

The Significance of Incorporating Language Skills into EFL Syllabus

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ABSTRACT: It is generally observed that most Arab EFL learners (and some teachers) demonstrate poor communication skills. Other things being equal, this paper draws on the assumption that part of the problem lies with the kind of training that the English departments have been offering; viz. the bulk of their courses centres upon the teaching of knowledge course: literature, pure linguistics and English language rules. These, the paper argues, could hardly improve learners' skills at listening, reading, speaking and writing. This paper attempts to examine this assumption in the light of the existing EFL syllabus in some Arab universities. In so doing, it begins by giving a theoretical overview of the major theories shaping modern English language teaching methods and proceeds to evaluate the Arab EFL syllabus in the light of these theories.

1. Introduction

The theme of this paper occurred to me during my first academic year at Al-Majma'ah Community College of King Saud University (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia) in 2005. As the then coordinator of the Department of English, I was responsible for assigning courses to teachers according to their specialty and interest. I was also responsible for submitting final examinations to the English Department examination board at the University headquarters in Riyadh for approval.

Generally speaking, the College English syllabus centres roughly upon five branches: general English courses (grammar and vocabulary), linguistics, English communication skills, translation and literature. It was felt that most teachers readily classify themselves either as linguists or literature specialists. Such classification was true even for those who earned M.A. degrees by courses. There were endless disputes over linguistics and literature courses at the beginning of terms. Teachers with M.A. in English were particularly keen to teach courses pertaining to

these two branches under the pretext that they constituted the backbone of their postgraduate training and, therefore, qualified them to make such specialty claims. Counter-arguments were produced to persuade them that M.A. courses would give a general survey of the branches involved. Thus, picking a branch to be one's specialty was less than convincing.

By contrast, no disputes over skills courses were reported. In fact, most teachers avoided teaching listening, speaking and writing courses. This confirms the assumption that skills courses were hardly part of their undergraduate and postgraduate training. It was unfortunate that some teachers were even reluctant to communicate in English in the Department board meetings despite the Dean's strict instruction that a minutes copy must be submitted to him in English.

This paper, then, is an attempt to examine the place of the English communication skills in the English syllabus in some Arab universities. The significance of this choice stems from the fact that language assessment is generally based on students' and teachers' mastery of the four skills prior to their knowledge of linguistics and literature as the latter are confined to academic institutions only. What is more, assessment of the students' knowledge of linguistics and literature is carried out through some of the four skills. Thus, the objective of this paper is twofold. First, it assesses the EFL syllabus' concern with the skills courses in the Arab Universities. Second, it argues for the incorporation of more skills courses into the EFL syllabus in these same universities.

2. Linguistics and Language Teaching

Like other disciplines, language studies abound in a variety of theories. Thanks to Hymes' 'communicative model' that many linguistic theories have come to be subsumed under two major models: Hymes' own model of 'communicative competence' and Chomsky's theory of "linguistic competence". Nothing can be said about a winning camp. For there are basic Chomskyan tenets that are still present in Hymes' model. Viz. Hymes (1979:115) proposes that the "acquisition of linguistic competence has to be fed by social experience, needs and motives". This shows that "linguistic competence" still remains an essential component of the language study and language education but that it should operate along other factors within the relevant social situation.

It is widely argued by the communicativists that the "linguistic competence" model centres upon the teaching of some language rules that can be entirely irrelevant to the daily communication needs of the students. For example, knowing how surface structures are generated

from deep structures through the application of some transformational rules does not seem to improve learners' skills at listening, reading, speaking and writing.

Whether or not the classroom activity draws on the model of the linguistic competence or the communicative competence or both, linguistics has been argued to be one of the major contributors to the development of the language teaching syllabus (Brumfit and Johnson 1979: ix). It is necessary, therefore, to make broad statements about the role of the linguistics in the curriculum development.

To begin with, some linguistic theories seem to have been favoured over others. For instance, advocates of the communicative model argue enthusiastically against any degree of relevance of the Chomskyan model to the teaching of language for communication. To report but some views, Wilkins (1979:82) terms the language teaching syllabus which draws on the linguistic competence model as the "grammatical syllabus". Wilkins associates two drawbacks with such a syllabus. First, grammatical syllabus is over-concerned with presenting all the grammar rules of the language despite the fact that quite a good deal of it is of no practical use for learners' communicative needs. Second, emphasizing the teaching of the grammatical component of the language overshadows the basic function of the language, i.e., communication.

Alongside these lines, Widdowson (1979:49) argues that "the language teacher's view of what constitutes knowledge of a language is essentially the same as Chomsky's ... once competence is acquired, performance will take care of itself". Widdowson contends that such a view can be proved to be invalid. He reports that students at tertiary level with more than six years of instruction in English have been reported to be unable to communicate normally (ibid). Widdowson argues further that associating the language syllabus with the linguistic competence model will have the effect of conceiving of the "sentence as the basic unit in language teaching". This, he believes, emphasizes the teaching of, what he calls, "sentences in isolation", which has nothing to do with the teaching of language as communication (p. 50). Widdowson proposes, instead, an approach which he terms "sentences in combination". For language, he quotes Harris (1952), "does not exist in stray of words or sentences but in connected discourse".

McDonough and Show (1993:24) report that one of the implications of the communicative approach to the language teaching is the fact that the term "communicative" is relevant to all the language

skills. Historically speaking, the successive language teaching methodologies did not seem to give such equal weight to these skills. For instance, as its name suggests, the reading method emphasized the teaching of the reading skills. The 1950s and 1960s witnessed the prevalence of the listening and speaking skills over the other skills. In each case writing was considered an auxiliary practice that would reinforce the classroom activities pertaining to the other skills (Freedman et al 1983:187). Rivers (1982:241) points out that during the audio-lingual era, the writing skills "functioned as the home maid of the other skills, which must not take precedence as major skills to be developed", and that "they must be considered a service activity rather than an end in itself" (p. 258). However, in the mid 1960s writing became independent owing to the emergence of the "current traditional rhetoric" - an approach that centred upon the teaching of writing.

It is highly probable that emphasizing some skills over the others can have the effect of producing more proficiency in that skill. This can sometimes meet the language needs of some students who study English for specific purposes. For instances, students who do much laboratory work may need more emphasis on the writing skills as this would be necessary for the laboratory report writing. Other students may do courses that require library work in which case reading will dominate the classroom activities and so on.

3. Methodology

It was reported above that the theme of this paper was given impetus by a variety of events at King Saud University during the academic years 2004/05 and 2005/06. Because most of the English language teachers at King Saud University were Saudis, Jordanians, Egyptians, Palestinians and Sudanese, this research intends to examine the English syllabus in some universities in these countries. As shown above, the prime objective behind this procedure is to assess these institutions' concern with the teaching of the English communication skills as this might explain teachers' specialty claims that were reported in (1) above.

The academic institutions involved in this investigation were University of Khartoum (Sudan), King Saud University (King of Saudi Arabia), Cairo University (Egypt), Petra University (Jordan), Beirut Arab University (Lebanon) and Damascus University (Syria). Except for the first two Universities, EFL syllabus has been accessed online at the website of the Association of Arab Universities. Examination of the English syllabus was confined to these institutions because many association members denied access to their syllabus. As for King Saud

University and University of Khartoum, the relevant data have been accessed from the Departments' records as the researcher was a staff member of each.

4. EFL Syllabus in some Arab Universities

The data accessed from the websites and hard records have been presented in the table below. The table reports the English courses map whereby the percentage of the skills courses has been calculated vis-à-vis the non-skills courses (for detailed information about the skills courses see the appendix or log on the website of the Association of Arab Universities as shown on the reference list).

EFL Syllabus in some Arab Universities

University	College/Faculty	No. of all English Courses	No. of Skills Courses	% of skills courses
University of Khartoum (Sudan)	Faculty of Arts	18	3	16.7
King Saud University (KSA)	College of Arts	43	10	23.3%
Cairo University (Egypt)	College of Arts	33	5	15.2%
Petra University (Jordan)	College of Arts and Science	36	6	16.7%
Beirut Arab University (Lebanon)	Faculty of Arts	46	11	23.9%
Damascus University (Syria)	Faculty of Arts	43	6	14%

All these universities, except the University of Khartoum, apply a single major system whereby students graduate with a degree in English only. It is true that there are other college and/or university requirements

that the students should do as a graduation prerequisites, but these remain fewer compared to the English courses. Other things being equal, the single major system allows for more English input, which can, in turn, contribute positively to the development of the students' competence and performance in English.

As to the University of Khartoum, all the Language Departments are of the view that a radical modification needs to be introduced into the academic system of the Faculty so that the language students, allowing for the Faculty and University requirements, should study and graduate with a degree in the language in question only. The present joint-degree system allows the students to graduate with two subjects.

The table shows that all the departments surveyed offer more Knowledge (or content) courses than skills courses. Admittedly, such a syllabus structure would, implicitly or explicitly, have the objective that learners should be trained to master the English structure on all levels: phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic. Alternatively, curriculum developers might have been of the Chomskyan view reported in connection with Widdowson (1979:44) in (2) above that "... once competence is acquired, performance will take care of itself". The problem with this view is that "linguistic competence" may not be acquired satisfactorily so that performance can take care of itself at least for one essential reason: human language is an open-ended phenomenon and, as such, there will always be some new language component that has to be incorporated into the learner's system. What is more is that the globalization has accelerated the introduction of a variety of language forms, reflecting different aspects of human life. Learners then shall have to wait for a long time in order to come to grips with all the language forms necessary for effective communication.

Curriculum developers of the view reported above might wish to argue that by emphasizing a knowledge-oriented syllabus, learners might be introduced to language structures that help them develop their own language skills. Learners, that is, would implicitly be provided with training in the language skills that they need in real communicative situations. Such a view can be rejected on a number of grounds. First, since such training is implicit, it may not be successfully brought to the consciousness of the learners, who would in the end view it as mere course materials that need to be digested for examination purposes.

Second, the knowledge-based syllabus can be argued to be irrelevant to the development of the learners' speaking skills per cent. This argument stems from the fact that such a syllabus draws on written

materials. Admittedly, speaking skills can only be developed through situations and activities whereby only spoken English is needed, e.g. interjecting to show that someone has made a mistake. Otherwise, the well-known speaking/ writing distinction would have been pointless. While it is true that the speaking activities in a foreign language context also draw on written texts, only situations requiring spoken forms are included. Verbal reports from speakers of English as a foreign language, who did their post-graduate courses in English speaking countries, indicated that they had been accused of speaking "bookishly" in encounters with English native speakers.

Third, textbooks selected for different courses represent different theories, and are based on different educational philosophies. Thus, it would virtually be difficult, if not impossible, for the learners to choose between these theories and philosophies. By contrast, the teacher is not likely being in a position to unfold what is implicit in the course items that they teach. The time factor would force teachers to keep to the items that appear in their course outline.

It can be argued, then, that the knowledge-based language syllabus would render the students accountable for tasks that they have not been trained to perform. The table shows absolute dominance of knowledge courses over skills courses. Nevertheless, the students would be required to perform satisfactorily in, say, speaking and writing. Of course, they will have to model their demonstration of these productive skills on the textbooks that were originally prescribed for knowledge courses.

Given the fact that writing is the only assessing criterion for the majority of courses including some audio-lingual components, it is highly probable that the students could be put at disadvantage, especially if they have not benefited from their 'implicit' skills training. Thus, it has become a general observation that examiners increasingly complain about the poor writing performance of their EFL students. This is particularly true in the case of the examination answers that take essay forms. These complaints have had far-reaching implications for EFL research. All aspects of learners' writing competence have been over-researched. At least, a glance at the Khartoum University research record would show that this is so. Because the language syllabus underlying the students' performance targets the development of their linguistic competence, it is possible to argue that some research will be pointless if it draws on the effect of instruction on the learners' writing competence. For it has become an undisputed communicative tenet that there is more to

communicative competence than mere knowledge of the language rules that produces competent communicators (cf. Allwright 1979).

The language skills dilemma is equally applicable to the ESP classes. Here the specialist timetable hardly permits the inclusion of enough English courses. Moreover, the class size usually discourages the language teachers from any serious attempts to improve the students' performance. So they might end up teaching grammar due to the complications involved in applying continuous assessment to large classes if their activities centre upon language skills.

Still some advocates of the knowledge-based English syllabus might go so far as to argue that such a language teaching trend reflects certain versions of the communicative language teaching method, viz. "Language across the curriculum". Put simply, the focus of the language across the curriculum is that "language skills should be taught in the content subjects and not left exclusively for the English teacher to deal with" (Richards and Rodgers 2001: 205). However, according to these same authors, there are two reasons that render this method inappropriate to EFL Arabic-speaking learners. First, the "language across the curriculum" "was a proposal for native language education ...". Second, this method needs "collaboration between subject matter teachers and language teachers" (ibid). The second reason is particularly interesting. It seems to focus on the teaching of English for specific purposes where texts from the specialist's area form the backbone of the language course. Of course, concepts pertaining to, say, medicine, physics, politics, etc., cannot be professionally presented by the language teacher, who can at best provide dictionary definitions for the scientific concepts in question. So the success of the teaching process seems to rely on the specialist's collaboration, otherwise the content departments can hardly be satisfied.

The question that we have to answer, therefore, is whether or not they are enough specialists to assist with the teaching of language skills in the Arab higher education institutions. Moreover, it has to be ensured that these specialists have been sufficiently trained to teach the language skills in such a way that the objectives of these courses could be realized. Unfortunately, it is possible to claim that many Arab universities do fall short of providing the valid basis for ESP courses to be jointly taught by specialists and English teachers owing to the lack of enough staff, staff training, limited financial resources, etc.

It is not the intention of this paper, nor can it be, to argue against the inclusion of knowledge courses, i.e. literature and sentence linguistics in the TEFL syllabus. No doubt, it is part of the specific objective of any

English Department to produce future literati and linguists. However, if knowledge courses are not fed with enough skills courses, this objective could simply be jeopardized. A case in point is that the students who have not been satisfactorily trained to master, say, the reading skills will have difficulty in dealing with knowledge courses. For such courses abound in textbooks, and can only be accessed through reading.

5. Conclusion

This paper has been an attempt to evaluate the position of the EFL skills in the current English language syllabus in some Arab universities. There are two considerations that have given impetus to the attempt. First, there is a growing complaint among English teachers about the dramatic drop in the English standards particularly where skills demonstration is concerned. The keynote speaker at a workshop held at the University of Khartoum in 2004 has gone so far as to report that the standard drop has become characteristic of a number of English speaking students. Second, the paper has intended to detect if the students have been given a balanced input and output so that they could rise to the expectations of their tutors.

The paper has then reviewed the linguistic theories that have widely been argued to underlie many modern language teaching methods: Hymes' "communicative competence" and Chomsky's "linguistic competence". As its name suggests, the former model seems to be more central to the line of argument developed by this paper. Despite the fact that the acquisition of linguistic competence has a role to play in enhancing learners' performance, the focus of EFL syllabus on knowledge courses can hardly help prepare learners to communicate sensibly. To report but one example (to show that this is so), such expressions as "What did you say?" is linguistically correct but is socially inappropriate in communicating with interlocutors of different social backgrounds. Admittedly, formal grammar books do not waste time on explaining the match between linguistic forms and situations requiring them. Moreover, advocates of the theory of transformational grammar will only be interested in how this structure has been generated from the underlying structure through the application of a given transformational rule (cf. Radford 1986). Thus, upon generating the well-formed surface structure, the language users have to decide on whether or not they should use it.

Examination of EFL syllabus in some Arab universities has indicated that such a syllabus has been much concerned about acquisition of linguistic competence. For only a marginal percentage has been

devoted to the language skills. Emphasis on knowledge-based syllabus has been argued by this paper to provide "implicit skills training", which might not be always successful in improving the students' communicative competence. All in all, it can still be argued that lack of enough skills courses in many Arab universities is primarily responsible for the students' (and some teachers') weak communication competence.

Appendix

University of Khartoum

Course Code	Course Title	Weekly Hours	Level/Year
E101	General English I	6	First Level
E102	General English II	6	First Level
E202	Advanced Composition	3	Second Level

King Saud University (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia)

Course Code	Course Title	Hours/Week	Level/Year
Eng. 111	Basic Language Skills	3	First Level
Eng. 112	Listening and speaking I	2	First Level
Eng. 113	Reading Comprehension i	2	First Level
Eng. 114	Composition: Writing Paragraph I	3	Second Level
Eng. 115	Reading Comprehension II	3	Second Level
Eng. 122	Listening and Speaking II	2	Second Level
Eng. 213	Composition II	2	Third Level
Eng. 312	Essay Writing	2	Fourth Level
Eng. 412	Speech	2	Fifth level
Eng. 413	Advanced Writing	3	Seventh Level

Cairo University (Egypt)

Course Code	Course Title	Hours/Week	Level/Year
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-	نحو و تعبير (تحريري)	4	First Year
-	قراءة و استماع	1	First Year
-	تدريبات في القراءة و التعبير و مناهج البحث	2	Second Year
-	مقال و تدريبات	2	Third Year
-	مقال و تدريبات لغوية	2	Fourth Year

Petra University (Jordan)

Course Code	Course Title	Hours/Week	Level/Year
402101	Group Discussion	3	-
402102	Reading Summarizing and Paragraphing	3	-
402103	Narrative and Descriptive Writing	3	-
402212	Essay Writing	3	-
402334	Report Writing	3	
402211	Advanced Reading (optional)	3	

Beirut Arab University (Lebanon)

Course Code	Course Title	Hours/Week	Level/Year
E126	اللغة الانجليزية (سمع-قراءة-فهم)	2	First year
E127	اللغة الانجليزية (كتابة)	2	First Year
E128	اللغة الانجليزية (نطق-حديث)	2	First Year
E214	اللغة الانجليزية (سمع-فهم-حديث) (continued in the second term)	4	Second Year
E215	اللغة الانجليزية (كتابة-قراءة-فهم) (continued in the second term)	4	Second Year
E318	اللغة الانجليزية (كتابة) (continued in the second term)	4	Third Year
E401	المقال (continued in the second term)	2	Fourth Year

Damascus University (Syria)

Course Code	Course Title	Hours/Week	Level/Year
-	التعبير و الاستيعاب (1)	2	First Year
-	التعبير و الاستيعاب (2)	2	First Year
-	التعبير و الاستيعاب (4)	2	Second Year
-	التعبير و الاستيعاب (5)	2	Second Year
-	التعبير الكتابي	2	Third Year
-	الكتابة و منهجية البحث	2	Third Year

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