

## EXPLORING SUDANESE EFL UNIVERSITY LEARNERS' DISCOURSE COMPETENCE

**Ali Ahmed Osman Zakaria**

*Department of English language & Linguistics, University of Kassala, Sudan*

E-mail: haddad\_31970@hotmail.com

**Abdel Rahim Hamid Mugaddam**

*Institute of African & Asian Studies, University of Khartoum, Sudan*

E-mail: sudan\_98@hotmail.com

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates the discourse competence of the Sudanese EFL university learners. The main objective is to evaluate and assess the students' ability to produce unified and meaningful texts. 98 Sudanese EFL students from Faculty of different Sudanese Universities served as subjects for the study. Two instruments were employed for data collection: a questionnaire and audio-recorded conversations. Results revealed that the students had some difficulties in producing coherent and meaningful texts. The linguistic forms they used were very limited, which did not show any sophisticated use of language. Results also revealed that the students were not well-acquainted with turn-taking rules during conversation. In their responses to the questionnaires, they reported a very good command of cohesive devices in the process of producing coherent discourse events, which appeared to be incorrect. However, they were able to use simple language to expand certain points into meaningful stretches of language. In addition, some students were able to demonstrate an ability to engage into the production and interpretation of unified and meaningful discourse. Nevertheless, the analysis suggests that the students under study are still far from being competent as far as discourse competence is concerned.

**Keywords:** *discourse competence, turn taking, conversational norm, communicative intentions, transition-relevance principle*

### INTRODUCTION

The ability to communicate effectively in English is one of the factors that are highly appreciated in workplace. Being good communicator in English is an indicator for the success in the tasks performed by employees. That is why in many job announcements fluency in the English language is regarded as one of the factors that are used for rating applicants. Morreale et al. (2000) state that as individuals become mature and working adults, communication competence continues to be essential. Communication skills are required in most occupations. Employers identify communication as one of the basic competencies every graduate should have, asserting that the ability to communicate is valuable for obtaining employment and

maintaining successful job performance. To be given a job, the applicants must be with oral and writing competence so that they perform well and demonstrate success in team work. This situation does also exist in Sudan. In many instances, speaking and writing in English fluently is considered as a gate keeper for success and employment. So developing students' discourse competence is very important. Students are expected to be with good skills in communicating in English by the time they have finished their university education. They will not manage to do so unless they have a good knowledge of the features that contribute to the production of effective and interpretable discourse.

Hymes (1972) proposes that discourse competence accounts for students' knowledge of the ways discourse is

sequenced and the ability to structure discourse effectively. So it is the knowledge of rules regarding the cohesion and coherence of various types of discourse. Canale and Swain (1980) emphasize that rules of discourse are crucial in interpreting utterances for social meaning, particularly when the literal meaning of an utterance does not lead to the speaker's intention easily. Discourse competence entails knowledge of how language is used in social settings to perform different communicative functions. Further, discourse competence deals with how utterances are used in more coherent and unified fashion to perform different communicative functions in different social contexts. Therefore, it is the mastery of how to combine grammatical forms and meanings to achieve certain communicative purposes in some social situations. Discourse Competence can be seen as the ability to understand, create and develop forms of the language that are longer than sentences with the appropriate cohesion, coherence and rhetorical organization to combine ideas.

Turn taking is a very important factor in the instances of any discourse event. Sacks et al. (1974) state that people take turns when they are selected or nominated by the current speaker, or if no one is selected, they speak of their own accord ("self-selection"). If neither of these conditions applies, the person who is currently speaking may continue. Sacks et al also suggest that a turn can be taken at any point of the conversation, yet a smooth turn shift occurs at a transition-relevance place, when a speaker expects to yield the floor and the listener is ready to accept the new role. Violating the transition-relevance principle will disrupt the discourse through interruptions. It must be noted that even if they can indeed materialize through overlaps, interruptions should be distinguished from natural overlapping. As noted by Freeman and McElhinny (1996) "to understand any overlap as an interruption is to argue that the conversational norm is one speaker at a time". Students need to be taught when and how they can intervene when being involved in a conversation.

Cohesion is concerned with relationship both within and beyond the sentence. Cohesive categories are functional categories, though of course realized in lexical, grammatical and other forms (Wingard, 1981). For Martin (1992) cohesion is one of the text properties that contribute to the organisation of discourse. The same view held by Hoey (1991), who notes that cohesion may be crudely defined as the way certain words or grammatical features of a sentence can be used to create connected sentences within a sequence. Halliday and Hasan (1976) note that cohesion research focuses on a comprehensive examination of systematic devices used to connect the surface form of texts. It is the surface manifestation of the underlying relations that bind a text. While cohesion does not provide a full account of the textual interpretation of a text, it is an important indicator. For Halliday and Hasan, the organisation of text is realized (in large part) in the relations among semantic and grammatical items in the text. These items are referred to as cohesive ties. Cohesive devices are divided into five broad classes: conjunction; reference; substitution; ellipsis; and lexical cohesion. Cohesive devices play a crucial role in holding a text together. They provide means for linking the surface text structure. Grabe and Kaplan (1996) argue that cohesive devices reflect both the communicative intentions and the choices made by the author in structures used and in the linear ordering of the text.

Coherence is the quality of creating a unified and solid text which makes understanding and interpretation easy for the audience. Thornbury (2005) points out that coherence is the capacity of a text to make sense. An incoherent text does not make sense, however closely connected its individual utterances might be. Coherence is the quality that the listener/reader derives from text. Beck et al. (1991) argue that coherence as a theoretical construct in text structure refers to the underlying relations that hold between assertions (or propositions) and how these assertions contribute to the overall discourse theme (or macro-structure). This set of relations

assumes that coherent text will be unified by one overarching theme, whether stated or implicit. It is coherence in text structure which allows the listener/reader to build a model of comprehension (Garnham 1991, Singer 1990). Thus it is the responsibility of the speaker to attach the aspect of coherence to the text he/she is creating in order to convey the message in a way that meets the audience expectations. The speaker who wishes to communicate his/her thoughts to their audience successfully must produce a coherent piece of discourse.

Thornbury (2005) points out that coherence is usually approached from two levels: micro and the macro. At the micro-level, the audience have certain expectations of how the proposition (the meaning) of an utterance or a sentence is likely to be developed. When these expectations are met, the emerging text will seem to be coherent. At the macro-level coherence is enhanced if: a) the audience can easily discern what the text is about, b) the text is organised in a way that answers listener/reader's likely questions and c) the text is organised in a way that is familiar to the audience. Brown and Yule (1983) following Widdowson (1973) suggest that coherence is the result of conventionalized knowledge and sequences which a reader/hearer will be able to call upon to impose a coherent frame onto a message. Yule and Brown continue that coherence is essentially the creation of the reader/listener rather than a product of the text. So, it is not created in the text itself, but in the reader/listener's ability to call upon certain shared conventionalized knowledge.

## **METHOD**

### *Participants*

The participants in this study included 98 Sudanese EFL students who are taking English as their major at three Sudanese universities - Sudan University of Science and Technology, Alneelain university and Kassala university. The students come from different regions of Sudan. This means they can be taken as a sample for the Sudanese EFL University learners' community. The students are believe to use English effectively by the

time they have finished their university education. They are expected to contribute to the development of their local communities which leads to the development of the country as a whole. The courses the participants took at university are believed to equip them with the knowledge necessary to perform successfully all the sort of the jobs that require command of English. However, some researchers believe that the participants are not competent to the extent that they can provide data reliable for research work. English in Sudan is not practised by the students outside lecture rooms. It is not used by the students in their daily social life. English is only a university subject that is taught and practised in the lecture room.

### *Instruments*

Two tools were used to collect the data for this paper: a questionnaire, and an audio-recorded interview. Adopting two different instruments for data collection helps the researchers get a comprehensive view on the responses provided by the respondents. Observing students' actual performance will reveal the facts that cannot be obtained through the questionnaire. So, the reason behind having these two tools for data collection is to have reliable data that can yield reasonable results.

### *The questionnaire*

The questionnaire designed to collect the data for this study was based basically on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001). This emerges as a serious step to conduct an efficient and useful study. The questionnaire was designed to collect information about how Sudanese university learners evaluate and assess their discourse competence. It is also to let students consider the sort of the factors that they need in order to produce and understand meaningful and communicative discourse. The questionnaire also represents a tool to collect information about students' ability to produce and interpret unified and meaningful discourse. The questionnaire comprises four sections.

Section one is about students' flexibility in constructing fluent and comprehensive discourse. The second section tackles students' competence in turn staking. Section three deals with students' capacity to develop and elaborate a particular theme into meaningful stretches of language. The fourth section involves students' knowledge of text cohesion and coherence.

*The audio-recorded interview*

The interview was conducted with the participants to compare and contrast the facts about students' discourse competence and the facts that could be drawn from their actual discourse. This is to be certain that the data used for the paper is more reliable and realistic.

**FINDINGS & DISCUSSION**

*Flexibility*

Table 1. *Students' own appraisal of their ability to engage into a meaningful and comprehensive discourse*

No	Item	Yes	No	Median
1	I can show great flexibility reformulating ideas clearly according to different situations of use.	82.8% 81	17.2% 17	1
2	I have the ability to adjust what I say and the means of expressing it to the situation and the recipient.	74.5% 73	25.5% 25	1
3	I can normally adjust to the changes of direction, style and emphasis found in conversation.	58.5% 57	41.5% 41	1
4	I am able to vary formulation of what I want to say.	76.6% 75	23.4% 23	2
5	I can adapt my expression to deal with less routine, even difficult, situations.	58.5% 57	41.5% 41	2
6	It is not difficult for me to exploit a wide range of simple language flexibly to express much of what I want.	67.2% 66	32.8% 32	2
7	I can expand learned phrases through simple recombination of their elements.	59.6% 58	41.4% 40	2

Most of the students claimed that they had the ability to formulate their ideas according to the situations. They held that they were able to modify their expressions due to the situations and recipients. Students assumed they could adjust to changes according to the directions, style and emphasis found in the conversation. The subjects of the study reported that they could vary in the sort of the expressions they produced in order to convey their message. Further, the students stated that they had the ability to adapt their expressions to deal with the difficult situations. So it was easy for them to use simple language with great flexibility to express much of what they wanted to say. The subjects also reported that they could use the language they had already learned in new different situations. Analyzing the audio-recorded discourse of the students made it obvious that the students did not show any flexibility in their discourse formulation and reformulation.

They could not show any ability to adjust to the changes that occurs during conversation.

*Turn taking*

Table 2 reveals that the students were able to take the floor in a conversation effectively. The table also shows that the students could select the suitable phrase from their linguistic repertoire to signal that they intended to take part in the conversation. The students believed that they were able to appropriately intervene in a discussion. They asserted that they could select the proper language in order to do so. The subjects stated that they were competent to begin a conversation. They could keep on talking in a subtle fashion; and that they could end the discourse appropriately. Moreover, the table also reveals that most of the students were able to initiate, maintain and end the discourse when they wish to do so. Results in the table show that the participants depended on certain strategies to gain time and keep their turn in the conversation while

thinking of how to proceed. They used certain linguistic expressions in order to achieve this. Results also show that most of the respondents took turn and participated in the instances of discussing familiar topics using simple expressions. They were able to engage into a face-to-face conversation concerning topics that are familiar and that of personal interest. Studying the table, one can guess that the students were able to adopt simple techniques to begin, keep or end a

short conversation. One can also see that the results indicate the subjects' ability to ask their audience for attention. The students reported that they were good at turn taking but this appeared to be not true when their discourse was studied and analysed. They did not choose appropriate expressions to intervene. Furthermore, they did not leave the current speaker end his/her turn and then they intervene and began talking.

Table 2. *Students' statement about their ability in turn taking*

No	Item	Yeas	No	Median
8	It is easy for me to select a suitable phrase from a readily available range of discourse functions to preface my remarks appropriately in order to get the floor.	65.9% 64	34.5% 34	2
9	I can intervene appropriately in discussion, exploiting appropriate language to do so.	69.2% 68	30.8% 30	2
10	It is not difficult for me to initiate, maintain and end discourse appropriately with effective turn taking.	65.9% 64	34.5% 34	2
11	I can initiate discourse, take my turn when appropriate and end conversation when I need.	80.8% 79	19.2% 19	1
12	I can use stock phrases (e.g. 'That's a difficult question to answer') to gain time and keep the turn whilst formulating what to say.	57.5% 56	42.5% 42	2
13	I have the ability to intervene in a discussion on a familiar topic, using a suitable phrase to get the floor.	68.1% 67	31.9% 31	2
14	I can initiate, maintain and close simple face-to-face conversation on topics that are familiar or of personal interest.	69.2% 68	30.8% 30	2
15	I am able to use simple techniques to start, maintain, or end a short conversation.	76.6% 75	23.4% 23	1
16	I can appropriately ask for attention.	72.3% 71	27.7% 27	2

### *Thematic development*

Table 3. *Students appraisal of their own ability to develop a topic into meaningful discourse.*

No	Item	Yeas	No	Median
17	I can give elaborate descriptions and narratives, integrating sub-themes, developing particular points.	63.2% 62	36.8% 36	2
18	I can develop a clear description expanding and supporting my main points with relevant supporting detail and examples.	63.2% 62	36.8% 36	2
19	I can fluently relate a straightforward description as a linear sequence of points.	56.4% 55	43.6% 43	2
20	I have the ability to describe something in a simple list of points.	79.8% 78	20.2% 20	1

The table above reveals that the students could describe and narrate any events very appropriately. They could discuss and develop very complicated themes and sub-themes. They had the ability develop and elaborate any topic into a very successful communicative event. Further, the table shows that the participants were able to

support the claim they made with comprehensive and detailed data. The subjects could move smoothly developing the discourse in which they were engaged. They could elaborate it by smoothly moving from point to another. Analysis of the students' actual discourse shows that the students were not able to develop a particular theme

into a meaningful thought. They found it very difficult to express what they felt about a particular topic. However, the students reported that they had the ability to use simple language to expand certain points into meaningful stretches of language.

*Cohesion and coherence*

Table 4 reveals that the students could use cohesive devices to produce well connected piece of discourse. The table also shows that the students had the ability to produce unified and coherent stretches of language. They could connect these stretches to produce interpretable and meaningful discourse. The table also reveals that the respondents could use discourse makers to demonstrate the different relations that hold among different ideas. The table makes it

clear that the students had the ability to use a limited set of cohesive devices to connect the ideas they weave in their discourse which results in a clear and coherent discourse. The table also shows that the subjects could link a series of short, discrete, simple elements into a connected, linear sequence of points. Further, the table reports that the participants were able to use coordinating conjunctions in order to produce effective discourse. Students' discourse seemed to lack in any sort of cohesive devices. In their response to the questionnaire, the respondents claimed that they could make a very good use of cohesive devices in order to link words and phrases into a coherent and unified discourse. But their actual discourse did not reveal such a claim.

**Table 4.** *Students' evaluation of their own ability to produce a coherent and unified discourse.*

No	Item	Yes	No	Median
21	I can create coherent and cohesive text making full and appropriate use of a wide range of cohesive devices.	63.2% 62	36.8% 36	2
22	I can produce clear, smoothly flowing, well-structured speech, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.	51.1% 50	48.9% 48	3
23	I am able to use a variety of linking words efficiently to mark clearly the relationships between ideas.	80.8% 79	19.2% 19	1
24	I have the ability to use a limited number of cohesive devices to link my utterances into clear, coherent discourse.	72.3% 71	27.7% 27	2
25	I can link a series of shorter, discrete simple elements into a connected, linear sequence of points.	66.9% 65	33.1% 33	2
26	I am able to use the most frequently occurring connectors to link simple sentences in order to describe something as a simple list of points.	73.4% 72	26.6% 26	2
27	I have ability to link groups of words with simple connectors like 'and', 'but' and 'because'.	81.9% 80	18.1% 18	1

**CONCLUSION**

Analysing the audio-recorded discourse of the students made it obvious that the students did not show any flexibility in their discourse formulation and reformulation. They could not demonstrate their ability to adjust to the changes that occurs during conversation. The linguistic forms they used were very limited which did not show any sophisticated use of language. The students reported that they were good at turn taking but this appeared to be not true when their discourse was studied and analysed. The participants did not choose appropriate

expressions to intervene. Furthermore, the subjects ignored the techniques necessary for turn taking; they did not leave the current speaker end his/her turn before they intervened and began talking. Analysis of the students' actual discourse also showed that the students were not able to develop a particular theme into a meaningful thought. They found it very difficult to express what they felt about a particular topic.

However, the students reported that they had the ability to use simple language to expand certain points into meaningful stretches of language. Students' discourse

seemed to lack in any sort of cohesive devices. In their response to the questionnaire, the respondents claimed that they could make a very good use of cohesive devices in order to link words and phrases into a coherent and unified discourse. But their actual discourse did not reveal such a claim. Teachers need to provide exercises which help students develop their communicative competence so that they could produce effective discourse. They should train the students on how to develop a particular topic into a meaningful thought. Students need to believe that the skills necessary to engage into a successful communication dictate being involved in more serious and deliberate use of language. Teachers also need to play some important role in clearing away students' apprehension in respect of using language for communicative purposes. Some students reported that they had very limited knowledge of English; and that they could not speak English. However, the students reported this in English which means the students can perform well if they are encouraged and motivated by the teacher. So teachers should tell the students that they can achieve the tasks they are asked to perform.

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