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Communication Difficulties Faced By Undergraduate Libyan Students

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Abstract

Learning English either as an ESL or as an EFL seems to be difficult. Relating to this statement, this paper aims at presenting the communication difficulties faced by Libyan students at Alzytoona University in Libya. Some of these difficulties are: speaking problems; students have low motivation to learn English; pronunciation difficulties; lack of the necessary vocabulary; excessive use of Arabic in the classroom and anxiety. In addition, this paper is going to focus on the factors behind these difficulties such as: language teachers are native speakers of mother tongue, which results in lack of exposure to the target language; confidence and lack of training. Then, to suggest the solutions for these problems. Besides, to solve the problems faced by students, this paper discusses the role of communicative competence in learning language, and to define the communication strategies. Finally, it concludes that Libyan students encounter many serious speaking problems in the target language.

Keywords: undergraduate, communication, difficulties

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1. Introduction

The main aim of teaching a language is to help learners to be able to use it effectively and accurately in communication. However, the purpose of real communication is to accomplish a task, such as conveying a message, obtaining information, or expressing an opinion. Not all language learners can communicate fluently and accurately in English due to several difficulties that they may encounter. According to Abbad (1988), Arab learners of English encounter problems in both speaking and writing. For example, foreign language learners learning to acquire the oral proficiency in the target language may have some problems, which include internal and external problems. Internal problems imply cognitive factors such as, intelligence; language aptitude; and language learning strategies, and affective factors such as motivation, anxiety, risk-taking ability; willingness to communicate; language attitude; Whereas, external problems refer to social class, first language, teachers, and L2 curriculum (Cheng & Dörnyei, 2007). Many studies have discussed the problems that foreign language learners encounter, but little research has been conducted to solve these problems. However, in order

to solve these difficulties, foreign language learners' strategic competence should be developed through using of communicative strategies because these strategies can help students to solve their communication problems they experience during the course of communication and because these strategies may lead to better learning.(O'Malley & chamot,1990).

Therefore, the communication problems encountered by Libyan learners of English will be addressed in this paper. Then, briefly language problems specific to Libyan students of English at Alzytoona University will be discussed. The author of this paper also intends to highlight the factors for such persistent problems. In addition, the solutions to these difficulties will be presented with a brief reference to the significance of strategic competence and the use of communicative strategies in language teaching/learning process. Finally, this paper will offer a better insight into the different challenges experienced by Libyan students.

2. The Role of Communication Strategies and Communicative Competence in Learning the Language

2.1. First: Communicative competence

Speakers of any language need communicative competence which may help them know how and when to communicate in the target language. The term communicative competence is defined by Saleh (2013) as, ''linguistically, it refers to the speaker's ability to use the appropriate language in the right context for the right purpose". According to Hymes' (1972) theory, "communicative competence indicates to what a speaker needs to know in order to be communicatively competent in a speech community".

In addition, in order to speak in L2 or FL efficiently, the following factors are needed such as linguistic competence, an adequate vocabulary and mastery of syntax (Nunan, 1999). Furthermore, communicative competence is needed for second language students to communicate in and learn from their classroom experiences (Johnson, 1995). According to Canale and Swain (1980) communicative competence consists of four components: Discourse competence: helps students to be able to combine language structures into different types of cohesive texts, for example: giving a political speech or saying poetry. Grammatical competence: as defined by Chomsky (1993) indicates to "theoretical and practical knowledge of a limited number of grammatical rules, which allow generating an unlimited number of correct sentences". in this aspect, learners should learn how to deal with grammatical rules, vocabulary, pronunciation, and spelling.

Sociolinguistic competence: students should be competent in the sociocultural code of language, such as politeness and style in a given situation. For example: It is important to have knowledge that may help learners to communicate properly and politely with people in different cultural backgrounds. For students it would be very important to help them learn how to behave well and how to speak politely with their teachers and as well with others in order to avoid confusion and embarrassment. Strategic competence: it relates to the knowledge of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may assist students to overcome some language difficulties when they experience communication breakdowns.For instance: When learners need to convey messages which they cannot express them effectively due to some linguistic barriers.

Although communicative competence is well known in education field, it is still difficult for many teachers and students to achieve the level of competence. The failure to achieve that is being attributed to several reasons, such as the high proficiency level required for the effective teaching of different courses and/or programs; EFL teachers' low proficiency level in utilizing communication methods for teaching and learning language skills, and teachers' misconception of the meaning of the term 'communicative competence' (Huda, 1999).

2.2. Second: Communication strategies

Communication strategies (CSs) are used by students to overcome their communication difficulties and breakdowns due to a deficiency in available linguistic resources. Sometimes students are unable to perform messages or conversations in an accurate way like in their mother tongue, they use communicative strategies in order to convey those messages or can communicate continuously. Linguists define communicative strategy in different ways according to their different prospects. For example, Færch and Kasper (1983) perceive CS from psychological approach.Tarone (1980) investigates communicative strategies from the interactional perspective while Brown (1994) looks at CS from the perspective of error resources.

According to Tarone, the notion of communication strategies refers to ''a mutual attempt of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures are not shared ''. Furthermore, she confirms that "meaning structures include both linguistic and socio-linguistic structure" (1980). However, she divided communication strategies into different types such as follows: 1. Paraphrase: includes: (a) Approximation: utilizing the closest meaning of a word or structure of a target language, which the learner may know is not correct, but shares the semantic features with the

correct item of the target language in order to make himself understood to others. (e.g. Ship' for 'sailing boat'", 'fishpond' for 'fish pool'. (b) Word coinage: indicates to inventing a new word by using an origin word from the target language in order to express the ideas or thoughts. For example: *Kleenex* for a facial tissue and *neologism* meaning "new word."

(c) Circumlocution: in conversations sometimes the speakers don't know some type of words or phrases in L2 to use in conversation, therefore they give definitions or examples of the terms or phrases in L2. (e.g. When they say "the vehicle that we use to go to work in the mornings" is a circumlocution for "our car"). (2) Conscious Transfer: consists of: (a) Literal translation: when translating terms and phrases of L1 word for word to L2. This sometimes occurs due to the impact of L1 on L2. (e.g., I and my friend went shopping. Instead of: my friend and I went shopping. And "He invites him to drink" for "They toast one another"). (b) Language switch: when the students can't remember the correct term to use, so, they switch from the L2 to L1. In other words, the learner uses the native language term without translating it into L2 (e.g. اعطيني كتابك بليز or الاستاذة كنسلت المحاضرة " or "tirtil" for "turtle"). (3) Appeal for assistance: the learner asks for the correct term or structure of the TL. (e.g. "What is it, Sir? Err... I...).Sometimes uses the same word of the L1 thinking that the listener will give him/her the exact term. (4) Mime: sometimes the learners find it difficult to remember a specific term or phrase during conversation, so they use a nonverbal gesture to convey the idea. (e.g. "clapping one's hands to illustrate applause"). (5) Avoidance: it consists of: (a) Message abandonment: When students start conveying a message to others, and they feel that it is difficult for them to continue, so they leave the message unfinished. (b) Topic Avoidance: While students conduct a conversation about a specific area and can't continue talking in that topic because it is difficult and may need academic terms, so they try to avoid it. (ibid).

2.3. Key problems faced by students in Libyan universities

Since have been working as a teacher of English language in different stages, starting from preparatory stage to secondary stage and ending in university stage, the author noticed several difficulties Libyan students have been experiencing. For example, first: pronunciation problems related to stress, others are related to intonation. Second: Another significant issue the writer realized related to the problems encountered by Libyan university students is the excessive use of Arabic (L1) in the classroom and out of the classroom. However, it is easier for the students to use their mother tongue in the class because it looks naturally. However, most of the students are not disciplined in

using the target language in the learning process. Al-Nofaie (2010) states that "the use of Arabic was an unavoidable phenomenon. The teachers' and students' use of Arabic language appeared to be systematic". In line with Al-Nofaie's view, Harmer (1991) states that if the students are asked to discuss a specific topic and they are unable to express their ideas they shift to their mother tongue.

Third: another apparent problem is anxiety: Language Anxiety may affect the communication strategies students employ in language class. Consequently, it may hinder the students from acquiring the language. For example, an anxious student may avoid participating in class discussion, reduce their performance in public communication. To speak or to perform something using foreign language in a classroom situation can cause students' anxiety because they have to perform unfamiliar sounds in front of audience, or because teachers may ask more questions that need to be answered. In addition, Horwitz (1986) suggested three types of language performance of anxiety: 'communication apprehension', that indicates to an individual's fear or anxiety of negative evaluation, 'social evaluation', and 'test anxiety'. Moreover, Young (1991) classified sources of anxiety to different types such as: personal and interpersonal, teacher-student interaction, teachers' beliefs about language learning, students' beliefs about language learning, procedures of classroom and testing.

Fourth: the difficulties faced by Libyan students are related to the use of adjectives; overuse of grammatical and syntactic rules; prepositions and idioms; pronunciation, and negative transfer and semantic errors. (Pathan et al, 2014).

Finally: students sometimes find it difficult to communicate freely in the target language either when dealing with 'academic topics' or 'common everyday topics. For example, when we conduct a specific discussion, students are unable to continue their speech.

2.4. Causes of these problems

Referring to the writer's experience in teaching English language to EFL students,the difficulties that faced by Libyan students are attributed to faulty teaching strategies, lack of language centres and practice, lack of interest and confidence, lack of unified syllabus and teaching approaches and methods used in teaching English in Libyan universities especially speaking skill. Moreover, they might be due to students' deficiency in communicative competence and the absence of target language environment.

Students in Libya usually learn English in their home country where the native language is Arabic. The only way to learn English in Libya is through formal instruction, i.e.,

in the classroom where language teachers are native speakers of Arabic. However, there is no opportunity to learn English through natural interaction in the target language as Libya is a non-native English speaking country. In other words there is lack of exposure to the target language.

In addition, there are more causes such as: overuse of mother tongue, however, the reasons behind using mother tongue in classroom are due to their shyness, lack of proficiency, or being unmotivated to communicate in L2 (Nation,2003). In addition, most of these problems can be attributed to the differences in pronunciation between English and Arabic. What's more, insufficient vocabulary, the lack of the necessary vocabulary they need to get their meaning across, therefore, they cannot keep the interaction going for an extended period of time. This idea is in line with Saleh's study (2015), limited vocabulary often results in communication problems. Failing to find appropriate words for expressing ideas during communication can lead to embarrassment or withdrawal from the conversation. Last, lack of pertinent knowledge on the part of secondary school freshmen students who join university. For example, a student who has lately joined university in the English language department whom the writer asked to pronounce the term 'child', she pronounced it like the word 'shield', /ʃi:ld/, instead of '/tʃaɪld/. However, she attributed that to her previous teacher's mispronunciation of some words.

2.5. Suggested solutions of these problems

In order to solve students' difficulties in speaking skill, the following strategies can be suggested: teachers should encourage students interactions and participation, make speaking activities communicative and should be involved not only in class but also out of class. Since the teaching methods affect learning a new language, therefore, teachers have to apply modern methods such as CLT rather than implementing the grammar translation method and/or audio-lingual method. However, according to Richards, Rodgers (1986) CLT aims at making students to communicate in a foreign language using activities such as, communicating with games, problem solving, oral communication activities, stimulation, and dialogue complementation. On the other hand, the Grammar-Translation Method focuses on reading comprehension, grammar rules, translation and the Audio Lingual Method does not focus on lots of vocabulary and Grammar is the most important in this method, particularly when the students have to repeat the grammar pattern after the teacher. Moreover, exposure to the target language helps students to master their speaking skill, so they should try to communicate with native speakers of the target language in case of availability. In addition, students should be given more time for

speaking in the target language and overuse of correction during speaking should be avoided.(Ryan,2001).Finally, learning/ teaching style should be student-centered class rather than teacher-centered class.

3. Conclusion

To conclude, Libyan university students experience several difficulties in learning English especially speaking skill. However, these difficulties include anxiety, overuse of mother tongue in class and lack of target language exposure. Therefore, it is essential that English language teachers pay great attention to teaching speaking by helping students to have adequate exposure with the language and with adequate motivation to communicate in the target language. In order to solve students' problems teachers should implement effective communicative strategies and implement modern methods.

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