

An Investigation of Undergraduate Students' Perception About Functional English Taught at Mehran University of Engineering and Technology

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper was to investigate students' perception about English Language teaching and their development of language competency after taking functional courses of English at Mehran University of Engineering and Technology, Jamshoro. Participants of this study were 15 male and female undergraduate students from four disciplines of Textile Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, Telecommunication, and Petroleum & gas. A semi structured interview was used as an instrument for data collection from engineering students. The data was thematically analyzed. Findings show that students' perception about English Language has totally changed. This small-scale study has revealed that undergraduates at Mehran University of Engineering and Technology are in thoughtful hands. Functional classes not only help students to develop language competency in particular skills of the English language but has also helped them gain confidence to use English language. This paper encourages teachers who have been using very innovative and practical ways which have helped students to enhance their language competency. This paper also teachers to come up with some interesting written tasks to make students interested towards writing activities. And management should cope with large classes for students benefit.

Keywords: Students perceptions, Functional English, Competency development, Large classes

1. Introduction

The present research attempts to conduct a study to explore the perception of undergraduates about language proficiency taught through Functional English in ESL class. The purpose is to assess the English language competency of the students in the target university and identify the issues having a negative effect on their language learning. The reason for adopting functional practices is to enhance the micro and macro skills of language of the students. “The word functional by both print and web definition is designed to be practical and useful. Whether it’s reading, or spelling, defining the problem is quite crucial. Diagnosis of the problem is perhaps the first step in working through a student's weaknesses, and there are several ways to initiate this process and attain the predetermined objectives” (Khan, 2017). Functional English has a dominant impact on improving the language skills of university students. Functional English refers to, “defining some of its key terms and concepts, and illustrating how the theory can be put into practice both in linguistically diverse classrooms and in teacher-education courses in ways that ultimately support the academic literacy development of English language learners” (Schulze, 2015). College education without English language and professional training is useless because students are unable to secure jobs in the future. The real purpose of college education is to provide conducive learning environment to students that will allow them to develop professional skills. However, the findings indicate that college education has become less useful due to the flaws of the education system (Chater & Christiansen, 2018). The education doesn't focus on building strong professional personalities such as limited or no attention is given to the promotion of confidence. Every year many graduates leave universities but face challenges in the job markets. However, the colleges fail to adopt adequate strategies that would allow students to mitigate these challenges. Language competency is essential for finding good jobs (Farahian & Rezaee, 2015). The overall analysis depicts that the central argument is valid that proves with the help of facts and evidence that college education is a waste of time and money. The current study will emphasize on adoption of the functional strategies for building adequate English language competency and skills among the students. It will determine the causes and the factors that undermine the English language competency of the university students. It will also highlight the physical facilities and the impact of available material resources on language development. The suggestions will be provided for improving the policies that act in favor of the students, involving the teacher-learning process and its impact on language enhancement.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

English is essential for acquiring university education as all courses of the curriculum are offered in this English. Pakistani students face complications in universities due to their language weaknesses. Their inability to understand the English language undermines their educational attainments. To overcome the language barrier, adoption of functional strategies are important. There is a need for improving the language knowledge and speaking skills of the below average university students. Introducing the English language as a functional course will have a positive impact on the learning capabilities. Students struggle in their

studies without adequate knowledge of English language, and without proper attention by teachers. The emphasis of the functional languages is to permit students to contribute completely to the academics by enhancing their language competency (Khan, 2017).

1.2 The Significance of the Study

The existing knowledge from literature indicates that functional courses offered in the university environments are the basic tools for building language competency among students. Research shows that there is not enough work done in this field in our context which made me interested to put my effort on it. Being a student, I can relate myself in the context. This study will use the idea for identifying the problems faced during the functional English classes by the students in the selected university. I, being a student, have an idea of the pros and cons of the English courses offered. And the impact these courses put on students are helpful to the students or not. These courses are compulsory for every student in the universities, but universities have students from different backgrounds and possess different competency level, so the course taught must be according to the level of students. Functional English courses will provide an opportunity to the low achievers to improve their grades. This study will suggest designing environment and course activities for allowing students to build attention toward English language and practice proficiency in the English language.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Importance of English as Secondary Language

Studies have examined students' perceptions about the significance of secondary language skills. Rose (2006) determined that the skills identified by students regarding secondary language include listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation. The findings depicts that translation is an important skill that promote communications among strangers. Wang (2009) identifies translation as a practical tool used for helping students in secondary language. Din and Saeed (2018) studied the importance of English language in academic career of students in which relationship between secondary language and academic achievement was assessed. The findings depicts that English proficiency has significant relationship with academic achievement. This indicates that students having better English competency performed better academically compared to the students with low English proficiency. Participants were not satisfied with teachers' feedback on English (Din & Saeed, 2018).

2.2 Remedial/Functional English at University Level

Sahito et al., (2017) studied the need for remedial English in the universities of Sindh and identified the reasons for its adoption. Remedial English is essential for the students because they undergo language problems having an impact on their academic careers. The sample included the students from the University of Sindh. The purposive random sampling technique interviewed five teachers and 40 students. The results uncovered limited opportunities for enhancing the English language. The students were not satisfied with the university administration for not providing adequate learning facilities. The strategies for improving language competency include multimedia, video and audio resources. The common issues identified in the study include low skilled language teachers and inadequate wages lack of material support. Flawed policies are also the apparent cause of inadequate

language skills (Sahito, Siddiqui, Khawaja, Shaheen, Saeed, & Laghari, 2017).

2.3 English for Professional Competency

Chen and Wang (2013) determined the benefits of building English language proficiency. English language is crucial for students because it helps them in their academics, careers and professional fields. The benefits are not only limited to the college life but play important part for getting better jobs. The purpose of college education must not be limited to academic aspects. The real need is to provide opportunities that will allow students to learn about professional language that they are required to use in future. Although the purpose of getting education is to find jobs in future but the implications are different. In order to promote professional competency the colleges need to invest in language intervention programs. It is important for the students to learn the art of writing and speaking English because this will be essential requirement for entering a professional life. In professional lives people are required to write reports or perform some language related tasks which exhibits the need for having good understanding of language (East, 2016). Performance evaluations of employees also include assessment of their language skills. It is thus important to build adequate English language skills for having a bright future (Weisleder & Fernald, 2013).

2.4 English for Critical Skills Development

Khan (2017) studies the significance of functional language in developing critical thinking skills. The study reveals that English is an essential language for university students as all courses are conducted in it. Functional English must be a mandatory course allowing students to build augmentative skills. The English language is crucial for critical skills development. Higher education without the English language is not possible to attain. The students in Pakistani universities exhibit complications in understanding and speaking the language. Pakistani universities need to focus on language enhancement because without English they cannot compete with international universities (Khan, 2017).

2.5 Challenges for Pakistani Education System

Lack of experience and inadequate skills of the university educators have adverse impacts on the English competency of the university students. Pakistani education system faces significant challenges due to limited funds availability. Lack of field experience, lack of qualified faculty and collaboration are also common problems faced by the students in universities. In Pakistan, there are multilingual people so adopting English as a secondary language involve set of challenges. Safranji (2013) uncovered that the perceptions of the students and the teachers influence the functional and remedial English courses. Lack of professional techniques limits the potential of students to build language skills. Another flaw reflects the inability of colleges to prepare students for using English language in their professional lives. Their inability of speaking English language is problematic in both academic and professional life. This reflects the importance of foreign language for preparing learners to take jobs in good organizations.

2.6 Improving English Language Competency in University Students

Mughal and Memon (2016) provided recommendations for improving the English language competency of the university students. The study explored the role of students' perception in speaking and writing English as a functional language. The results reveal that the level of

perceived speaking and writing of the student had a significant impact on their language competency. The students considered it important for their academic careers were more willing to take remedial courses. The universities are offering remedial English language courses managed to improve the speaking and writing of the undergraduate students (Mughal & Memon, 2016). Rind et al. (2016) uncovered the impact of teaching practices on the English as a second language in universities of Pakistan. The qualification and skills of the language trainers have a significant impact on the development of language skills in students. Rind (2015) identified the differences in English competency of male and female students in Pakistani universities. The study states that gender roles have a significant impact on the language competency of the students. Shahriar (2013) suggests autonomous learning and capacity building for enhancing functional language skills. Othman et al., (2013) explored the effectiveness of remedial classes for improving the language ability of students in Arab universities. Remedial classes are an effective tool for promoting better language skills among students who are adopting it as a second language. Remedial courses have positive impacts on improving the skills of the students.

2.7 Perception of Students about Functional Language Courses

Bhatti et al. (2016) studied the perceptions of English language learners in Pakistani institutes using Foreign Language Anxiety Scale (FLAS). The findings depicts that nervousness and anxiety were observed that reveals English is considered as a challenging subject for majority students. Findings of the study confirm that English is linked to negative emotions of the students and it gives them stress because students are lacking skills to communicate in foreign language. Shams (2008) uncovered the perceptions of students towards English language. The study focused on examining the level of motivation, anxiety and feelings of students associated with foreign language. The study of the perceptions indicates that students have affirmative and enthusiastic attitudes towards learning English language. However motivation was slightly high in girls compared to boys. The assessment of the anxiety show that majority of the learners were conscious about speaking or using this language. This confirms prevalence of anxiety and nervousness among English learners. It was also found that it develop feelings of discomfort and fear (Shams, 2008).

3. Research Methodology

Research methodology is the key and crucial part of any research; it aims to evaluate the actual selected and implemented methodology in this research. A thorough review of literature was conducted before selecting the topic of the study and methodology to be used. A qualitative approach is warranted when the nature of research questions requires exploration (Stake, 1995). Qualitative research questions often begin with how or what, so that the researcher can gain an in-depth understanding of what is going on relative to the topic (Patton, 2002; Seidman, 1998). For the present study, the qualitative research approach is selected. A qualitative study allows the researcher to explore phenomena, such as feelings or thought processes, which are difficult to extract or learn about through conventional research methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For the present study, we explored participants' perception and lived experiences (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2006) faced through learning in ESL class.

3.1 Research Instrument

This study required Semi-structured interview for the reason that it allows the researcher to ask key questions without the hurdle of restricting the perception of students. The investigator developed protocol for conducting semi-structured interviews and planned queries so that important perceptions and thoughts do not escape. Mughal, B., & Memon, N. (2016) constructed an interview protocol using Sahito et al.'s interview protocol for studying the perceived level of proficiency of students' skills related to English language. Present study utilizes the same interview protocol with some modifications for identifying responses of students towards language strategies. Questions will be based on the exploration of perceived level of proficiency of speaking and writing skills of students regarding the functional English classes, Mughal, B., & Memon, N. (2016). A 15-item semi structured questionnaire is used for interviewing selected participants. Open-ended questions are used for finding perception of students based on their personal experiences. By using open-ended questions, participants are not restricted to specific options. This improves the validity of the research instrument.

3.2 Population and Sample

The population to be investigated in this study is final year (B.E) students at Mehran University of Engineering and technology, who have attended Functional English classes in the first year. To select the representative sample out of this population; we have selected four different disciplines (Textile Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, Telecommunication, and Petroleum & Gas). From these disciplines, qualitative approach has been selected, in which the semi-structured interviews are taken from participants. The semi-structured interviews were held using interview protocol for the collection of responses from students. For qualitative data, sample size was 15 participants, randomly selected from each discipline.

3.3 Data Collection Procedure

Data was collected by researchers themselves. The students were interviewed and audio recorded with their consent and willingness, from each selected discipline by the researchers. The data was thematically analyzed by researchers themselves and it was arranged in theme form.

3.4 Data Analysis

This research was a qualitative based approach, therefore, thematic data analysis strategy was chosen accordingly.

3.4.1 Theme (01)

English as a globally communication tool

All participants agreed that English language is used a communication tool globally, and they knew English language will give them a bright future. Hence it is important because it is emerging day by day and is mostly spoken at the work places and is official language of Pakistan. One of the participants commented,

'It is very important to know English language as most of the jobs require English speaking and writing skills. It is also an essential language to be used in academic area. It is also an international language and official language of Pakistan.'

As one of the participants asserted,

"I think learning English is the key to success because without it you can't survive in the world"

Participants know the importance of English language, and they are interested to learn it in a proper way. Which shows a positive attitude towards English language learning and awareness of English as an international language.

3.4.2 Theme (02)

Attitude towards remedial English class

As the first question shows that students are aware of the status that English language possess in our society. Their feedback showed that some of the participants took keen interest in learning English language. On the other hand, many participants accepted that they were not serious for functional English course. Many participants commented,

‘There were strict rules for attendance due to which most of us attended the classes’.

One of the participants asserted,

‘English is a subject that we all have to study for our degree. But I was always attracted to the language and due to which I enjoyed the classes’.

3.4.3 Theme (03)

Teacher's impact on students

All the participants agreed that they liked the way functional English teacher taught them. Their interest towards English language increased a lot. One of the participants also mentioned that teacher's friendly attitude made them comfortable with them. Students find learning activities through real life implementation interesting and fun. These fun activities make them learn more than the traditional way to teaching.

One of the participant mentioned,

‘Yes, she used to talk to us, cracked jokes which made us very comfortable with her’.

One of the participant asserted,

‘Sir used to tell his own stories to make us feel comfortable and then ask us to write our stories’

3.4.4 Theme (04)

Teacher's teaching technique

There was a time only traditional teaching method was used and now when a number of teaching techniques and methods are encouraged, students have found learning very attention-grabbing and they don't run from learning. All the participants agreed that teachers used to bring different activities and gave us group tasks through which we gained confidence in speaking to our peers. But one of the participant shared that long notes, and writing tasks were boring.

‘She used to bring long notes which I was unable to understand as she read from the notes. But when she gave group activities, they were very energy boosting’

Many participants stated,

‘He was very friendly. He used to give many group tasks and bring different activities that

made us very energetic towards learning English language’

According to the feedback received, many teachers used group tasks only. Different activities other than group tasks could have improved students’ competence. Slow learners complained that ‘group tasks were usually handled by active students and there was less concentration given to us’.

3.4.5 Theme (05)

Large class

Large class at university level is standard as most of universities get a million of admissions for undergraduate session. All the classes are filled with students but it is the responsibility of the university to cope with this issue for the benefit of students. Students praised the University management that they have divided the classes into sections so each class has 60-65 students. But they also mentioned that classes must only have maximum 30-35 students so teacher could give equal attention to all the students.

One of the participants quoted,

‘Our class had maximum 60 students per section including boys’ and girls’

One of the participants mentioned,

‘Our friends who study in different university tell us that their remedial class is so crowded that sometimes they even sit on the floor, but our class had maximum 60 students and teacher still wasn’t able to give proper attention to all students. Till the teacher learns students’ name, the session used to be over. Classes should be further divided as English is a must language for everyone’.

4. Results

Participants’ attitude towards English language shows promising results towards its learning as it is used as a communication tool globally. The results display awareness and understanding of the students towards English language and its status in our society. Teachers’ attitude in class plays an important role in learning a language. It builds a bridge between teacher and students which provides a comfortable learning environment. As opposed to traditional teaching method, students enjoy learning when teacher uses a number of techniques for teaching. Large classes at university level are a standard across Pakistan; and the results reveal that the university administration should divide classes into 30-35 students per section to avoid over crowded classes which hinders in teaching and learning.

5. Conclusion

Pakistani students face complications in universities due to their language weaknesses. Their inability to understand the English language undermines their educational attainments. Accuracy in language, role of fluency and modern and new activities are common factors that affect perceptions. The analysis of perceptions depicts that students considered activities as a positive learning technique. And along with the activities, teacher plays a very essential role in making students learn and feel confident about English language. Overall written tasks and large classes were an issue for students according to the collected data.

6. Recommendations

The study is conducted in Mehran University of Engineering and Technology, Jamshoro and

the findings are based on the responses of 15 students only. The results may not be appropriate for representing the foreign language competency of the college students at a larger level in Pakistan. Future researchers can consider a larger sample size for understanding perceptions of Pakistani students. The results are computed on the basis of narrative approach which might include bias. Future researchers can adopt mixed methods including quantitative approach for statistical analysis of data. Results are computed on the basis of students' perception. A more comprehensive research can be conducted by investigating attitude of instructors towards Functional English language course. Future study can be conducted for finding complications faced by instructors in teaching English as second language to young learners.

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Appendix

Interview protocol:

Hello/ Assalam o Alaikum, thank you so much for your time, I am glad that you are a participant of my research study. My name is Ayesha Mahmood, I am doing my MS in English Linguistics (Roll number: 21) from Mehran University of Engineering and Technology in Applied linguistics.

During the interview, we will discuss the problems faced by students during Functional English ~~functional~~ classes at Mehran University of Engineering and Technology and we will explore the causes of problems faced by students during Functional English ~~functional~~ classes.

- Q: 01. How much learning English is important for you?
- Q: 02. What do you think about Functional English classes which you attended in the first year at university?
- Q: 03. Did you like the teaching ways of your Functional English teacher? Why?
- Q: 04. Did your Functional English teacher use same teaching style in every class? If no, which technique did they use?
- Q: 05. Does English course helps in improving interaction between teachers and students? How?
- Q: 06. Do you think Functional English course material are well organized?
- Q: 07. Do you think there is need for more one-on-one interaction between students and teachers? Why?
- Q: 08. How were the instructions provided by your Functional English teacher?
- Q: 09. Have you seen any change in your English language after taking Functional English class? How?
- Q: 10. Can you tell me about the number of students who use to attend functional class with you?
- Q: 11. Were there enough resources, like books and AV aids, available at the campus?
- Q:12. In your view, which teaching style/way should be used for teaching English language?
- Q:13. How did your teachers use to guide/instruct you for using English language during Functional English class?
- Q:14. Can you tell me any other problem that you faced during Functional English classes which so far, we did not discuss during our conversation?
- Q:15. Any suggestion you want to add which is important to incorporate in Functional English ~~functional~~ classes for better language teaching and learning?

Thank you very much for your time and cooperation. The information which you have given will help me to put more effort in improvising Functional English classes at Mehran University of Engineering and technology. And may be by this effort we can bring little bit change in the Functional English classes.

Thanks a lot.

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