

## AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE POSSIBILITY OF DEVELOPING UNIVERSITY EFL STUDENTS' COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

Mutwakel Abdalla Ali Garalzain<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Abdalla Yassin Abdalla<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Sudan University of Science and Technology-College of Graduate Studies and Scientific Research, SUDAN  
([mutwakil125125@gmail.com](mailto:mutwakil125125@gmail.com))

<sup>2</sup>Sudan University of Science and Technology- College of languages, SUDAN

### ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to investigate the possibility of developing the university EFL students' communicative competence. The descriptive, analytical method was used in this study. To collect the data the researcher designed a questionnaire, for university EFL students. The respondents of the study were (76). The data obtained was analyzed by using (SPSS) statistical package for social science. The findings of the study have revealed that, most of the university EFL students are unable to express their ideas properly, although they have an abundance of vocabulary. The findings of the study have also shown that most of the university EFL students have positive attitudes towards communicative competence. The study recommends that, the English language textbooks should be compatible with the requirements of the student-centered approach.

**Keywords:** Communicative competence, English language Teaching.

### INTRODUCTION

Learning an additional language is a difficult and complex endeavor. There exists not only the awesome task of mastering the grammatical system of the language, but also the job of learning how to utilize this system appropriately and effectively when actually communicating in real life situation. Describing this process is perhaps even more difficult. One of the areas of difficulties in EFL is the ability to use the language correctly and appropriately. However, globalization is leading to closer relationships between countries. So that English as a global language is widely used in communication between people and countries. Communication is a crucial activity at the center of world changing events. So that, developing learners' communicative competence is the most important part in the learning of the English language, mainly because of the fact that being able to express yourself in English today is of great importance and because through this learners get to use English language a lot themselves.

Yule (1996) states that, the complex nature of second language learning is not only from linguistic analysis, but also from other fields such as communication studies, education, psychology, and sociology. This large scale is described as applied linguistics. Hymes (1972) argues that, the ability to communicate properly should be cultivated in language teaching. Learners should learn how to use a language in their daily communication in order to demonstrate their mastery of a language. Moreover, speakers of a language have to have more than grammatical competence in order to be able to communicate effectively in a language; they also need to know how language is used by members of a speech community to accomplish their purposes. Widdowson (1978) asserts that, language learning not merely as acquiring the knowledge of the rules of grammar, but also as acquiring the ability to use language to communicate.

Developing university EFL students' communicative competence is the core aim of the current article as well as to fulfill the following objectives:

1. To investigate the possibility of developing the university EFL students' communicative competence in English language.
2. To identify what stopping learners from communicating effectively, and using the language correctly and appropriately.

### **Statement of the problem**

Given the importance of communicative competence in English language teaching, a language user needs to use the language not only correctly, but also appropriately. They want to be able to master English to a high level of accuracy and fluency. Moreover, fluency in English is a prerequisite for success and advancement in many fields of employment in today's world. Naturally, if learners can communicate well, they can get their message across to others in an effective way and they then have accurate instruction to complete their assigned tasks. If they are not able to communicate well, the messages they send get lost in translation.

### **Research Questions and Hypotheses**

**Q1:** Why are most of university EFL students unable to express their ideas properly, although they have an abundance of vocabulary?

**Q2:** What are the university EFL students' attitudes towards communicative competence?

**H1:** Most of university EFL students are unable to express their ideas properly, although they have an abundance of vocabulary.

**H2:** University EFL students have positive attitudes towards communicative competence.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Communicative Competence**

Communicative competence is a term coined by the anthropological linguist Dell Hymes (1972); he introduced this notion as opposed to the theory of the formal linguist Noam Chomsky in 1965, who focused on linguistic competence and claimed that any consideration of social factors was outside the domain of linguistics. Hymes (1972) argues that, in addition to linguistic competence (the rules of describing sound systems and for combining sounds into morphemes and morphemes into sentences), one also needed notions of sociolinguistic competence (the rules for using language appropriately in context) to account for language acquisition and language use. Hymes thus asserted that, language structure and its acquisition were not context-free, while Chomsky had claimed they were (i.e. That an innate language mechanism was sufficient to account for first language acquisition).

### **Chomsky's theory of linguistic competence**

As it was mentioned above, the term communicative competence was suggested by the American linguist Dell Hymes in (1972) as a sociolinguistic concept in reaction to 'linguistic competence' which proposed by Chomsky. Chomsky's contribution led to the emergence of the linguistic competence theory in which he clarifies (Chomsky:1965:3):-

*"Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristics) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance."*

Chomsky makes a fundamental distinction between competence (the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language) and performance (the actual use of language in concrete situations) and based linguistic theory on an ideal speaker-listener with the perfect linguistic knowledge, which is supposed to be unaffected by cognitive and situational factors during actual linguistic performance.

### **Dell Hymes' model of communicative competence**

Hymes (1972) states that, Chomsky's concept could not serve as a relevant component in a theory of real-life communication. Hymes made a clear distinction between two kinds of competence. The first, linguistic competence, concerns the production and understanding of grammatically correct utterances, whereas the second, communicative competence, involves what is appropriate or acceptable to say in a particular situation. He incorporated the notion of knowledge and ability into his definition of communicative competence, defining them as the "knowledge as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, what, where and in what manner... and the ability to accomplish a repertoire of speech acts, to take part in speech events, and to evaluate their accomplishment by others" (Hymes, 1972, p. 277).

Hymes also contends that, the consideration of the sociocultural aspects are imperative in any study of language use and accordingly increases the number of the parameters from two to four components, possibility, feasibility, appropriateness and occurrence, which he interpreted them in the following way:

- Possibility: the extent to which something is possible within the individual's linguistic system and grammatical knowledge.
- Feasibility: what is achievable within the psycholinguistic capacity of the individual?
- Appropriateness: to what extent something can be considered appropriate or acceptable in a particular communicative situation.
- Occurrence: to what degree something is actually done.

Hymes's framework proved to be a milestone in speaking about linguistic behavior and served as a basis for subsequent, more elaborate communicative competence models. Widdowson (1983) criticizes the limitation of using grammatical rules only in second language classrooms and advocated for the importance of teaching language social rules as well. He maintains that, linguistic competence learning was "*the internalization of a system of rules which defines correct component*" (p. 97). Linguistic competence rarely determines what people can do in any absolute sense. He writes:-

*"The aim of language teaching has generally been understood as the gradual consolidation of competence in the learner's mind. Correctness is crucial to this operation since competence in language means conformity to rule. Any expression that does not conform is by definition ill formed and a sign of incompetence. But to force the learners into compliance in this way is to suppress the very creative capacity by which competence is naturally achieved. It is not surprising, therefore, that attempts at error elimination by exhortation and drills are so seldom effective". (Widdowson, 1983, p. 104).*

According to Hymes communicative competence refers to the level of language learning that enables language users to convey their messages to others and to understand others' messages within specific contexts. It also implies the language learners' ability to relate what is learned in the classroom to the outside world. Macaro (1997) refers to four beliefs among language teachers that facilitate the realization of the level of communicative competence. These

include: giving more attention to speaking and listening skills than reading and writing, practicing more in communicating new information rather than already known information, enhancing students' involvement to overcome passive learning and focusing on practicing the language in meaningful situations rather than on producing well-formed sentences or in individual words.

### **Halliday's Meaning potential**

Halliday looks at language from a functional point of view. For him learning a language is learning, meaning potential of language. Halliday (1978) maintains that, the term language acquisition is misleading in that nobody acquires language; what is acquired are the functions of language. Therefore and he refers to the term 'language development' to 'language acquisition'. Language according to Halliday is a product of social processes. When a child learns language, two simultaneous and inseparable processes occur: (1) he constructs a picture of the reality around him and inside him and (2) he constructs the semantic system, so this this sense Halliday argues that language is shared meaning potential.

### **Canale and Swains' model of communicative competence**

Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983) assert that the theoretical framework for communicative competence includes four areas of knowledge and skills. The first two types reflect the use of the linguistic system and the last two defined the functional aspects of communication. Grammatical competence (It focuses directly on the knowledge and skills required to understand and express accurately the literal meaning of the utterances), discourse competence (It is the ability we have to connect sentences in stretches of discourse and to inform a meaningful whole out of a series of utterances), sociolinguistic competence ( This type of competence requires an understanding of the social context in which language is used: the roles of the participants, the information they share, and the function of the interaction) and strategic competence (This component relates to the verbal and non-verbal communication strategies which learners may need to use either to compensate for breakdowns in communication or to enhance the effectiveness of communication ). Bachman (1990) states that, communicative language ability can be described as consisting of both knowledge, and the capacity of implementing that competence in appropriate contextualized communicative language use. His framework of communicative language ability which was constructed on the basis of extensive language testing, research included three principal components: language competence, strategic competence and psychophysiological mechanisms. Celce-Murcia et al (1995) proposed actional competence (the ability to comprehend and produce all significant speech acts and speech act sets) should also be part of communicative competence.

The above discussion of the models of communicative competence is indicative of the interest and enthusiasm of the scholars who proposed them. It also indicates the popularity and the requirement of the model of communicative competence. The discussion also underlines the need of a model of communicative competence to assess the linguistic achievement of the learner because of the last 45 years or so communicative competence has been set as the ultimate goal of language learning and teaching all over the world.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Method and design of the study**

To fulfill the objective of the article, the descriptive, analytical, the quantitative and the experimental methods were used. The article design was structured and particularly prepared

to investigate the possibility of developing university EFL students' communicative competence.

### Subjects

The subjects of the current article were third year, university EFL students at Sudan University of Science and Technology (College of Languages). They were coming from different background and share similar experiences. Their ages ranged from 24 to 28 years old. 76 students, both males and females participated in this paper.

### Instrumentation

In this article the researcher used a questionnaire for the data collection. The questionnaire was designed for university EFL students. It was distributed to seventy-six (76) university EFL students, it reflects their views on their communicative competence.

### Procedure

The questionnaire was used as data collection tools. Particular procedures and steps were followed in collecting the data. To check the content validity of the questionnaire, the researcher ran a pilot study, where fifteen copies of the questionnaire were distributed to third years university EFL students, they requested to fill in the questionnaire in their class. According to the pilot study, the numbers of the statements were reduced from sixteen in the pilot questionnaire to ten (10) statements. Also, some of the statements were modified.

**Table (1) shows the reliability and validity test.**

Test	Reliability	Validity	Interpretation
Value	0.715	0.846	Meaning full

The values of reliability are (0.715) and validity (0.846) this implies that the phases in the study are more consistency relating to the hypotheses of the study, which indicate that a questionnaire is characterized by high validity and high reliability. So, it achieves the purposes of the study and makes the statistical analysis fit and acceptable.

## RESULTS OF DATA ANALYSIS

**Table (2): The learning styles are too rigid and inflexible.**

Programs	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	27	35.5
Agree	26	34.2
Neutral	8	10.5
Disagree	11	14.5
Strongly disagree	4	5.3
Total	76	100

The first statement says that, the learning styles are too rigid and inflexible. From table (2) above, we can see that (35.5%) of the subjects strongly agree with the statement, (34.2%) agree with it, (10.5%) of them were neutral, (14.5%) disagree with that. Whereas (5.3%) of the participants strongly disagree with the item. It is clear that, most of the respondents agree with the first statement. So this result pointed out one of the barriers obstructed EFL learners' ability to develop their communicative competence in English language.

**Table (3): The English language textbooks are not compatible with the requirements of the students-centered approach.**

Programs	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	21	27.6
Agree	23	30.3
Neutral	15	19.7
Disagree	11	14.5
Strongly disagree	6	7.9
Total	76	100

The second item says that, the English language textbooks are not compatible with the requirements of the students-centered approach. (27.6%) of the subjects strongly agree with this item, (30.3%) agree with it, (19.7%) were neutral and about (14.5%) of the participants disagree with the item. Those who strongly disagree represent (7.6%) of respondents. From the table (3) above, we can say that more than half of the sample agrees with this item. However, these views identified another obstacle that hindrance of enhancing learners' communicative competence.

**Table (4): There is a lack of authentic English language materials (audio, videos).**

Programs	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	42	55.3
Agree	20	26.3
Neutral	4	5.3
Disagree	7	9.2
Strongly disagree	3	3.9
Total	76	100

The item number three pointed out that, there is a lack of authentic English language materials (audio, videos). About (55.3%) of the respondents strongly agree with this item, (26.3%) of them agree with it, (5.3%) of the students were neutral and (9.2%) of them disagree with this item. Those who strongly disagree represent (3.9%) of the participants. From table (4) above, the majority of the subjects agree that, there is a lack of authentic English language materials. The researcher thinks that, this fact was counted as one of the hindrances of developing students' ability to communicate properly.

**Table (5): The facilities of the language lab are inadequate.**

Programs	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	19	25
Agree	26	34.2
Neutral	12	15.8
Disagree	12	15.8
Strongly disagree	7	9.2
Total	76	100

Table (5) above, indicates that (25%) of the respondents strongly agree this item, The facilities of the language lab are inadequate. About (34.2%) of them agree with this statement, (15.8%) were neutral, (15.8%) of the subjects disagree with it, and about (9.2%) of them strongly disagree that. As we can see, most of the participants agree with this statement. Thus, these views also identified one of the obstacles that encounter EFL learners to develop their communicative competence.

**Table (6): I want to use English language effectively in the real life situation.**

Programs	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	50	65.8
Agree	23	30.3
Neutral	1	1.3
Disagree	1	1.3
Strongly disagree	1	1.3
Total	76	100

Table (6) above, shows that (65.8%) of the subjects strongly agree with this item. I want to use English language effectively in the real life situation. About (30.3%) agree with it, (1.3%) were neutral, (1.3%) disagree with that. Whereas (1.3%) of the respondents strongly disagree with that. If we have a look at figure (6) above, we can see that the majority of the participants agree with the item. So this is expected result, that all the students want to use English effectively in the real life situation.

**Table (7): I need to use the language productively in unrehearsed situations.**

Programs	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	23	30.3
Agree	31	40.8
Neutral	15	19.7
Disagree	6	7.9
Strongly disagree	1	1.3
Total	76	100

I need to use the language productively in unrehearsed situations, (30.3%) of the respondents strongly agree with this statement, (40.8%) agree with it, (19.7%) of the subjects remained neutral, only a small number (7.9%) of them disagree with it. Whereas (1.3%) of the students strongly disagree with this statement. According to table (7) above, most of the participants agree that they need to use the language productively in unrehearsed situations. So that they have positive attitudes towards this point.

**Table (8): I think improving my English communicative competence may help me a lot in my career.**

Programs	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	40	52.6
Agree	26	34.2
Neutral	2	2.6
Disagree	8	10.5
Strongly disagree	0	0.0
Total	76	100

Table (8) shows that, (52.6%) of the respondents strongly agree with this item. I think improving my English communicative competence may help me a lot in my career. About (34.2%) agree with it, those who remained neutral represent (2.6%) of the subjects. (10.5%) of the participants disagree with this item. These attitudes showed that the majority of the subjects think that, improving their English communicative competence may help them a lot in their career (see table 8).

**Table (9): I love to communicate with others in English in my daily life.**

Programs	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly agree	34	44.7
Agree	35	46.1
Neutral	6	7.9
Disagree	0	0.0
Strongly disagree	1	1.3
Total	76	100

Concerning statement number eight, I love to communicate with others in English in my daily life. (44.7%) of the respondents strongly agree with this statement, (46.1%) agree with it, about (7.9%) of them were neutral, (0.0%) of students disagree with that. Whereas (1.3%) of them strongly disagree with this item. Table (9) above, shows that, a large number of the participants say, they love to communicate with others in English in their daily life.

## DISCUSSION

The statistics and the analysis results have shown that, most of university EFL students are unable to express their ideas properly, although they have an abundance of vocabulary. However, the majority of the students think that, the main causes of this problem are: The learning styles are too rigid and inflexible, they have few opportunities to practice English in the class. There is a lack of authentic English language materials (audio, videos). The English language textbooks are not compatible with the requirements of the students-centered approach and the facilities of the language lab are inadequate. The results also showed that, most of the university EFL students have positive attitudes towards communicative competence.

## CONCLUSION

Aforementioned, developing university EFL students' communicative competence is very important in teaching English language. Learners need to enhance their communicative competence so as to communicate effectively in the target language. The findings that obtained from the questionnaire led to very satisfying and valuable outcomes concerning learners' communicative competence in English language teaching. These results can be obtained as follows:

1. The learning styles are too rigid and inflexible.
2. The English language textbooks are not compatible with the requirements of the students-centered approach.
3. There is a lack of authentic English language materials (audio, videos).
4. The facilities of the language lab are inadequate.
5. University EFL students want to use English language effectively in the real life situation.
6. University EFL students think that, improving their English communicative competence may help them a lot in their career.

Eventually, the article recommended that, The English language textbooks should be compatible with the requirements of the student-centered approach. English language teachers should adopt the communicative approach's strategies in EFL classroom.

## REFERENCES

- Bachman, L. (1990). *Fundamental Considerations in Language Testing*. Oxford: Oxford University press.



- Canale, M. & Swain, M. (1980). *Theoretical Bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing: applied linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University press.
- Canale, M. (1983). *From communicative competence to communicative language Pedagogy*. In: J. C. Richards, & R. W. Schmidt (Eds.), *Language and Communication*. New York: Longman.
- Celce-Murcia, M. Dörnyei, Z. & Thurrell, S. (1995). *Communicative competence: A pedagogically motivated model with content specifications*. *Issues in Applied Linguistics Journal*, 6, 1050-4273.
- Chomsky, N. (1965). *Aspects of the theory of syntax*. Cambridge: AM, MIT Press.
- Hymes, D. (1972). *On communicative competence*. In: J.B Pride. & J. Holmes (Eds) *sociolinguistics*. Penguin books Ltd.
- Macaro, E. (1997). *Target Language Collaborative Learning and autonomy*. Clevedon: Multilingual Masters LTD.
- Widdowson, H. (1978). *Teaching Language as Communication*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Widdowson, H. (1983). *Competence and capacity in language learning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Yule, G. (1996). *The Study of Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.