

INVESTIGATING ENGLISH MAJOR STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE EFFICIENCY OF THE "CONVERSATION" COURSE

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ABSTRACT: *In the scope of teaching English as a foreign language, and more specifically teaching speaking, this study reflects the attitudes and anticipations English language teachers-to-be have towards the "Conversation Course" provided by the College of Basic Education in Kuwait. The study is based on the analysis of 106 questionnaires distributed to first year college students registered in the conversation class at the time of the study. In addition, 28 students were interviewed to observe vividly their expectations from the conversation course. Both, the questionnaire and the interviews, aimed at knowing how the students perceived the conversation class at the end of the semester. The study shows that the majority of students feel that they have benefited from the conversation class in different domains; yet, many required a clearer outline of the course. Between their fondness for the conversation course and confusion of its aims, English language students understand their need for the course, and perhaps an extra advanced one too.*

KEYWORDS: Speaking, Four Skills, English Language, Teaching methods, EFL.

INTRODUCTION

The process of language learning and language teaching is constantly changing. It started at a time when students were prescribed what to say and how to say it, and reached the acceptance of a standard "international" variety that is intelligible and local (Crystal, 2001, p57). Since the cultural effect is clear on language learning, educationists could no longer assume the availability of a "one-size-fits-all" method of teaching and need for learning. English speaking classrooms in EFL environments started to focus on the students' needs and motivation, rather than the teacher assumptions and prescription of dos and don'ts. For a long time, syllabus design, course material and teaching methods were carefully selected based on the EFL teachers' beliefs and practices. In this respect, Wu (2006) found that the similarities between the teachers' teaching methods and the students' expectations were extremely limited. In her study, Wu (ibid) reflected the confidence that when students do not find their expectations, and hence do not feel comfortable in their learning environment, they might start resisting the learning process.

In the light of the knowledge of the importance of the collaboration between teachers' beliefs and students' expectations, this study attempts to reach the students' point of view in a specific EFL course. This paper is meant to investigate the attitudes of students in the English Department, in the College of Basic Education in Kuwait. The "Conversation Course", which is the focus of this study, is one of four compulsory basic skills courses

(Conversation, Reading, Basic Writing, and Advanced Writing) offered to all English major students during their first year in college as prerequisites to the rest of courses in their major sheet.

At first, this paper will provide important literature in the field of EFL conversation. It will look closely at similar studies conducted internationally. This will be followed by a review of the methods utilized to conduct the study. Afterwards, statistical analysis of the quantitative data will be given in detail. The statistical results will be discussed thoroughly in the light of the literature reviewed to find the relationship between the current study and different studies of EFL teaching and Learning. A conclusion at the end would attempt to summarize the findings and provide recommendations that might be useful to EFL communities worldwide.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK & REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The mastery of speaking skills in English is a priority for many second-language or foreign-language learners. Consequently, learners often evaluate their success in language learning as well as the effectiveness of their English course on the basis of how much they feel they have improved in their spoken language proficiency. Oral skills have hardly been neglected in EFL/ESL courses (witness the huge number of conversation and other speaking course books in the market), though how best to approach the teaching of oral skills has long been the focus of methodological debate. Teachers and textbooks make use of a variety of approaches, ranging from direct approaches focusing on specific features of oral interaction (e.g., turn-taking, topic management, and questioning strategies) to indirect approaches that create conditions for oral interaction through group work, task work, and other strategies (Richards, 1990). Advances in linguistics as related to language pedagogy should have been reflected in the preparation programs designed for EFL teachers (Salamah, 2004). Despite the abundant attention to linguistic views and theories with relevance to TEFL methodology, the preparation year at the department of English under investigation did not witness major changes to meet the real needs of the prospective EFL teachers (Dashti & Salama 2013). Researchers, also, believe that EFL foundation year programs would be quite useful if they included, in addition to a phonetics, another course in 'teaching pronunciation' because the latter is of great benefit to the target of the teaching process, i.e. the young learner (Doff, 2004). Besides, a course in spelling is of no less importance as it acquaints the learners with the irregularities between the English phonemes and graphemes in an attempt to remove or reduce the abundant spelling mistakes among Arab learners of English in particular (Shemish & Waller, 2000 ; Harmer, 2005). Luoma (2004) cites different features of spoken discourse, for example, composed of idea units (conjoined short phrases and clauses), may be planned (e.g., a lecture) or unplanned (e.g., conversation), employs fixed phrases, fillers, and hesitation markers, and shows variation (e.g., reflecting speaker roles, speaking purpose, and the contexts).

Richards (2008) states that an important dimension of conversation is using a style of speaking that is appropriate to the particular circumstances. Different styles of speaking reflect the roles, age, sex, and status of participants in interactions and also reflect the

expression of politeness). Similarly, Hughes (2003) and Bachman (1990) believe that a suitable background of evaluation criteria ,types and styles is of great value for the student teachers exposed to the preparation programs.

As far as functions of speech, Richards (ibid: 22-28) mentions three types of ‘talk’, talk as interaction, talk as transaction, and talk as performance. Each of these speech activities is quite distinct in terms of form and function and requires different teaching approaches. Talk as interaction refers to what we normally mean by “conversation” and describes interaction that serves a primarily social function. Talk as transaction refers to situations where the focus is on what is said or done. The message and making oneself understood clearly and accurately is the central focus, rather than the participants and how they interact socially with each other. The third type of talk that can usefully be distinguished has been called talk as performance. This refers to public talk, that is, talk that transmits information before an audience, such as classroom presentations, public announcements, and speeches. Through conducting a survey analysis, Al-Bustan and Al-Bustan (2009) investigated students’ attitudes and preferences towards learning English at Kuwait University in non-English major ESL students. The study investigated the attitudes of 787 ESL students who declared their preferred certain language skills while learning English on the basis of a questionnaire.

Kang (2010) identified adult ESL learners’ perspectives of pronunciation studies in the inner circle countries. The study reported on students’ expectations of their pronunciation lessons and their attitudes toward instructors’ accent varieties in the environment of speaking English in New Zealand (NZ) and North America (US). Two hundred thirty eight ESL students participated in interviews and questionnaire surveys. The results of the investigation showed that students in NZ, compared to those in the US, were more dissatisfied with their current curriculum of learning pronunciation due to misunderstanding of various models and accents of pronunciation made available to them. These results suggested that students’ perceived needs should be better synchronized in ESL contexts. The implications of the study regarding the relations among pronunciation training, learner perceptions, and accent variety extend beyond the immediate setting in NZ and US higher education, and in fact pertain to the teaching of World Englishes in every nation.

Ihmeideh et al (2010) carried out a study to determine the positive and negative attitudes among 289 students of class teachers and childhood teachers' disciplines using the communication skills attitude scale (CSAS) in Jordanian public universities. GPA, year level of students were recorded. Overall results of study revealed that the mean of positive attitude score was 4.03. The mean of negative attitude scale score was 3.63. There were no significant differences between class teachers and childhood teachers students in their positive and negative attitudes toward communication skills. Students with grade point averages 2 and more have positive attitudes toward communication skills than students with grade point average less than 2. Senior students have high positive and less negative attitudes toward communication skills than sophomore and

junior students. Ahmed (1996) conducted a study to investigate the teaching of oral communication skills in academic settings. The paper discussed the applications of the task-based approach to designing a syllabus for an oral communication skills course in an academic setting. It has presented a case study based on the actual development of such a course in the intensive English program at the International University of Japan. This course has been quite successful in achieving its goals. In their program evaluations for IEP 1995, 25% of the student body referred to the CS course, or some aspects of it, in response to the question: What did you like most about IEP? Part of this success can be attributed to the task-based approach which emphasizes functional uses of language, i.e., what people do with language. Furthermore, if the tasks selected relate to well-defined needs in specific institutional contexts, the course becomes more relevant and useful in the minds of the students.

Shalabi (1988) conducted an evaluative study of the Teaching of English Program offered by the College of Education, Kuwait University. A questionnaire containing a list of courses required for graduation was also developed and given to those students at the end of the internship program. A questionnaire containing a list of courses required for graduation was also developed and given to those students at the end of the internship program. The results showed that despite the fact that more than 80% of the student teachers obtained distinctive ratings in most teaching skills required of language teachers, they were not as highly evaluated in competency skills, the main weakness pertained to the students' command of the English language.

Research Objectives & Hypotheses

This paper aims at investigating the attitudes of English major students at the department of English in the College of Basic Education towards the "Conversation" course. The "Conversation Course" is one of four compulsory basic skills courses (Conversation, Reading, Basic Writing, and Advanced Writing) offered to all English major students during their first year in college as prerequisites to the rest of courses in their major sheet. It holds the number 131, with 3 credit hours and 5 contact hours. The course focuses on basic skills of oral expression and comprehension by providing experience of a wide range of everyday situations through both group and individual exercises. Particular attention is given to structure and pronunciation. Students are supposed to a variety of drills in conversational English (by native speakers) with the help of audio-visual material. The objectives of the study are found in Appendix 1.

Through such an investigation, the research endeavors to explore the possible defects of the "Conversation" course designed as a compulsory course during the foundation year. It comes as an attempt to find an answer to the growing complaint about the low level of English language teachers at Kuwaiti schools particularly at the primary stage. The blame is primarily and specifically directed to the preparation program before graduation and employment. The reports of the ministry of education refer to the low standard of EFL teachers in Kuwaiti schools in both language performance and teaching methodology. (Ministry of Education Annual Report, 2003). The general nature of the complaint does not necessarily refer to a specific qualifying institution. Nevertheless, the researchers feel that

the CBE preparation program is part and parcel of this problem as it does not differ much from similar programs in other Arab educational institutions (Salamah, 2004). Therefore, the study is based on a number of hypotheses.

The main hypothesis of the research is the shortage and/or inadequacy of the “Conversation” course offered by the department of English. Unfortunately, the real needs of graduates from these colleges have hardly been sought from the students’ point of view. The researchers hope, in this study, to pinpoint the needs of the skills and tools required for the best performance of the EFL teachers. It is, also hoped to reach a proposal of a modified “Conversation” course for a more competent and qualified English language teacher.

METHODOLOGY

This paper aims at investigating the attitudes of English major students at the department of English in the College of Basic Education towards the “Conversation” course through the utilization of two tools for data collection. First, a questionnaire has been designed and distributed to all the students enrolled in the four sections of the “Conversation” course offered during the First Academic Term (2014/2015). The total number of students enrolled is (n=122), while the valid number of questionnaire sheets were 106. The questionnaire includes 18 Lickert type questions which aimed at investigating students’ perception of the course, material and instructor. The data was quantitatively analyzed using SPSS, where frequency and mean were produced. Second, 7 students from each class were randomly selected to be interviewed to verify the questionnaire results. They were asked the seven research questions stated below.

Research questions

The paper will attempt to answer the following questions:

1. Do English major students feel that the “Conversation” course is important and beneficial?
2. Does the “Conversation” course helps English major students develop communication skills through, for example, Turn-taking, role-playing, etc. and maintain self-confidence and critical thinking?
3. Does the “Conversation” course help English major students develop their semantic, syntactic, phonological, and fluency skills?
4. Does the “Conversation” course help English major students in doing well in other major courses?
5. What do English major students think of the way the “Conversation course administered (e.g., contact hours, introducing more than one course of “Conversation”)?
6. What do English major students think of the material presented to them in class?
7. What do English major students think of the instructors who teach the “Conversation” course?

ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

The questionnaire

In order to investigate the usefulness of the conversation course, it is essential to view the students' perception on its importance to the students and to the English major more specifically. It appears from the analysis that the majority of students believe that the conversation class is very useful (81.2%). In addition, 89.6% reflected their view that the conversation class is essential for English major students.

The importance of the conversation course is clearly reflected in the amount of knowledge gained, which could simply be measured by measuring linguistic and communicative improvements. The statistics show that 77.4% of the students have improved their communicative abilities after taking the conversation class. Moreover, the majority of students believe that they are now more confident using their English, and have the ability to be more creative and think critically. Many students (78.3%) feel that their vocabulary has enhanced since they have started the conversation class. While 36.8% did not believe their grammar improved, 63.2% feel it did. The vast majority of the participating students think that they are more fluent and are better at the pronunciation level. On the other hand, 41.5% of the students are not sure that the conversation class helped them excel in other classes.

Most students replied with "completely agree" to the statement "the contact hours of the conversation class are enough. While the thoughts were split between "agree" and "disagree" when the students were asked if they need more conversation courses (49.1% and 33.1% respectively). Additionally, it was found that the majority of students would like the conversation class to be in the morning as they feel it requires a lot of energy.

When it comes to classroom preparation for a conversation class, 41.5% of the students did not believe that the classrooms are suitable for a conversation class, while 32.1% were not sure. On the other hand, some students stated that they believe 67% of the students reflected the need for a language lab. When the participating students were asked whether they wanted to have a specific text book, about half the student reflected the need for a textbook, while the other half disagreed.

The interview

The interview results were not very different from the questionnaire. The majority of students interviewed (64.2%) believed that the conversation class is very important and beneficial. Three students asked if more class (contact hours) could be added to the current course. Some of the participating students (17.8%) believe that this course should be taken at a stage where their confidence in their language use has enhanced. When asked if they felt that the conversation class enhanced their communication skills, 53.5% agreed, stating that they have never stood in front of a class and presented in English. Some added that they used to be required to memorize a piece before presenting. Two students felt that they did not learn communication skills because they are not fluent in English, and were embarrassed to use the language.

Most participants do not believe that their language skills developed enough during the time they have taken the conversation class, which in turn press the needs for more conversation classes. In fact, 25% of the participating students stated that they should take a grammar course side-by-side with conversation to be able to apply what they have learned. Four students felt that their pronunciation and vocabulary slightly improved; however, they thought it would improve more. Some students stated that the conversation course helped them in other major courses. The five students believed that they were able to communicate with confidence with other instructors in English; something they would not feel comfortable doing before.

Many students felt the need for a little change in the conversation course. While some students asked for a clear syllabus, others wanted a course textbook. In addition, 25% of the participants wanted to know their mistakes after every presentation, a couple of them suggested notes to be given to the students on their performance. 10.7% of the students believed that the contact hours were not enough, and the number of courses should be doubled at least. A few students believed that the type of exams and tests should be clear to prepare the students academically and psychologically.

A major complain students have over the material presented in class was the way it was presented. 42.9% of the students wanted to use technology in class, such as, projectors and speakers. Some students hoped they could practice their fluency in language labs. They felt that listening to native speakers and answering listening-comprehension questions a stage for role-play, and controversial topics for discussion were also requirements by the students. 10.7% of the students also believed that there was not enough time given to practice before a presentation.

It seems that, to the majority of the participants, the instructor is the most important element in the conversation class. Many students stated that their teacher made them love the conversation class by making it more informative, entertaining and fun. A few students felt that the instructor should immediately correct their mistakes, while most students believe that an instructor should avoid embarrassing the students in front of the class, and correct their mistakes individually. Some students wanted “flexible” teachers in terms of topic and grading. Two students reflected their belief that the conversation teacher should have a clear voice and native-like accent, because a teacher is a role-model that students look up to and learn from.

THE DISCUSSION

The statistical analysis above provides a number of insights regarding the nature of the Conversations course being taught in the foundation program. As demonstrated in the analysis, the first and perhaps most important point is that a significant proportion of the students expressed their perceived improvement in a variety of domains within spoken English. The fact that the course provided an ample number of opportunities to speak in front of an audience was reflected in the students’ increase in confidence in use of English. We can conclude then that this specific style of teaching ‘talk as performance’ is therefore

a vital element that contributes to the efficacy of any foundation program for EFL in general and efficacy of a Conversations course in particular.

With regards to the efficacy of the course at teaching ‘talk as interaction’, the students’ responses clearly emphasize the paramount role of the instructor in acquiring this skill. The interviews were particularly informative, as they provide us with insight into some key features which will potentially positively impact the learning experience; namely, vocal clarity, accurate native-like pronunciation, and charisma. By charisma, we refer to the ability of the instructor to maintain an exciting environment through a combination of humor, and the ability to engage the students in topics of relevant interest to their age groups. However, it is not enough to merely state the Conversations course’s efficacious aspects; as educators, we must concentrate on the areas which call for improvement.

One such area is that of the overall structure of the course itself. The fact that nearly half the students emphasized their need for a reference textbook to guide them in the course, whilst the other half disagreed, shows that there is a degree of confusion amongst the students with regards to the syllabus itself. This issue is further emphasized in the interviews given, whereby the students were divided in their opinions between the need for a clear syllabus and the need for a course textbook; both symptomatic of the underlying need for clear structure. The absence of a clear syllabus with well-defined objectives may be negatively influencing the motivation of the students (Ahmed 1996), which in turn has the propensity to negatively impact both students’ attention to the course material, as well as the efficiency of processing of that material (Bergin et al, 2006).

The issue of generating enough motivation to facilitate learning is critical due to the perceived difficulty of the Conversation course itself. The fact that the majority of students stated that the sessions require a lot of energy, and that nearly half of the students portrayed their desire for more conversation courses (whilst only 1/3rd disagreed), is symptomatic of this experienced difficulty. Numerous studies have pointed to the fact that an increase in motivation towards certain tasks results in increased energy levels and, consequently, the amount of effort contributed, towards the completion of those tasks. (Csikszentmihalyi & Nakamura, 1989). It is therefore our recommendation that an increase in the difficulty of the tasks set for the students be done over a more prolonged, stretched out period of time, allowing for small incremental steps of improvement instead of highly demanding jumps that would greatly stress out the students. Another issue that may be contributing to the decreased motivation is that of the availability of appropriate classroom facilities to help with the tasks set by the instructor. This was clearly emphasized in the interviews, whereby students elaborated that the technologies made available were inadequate. Studies have shown that the suitability of the environment for certain tasks greatly influences the levels of motivation of those that engage in those tasks in the context of such environments (Paris & Turner, 1994). Consequently, it is important to include this often overlooked aspect into the formula for the development of a highly efficacious course.

Finally, it would be sensible to take a step back and look at the courses that are being offered alongside the Conversations course. The foundations program prescribes, in

addition to the Conversations course, a course in reading, a course in basic writing, and a course in advanced basic writing. The Reading course aims at increasing reading comprehension and reading rate, whilst the Basic Writing course aims at the development of an understanding of the main components of paragraphs, which the Advanced Writing course builds upon through essay-writing practice. Interestingly, a significant proportion of the students signified their lack of improvement in grammar after completion of the conversation course. This issue was again brought up during the interviews, where a quarter of the students suggested that a course in grammar be taught alongside the Conversations course, in order to facilitate their use of appropriate sentence structure during their speaking exercises. This leads us to seriously consider altering the contents of some of the concurrent courses being taught in order to introduce a greater concentration on the most relevant aspects of grammar necessary for communication.

In summary, we believe that this study has been successful at providing us with important insights into the nature of any course which would successfully serve the 3 main functions of speaking, many aspects of which are to be found in the Conversations course currently being taught. However, as can be seen, there is still ample room for improvement in numerous areas. It would be interesting to see how addressing such areas would impact future students; a replication of this same study at a future date after the necessary manipulations might prove fruitful.

THE CONCLUSION

This study investigated the attitude of 106 English language students' attitude towards the efficacy of the Conversation Course provided by the English department in the College of Basic Education. The results obtained from the questionnaires and the interviews indicate that the students feel that the conversation class is important and beneficial. Most students found that it helped them improve their language, and their communicating skills. Many students reflected the need for another conversation course to promote language learning. The students reflected their admiration of the course; however, requested a clear course outline which would enable better practice and revision. Moreover, the students stated that the instructor plays a vital role in either enhancing or intimidating learning. The instructor could encourage students to learn, and might cause intimidation by his comments and interruption of presentations.

The researchers believe that the importance of any conversation course does not only lay in improving speaking and phonology, but also enhancing the students' knowledge of language in terms of vocabulary, syntax and semantics. The conversation class should also help students improve their communication skills, hence being able to describe, debate, compare and contrast, and argue with confidence and structure. The current conversation class in the English Department, in the College of Basic Education mostly offers what is required from it depending on two key issues (as stated by the participating students): the instructors' abilities and the time available. Therefore, it seems safe to assume that with good time management and clear organization of the course outline, the students would reach maximum benefit from the conversation course. This would bring into place the

necessity of a second, more advanced conversation course to help students attain and practice the skills required to apply in further advanced courses.

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