

The Use of Language Functions among Sudanese EFL Learners

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Abstract

The study probes into the Sudanese EFL university learners' discourse to appraise their ability to use different language functions. To achieve this goal, seventy of Sudanese students studying English as their major at Ash-sharq Ahlia College and El Imam Alhadi College were chosen to be the subjects of this study. The students were asked to respond to a questionnaire, a written test and an interview specially prepared for this purpose. The students were asked to write different types of letters in which they had to express different language functions. The questionnaire, the written test and the interview were thoroughly investigated and statistically analyzed. Results showed that students were not able to make an active use of language to express different language functions. They did not succeed to form the discourse that enable them to give or receive information. So this inability to express language functions properly made the discourse the students produced incoherent and less consistent. The way they began and ended a discourse event was not proper. They did not use appropriate expressions when addressing their audience. The students could choose a function but the problem resides in how to employ proper forms in order to express this function. The content of the message they intended to convey was affected by the inaccuracy of the forms they chose. For this reason, the students failed to express their thoughts and feelings appropriately. In order to understand the message, these students wish to convey you need to exert much effort and pay more attention.

Keywords: language functions, linguistic forms, social interactions, conventionalized language

1- Introduction

To communicate effectively through English and reach mutual understanding during any communicative event, is one of the goals most Sudanese EFL students starve to achieve. This is because the command of the English language and the ability to use it properly represent one of the factors that guarantee a good job opportunity in the future. In order to achieve this goal, the students should study hard at the school and later at the university: the sole environment where they can practice English. English in Sudan is a school subject; the students might not have the opportunity to use it in their everyday life. So, the education these students receive in English should prepare them to acquire the knowledge that paves their way to become active practitioners of the English language. That is, the language content to which the students are exposed should be authentic. The students must deal with the activities that foster and enhance their ability to use language functions in real situations. This procedure will help them understand other participants and make themselves understood as they use language. The students are expected to use language, as hypothesized by Purpura (2004) as a resource of transaction and negotiated interaction. But Sudanese EFL students often struggle to interact with others through English to properly communicate their thoughts or feelings. It is often very difficult for them to express language functions effectively. This might reflect the quality of the instruction they receive. It does not incorporate the sort of strategies that could help them act effectively in different situations of language use. Both teachers and students should realize the fact that the command of English is not merely a matter of learning lists of vocabulary items alongside their sounds and meaning. Learning language entails, as assumed by Lucas (2011), learning to socialize, to empower oneself to meet one's goals, to be able to plan cognitively how to work in the future, to use language to learn new things, and to create new ideas and think critically. Any educational program should incorporate the sort of the activities and tasks the students need to depict and manipulate language functions properly

2- Background

In order to make a comprehensive and informative use of language, students need to appreciate the communicative aspect of language. That is, they need to recognize and understand the purpose behind the use of language. They must know what are language functions and how they can use these functions in their social interaction. Language function involves the use of language in its two modes – spoken and written – for certain communicative purposes. Wilkins (1976) states that within a social context, language users need to perform certain functions, such as promising, inviting, and declining invitations. For Richards and Schmidt (2002) Language function is the purpose for which an utterance or unit of language is used.

They hold that in language teaching, language functions are often described as categories of behavior; e.g. requests, apologies, complaints, offers, compliments. The functional uses of language cannot be determined simply by studying the grammatical structure of sentences. Harmer (2008) assumes that language functions deal with the purpose language users wish to achieve when they say or write in any act of communication. By ‘performing’ the function, they are performing an act of communication. He keeps saying that if students want to express themselves in speaking or writing, they need to know how to perform these functions. Brown and Yule (1983) identify two functions of language. These are: transactional and interactional. Transactional function has to do with the expression of content while interactional function deals with the expression of social relations and personal attitudes. Finch (2003) describes language function as the different uses we make with language. He distinguishes between the micro and macro functions of language. Micro functions, as the name suggests, cover the particular individual uses whilst macro functions relate to the larger, more general purposes underlying language use. For Halliday (1975) language functions are 1) instrumental language which is used to communicate preferences, choices, wants or needs, 2) personal language is used to express individuality, 3) interactional language is used to interact with other members of the community, 4) regulatory language is used to control, 5) representational is used to convey facts and information, 6) heuristic language is used to find things out, wonder or hypothesize, and 7) imaginative language is used to create, explore, and entertain. Functional approach to language teaching should be adopted by teachers so that they can help their students know how to use language as a vehicle of communication. Ur (2010) emphasizes the importance of teaching language units as samples of language used by people within specific interactive situations. Language should be presented as a whole rather than being presented as decontextualized items such as lists of vocabulary, or isolated examples of grammatical structures. The functional approach to language teaching can play a very important role in this respect. Olenka Bilash (2009) claims that often when students are assigned projects and assignments their lack of practical tools to produce the actual language becomes evident. In these cases, students might very well have the necessary resources to accomplish the task, but teachers might need to consider a communicative approach to teaching the language, focusing on the functions of language, to properly equip students to complete assigned tasks.

3- Methods

3-1- Participants

Seventy Sudanese EFL students from Ash-sharq Ahlia College and El ImamAlhadi College represent the participants in this study. The students are in their fourth level at the university which means they are at the final stages of their study of English. The language input to which they have been exposed during the course of their study must have equipped them with a considerable knowledge of the English language. This knowledge is the gate to upward social mobility as active practitioners and users of English in their community. Accordingly, the students can be a good sample for the current study.

3-2- Instruments

Three tools were used to collect the data of this study; a questionnaire, writing test and an interview with the students. The questionnaire was designed to collect information about how the students evaluate their use of language functions. The test and interview were conducted to obtain information about students’ real performance. These three tools complement each other. That is, the questionnaire, the writing test and the interview were made so that the data collected about students’ performance could be comprehensive and reliable.

4- Results and Discussion

To discuss the results of this study, statistical results of the tables (1, 2, 3, 4) and the result obtained from the students’ actual written and spoken performance were thoroughly examined and discussed.

Table (1) Students' Ability to Impart and Seek Factual Information

No	Item	Yes	No
1	I can use language to identify information.	61	9
		87.1%	12.9%
2	I can easily use language to report different speech acts.	48	22
		68.6%	31.4%
3	I can correct the truth condition of information being discussed.	44	26
		62.9%	37.1%
4	I can employ language to ask for information.	57	13
		81.4%	18.6%
5	I can respond to other participants and answer different types of question.	51	19
		72.9%	27.1%

The students claim that they can use language to identify information. They can report different speech acts. They can tell whether the information they receive is correct or otherwise. They also state that they can use language to ask for information in different situations of language use. They can easily use language to answer the questions posed by the other participants during any communicative use of language. But investigating learners' actual performance shows that the students' ability to communicate their thoughts is not as effective as they claim. Examine the following sample of students' actual performance:

- 1- *I feel sorry after I mistake for you my Teacher I hope that never ever do again an I accept any accountable of you... my friend you have to promse me according To my condition I beeing absant about the meeting because I have something to do Today....*
- 2- *How are you? I hope you are well and having a happy time. My dear brother, on my behalf, I would like from you to find me a job. I have been seeking, but unfortunately I have not found yet. I hope to try as soon as possible to find it. As well as I prefer to be has a good salary....*
- 3- *friendship is a relation that never end, because still have honey of circumstances that be for friend. So if a person that what ever be, when ever where ever be with me in any condition. And he known my scret and everything about me and about him in life you have to have the best thing that always with in any condition can help you and help him, so I have my best friend. ... finally, we can't life without friend and we are not doing everything alone so we have to find best friend in this life.*

Students' actual performance reveals clearly the fact that it is not easy sometimes to understand what function they wish to convey during their interaction with other participants. This does not accord with the assumption that the students are able to impart and seek for factual information during their interactional use of language. In the extract (1) above, for example, it is difficult to depict what function the student wish to express. By the use of "*I feel sorry after I mistake I hope that never ever do again an I accept any accountable of you...*", the student seems to express "regretting" and "promising". He/She regrets and promises his/her teacher no to commit certain mistakes again in the future. In the same context, the student uses another function interacting with one of his/her colleagues. The function that is expressed in this part is not clear. "*my friend you have to promse....being absant about the meeting....*". The other participants need to ask for explanation in order to understand what the student wishes to convey. Discussing one single and concrete main idea in a particular part of their discourse seems to be one of the problems encountered by the students. It is also difficult to tell the time to which the student refers.

Table (2) Students' Evaluation of their Ability to Express out Attitudes

No	Item	Yes	No
6	I can state my agreement and disagreement to certain thought.	46	24
		65.7%	34.3%
7	I can neatly express my intentions to do things.	46	24
		65.7%	34.3%
8	I can use language to express my state of mind.	59	11
		84.3%	15.7%
9	I can use language to express preferences, choices and needs.	46	24
		65.7%	34.3%
10	I can use language to express apologies, approval, regret.	43	27
		61.4%	38.6%

Most of the students assume that they can use language to state agreement and disagreement. They contend that they can properly express their intentions to fulfill their personal needs. Further, the students hypothesize that they can employ language to talk about their mood, emotions – how they feel towards a particular person or situation. So the ability to express their attitudes is one of the functions that students assume to easily deal with. But investigating students' written performance and the result of the interview conducted with them, clearly showed that the students could not express their state of mind fluently and smoothly. Many of the expressions and utterances they used did not coincide with the responses they provided in the questionnaire. This can be clearly noticed in the written samples of the students:

4- *I have heard that you have come across some difficulties, and I would like to tell you something about what I know. First you have to be a wise, power and patient to find your problem and analyse it....*

5- *Dear teacher, I am so sorry for what happen from me yesterday. I have just realize that I was nervous when I did it... I promise you that I will my relationship with you, also; I will try to be a good student even an example for other students in the future.*

The students claim that – in their responses to the questionnaire – that they can neatly express their intention to do something. This claim does not appear to be true. The students write “*I have heard that you have come across some difficulty, and I would like to tell you something...*” The students' discourse is not proper; it contains a lot of redundant forms, and it is not clear.

Table (3) Students' Appraisal of their own Ability to Persuade Others

No	Item	Yes	No
11	I can express suggestions.	48	22
		68.6%	31.4%
12	I can politely make requests.	54	16
		77.1%	22.9%
13	I know how to warn without stating that I am doing so.	38	32
		54.3%	45.7%
14	I can politely offer and ask for help.	53	17
		75.7%	24.3%
15	I can offer and politely respond to advice.	52	18
		74.3%	25.7%
16	I can employ language to encourage people to do something.	56	14
		80%	20%

The students state that they could use language to make proposals or make decisions on what should be done. The students report that they could properly use language to socialize with other users of language. They also maintain that they can use language to express different speech acts. Studying their actual performance, it is clear that this is not true. They couldn't use the expressions that enable them to fulfil these functions.

6- *Dear friend as much as you know about the university it's totally different than other kinds of educational stages see here you became mature enough to distinguish between the right and wrong, between good and bad so the in your hands it is up to you to be successful person or to be looser person*

7- *I advising you to do hard as much as you can if you succeed.....
Bear in mind no easy and no difficult, what you see easy is easy, and what You see difficult is difficult. My friend nothing come tour life without pain.*

The students' linguistic knowledge is very poor. For this reason, they are unable to make a coherent use of language. The forms they select to express a particular function are not appropriate. The students also failed to use the sort of the forms that enable them to politely interact with others giving and asking for advice.

Table (4) Students' Ability to Socialize

No	Item	Yes	No
17	I know how to attract the attention of my audience.	47	23
		67.1%	32.9%
18	I can address my audience according to their age and relationship between us.	55	25
		78.6%	21.4%
19	I know the suitable expressions to greet during the different time of the day.	46	24
		65.7%	34.3%
20	I know how to begin and end a conversation.	52	18
		74.3%	25.7%
21	I know how to take leaving.	52	18
		74.3%	25.7%

The students contend that they can effectively use language to play important roles in different communicative events. They can prepare their audience to respond to the acts they express through attracting their attention. They can respond to their audience and can meet their expectations. They maintain that they can use language functions properly; they can use language that suits the situations and the participants who they interact with. The students also assert that they can express the function of language that is responsible for socializing with different users of language during different times of the day. Furthermore, the students state they are good users of language; they know how to begin or end a communicative situation; and that they know when to leave. But this does not appear to be true examining the students' written and oral performance. The following extracts can explain this fact about the students' performance.

8- *Dear dad I want to tell you one thing I hope from you to believe me that I do not make mess with you books because I know what it mean for you and the person who doing that he is my brother and my three sisters also know that so can tell him that he does not try this again.*

9- *My father I am not who made mess with your books I am not mistake. The one who has made mess he is your brother....*

Really I can not come to the meeting because my sister have a big accident and all of us in the hospital and we not know what will happened... so I can't come.....

The students' language is poor to the extent that it would not stimulate a reader to continue reading and get informed of what they wish to convey. Furthermore, the language lacks the kind of the expressions that a user could employ to persuade others that he/she is not responsible for doing something wrong. Consequently, this can negatively affect the communicative value of the message being conveyed which reflects students' inability to use language functions communicatively.

5- Conclusion

Studying students' responses, reveals that the problem encountered by Sudanese EFL learners expressing different language functions is linguistic. They choose a function but how to express this function is a great problem. The content of the message they intend to convey is negatively affected by the inaccuracy of the expressions they choose. For this reason, the students fail to express their thoughts and feelings properly. The other participants must exert effort and pay more attention to grasp what the students wish to convey during their interaction with others. Sometimes it is not easy to tell exactly what function the students use in a particular context. Furthermore, the students could not use the language that suits the situation and the participants with whom they interact. Teachers need to introduce students to different functions and highlight the role of linguistic accuracy expressing these functions. They also need to help the students understand when and how to use these functions. So doing, the students will be acquainted with functions and the language that better expresses the situations in which they use these functions. Butler et al. (2005) suggest that language should be seen primarily as a means of human communication in sociocultural and psychological contexts, and that this fact must determine our view of how language should be modelled. In order to use language communicatively, as stated by Richards (2006), communicative competence is needed. Communicative competence is viewed as mastery of functions needed for communication across a wide range of situations.

Therefore, Sudanese syllabus designers and teachers should consider the issue of developing students' communicative competence in the debate of language teaching and learning. The input to which Sudanese EFL students are exposed should incorporate the sort of the conventionalized language they need to be good users of English. So, language functions and the forms necessary to express these functions are to be considered so that the students can better express their thoughts and feelings in a particular conversational situation. One of the main goals of language teaching should be to provide students with the tools to be effective communicators in the target language.

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