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The Current Situation of English Language at University of Khartoum: Problems and Solutions

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Abstract
The need for English language in Sudan is increasing rapidly for a variety of reasons, despite the fact that there is a severe decline of the students’ standards of English. This study tries to locate the problems that confront the learning and teaching of English language at University of Khartoum. A questionnaire was distributed to 303 second year students at the university to investigate the problems that face them in learning English language. Results show that the problems related to the students themselves, the syllabus, the learning environment, and relatively to the teachers. Some recommendations were given to solve these problems.

1. Introduction
The need for English language arose globally with the explosion of technological information. The status of English changed from a language of Britain or America to become a lingua franca of the international community. “The explosion of the technological information in this century (which) has caused English to become the lingua franca of the international community” [Hitchcock, 1978:9]. English is desired for the purpose of being a natural link within multi-cultural, multi-lingual societies and as a vehicle for international communication. Therefore, it became a global language for interaction. The need for English language competence has become a perquisite for a successful perception of the world.

In Sudan, as an ex-colony of Britain, English was always of a crucial importance. But during the last few years two special reasons have increased the need for English competence in Sudan. The first was the discovery of oil in some parts of the country which attracted a lot of foreign investment to Sudan. The second reason was the signing of the peace agreement with Southern Sudanese opposition.
The 8th amendment of the transitional constitution that was modified to accommodate the peace agreement, stated that Arabic and English are the two official languages for the national government and the teaching in the higher education (Nur : 2005). Thus, the status of English has changed from a foreign language to a second language.

There is an unmistakable global trend at present times, particularly in ex-colonies, of adopting the national language rather than the foreign as the official language and a language of instruction and education. In Sudan, the policy of Arabicization was implemented at Sudanese secondary school in early 70s through a governmental decree. In 1990 a full Arabicization of higher education was implemented. As a given fact, the implementation of the national language in educational setting is usually accompanied with a complain as regards to the deterioration of English language standards among the students of English language [Mohammed, 1991, Al- Hassan: 2006]. Nevertheless, Arabicization is not the only reason behind the decline of English language standard among Sudanese students.

The deterioration of English in tertiary level was even increased by the disruption of the educational ladder many times in 1969 and 1996. During the last change of the educational system one year was cut off the educational ladder thus resulting in 11 years instead of 12 years which are known to be the minimum amount of education needed before admission to university. Other indirect reasons for the deterioration of English are:
- Migration of well trained teachers to the Gulf countries during the 70s and 80s and up to now.
- The reduction of English language teaching hours at schools from nine periods to five.
- Deletion of extensive reading (literature) and
- Poor curriculum.

These reasons combining together played a great role in the deterioration of the English language standards at pre-tertiary level. So, students admitted to university could be classified as ‘false beginners ‘[Al-Hassan: 2006]. Harmer (2000) describes false beginners as those learners who learned English and cannot use it, but they can quickly be motivated. These students pursuit their tertiary studies in Arabic but still they are faced with a need to acquire competence in English for personal, academic and professional needs.

2. The current situation of English language in U of K

In 1990 Arabic language became the language of instruction in higher education. As a result, English language became just a subject to be taught as a university requirement and it is no longer a medium of instruction. After that the situation witnessed two phases. The first one
was from 1994 to 1998. During this period English language, at U of K was taught as a four –year course under the supervision of Arabicization Administration [Administration for University Requirements {AUR} Guide 2004:4].

The second phase started in 1998 up to now. English language was taught only in the first two years. The Administration for University Requirements was established to carry over the responsibility of teaching English language as a required subject among others. The former English Servicing Unit (ELSU) has become the Department of English in the Administration. Students were required to study 90 hours, 45 in the first year and 45 in the second year [AUR Guide 2004:5].

The course description is divided into two levels; first year and second year. The first year course, which is a common core, aims at developing the students' four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Also first year students study the uses of the dictionary, the library, and references. In addition, the course aims at enabling the students to translate from English into Arabic and vice versa. The grammar content of first year course include: tenses, articles, and passive voice. In the second year course, which is English for Specific Purposes (ESP) oriented, writing, reading, speaking skills are the contents of this course in addition to phonetics and grammar. The reading comprehension texts are related to students' specialization [AUR Guide 2004:15]. In both courses contents were left for the different teachers to prepare.

3. Statement of the problem

Experience in teaching English to students at U of K as well as observations of the English language teachers proved that there is a severe decline in the standards of English language. This view is supported by Mohammed (1991), Mirghani (2005), and Al-Hassan (2005). Since there is deterioration in the students' level of English language, it is assumed that there are some problems that confront the learning and teaching of English language at U of K. The purpose of this study is to spot these problems and to suggest some solutions for them.

4. Questions of the study

The study aims to answer these questions:

1. What are the problems that face the teaching of English language?
2. What are the suggested solutions that can be found for these problems?

5. Methodology

5.1. Instrument
In order to collect data for this study, a structured questionnaire was designed. The questionnaire is divided into two sections. Section one concentrates on the need for English. Section two focuses on the problems that face the learning and teaching of English language at U of K.

Section two is further divided into four domains. Questions 1-3 cover the role of students in learning English language. Questions 4-8 deal with the syllabus. Questions 9-13 discuss the lecturers who teach the course. Questions 14-18 focus on the learning environment.

5.2. Subjects

The questionnaire was disturbed to second year students at U of K. They were selected because they have studied English for two years at the university and will be able to give a good judgment of the situation.

303 students participated in this questionnaire. They were chosen randomly to represent ten different faculties from the four major campuses of Shambat, Medicine, Education and the Center. Half of the faculties in each campus were selected. A percentage of students from the selected faculties responded to the questionnaire. Table (1) below illustrates the percentage of the subjects of the study:

Table (1): The subjects of the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Campus</th>
<th>Faculty</th>
<th>Number of student</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicine</td>
<td>Pharmacology</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Health Care</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shambat</td>
<td>Animal Production</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Veterinary</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Art</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Center</td>
<td>Science</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>13.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Law</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Engineering</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>24.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School of Math</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>303</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6. Data Analysis

6.1. The need for English

The first part of the questionnaire was designed to investigate the need for English from the students’ point of view. Students were given five questions to investigate why do they need to study English Language. Graph (1) below sums up the responses of the subjects in the survey.

Graph (1): The Need for English

Graph (1) shows clearly that students need English mostly in three major fields, academic study, and communication with the outside world -and for the work market. Only 173 students out of 303 students think they need English for daily use. All the subjects agreed that they need English.

6.2. The Problems facing the learning and teaching of English language:

This part of the questionnaire was set to investigate the problems that face the learning and teaching of English at U of K. It is divided into four domains to investigate the problems related to students, teachers, syllabus, and the learning environment.

6.2.1. Problems facing the students
Graph (2) Problems facing students

203 of the participant agree that students depend on the use of the L1 in the class, while 69 disagree and 30 do not know. When participant were asked if one of their problems is that they did not practice English, 147 students agreed while 120 disagreed and 34 answered that they do not know. The last question asked that if the students do not find learning aids, 163 agreed, 101 disagreed while 39 answered with do not know.

6.2.2. Problems in the Syllabus

This part of the questionnaire dealt with the problems caused by syllabus. The results are shown in graph (3) below.

As it is clear from the above graph, the syllabus is one of the major problems facing students when learning English language. 223 Students
answered that one of the problems facing them in the present syllabus is the absences of extensive reading, 37 disagree while 33 do not know. When asked if the syllabus was not suitable and weak, 166 agreed, 92 disagreed and 45 do not know. 165 answered that the syllabus is not organized, while 73 disagreed and 65 do not know. 210 students think that the syllabus ignores some of the skills, 38 disagreed while 55 answered with do not know. The last question in this category asked if there was a gap between the present and the previous syllabus, 179 agreed 56 disagreed while 68 answered that they do not know.

6.2.3. Problems concerning the Teachers
Five questions concerning the teachers were given to the students. The answers are illustrated in graph (4) below:
Graph (4): Problems Concerning the Teachers

When the students were asked if the teachers teach above the level of the students 145 students agreed, 107 disagreed and 51 answered with do not know. The students were asked if the teachers were not available outside the class 150 agreed, 93 disagreed and 60 answered with do not know. 171 students thought that well trained teachers migrated, 52 disagreed
and 80 answered with don’t know. Only 62 students thought that teachers do not prepare their lessons 143 disagreed and 98 answered with do not know. In the last question students were asked if they thought that the teachers were not qualified 83 agreed, 142 disagreed, and 78 answered with do not know.

6.2.4. Problems in the teaching environment.
The last domain was about the problems in the teaching environment. The results can be seen in graph (4) below.

Graph (4) Problems in the teaching environment

In this sub-section the students were asked five questions. The first question was if the students think that large classes are a problem. 149 agreed, 106 disagreed and 48 answered with do not know. 130 students agreed that one of the problems was that books are not available, 119 disagreed and 54 answered with do not know. When students were asked that one of the problems facing them is the absence of extracurricular activities, 230 agreed, 25 disagreed, and 48 answered with do not know. Students were asked if absence of audio –visual aids was one of the
problems hindering them from learning English 224 agreed, 36 disagreed, and 43 answered with do not know. The last question was if the time allocated to English was limited, 167 agreed, 86 disagreed and 47 answered with do not know.

7. Results:
From the above analysis it is clear that there are many problems facing students learning English language at U of K. These problems can be categorized as follows.

7.1. Problems in Students:
Students see that over dependence on L1 (Arabic) in learning L2 (English), lack of English language practice and lack of teaching aids are all problems facing them inside the classroom.

7.2. Problems in the syllabus:
Students see that there are problems in the syllabus and these problems are:

- lack of extensive reading
- weak and unsuitable syllabus
- unorganized syllabus
- neglects some of the skills.
- presence of a gap between the current syllabus and the previous in the secondary schools.

7.3. Teachers:
Students think that there are also problems with the teaching staff. For them the teachers:

- teach above the students’ level.
- are not available to the students after their lectures.
- are not well trained.

7.4. The learning environment:
For the learning environment students see the following as problems:

- lack of audio visual aids.
- large classes
- limited time allocated to English language.
- absence of extra curriculum activities.

English language teaching (ELT) literature such as in (Renaud et al 2007, Stevick: 2005, Harmer 2004, and Hill: 1979) showed that the problems mentioned in section 7 are frequently faced by English language learners and teachers. So all the above problems are valid reasons causing hindrance in the learning and teaching of English language at U of K and Sudan at large.
8. Recommendations
After the above discussion it is possible to make the following recommendations:

1. Teachers should encourage students not to depend on translation. They should gradually abandon the use of Arabic in the classroom.
2. Learner-centred approach should be adopted. This could be done by establishing self-access centres, encouraging students to take responsibilities of their own learning and training teachers in adapting techniques leading to learner’s autonomy.
3. Suitable learning aids should be provided.
4. The syllabus should be reviewed and updated to meet the students’ needs. In addition, it should also focus on the areas which the students find difficult in learning English language.
5. Large classes need to be divided into classes with small numbers of students.
6. Teachers should use some techniques such as group and pair work, self correcting activities, and choral work to deal with large classes (Stevick: 2005, and Hill: 1979).
7. The time for English language lectures should be increased to reach 4 hours per week. Stevick (2005) considers it a problem if the class meets only 2 hours a week.
8. If the time for English lectures increased, the syllabus can cover all the four skills.
9. For the ESP component for the second year, a systematic and a comprehensive needs analysis should be conducted to find out the students' needs and to design a course to meet those needs.

9. Conclusion
The current situation of English language at U. of K. is not satisfactory. There are large classes, lectures time is not enough, no audio visual aids, weak syllabus, unmotivated students, and absence of self-access centres. The solutions suggested need a will for change, money and time to be accomplished. It is important to examine the problem again and to assure that the proposed solutions are put in action.

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