is: 'I love giving
 8 zeros to students' ☺
 9 Also, it's ok for her to speak Arabic in class, but she
 10 expects students to speak English at all times.
 11 She hates students who question their grades!
 12 Zaid Khalil, is the best professor ever. He's so friendly
 13 and kind with grades, but you have to show him that
 14 you're worthy. He encourages discussion in class.
 15 No one likes Ahmed Mousa! Even English school
 16 graduates end up with a "C" maximum in his course,
 17 so that pretty much leaves the rest of us with no chance
 18 of getting good grades with him.
 19 I attended a course with him, but I ended up
 20 withdrawing the course early on.

Some students air out their experiences after completing the semester for other students to learn from the reservoir of these past experiences. However, this forum is not simply a "safe space" to broadcast public warnings about professors in TED, but also a safe space where some students provide recommendations and tips and others seek advice about academic and administrative matters. We mention the expression safe space above, because students within this sphere use nicknames in order to protect their identities. The use of nicknames allows them to express their subjective opinions freely and honestly.

Very much like the data found in postcards, the language used within this forum pivots mainly around the use of evaluative adjectives with expression patterns typically including two main components: **name of subject (or in this case professor) + adjective**. Whichever direction a given pattern gravitates (whether positive or negative), a piece of advice is often given as a sequel. Also, worth noting here are the minor interactive signals, such as the use of smiley

² All the names used in the extracts presented in this study are pseudonyms.

faces (see lines 1 and 8, Extract 5) and the expressions ‘girls’ and ‘guys’ (see lines 1 and 8 subsequently, Extract 4) both of which suggest a sense of solidarity and group membership among the students in this safe setting.

Professors do have access into the students’ online forum and can easily find out what students have said about them, but the question that presents itself here is: do professors care what students say about them? To a certain degree, only a few professors may care about how they are perceived by students. A professor’s career at CBE is not affect by students’ evaluations since the tenure system disregards students’ views of their professors. However, often, professors that are perceived by students as good teachers seem to be the only few who appear conscientious enough to take this evaluative talk into consideration.

Another source of students’ evaluative outlet is classroom tabletop graffiti which, although scarce, is an important insight into images that students have of their teachers. Tabletops (according to students at TED) are commonly an ideal, recreational space onto which to doodle when a student is feeling bored or incapable of following the teacher in class. After frequenting several classrooms during one complete semester, we noted that tabletops graffiti typically consisted of: piles of small print subject-related information used for cheating in tests, lyrics of love songs, drawings of eyes and sometimes faces, love shout outs to boyfriends, and caricatures of professors and humorous comments either praising or condemning these professors, see the examples in Figure 2 and Figure 3 below.

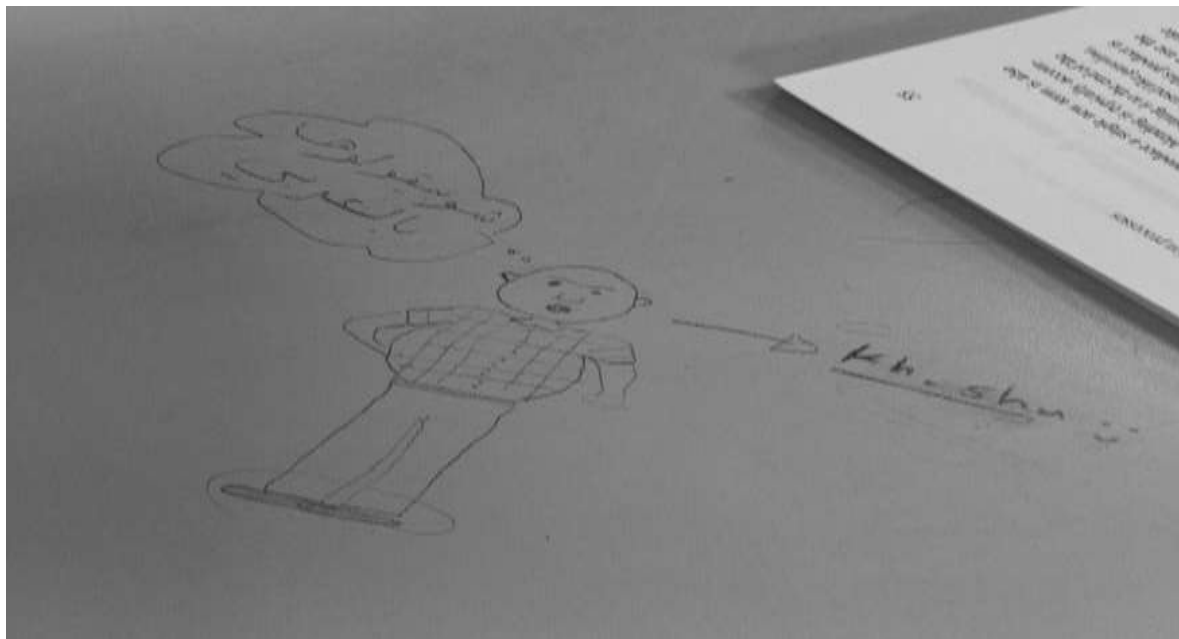


Figure 2

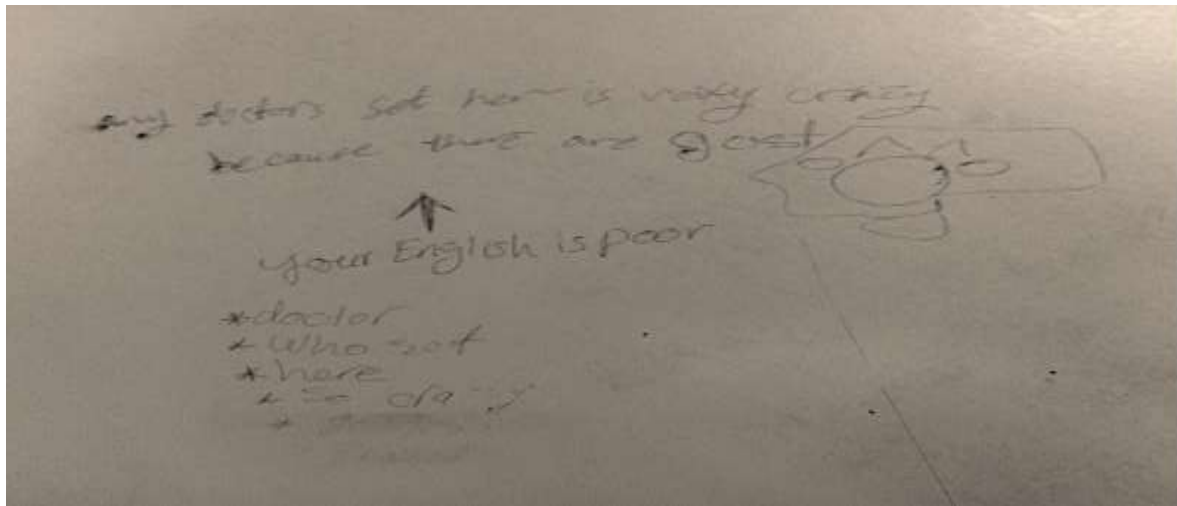


Figure 3

Figure 2 illustrates a cartoon figure of a professor, which is based on general observation on our part and from the postcards data is the students' favorite teacher at TED. He is here characterized as using a signature expression often used by him while teaching, which is translated as "how do you say this in Arabic" and his initials written along the bottom of a caricature of him (Since this professor is also one of the researchers taking part in the present study, he has opted not to conceal his initials). This tabletop graffito signals a perception of endearment by students, which is clearly a positive gesture in comparison to the graffito in Figure 3. Illustrated in Figure 3 is a square-like shape with eyes and a clown-like round nose inside it and which supposedly resembles a ghost. The drawing attempts to represent any professor who sits behind the teacher's desk and refers to the professor by the words, 'a ghost' and 'crazy', see Figure 3. Another student responds to the caricature by writing a humorous comment underneath the drawing, which criticizes the language used in the caricature by calling it, 'poor English'. Clearly, the caricature itself and the comment tagged with it are embedded with negative sarcasm against professors at TED.

Finally, to establish credibility to the issue of students' evaluative discourse, 3 short interviews were conducted with 12 students (4 students at a time) in order to explore the following question: 'if you are keen on gathering background information about a given professor before signing up for his/her class; where would you get this information?' Their answers unanimously pointed to a number of observations. Firstly, seeking advice from academically poor students is strictly avoided because their feedback would be skewed by their non-committal to student responsibilities and duties. Secondly, students almost always seek a second and third opinion about a professor. Finally, students assume that an overpopulated class is an indication that the professor of this class is a "good" teacher.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

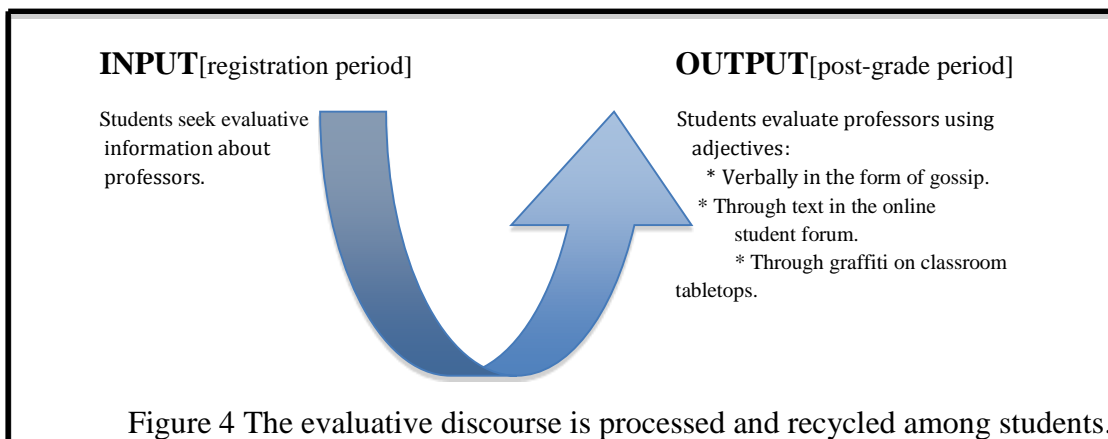
Generally, the results from the questionnaire and the postcards touch on the priorities students have in mind when they engage in evaluative talk of their professors and, at large, on the way they view their learning experience in CBE. The attainment of high grades with the least effort seems to lie at the center of the learning experience. In addition, it seems that the educational environment of CBE is one that promotes grades at the expense of learning too, since grade inflation is a common practice by many professors.

Based on the researchers' experience of years of teaching at TED, it seems that grade inflation has become a common practice by many professors. Grade inflation, by its very nature undermines learning. The issue here is not that too many students are getting "A's", but that too many students have been led to believe that getting "A's" lies behind the purpose of going to college. Firstly, students tend to lose interest in whatever they are learning. As the motivation to obtain good grades increases, motivation to explore ideas and gain knowledge tends to decrease. Secondly, students try to avoid challenging tasks whenever possible. More difficult assignments, after all, would be seen as an impediment to getting a top grade. Eventually, the students' critical thinking skills diminish. As Cote and Allahar have shown, creativity and even long-term recall of facts are adversely affected by the overemphasis on high grades (2011: 80-96).

From another perspective, our various exploratory sources of data all point to another consistent finding, which is that the primary participants in the present study – the students – are positioned asymmetrically because of the institutional context of the college. Most patterns of evaluative discourse about professors tend to reveal an asymmetry in power. According to many students, the evaluative discourse they utilize serves the goal of delivering justice by suggesting strategies to overcome academic injustice or difficulties that they perceive are created by some professors. The institutional power enacted in TED gives professors the prerogative to impose stringent classroom rules and evaluate students' performances quite harshly in order to maintain a high educational standard. But evidently, once outside the classroom context, the power is shifted and the evaluator becomes the evaluated. In other words, students are allowed the freedom to pass non-confrontational judgments about their professors without being seen as impertinent. To borrow concepts from Fairclough and Lakoff, this shift towards a more egalitarian position by students is manifested through the frequent and overt use of adjectives in evaluative talk, which becomes symbolic of a student body that is in need for a change of the rigid social boundaries between students and professors (Fairclough 1989: 90-102 and 233-246; and Lakoff 1990: 11-23).

According to Cameron (2001), 'talk is always designed by those who produce it for the context in which it occurs' (2001: 145). By choosing a safe context such as an online setting (e.g. the student union's online forum) or classroom tabletops to engage in evaluative discourse in the absence of their professors, students are intuitively protecting themselves and preventing any potential 'face threatening acts' towards their professors (see Brown and Levinson 1987: 67).

Additionally, the use of adjectives as a venting and advisory strategy across different methods allows students to re-contextualize these adjectives by creating new meanings and adding strength to them. In fact, the whole concept of good/bad teacher is reinforced. It is also worth mentioning that interestingly, the more this evaluative adjectival discourse is ignored by professors, the louder it seems to be getting mostly by the evaluative discourse itself being recycled among students, see Figure 4 below.



The way in which evaluative discourse is processed through the college's speech community is enmeshed in the society at large. The Kuwaiti society tends to regard evaluative talk as an important part of its socio-cultural fabric. This study has attempted to open up a relatively unexplored area of research in this part of the world (the Arabian Gulf region), which is at the intersection of language and socio-culture. What remains open to question is: how is the college's biannual, official and written online student evaluation of professors seen in view of the present discussion? The answer to this question is well worth investigating in future work. Also, worth exploring in a comparative study is how male students perceive their professors in the all-male CBE.

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Appendix 1



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Appendix 2

QUESTIONNAIRE

1) Would you ask other students and teachers for background information about the teachers of your classes before your registration? (Yes/No)

2) If the answer to **question 1** is 'yes', look at the 8 characteristics of a 'good teacher' below and rank them from 1 to 8. (**1** being the **most** important characteristic in a good teacher, and **8** being the **least** important characteristic):

*** Based on what characteristics do you choose your teacher when you register for your subjects?**

--- Whether the teacher sometimes smiles and jokes around as opposed to being serious all the time.

--- Whether the teacher gives high grades easily.

--- Whether the teacher is not very strict about student's punctuality, attendance, and deadlines.

--- Whether the teacher's teaching methods are clear and comprehensible.

--- Whether the teacher is sympathetic and understanding when a student has an emergency.

--- Whether the teacher has a high academic background.

--- Whether the teacher speaks English with a British/American accent rather than an Arabic accent.

--- Whether the teacher's tests and exams are short and simple.

3) Have you ever been successful in choosing a 'good teacher' under the criteria mentioned in **question 2** above: (Yes/No)

a) If 'yes' which subject was it, and what was your grade?

- Subject: -----

- Grade: -----

b) If 'No' which subject was it, and what was your grade?

- Subject: -----

- Grade: -----

4) If your answer to **question 3** is 'No' could you explain briefly what went wrong with your choice, which was based on the 'good teacher' information from others?

5) Rank from 1 to 5 the following sources of information that you would rely on most to find out about a teacher. (**1** being the **most** important source of information and **5** being the **least** important source of information):

--- Through social network media: student forums.

--- Face-to-face gossip talk among student groups.

--- Table/wall graffiti.

--- Social network media: WhatsApp.

--- Face-to-face gossip talk one-to-one between friends.