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A LINGUISTIC AND TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF CLASSROOM ENGLISH INTERACTION AT SIRTE UNIVERSITY IN LIBYA

Abstract:

As English spreads and becomes a dominant language of power in global commerce, science, and technology, the need to teach and learn through it has also grown. It is not surprising that the aim of most education curriculum around the world, including the Arabic governments, has been developed to suit the curriculum of teaching and learning English inside their countries. Libya is one of the Arab countries where the government has invested heavily in the English language teaching curriculum, which is geared towards improving the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language (EFL) in schools and universities. The aim of this emphasis on the teaching and learning of English is to enable Libya to catch up in the development of its economy and to promote international exchange. However, in spite of the government's efforts towards improving English language learning, there have been claims from various quarters in the education field that students at all education levels are not performing successfully in the language, with regard to literacy and the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Very few studies have been done so far on teaching English in Arabic countries in Africa and classroom interactions in the Arabic social context, especially at the university level. Hence, this study was undertaken using a qualitative research design, and the data was collected through classroom observation and a questionnaire issued to the lecturers in Sirte University in Sirte, Libya. Recommendations and suggestions are offered, based on the findings of this research.

Keywords:

Linguistics, Competency, Discourse Analysis, social context.

1.0 Introduction

English has increasingly become the language of the market and globalization as well as the language of the new world order (Banda 2003; Fairclough 1995, 2001) which is attributed to the political dominance of the British and American colonialists (Graddol 1997:10). Apart from political dominance, English has also been associated with the advancement of Science and Technology, especially Software and Information Technology. All trades and professions around the world demand people who are able to use English as a second language or as a foreign language effectively. In the light of the information above, it is clear that English language teaching and learning have gained currency in many education syllabi across the world. With the increase in the use of English as a lingua franca, all Arab governments have begun to recognize its importance by introducing the teaching of English into their schools' curriculum. Libya is one of the Arab countries in which English is taught as a compulsory subject in schools, from preparatory level to university level. In Libya, English is a foreign language. It is not used in government and media or in any other social domain. Outside the classroom, the language used for communication is Arabic. The need for improved English skills in Libya is growing rapidly as Libya's commercial and other links with the rest of the world develop. Sirte University is one of the major universities in Libya that grants bachelor's degrees in different majors. It was founded in 1987. The academic year in this university starts from September to July and the language of the instruction is Arabic and English. It has seven faculties including Faculty of Science, Faculty of Engineering, Faculty of Medicine and Faculty of Education. The English Department has nearly two hundred students at the time of the study. As has been shown later most of the lecturers in the English department are foreigners and qualified to teach English.

The teaching of EFL in many educational institutions in Libya is still unable to meet the requirement of the political and economic growth of the country as many school graduates find it hard to communicate in English effectively after spending a long time studying the language. Thus, this study was premised on the assumption that traditional teaching approaches, rely on outdated language material, the use of memorization and rote learning as basic learning techniques. The perceived role of the lecturer, among other things, may have hampered the effectiveness of both the teaching and learning of EFL in the Libyan social context. In this context, most Libyan students see knowledge as something to be transmitted by the lecturer rather than discovered by the students. They, therefore, find it normal to engage

in modes of learning which are lecturer-centered and in which they receive knowledge rather than interpret it.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Arising from the assumptions made in the introduction above that there is a problem in the EFL teaching and learning strategies in the Libyan social context, there is need to investigate the whole EFL teaching and learning process in the English department at Sirte University. In particular, there is need to focus attention on the students' English language competence at the university level. As noted in the background information, despite the improved English learning situation existing at Sirte University, students in the English department are still said to be unsuccessful in their English language performance in all the four language skills. Therefore, there is need to investigate the methodologies used in English teaching in Libya so as to see how they impact on students' EFL English language competence.

1.2 Aim of the Study

The general aim of the study was to do a linguistic and textual analysis of English classroom interaction at Sirte University in Libya. This entails doing a linguistic and textual analysis of the student-lecturer relationship in the English classroom interaction to find out how the available genres and discourses are made use of during these interactions. This study intended to critique the concept of English "appropriateness'' in the EFL learning (Fairclough 1995) with a view of suggesting ways of improving the teaching and learning of the English language in the Libyan social context.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives of this study are:

1. To explore Christie's (1997, 2002, 2005) curriculum macrogenres and Bernstein's (1990, 1996) pedagogic discourse (regulative and instructional) register in university context.

2. To explore the classroom discursive practices dominant in Libyan EFL classroom.

3. To identify and describe the students' spoken communicative competence with regard to classroom interaction.

1.4 Assumptions

The following assumptions guided this study:

1. That instructional method is the dominant register in EFL class stages because of the bilingual situation where English is not used for wider communication.

2. That teacher-student and student-student interaction is minimal in classroom practice.

1.5 Research Questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. Are Christie's curriculum macrogenres and Bernstein's pedagogic discourse (regulative and instructional) registers applicable in EFL classroom practice in university context?

2. How do the theories, methods, and approaches currently in use address the needs of the Libyan EFL instructors and students?

1.6 Methodology

This study used a conceptual framework constructed from Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Further, it draws on Christie's work, which in turn builds on Bernstein's (1990, 1996, 2000) model of pedagogic practice and his interest in how interaction reflects unequal power relations in the classroom. In this study the following data collection techniques were used:

1.6.1 Classroom observation: This involved five classes of EFL Libyan students. The main focus was the students, lecturer, language, the learning process, the lesson, teaching skills and strategies and classroom management.

1.6.2 Questionnaires: These included the lecturers' questionnaire which was used as a way of triangulation - to see whether the information gathered from the classroom observation and document analysis would be reflected. Further, they were aimed at soliciting lecturers' view on students' EFL literacy practices and what the expectations of the students' English language competence were.

1.7 Scope and Limitations

This study limited itself to Sirte region in Libya and Sirte University as the study area. The study investigated students' linguistic features in spoken and written communication. Thus, Sirte University in this case is used as microcosm of Libya's universities because, like any other university in Libya, Sirte University admits students from more or less similar socio-cultural background found in Libya.

In short, it was hoped that these tools would enable this study to do a comprehensive linguistic and textual analysis of the spoken and written discourse of students at Sirte University.

1.8 A brief literature review:

Morrow (1977) describes seven features which characterize communication, namely, interaction-based, unpredictable in both form and message, and varies according to sociolinguistic discourse context. Savignon (1985:130) views communicative competence as "the ability to function in a truly communicative setting - that is a dynamic exchange in which linguistic competence must adapt itself to the total information input, both linguistic and paralinguistic, of one or more interlocutors". The concept of negotiation of meaning plays a significant role in current language learning theories. Breen & Candlin (1980) give a thorough description of this concept which, they state, is a process whereby the learners, through discussing with their partners or working individually on texts in the target language, are able to interpret and construct meaning for them. In the late seventies, Widdowson (1978:3) emphasized the importance of language use by differentiating 'usage' of a language from the 'use' of it. According to Chomsky (1965) the concept of grammatical or linguistic competence are highlighted as 'cognitive aspects' of human language acquisition and learning. He distinguished between competence (one's underlying knowledge of the language) and performance (the realization of language in specific situations). In the view of Krashen's (1981 in Richards & Rodgers 2001) the second and foreign language acquisition is an unconscious process of using language, not directly obtained by conscious learning. Hymes (1972, 1974) introduced communicative competence as one of the earliest terms for this theorisation. The key components of this communicative ability as identified by researchers such as Canale and Swain (1980), Canale (1983), and Bachman (1990), can be listed as:

linguistic competence, pragmatic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence.

Adoption of communicative-oriented foreign language teaching, popularly known as communicative language teaching (CLT), in English classrooms has been repeatedly stressed by researchers, and, indeed, there have been many studies attempting to determine its effects on L2 learners (cf. Breen & Candlin 1980; Canale 1983; Canale & Swain 1980; Widdowson 1978). Brown (1994: 245), views CLT as an approach (that is, a theoretical position about the nature of language and of language teaching) rather than a specific method of teaching. The debate over whether English language classroom should include or exclude students' native language has been a contentious issue for a long time.

This study argues that using the mother tongue language (in this case Arabic) in the EFL classrooms alternatively with the target language does not hinder foreign language learning (in this case English), and it could play a facilitating role in the classroom and can actually help English language learning.

1.9 Research Design

This study followed a qualitative research design, based on the data collected from English department at Sirte University. A qualitative research, as a descriptive analysis, was appropriate in this case study. Furthermore, this approach allowed the researcher to be a part of the research exercise. This was also in line with the view that qualitative research uses the researcher as the data collection instrument and employs inductive analysis (see Maykut & Morehouse 1994).

1.10 Sampling Techniques

This study used judgmental sampling to select four classes from the English department at Sirte University. The classes were from different levels. The sample involved a total of 60 students: 15 students from the first year, 20 students from the second year, 15 students from the third year, and 10 students from the fourth year of study. These students have English as the main subject in their curriculum, as they are trained to become lecturers of English. All the students had previous experience of studying English in preparatory and secondary schools. They are also native speakers of Arabic, but they are learning English as a foreign language. This study also involved ten English lecturers from the English department. These lecturers

were of different nationalities and the majority were non-Arabic speakers. The lecturers are very qualified and obtained high degrees from different institutions in their home countries. Most of the lecturers had an experience of more than three years of teaching English in this department.

1.11 Types and Procedures of Data Collection

The techniques applied in this study were classroom interaction observation and questionnaires.

1.11.1 Classroom Observation

The classroom observation comprised five sessions, two were with the first year students and the subjects included were spoken English and phonetics. One session each was observed for the second and third year students on writing, and one for the fourth year students in English class discussion. In using the classroom observation, this study observed two lecturers as well as EFL students' discursive practices. The site of the observation was the English Laboratories (Lab) in the English Department at Sirte University. The observed sessions were on phonetics, speaking, writing, and classroom discussion courses.

1.11.2 Lecturers' Questionnaires

Questionnaires were submitted to the lecturers through the Internet and each EFL lecturer in English Department at Sirte University received a copy in the e-mail. The questionnaire had 12 questions, each covering one aspect of the teaching and learning of English (see Appendix: 3). These questionnaires were used as a way of triangulation - to see whether the information gathered from classroom observation and document analysis would be reflected. Further, it was aimed at soliciting lecturers' view on students' EFL literacy practices and their expectations of the students' English language competence were.

1.12 Findings and Discussion

1.12.1 Dynamics of Classroom Discourse Interaction in Libya

This study demonstrates that in most of the classrooms analyses, lecturers in EFL classes rarely use (if at all) or take advantage of the available semiotic sources such as English classroom equipments (Labs) or any authentic material (real context). Moreover, since it is discouraged, lecturers do not get any benefit from the L1 - Arabic in Libya's context. Such available resources might extend the EFL students' understanding of the English content or help lecturers in clarifying their educational goals or assessing students' progress. In the EFL classroom discourse practice, lecturers use only English language structure (form) as a resource to explore sources of difficulty and to achieve educational goals. Therefore, EFL lecturers in the Libyan social context fail to link language with social meaning. The lecturers seem to only follow the instructions of their curriculum syllabus, which mostly concentrate on English as a form. Thus, this study sees that the teaching of English in EFL classes seems inadequate, and students do not seem to benefit from the English teaching curriculum since EFL lecturers treat the students' L1 as an obstacle to L2 learning. Therefore, rather than viewing L1 use by EFL learners as totally counter-productive or unacceptable. Lecturers should consider that the use of L1 may be beneficial for certain communicative functions.

The role of home or family background including students' commonsense knowledge, in this case Arabic, is part and parcel of the students' individual experiences and hence, it cannot be ignored. The aspect of students' background knowledge has also a strong connection to students' motivation towards English language learning. If lecturers do not have a mechanism of identifying and being sensitive to students' different learning experiences, then their (lecturers') action may simply amount to the perpetuation of the existing inequality in EFL learning experiences. In turn, and in the long run, this may translate into the production and reproduction of social inequality, which is bound to structure the Libya social cultural set up (cf. Van Dijk 1993, Fairclough 1995, 2001).

The role of the teacher is a traditionally authoritarian one of regulating and controlling all classroom discourse practices, which effectively translates into the control of what the student should or should not say or do. The role of the student, on the other hand, is that of an obedient recipient of the lecturers' instructions.

1.12.2 Lecturers' Contradictory Claim between Their Perceptions of Students' Discourse Performance and the Real Classroom Situation

From the data it is noted a glaring contradiction between what the lecturers claim to be doing and what seem to be happening, or at least reported to be happening, in the classroom

discourse. In this aspect, the lecturers contradicted themselves and each other. For example, while commenting on the link between classroom lessons and students' real learning (of other subjects) or with real life experience**,** lecturers' contradictory claims became apparent in their own admissions. While some lecturers admitted of lack of link between the two (i.e. students lessons and real life experience), others reported that there is such a link. While the lecturers acknowledge students' deficiencies in English (for the reasons they give), they (lecturers) want to create an impression that there is nothing wrong with their approaches. When the researcher's questions probe lecturers' own discursive practices, they strive to construct different discourses implying that it is the students who ought to be blamed for everything that happens regarding their EFL learning. The lecturers' contradiction claims on students' participation in classroom discourse not only works against students' access to literacy practices, but also makes the lecturers to participate, unknowingly, in the enactment and perpetuation of the unequal relations in the classroom discourse (Van Dijk 1993).

The lecturers seem to advance the argument that any meaningful learning of English cannot take place if students do not want to forget their own cultural background and knowledge, which revolves around the use of Arabic language. In other words, if students want to learn English, then they should ignore Arabic. The parallel argument here is that lecturers do not consider students' knowledge of Arabic as literacy at all, but, rather, as a hindrance for students' successful learning of EFL. It is also worth noting here that success or failure of English programmes in Libya is judged in comparison and in the contexts of other countries in the world. At this juncture, it worth reiterating points that lecturers seem oblivious of the reality that Libya has its own cultural values, whereby certain things are highly valued than others. In Libya, as in many other Arab states, it is Arabic, which is dominant literacy and thus highly valued. If people cannot speak English in the street, it does not mean that they cannot think properly. It simply means that they have their own valued literacy practices, which matter most to them. If we have to do something, and succeed, in helping Libyan people acquire literacy practices in English, then we have to begin from what they already know - and Arabic is what they know. And this aspect brings back the issue of "common sense knowledge" versus "uncommon sense knowledge" as mentioned by Bernstein (cited in Christie 2002:96).

1.13 Conclusion

Using the interdisciplinary conceptual framework, the study made a linguistic and textual analysis of the student - lecturer classroom English interaction at Sirte University in Libya. The discussion in this chapter was structured around six themes. On students' motivation for learning English, the study noted that there is an increase in local demand towards English in Libya, which considers English as one of the essential languages for the country's participation in this new world economic order. In relation to the dynamics of classroom interaction, the study noted that students had little chance to participate in classroom literacy practices. Furthermore, it was noted that the Lecturers' approach to EFL literacy privileges English only approach to literacy learning of EFL, and the Arabic experiential, interpersonal, and textual (cf. Halliday, 1994) knowledge that students bring to the university is not considered as useful information at all. This study also has seen that language syllabi used in Libya are heavily influenced by the audio-lingual traditions, and, thus, place strong emphasis on the mastery of the formal structure of language. Therefore, the English syllabi in Libya have never considered communicative tasks as a part of teaching content. In the access to literacy, some students, because of their family backgrounds, may have higher expectation towards English than others. The lecturers' contradictory claims on students' participation in classroom discourse not only works against the students' access to literacy practices, but also makes the lecturers to participate unknowingly in the enactment and perpetuation of the unequal relations in the classroom discourse. Furthermore, the lecturers seem to advance the argument that any meaningful learning of English cannot take place if students do not want to forget their own cultural background and knowledge, which revolves around the use of Arabic.

The study shows that lecturers' language choices in this study work more with 'content' than with the 'pedagogic subjects' behaviors in the activity. EFL lecturers in this study do not use Arabic as a resource to access English field, tenor, and mode. Students are unsuccessful in performance in the EFL literacy in all the four language skills. The English lecturers' perception of EFL literacy in Libya tend to view 'grammar form' as an exclusive departure point of learning English. Students receive only formal English teaching. They frequently remain deficient in the ability to actually use the language, and to understand its use, in normal communication in both spoken and written mode. Lecturers view language teaching as the provision of grammatical items. Such teaching, therefore, could only be applicable in the traditional methods where lecturers dominate classroom interactions as in the case of Libya's social contexts. There is power imbalance in the lecturer- students' relationship in the socio-

discursive space of EFL classroom. English in Libya's EFL classrooms is the dominant literacy, and, in the views of the lecturers, the background knowledge that students bring to university is not considered as knowledge at all. The problem of communication competence in English has not been able to excite research interest in the Libyan social contexts.

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