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Impact of the Knowledge of Discourse Community on the Written Discourse of Efl Learners

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ABSTRACT

The study investigates the influence of the knowledge of discourse community on the written discourse of Sudanese EFL university learners. It is an attempt to see if the students are able to employ their understanding of the concept of discourse community to communicate meaning through the written discourse. To achieve this, the researcher adopted the analytic descriptive method. The study population included sixty students who are taking English as their major at Alzaeim Alazhri University. Two tools were employed for data collection: a questionnaire and a writing test. Results revealed that the students did not know the characteristics and features of the community of the English language speakers. Results also showed that students were not aware of the norms and conventions that govern interaction among members of the English language discourse community. Furthermore, results revealed that the students did not benefit from the instruction they received on how to develop the skills and strategies that could help them observe how the written discourse is used for effective communication. Students' inability to understand the English language discourse community negatively influences their written performance. Their written discourse could not be accepted by the native speakers or other users of English. All they produce is vague and unrelated strings of words.

1- Introduction

Kiesling and Paulston (2005) state that the interaction of language with social life is viewed as, first of all, a matter of human action, based on the knowledge that enables persons to use language. How this knowledge increases and develops is one of the problems experienced by most of Sudanese EFL university students. They often experience great problems when they set out to use English in order to achieve different communicative purposes. As such, the students cannot express their thoughts properly. The education they receive in this respect is partial; they know very little about how to communicate. The result is that they cannot integrate with the community of English language. Wolfgang Teubert (2010) states that using language is exchanging and sharing content. People are social beings. They grow intellectually if they are integrated in communities. In isolation, their minds tend to deteriorate. English in Sudan is not used as a means of communication. It does not have any communicative function among students. That is, it is only learnt as a school subject. Absence of practice complicates students' problems knowing the norms and conventions shared by members of English language discourse community. So the students' knowledge of the concept of discourse community is fragmentary. However, to obtain a good job in Sudan, the applicant must have the knowledge of English. Only a few students use English to fulfill certain functions. This takes place only at the university because outside the university it is not easy to speak English. In order to fully integrate with the community of English language, students need to understand the concept of discourse community. This will help them be skilful in their understanding of the norms that govern interaction in this community and therefore communication becomes easier and effortless.

2- Background

Bizzell (1992) describes discourse community as a group of people who share certain language-using practices. Their community practices are "conventionalized" in stylistic conventions and canonical knowledge. This group as stated by Porter (1986) is bound by a common interest. John Swales (1990) outlines the characteristics of a discourse community as having: 1) common goals, 2) participatory mechanisms, 3) communication exchange, 4) community specific genres, 5) specialized terminology and 6) generalized expertise. Rafoth (1988) states that the notion of discourse community

includes writers, readers, texts, and social contexts in their natural interaction rather than artificially highlighted and separated relations between writer and reader. Pogner (2000) assumes that discourse communities affect the way in which their members define problems and formulate solutions, i.e. acquire, transform and produce not only language but also knowledge. The norms, conventions and expectations of a discourse community constrain the options of the members, but they also enable the communication of problem solutions and opinions. Herzberg (1986) states that the use of the term 'discourse community' testifies to the increasingly common assumption that discourse operates within conventions defined by communities, be they academic disciplines or social groups. The pedagogies associated with writing across the curriculum and academic English now use the notion of 'discourse communities' to signify a cluster of ideas: that language use in a group is a form of social behavior, that discourse is a means of maintaining and extending the group's knowledge and of initiating new members into the group, and that discourse is epistemic or constitutive of the group's knowledge. Grabe and Kaplan (1996) contend that the students need to be introduced to discourse communities so that their writing becomes purposeful in the academic setting. Grabe and Kaplan also highlight the importance of the expanded role that disciplinary awareness creates for writing across the curriculum. They hold that writing is not a skill that can be taught in isolation, but is the entire faculty's instructional responsibility. Beaufort (2007) offers a helpful framework for thinking about writing in discourse communities. For her, communicators have to consider four things: rhetorics, writing processes, genres and content. Sudanese teachers can make use of these ideas to help their students develop their understanding of the concept of discourse community which helps them produce an interpreted written discourse.

3- 0- Materials and Methods
3-1- Participants

The participants in this study included 60 Sudanese EFL students who are taking English as their major at Alzaeim Alazhri university. The students have been studying English for at least eleven years. During this period the students studied different courses in English which could help them gain an accumulated knowledge of English. As such, the students are supposed to have the ability to understand the nature and

characteristics of the English language discourse community. So the students can be taken as a sample for the Sudanese EFL students who can edit comprehensive and meaningful written discourse.

3- 2- Instruments

For collecting the data of this paper two tools were used: a questionnaire and a written test. The purpose behind the use of the questionnaire and the written test for data elicitation is to make sure that the data collected is reliable. What cannot be seen, for example, through the questionnaire, the test makes it apparent and clear. Comparing the results obtained from the questionnaire with the result of the test, one can get more realistic and comprehensible data which yield reasonable results.

3-3- The Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed to collect information about Sudanese EFL university learners' knowledge of the features and characteristics of English language discourse community. The questionnaire was also designed to see if the students could take the knowledge of discourse community as a mechanism which facilitates written communication among users of English. The questionnaire is a tool to obtain information about students' ability to understand and respond effectively via the written mode of discourse. The questionnaire consists of four sections. The first section is about students' knowledge of the concept of discourse community. The second section tackles students' motivation to develop their knowledge of discourse community. Section three deals with the role of the teacher to promote students' understanding of discourse community. The fourth section involves the role of the learning syllabus in developing learners' understanding of the concept of discourse community.

3- 4- The Test

The test was conducted to compare and contrast the facts about students' understanding of discourse community and its influence on their written discourse. It was also a step to obtain reliable data about respondents' ability to adopt effective strategies to develop their knowledge of the shared norms and conventions of the English language discourse community. It was conducted to be certain that the data used for the paper is more reliable and realistic. So the main reason behind the test is to assess the role of students' knowledge of the concept of discourse community in producing effective written discourse. This step is taken to help the researcher notice what cannot be seen through the analysis of the students' questionnaire.

4- Result and Discussion
4- 1- A - Students' Knowledge of the Target Discourse Community

No	Item	Yes	No	Median
1	I know the structure and characteristics of the English language discourse community.	81.7%	18.3%	1
		49	11	
2	Knowledge of the English language discourse community enables me to express my thoughts fluently.	80%	20%	1
		48	12	
3	I am aware of the habits of language use among members of the English language discourse community.	71.7%	28.3%	2
		43	17	
4	Knowledge of the linguistic habits of the members of the English language discourse community helps me edit effective written discourse.	81.7%	18.3%	1
		49	11	
5	I know that each discourse community has shared discourse conventions known to all its members which helps me produce a coherent piece of writing.	38.3%	61.7%	4
		23	37	
6	I can easily predict how members of the target discourse community respond to the expectations of their audience.	68.3%	31.7%	3
		41	19	

The students assume that they know the structure and characteristics of the English language discourse community. This enables them to express their thoughts fluently. The students also report that they are aware of the habits of language use among members of the English language discourse community. Their awareness in this respect makes it easy for them to produce and edit effective written discourse. The students state that they do not know the fact that each discourse community has shared discourse conventions known to all members of that community. These shared conventions enable members of a particular discourse community to select the appropriate linguistic content to participate in a discourse event. However, the students hypothesize that they can easily predict how members of the target discourse community respond to the expectations of their audience. This entails that their written discourse is meaningful and communicative in nature. But their actual written discourse does not reveal this.

Hobby is very beautiful and and people our the expression and emotion.

I hobby the charming very nise and the writer out the all emotion of drawing the explain of life and situation. drawing is very easy and not all the drawing but use the step after that is a good drawing. This place it is very beautiful or nise, all the people can visit This place. Egypt is the large country because it run the longest river. River Nile and to see the primets.

Considering students' writing, one will obviously learn that the learners are not aware of the structure and characteristics of the target discourse community. Their writing does not entail the ability to edit the sort of writing that could be accepted by members of the English language discourse community. Furthermore, one cannot assume that the students are aware of the shared discourse conventions; and that they could figure out what the audience expect.

4-2 - Students Motivation to Develop their Knowledge of the Target Discourse Community

No	Item	Yes	No	Median
7	I attempt to lead into some sort of correspondence with the users of English to improve my discoursal competence.	75%	25%	2
		45	15	
8	I have the ability to observe how members of the English language discourse community use English for communicating.	85%	15%	1
		51	9	
9	I observe the patterns of interaction among members of the English language discourse community.	73.3%	26.7%	2
		44	16	
10	I read authentic materials in English to be acquainted with the casual use of English.	56.7%	43.3%	3
		34	26	
11	I usually exert effort to understand the norms that govern interaction in the target discourse community.	56.7%	43.3%	3
		34	26	

In order to improve their discourse competence, the students assume that they lead into some sort of correspondence with users of English. They report that they have the ability to observe how members of the English language discourse community use English for their different communicative purposes. They can observe patterns of interaction among such speakers. This knowledge is gained through the effort students exert analyzing authentic materials about written discourse. They do so to be acquainted with the casual and spontaneous use of English. As an attempt to enhance and foster their knowledge of the target discourse community, the students endeavour to understand the norms and conventions that govern social interaction in the target discourse community. Students' written discourse does not show the ability to observe how

English is used to perform different functions of language. Their discourse does not reflect the ability to observe the patterns and norms of interaction among members of the English language discourse community. That is, students' writing does not reflect any sort of accumulated knowledge and experience that could possibly be gained through direct interaction with native speakers or other users of English. Consider the following sample of students' actual writing.

Last week go to The park with my friends. The park is very buitifull. and see some animal and child play In The park. Some The childen fraied from The lion in The stage. in The evening come back the home. Last week I went to journey to Port Sudan. I went with my Family we went by bus at 7 o'clock and we arrived at 2 o'clock.

4-3 - The Role of the Teacher in Developing Students' Knowledge of the Target Discourse Community

No	Item	Yes	No	Me-dian
12	Teachers help us to be knowledge-able about the different genres of language .	90% / 54	10% / 6	1
13	Our teachers focus on larger units than isolated words and sentences when teaching us.	71.7% / 43	28.3% / 17	2
14	Teachers encourage us analyze authentic discourse to observe the shared discourse conversations.	68.3% / 41	31.7% / 19	3
15	Our teachers always remind us to think beyond individual lexical items and sentences.	61.7 / 37	38.3% / 23	3
16	Teachers provide us with interac-tion strategies to raise our aware-ness of how to make an effective use of English.	78.3% / 47	21.7% / 13	2

The students assume that their teachers exert effort to make them knowledgeable about the different genres of the English language. This, of course, can help the students develop their knowledge of how to interact in different situations of language use. Their teachers also focus on teaching meaningful stretches of language rather than isolated words and sentences. The students report that their teachers provide them with authentic discourse to analyze and observe the use of shared discourse conventions in an interaction. The students also state that their teachers encourage them to concentrate on the whole text rather than individual sentence structures. Students assume that their teachers provide them with interaction strategies to raise their awareness of how to respond in different situations of language use. It seems that the students do not benefit from the instruction they receive on how to meaningfully communicate. This can be clearly seen analyzing samples of their written discourse. Their actual writing is neither coherent nor meaningful; it contains many strange and vague expressions. That is, the writings of the students reflect no thoughts but unrelated string of words put together. The following extract can clearly illustrate this fact:

They are many hobby in my life, Interst and I favourit the hobby such as the hobby: watching T.V, drawing and painting, reading newspaper, and magazine and the last hobby is sleeping some of them in my daily life.

4-4 - Learning Syllabus

No	Item	Yes	No	Me-dian
17	Our learning syllabus reflects a social view of language and emphasizes how language is used by members of the target discourse community.	71.7% / 43	28.3% / 17	2
18	Our learning syllabus provides a way of contextualizing the kinds of texts we produce in different learning situations.	66.7% / 40	33.3% / 20	3
19	The learning syllabus provides us with activities that develop in us the knowledge of kinds of language and genres that are valued in a particular discourse community	78.3% / 47	21.7% / 13	2
20	The learning material allows us a way into understanding how dis-course works in different discourse communities.	76.7% / 46	23.3% / 14	2
21	Learning material helps us recognize how discourse communities influ-ence language use.	85% / 51	15% / 9	1
22	Learning material develops our skills to recognize contextual features that influence what and how a text is constructed.	86.7% / 52	13.3% / 8	1

The students report that their learning syllabus provides them with a good view of how language can be utilized by members of a discourse community to achieve different communicative purposes. They also report that their learning syllabus incorporates the sort of the activities which provide a way of contextualizing the texts students are likely to produce in different learning situations. Such activities trains the students on how to be skillful in specifying the language content and genres that suit a particular context of use. Students state that their learning materials help them understand how discourse works in different discourse communities. Furthermore, the students report that the activities incorporated in these materials develop their skills to recognize contextual features that influence what and how a text is constructed. Considering the actual written discourse of the students, one will discover that students' writings do not assert the claim they make. The following extracts from students' sample writing will make this point clear.

……. I live in Kassala in Alswogi I live with my familys. My hobby is drowing a pictures of nature or any things is beautiful.

I need to improve This hobby in The Feature, another hobby is read a novel in a big writer in The world.

The students claim that their learning syllabus trains them on how to use language for real communication; and that it enhances and fosters their knowledge of the features of the target discourse community. Accordingly, the written discourse they produce is well constructed and edited. But this is not true of students' actual written discourse.

Reading is my best hoppy for my especially ((novel, poetry, Short Story. , and sometimes reading magazine, and new s Paper.

5- Conclusion
The findings of this paper suggest that Sudanese EFL university students ignore the features and characteristics of the community of the English language speakers. The findings also suggest that the students are not aware of the norms and conventions that govern interaction among members of the English language discourse community. The students did not benefit from the instruction they received on how to develop their understanding of the concept of discourse community. This resulted in students' failure to produce a written discourse that could be understood and interpreted by users of English. So it is the role of the teachers in Sudanese schools and universities to encourage their students to develop positive attitudes towards the learning of English. So doing, the students will become enthusiastic and exert much effort during their process of learning. This in turn helps them devel-

op an understanding of the discourse community and con-sequently know how to produce effective written discourse. Syllabus designers should also consider students' actual needs when they set out to prepare the learning materials for the students. They should also consider the communicative value of the activities they devise for the students. So that the students can use English effectively when they finish their university study.

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