Perception of Speaking for Academic Purposes among Novice Scholars at University of Khartoum

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Abstract: *This paper investigates novice scholars' perspectives on the importance of English for academic purposes. A mixed methodology was adopted and two tools were used for data collection: an interview and a questionnaire. The results of the direct interview showed the existence of divergent views and attitudes, featuring the faculty main stream among the sample. However, the results of the data collected by the questionnaire showed a largely unanimous agreement among the participants on the importance of the skill of speaking for academic purpose and the necessity of attending training courses on it. To explain this drastic change of attitudes towards the courses, a number of factors need to be considered. Among these one might say beforehand offeringof promotional sessions for the faculty on the importance of the required courses, and making the contents and the objectives of such course accessible to the faculty.*

Keywords: novice scholars, perspectives, academic purposes, disciplinary specialist, pedagogical knowledge

1. Introduction

Khartoum University administration has put into effect resolution imposing restrictions on promotion of the academic staff. The resolution stipulates that teaching assistants, lecturers, and assistant professors should attend certain required training courses at the Centre for Academic and Professional Development affiliated to the university of Khartoum or similar institutions before applying to get promoted. **Speaking for Academic Purposes** is one of three English modules among the required courses for promotion, which the centre offers. There have been conflicting views and diverging opinions on the justification and the importance of these required courses. Some faculty have accepted the justifications and welcomed the resolution, others rejected it all together and third group kept silent and held the stick about middle.

1.1. Statement of the problem

University of Khartoum, known as Gordon Memorial College when founded in 1902, is the oldest University in Sudan. It is a tradition in this great institution that the oust-standing graduates are potential teaching staffs. The university recruits from among of honour graduates, the ones who graduated with first or second upper as minimum. The selected candidates join the university in posts of teaching assistants and are promoted along their career paths after getting higher qualifications. Getting a higher qualification within a period of not more than ten years is a condition included in the contract they sign when they accept the job offer. This condition guarantees the growing of all novice staff academically. However, most of the novice teaching staff are graduates of non-educational faculties though their primary job is teaching in their field of specialization, be it medicine, veterinary sciences, law or any other discipline. Being academically qualified in specific discipline does not qualify one to be a good teacher of that disciple. The teaching career requires training on how to do the job and a continuous on the job training. In addition to training on how to the do the job of teaching, novice teaching staff need to be acquainted with the academic research and its ethics, academic presentations and

the various teaching approaches and theories. However, this part of most of the young teaching staff's profile is missing. Most of these young professors get their teaching experiences by trial and error practices. The required courses imposed on the novice scholar as a condition for promotion aim to compensate for this missing part in their professional development paths. This study investigates the novice scholars' attitudes towards these courses, specifically on 'Speaking for Academic Presentations' module. The study seeks to find out the extent to which the novice scholars like these courses, as well as the extent to which they believe the course are important and useful for their professional career.

1.2. Research Questions

The study aims to find out about the novice scholars' attitudes towards the courses they should attend so that they can apply to get promoted to a higher status in their profession. The study also seeks to investigate the expectations and needs that the scholars aspire to attain on attending these courses. The questions that the study tries to answer are as follows:
1) What do novice scholars think of the required courses including 'Speaking for Academic Presentations' course, which they should attend so that they can apply to get promoted to a higher rank in their career ladder?
2) What benefits do they expect to attain on attending these courses?
3) To what extend do these courses meet the novice scholars' expectations?

1.3. Research hypotheses

The research questions are based on the following hypotheses:
1) The required courses are useful to novice scholars. They provide both knowledge and professional training that they have never been exposed to.
2) Novice scholars expect to attain awareness of the different types of academic presentations, skills of presentations and general knowledge of what the profession of teaching requires.

3) The courses cover most of the scholars' needs and therefore they are expected to meet most of their expectations.

1.4. Objectives of the study

The current study aims to investigate the novice scholars' attitudes towards the required courses offered at the Centre for Academic and Professional Development of the University of Khartoum and their expectations of the gains they get on attending them. The ultimate objectives of the study are to help in improving such courses.

1.5. Scope of the Study

The Centre for Academic and Professional Development offers a number of training courses for novice scholars. Among these are three English courses. The English department of the Faculty of Arts, University of Khartoum is responsible for preparing and handling these three courses. One of these English courses is Speaking for Academic Presentation. The current study will be limited to studying the scholars' attitudes and expectations concerning this course, which aims to develop the skill of speaking for Academic Presentations.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Requirements of teaching in higher education

The job of teaching in higher education requires training for years in both research and teaching. Nevertheless teaching is left for University teaching staff to develop on their own (Heather Fry, et al 2009).Teachers learn what works and what does not work in teaching mostly by trial and error. Until they get the disciplinary knowledge necessary for being a disciplinary specialist, most higher education teachers remain specialists with some knowledge of teaching rather than disciplinary specialists who know how to handle the process of teaching within their disciplines (Heather, et at 2009; Berthiaume, 2007; Lenze, 1995).

Pedagogical knowledge and disciplinary knowledge are two lines of research in higher education. Pedagogical knowledge includes the teacher's knowledge about teaching, his or her beliefs, and his or her goals relating to teaching; while disciplinary knowledge consists of the sociocultural characteristics of the discipline and the epistemological structure of the discipline (Hiebert et al., 2002; Munby et al., 2001; Becher and Trowler, 2001).

2.2. Objectives of speaking in academic settings

Two sets of objectives for Speaking in Academic Settings listed in McEvedy et al (1986): instrumental and Acculturation. The instrumental objectives include a) planning and researching material for presentation, b) preparing an oral version of the written material, c) rehearsing, d) using appropriate visual aids, and e) explaining various types of preparations. The acculturation objectives include a) raising students' awareness of their expected roles in an academic presentation, b) explaining the roles of the leader and other participants in presentations,

and c) clarifying the researchers' roles when interacting with their supervisors (Kutzand Salzmann 1995).

2.3. Studies in speaking in academic settings

Edna F. Lima (2016) investigated the effectiveness of training foreign learners on prosody and oral presentation skills. The study included four Chinese speakers and 64 listeners, natives of 14 different languages. The findings indicated that training in oral presentation skills is an effective and may lead to academic success.

Carrie Cameron, et al. (2013) carried quantitative research investigating the trainees and their mentors' perceptions of the process of learning scientific communication skills, their feelings about the challenges, and their mentor's role in the process. Semi-structured focus groups and interviews were used as tools for data collection. Forty-three trainees and 50 mentors took part in the study. The results showed diverging views among the participants on the role of mentoring in fostering communication skills development. While the trainees expressed interest in learning scientific communication skills, the mentors reported a lack of motivation and guidance resistance among the trainees. The results also showed a degree of distress, dissatisfaction, and a lack of mutual understanding between the mentors and trainees.

Ohnishi, S., Ford, J. H. (2015) Carried out a study entitled 'Academic presentation skills for Ph.D. students'. The study investigated the extent of improvement that regular seminar presentation opportunities have on the academic presentation skills of Ph.D. students. Data from around sixty of the participants were used for detailed analysis. Three presentation skills: structure, visuals, and delivery, were scored for each seminar and the scores were statistically analysed. The results revealed improvement in the academic presentation skills of the participants.

Mu-hsuan Chou (2011) carried research in group oral presentations in an EAP context. The author investigated among other things, the benefits of cooperative learning on students' English speaking ability improvement. Questionnaires, interviews, and oral presentation assessments were used for data collection. Fifty-two college students majoring in French participated in the study. Participants delivered oral presentations on the topics taught in class. The findings showed positive impacts on the students' language performance in some types of presentations. The findings also showed that group oral presentation had a noticeable influence on improving students' speaking ability.

2.4. The current study

The previous studies and the current one have much in common, in that; these studies investigate the skill of presentation as an important skill necessary for survival in higher education institutions. However, the current study differs from the previous ones in a number of ways. It differs in the context where the study took place(University of Khartoum); it differs in the sample of the study (novice scholar); it differs in the objectives (novice scholars'

attitudes towards certain courses related to speaking for academic purpose); it differs in the methodology adopted. The expected results of the study will somehow differ from the previous studies as a result of these differences. The study aims to contribute in developing the skill of speaking for Academic Presentations in higher education institutions.

3. Methodology of the study

The current paper investigates the novice scholars' attitudes towards the courses offered by the Centre for Professional Development of the University of Khartoum. The paper seeks to find out what these scholars think of these courses, what needs they expect the courses to meet and to what extent the courses really met these needs. The study adopts a mixed methodology using two tools for data collection: an interview and a questionnaire.

3.1 Technique of data collection

The interview focuses on the novice scholars' attitudes towards the courses. It seeks to find out what they think of the courses; to find out whether they are important or not. The questionnaire aims to collect data to answer the three questions regarding the novice scholars' needs and expectations. It consists of two parts. Part A is concerned with the demographic information of the subject, and part B seeks to generate data to answer the research questions. part B consists of ten questions. Questions (1&9) aim to collect data for the research question no.1. Questions (2,3,7&8) collect data for the research question no.2. Finally questions (4,5,6 &10) are designed to collect data for answering research question no.3.(see appendix).

3.2 Participants

The subjects are novice scholars attending training courses in different disciplines at the Centre of Professional Development of the University of Khartoum. The participants are 26 university teachers including teaching assistants, lecturers and assistant professors at different universities, though the majority were from Khartoum University. They are of different specialties in both hard and soft sciences.

3.3 Procedures

The interview took place at the beginning of the course. It took place in the first session of the training course. The participants were asked individually two questions: one about their attitude towards the English component in the required training programme offered to the novice scholars at the Centre for Professional Development and the other is about the scholars' needs that they expect these courses would meet.

The questionnaire was distributed at the end of the course. It was distributed to the participants at the beginning of the last training session and the participants were asked to hand-in the questionnaire to the secretary of the centre when they finish completing it. They were also told to feel free to ask for clarification if they found any point in the questionnaire, which is not clear or needs explanation. Fortunately, the researcher received no enquiry about the content of the questionnaire. The completed copies were collected at the end of the last training session.

4. Data Analysis

4.1 The results of the interview

The study investigates the novice scholars' attitudes towards the course of Speaking for Academic Purposes offered among other English courses in the training programme of the Centre for Professional Development of the University of Khartoum. The study tries to find out what the novice scholars think of the English component in general and the course of Speaking English for Academic Purposes in particular, what needs they expected the course would meet, and the extent to which the course really met their needs. There were different views regarding the attitudes towards the English components in the training programme. The participants did not unanimously agree on any of them. Based on their attitudes, the participants might be categorized into three groups: Accepters, neuters and rejecters. The accepters' group welcomed the English courses and thought that attending these courses would be a chance for them to improve their English in general. The accepters' group expected the courses to help in improving their academic writing, enhancing their communicative ability and enriching their linguistic repertoires. The neuters' group said they did not have any idea about the contents of the courses and therefore they opted not to give any judgement on something they did not have any idea about and preferred to keep their judgement until the course finished. The rejecters' group were the ones who were not altogether in favour of the courses. They had the feeling that the courses were imposed on them and they had no choice other than accepting them. Most of the members of this group thought that the course would add nothing to their knowledge in English, and that getting a certificate of attendance at the end of the programme, which qualifies them to promotion, was the only thing that they would expect.

4.2 The results of the questionnaire

The questionnaire aims to collect data to answer the research questions regarding the novice scholars' needs and expectations. The questionnaire consists of two parts. Part A, which aims to collect demographic information of the subjects, and part B, which seeks to generate data to answer the research questions.

4.2.1 The participants' Demographic Information

Table 1: Demographic Information

Gender			Discipline			Training on presentation			Presentation at academic forums		
Category	No	%	Category	No	%	Category	No	%	Category	No	%
Male	12	46	hard science	14	54	trained	13	50	Yes	9	35
Female	14	54	soft science	12	46	not trained	13	50	No	17	65
Total	26	100	Total	26	100	Total	26	100	Total	26	100

As shown in table (1) above, the participants were 26 from both sex. They come from different academic backgrounds, including arts, education, medicine, health, nursing, agriculture and others. About 54% of the participants specialized in hard science and 46% in soft sciences. Half of the participants have received training in academic presentation. The majority (65%) of the participants have not had experiences of presentation at academic forums.

Part B consists of ten questions. Questions 1&9 aim to collect data for the research question no.1. Questions 2, 3,7&8 collect data for the research question no.2. Finally questions 4, 5,6&10 are designed to collect data for answering research question no.3.(see appendix).

The questionnaire included four aspects. These include novice scholars' attitudes towards the courses, their needs and expectations, the extent to which their needs and expectations were met, and an overall evaluation of the course.

The total number of scholars who responded to this questionnaire (sample size) was 26. The questionnaire used a five-point scale (Likert scale), and the mean and orientation were calculated for each item. The orientation (degree of agreement) was based on the weighted average as follows:Less than 1.80 is very low, from 1.80 to less than 2.60 is low, from 2.60 to less than 3.40 is average, from 3.40 to less than 4.20 is high and more than or equals to 4.20 is very high.

4.2.2 The novice scholars' attitudes towards the course

	Statement	No. of responses	Strongly Agree		Agree		Not Sure		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		% of agreement	Weighted Average	Degree of agreement
			N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%			
1.	Presentation skill is an index of excellence in work place	26	18	69	4	15	3	12	1	4	0	0	89.8	4.49	Very high
2.	The presentation skill is a necessity that the nature of our work dictates.	26	12	46	12	46	2	8	0	0	0	0	87.6	4.38	Very high
	Overall result of the theme												89	4.44	Very high

The summary results shown in the table above show that 89% of participants are satisfied with (the presentation skill as an index of excellence). The weighted overall average is 4.44 which means that the degree of satisfaction was "very high". About 89.08% of the participants agree that (the presentation skills is an index of excellence in the work place) and about 87.6% think that (the presentation skill is a necessity that their work place dictates). The degree of satisfaction with these statements was "very high "with the weighted average of 4.49 and 4.38 respectively. The overall, the average degree of satisfaction with all data was "very high".

4.2.3.The novice scholars' needs and expectations

	Statement	No. of responses	Strongly Agree		Agree		Not Sure		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		% of agreement	Weighted Average	Degree of agreement
			N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%			
3	My presentation skill needs improvement	26	14	53	8	31	2	8	1	4	1	4	85	4.25	Very high
4	I need to learn more about what makes an effective presentation.	26	15	58	8	31	3	11	0	0	0	0	89.4	4.47	Very high
5	Presenting a topic before the other participants enabled me to realize how far or close I was from being an effective presenter	26	11	42	9	35	6	23	0	0	0	0	83.8	4.19	High
6	Being observed and assessed by the other participants encouraged me a lot to work hard to satisfy their expectations.	26	13	50	7	27	6	23	0	0	0	0	85.4	4.27	Very high
	Overall result of the theme												86	4.30	Very high

The summary results shown in the table above show that 86% of the novice scholars are satisfied with the importance of improving their presentation skills with weighted average of 4.25, which means the degree of satisfaction, is very high. About 85%thought that their presentation skills need improvement, 89.4% are satisfied that the participation in the course would enable them to assess their presentation

skills and about 85.4 thought that peer observations work help them aspire to enhance their presentation capacities.

The weighted overall average is 4.30, which means that the degree of satisfaction is also "very high".

4.2.4 Meeting the scholars' needs and expectations

	Statement	No. of responses	Strongly Agree N	Strongly Agree %	Agree N	Agree %	Not Sure N	Not Sure %	Disagree N	Disagree %	Strongly Disagree N	Strongly Disagree %	% of agreement	Weighted Average	Degree of agreement
7	The course in presentation skill enhanced my awareness of the necessary elements of an effective presentation.	26	16	61	6	23	2	8	2	8	0	0	87.4	4.37	Very high
8	The course provided a hands-on experience of practicing the necessary elements of an effective presentation.	26	11	42	12	46	3	12	0	0	0	0	86	4.30	Very high
9	I learnt a lot by observing other participants presenting their selected topic, commenting on and giving feedback on the presentations of the participants.	26	11	42	13	50	2	8	0	0	0	0	86.8	4.34	Very high
	Overall result of the theme												87	4.34	Very high

The summary results shown in the table above show that 87.4% of the novice scholars are satisfied with the necessity of improving their presentation skills because of their increased awareness due to attending the course. The weighted overall average is 4.37, which means that the degree of satisfaction is "very high". About 86% agree that the course provided them a hands-on training experience. The degree of satisfaction with this statement is "very high

"with the weighted average of 4.34. As well, about 86.8 agree that they benefited from attending the course. The overall, average degree of satisfaction with all data is "very high"

4.3 An overall evaluation of the course

	Statement	No. of responses	Strongly Agree N	Strongly Agree %	Agree N	Agree %	Not Sure N	Not Sure %	Disagree N	Disagree %	Strongly Disagree N	Strongly Disagree %	of % agreement	Weighted Average	Degree of agreement
10	I think the training course on effective presentation skill was useful and I recommend it to novice scholars.	26	14	54	11	42	0	0	1	4	0	0	89.2	4.46	Very high
	Overall result of the theme												89	4.46	Very high

In general this course received a very high of 89.2% of the novice scholars with a very high weight of 4.46.

5. Discussion of the results

5.1. Summary of the findings

The results of the interview at the beginning of the course showed diverging views among the participants towards attending the course. The participants can be categorized into three groups: accepters, rejecters and neuters. The results of the questionnaire at the end of the course showed a unanimous agreement among the participants on the importance of attending the course for improvising presentation skill, considering the skill of presentations an index of excellence, and believing that the course helped them assess and evaluate their presentation skills.

5.2. Discussing of the results

The study sets to investigate the novice scholars' attitudes towards the English component related to promoting presentation skill. It also seek to find out about the participants' expected gains and the needs the course might satisfy. When the course started, there were three different views. However, there was a complete agreement among the participants on the importance of the course and the expected gains. In other words, the participants began with

diverging views and ended up with converging views on the course. So, what are the causes for this noticeable change in the participant's attitudes? There might be two reasons behind this change in attitudes: the first is that at the beginning of the course the participants have no idea about the contents of the course. All they know is that they have to attend required courses to get promoted. The second reason might be what really happened in the course specially the strategies and methods adopted in delivering it. Because of these two reasons, the participated had changed their attitudes positively.

6. Conclusion

The findings of the study emphasized the importance of including the English component among the required courses imposed by the administration of Khartoum University. Although the participants appeared to have diverging attitudes towards the components, the revealed diversity might have been due to lack of access to the contents of the courses. Had the participants been acquainted with the contents and what they would learn and how that would be handled, they would have not resisted the course at all. To fix this flaw in the training programme, the researcher suggests beforehand promotional sessions for the faculty on the importance of the required courses, and making the contents and the objectives of such course accessible to the faculty.

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Appendix

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A questionnaire for **Novice Scholars**

Dear scholars,

You are kindly requested to complete the questionnaire on novice scholars' perception of Speaking for Academic Purposes below by circling the letter (a) or (b) in section A or ticking the slot, which meets your perception in section B. Your answers will strictly be confidential and will be used for academic purpose only.

Perception of Speaking for Academic Purposes among Novice Scholars at U of K

Name of the Participant: ………………………….. (optional)

A. Demographic information

1. Gender: a. male b. Female
2. Discipline: a. hard science b. soft science
3. Degree: a. MA/MSc. b. Ph.D.
4. Training for academic presentation: a. trained b. not trained

5. Presentations at academic Forums:
a. Multiple presentations at local/regional/ international conferences
b. a few presentations at local/regional/ international conferences
c. no presentations at local/regional/ international conferences

B. Needs for Effective Academic Presentation

	Statements	SA	A	N	D	SD
1.	Presentation skill is an index of excellence in work place					
2	The presentation skill is a necessity that the nature of our work dictates.					
3	My presentation skill needs improvement					
4	I need to learn more about what makes an effective presentation.					
5	The course in presentation skill enhanced my awareness of the necessary elements of an effective presentation.					
6	The course provided a hands-on experience of practicing the necessary elements of an effective presentation.					
7	I learnt a lot by observing other participants presenting their selected topic, commenting on and giving feedback on the presentations of the participants.					
8	Presenting a topic before the other participants enabled me to realize how far or close I was from being an effective presenter					
9	Being observed and assessed by the other participants encouraged me a lot to work hard to satisfy their expectations.					
10	I think the training course on effective presentation skill was useful and I recommend it to novice scholars.					

Strongly Agree =5, Agree= 4, Neutral= 3, Disagree=2, Strongly Disagree= 1
Thank you so much.

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