Assessing the Communicative Competence of Advanced EFL Students at the Faculty of Education in Hodeidah University

Shameem Ahmad Banani
English department,Faculty of Education
Hodeidah University ,Yemen

Abstract
Communicative competence is one of the major goals which learners of English language seek to achieve. The aim of the present study is to explore the level of communicative competence among English majors in the Faculty of Education in Hodeidah University in Yemen. The participants in this study are third and fourth year students in the English department of the Faculty of Education. The data collection instrument was an Informal ESOL Speaking Assessment Test by Susan Bubp (2007) a coordinator in Adult Education Mini- Grant Projects. The findings of the study reveal that the students in the advanced levels in the Faculty of Education have a very poor degree of communicative competence in English language. Based on the findings the study suggests some pedagogical implications to improve the communicative competence of English majors.
Key words: assessment, advanced levels, communicative competence

Introduction

As early as 1972, Hymes defined communicative competence as the ability to use appropriate and socially acceptable language, knowing when to speak, what to speak about and what manner should one adopt at a certain time, in a certain place and with a certain person. Today, in times of rapid globalization of culture, science, economy and education in the 21 century, English has become entrenched as an international tool. Communicative competence in English is more needed than ever, and is considered as one of the necessary qualifications which college students in Yemen need to develop to confront the demands of the society. In the Faculty of Education in Hodeidah University the English majors in their training program as teachers take four courses in spoken English. These courses end in the second semester of the second year. So in the advanced levels i.e., in the third and fourth year, students do not take any courses in spoken English. However students feel that without a sound knowledge of grammar, which is the major component of linguistic competence, they cannot effectively complete the task of interacting with people in English. Therefore the assumption that after taking different courses in the English language the students' communicative competence will empower them to attain their goals as teachers is false, because many students in the English Department in the Faculty of Education graduate with low degree of communicative competence. The purpose of the present study is to provide an assessment of the communicative competence of the students in the advanced levels of the Faculty of Education in Hodeidah University. The Informal ESOL English Speaking Assessment Test by Susan Bubp an ALS coordinator was conducted by the researcher. The researcher skipped some questions and added someto match with the culture and nature of Yemeni Students. The number of participants was 60 students from third and fourth year English majors in the Faculty of Education. Students were very enthusiastic to have an oral test as this was a new experience for them. Usually their performance in English is measured through written tests.

The aims and significance of the study

The present study aims to investigate the level of communicative competence in English among the third and fourth year English majors in the Faculty of Education in Hodeidah University and to find out whether they are competent users of English or not. Also to know their capability of relating what is learnt in the classroom to the outside world to attain their goals as English language teachers?

The Question of the study

What is the level of communicative competence of third and fourth year English majors in the Faculty of Education? From this main question, a number of sub- questions emerged:
  a) What is the level of Fluency and Accuracy of the students in the advanced level?
  b) What is the level of Pronunciation and Vocabulary of these students?
  c) What is the level of Structural and Grammatical sentences of the concerned
students?
d) Is there any difference in the level of communicative competence between third and fourth year students?

Theoretical background

The term communicative competence was introduced by Hymes (1972) as the ability of speaking a language or being a competent speaker of a language. He described the competent language

user as the one knows when, where and how to use language appropriately rather than merely knowing how to produce accurate grammatical structures. Hymes theory of communicative competence has been widely acknowledged and accepted by English educators and scholars (Canale& Swain,1980; Kunschak, 2004; Mckay, 2002). In addition, Malmkjaer (2002) explicates that Hymes' concept of communicative competence consists of grammatical competence, the speaker's ability to form and interpret sentences and pragmatic competence, which is the ability to use expressions to achieve a desired communicative effect. As the concept of "communicative competence" is being further developed, different language skills such as linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, strategic and pragmatic competences are receiving increasing focus (Davies.2005, Hedge 2000).In the same vein, Wilkins (2002) posits that speakers of a foreign language may attain a less than full competence as a second language learner. It is explicated that speakers should posses a partial competence in all aspects of language use. Wilkins thus states that in a fully communicative and spontaneous use of language that is associated with being monitored, the learner's language shows characteristic features of the development stage of language acquisition at which the speaker has arrived rather than the direct effect of pedagogic input. Furthermore, Wilkins (2002) posits that the situation which places the greatest demands on the learner's language system is that of attempting to use the spoken language for spontaneous communication. Hence , effective and efficient use in this situation requires that as much of the language as possible should be internalized. This means that the learners or users of a language should have an unconscious mastery of as much of the mechanics of the language as possible, so that conscious attention can be given almost wholly to the content of the communication rather than to its form. Recently some Asian researchers attempted some studies which highlight the language learner needs to be fluent as well as accurate in the use of the language. For example, Nguyen Thi Mai Hoa (2008) stresses the increasingly important role of intercultural communication in ELT and the necessity to develop students' intercultural communicative competence. Yuko Iwai (2009) highly recommends for teachers to understand and teach communicative competence within the frame of grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence. He examined how to effectively teach English communicative skills to students in the Japanese setting. Fan Fang (2010) explains that the objective of College English Teaching in China is to develop students' communicative competence so that in their future work and social interactions they will be able to exchange information effectively through both spoken and written channels, and at the same time they will be able to enhance their ability to study independently . Olga Tostykh& Anastasia Khomutova (2012) compared the integrated-skill approach with the segregated skill approach and found that the integrated skill approach applied in the South Ural State Universityis considered to be most efficient method of language teaching in the modern word. Besides, Salma Saleh (2013) discussed the development of the term "communicative competence" and its implication among many language courses to end up with students' development of communicative competence. Furthermore, Suhair AlAlami(2014) suggests a helpful role of literature as an effective device which practitioners can utilize to promote communicative competence on the part of learners.

All these necessitated the need of this study to investigate and assess the communicative competence of the students in the advanced levels in the English Department in the Faculty of Education to meet the needs of Yemen's social development and international exchanges and reform English training programs in Yemen.

Methodology and procedure

Sample and population:
The population of the study is third and fourth year students in the Faculty of Education, English department. The study sample was chosen randomly. The names of the students were alphabetically ordered. The researcher started choosing from number 6 and its multiples i.e. 6,12,18…..etc. till 30 students from third year and 30 from fourth year with this 60 students participated in the test from both third and fourth year in the Faculty of Education .

Instrument and Data Analysis:
The Informal ESOL English Speaking Test by Susan Bubp (2007) an ALS coordinator was selected by the researcher as an instrument for this study because it can informally measure students' speaking ability. The test was approved by experts in the English department. The test consisted of seven parts. Part one in isolation aimed to find out the Fluency and Accuracy of the students using authentic pictures. Parts 2,3and 4 aimed to discover the students' Pronunciation and Vocabulary. Finally, parts 5,6 and 7 aimed to find the level of the Structural and Grammatical competence. The overall parts of this test were conducted orally. Some questions were skipped and replaced by other items that match with the nature and culture of Yemeni students. Each item was scored on a 0-3 scale:

0= No response

1= Response does not model what a native speaker would answer. The grammar has many errors which drastically interfere with the meaning. Pronunciation is often difficult to understand. Response is limited, and many vocabulary items are not known.

2= Response has some grammar errors which don't drastically interfere with meaning. Pronunciation has some errors, but still can be understood. Answer is complete, but not expanded. Some vocabulary items are not known or not accurate.

3= Response models a native speaker. The grammar has no or few   errors. Pronunciation is clear and easy to understand. The response is not only complete, but also expanded. It is clear that many vocabulary items are known and understood.

The total score was classified as follows:

0 - 14= Beginner
Students who have scores that fall in this range are minimally able to address some questions on this test. Their pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary frequently interfere with their communication.

14 – 17 = Low Intermediate
Students who have scores that fall in this range are able to minimally answer most questions on this test. Their pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary frequently interfere with their communication, but they are able to be understood with interpretation on part of the examiner.

28 – 43 = Intermediate
Students who have scores that fall in this range answer most of the questions on the test. The answers are complete, but have room to be more fully expanded. Pronunciation only occasionally interferes with communication. The vocabulary used is basic and there are some inaccurate uses of words. Control of basic grammar structures is emerging.

44 – 59 = High Intermediate

Students who have scores that fall in this range answer many questions fully and accurately. Their pronunciation does not interfere with communication. They accurately use vocabulary and some questions are expanded. Their control of grammar is expanded.

60 – 75 = Advanced

Students who have scores that fall in this range answer most questions fully and accurately. They are able to respond appropriately with elaboration using rich vocabulary. It is clear that they have control of basic grammatical structures.

Result and Discussion

The result of the test was obtained and analyzed. Table (1) displays the rank, score, final result and percentage of the students who participated in the test.

Table 1. *Classification and percentage of participants*

classification	Score	Final Result	Percentage
Beginners	0 -14	-----------	0%
Low Intermediate	14 – 27	12 students	20%
Intermediate	28 – 43	35 students	58%
High Intermediate	44 – 59	10 students	17%
Advanced	60 – 75	3 students	5%
Total		60 students	100%

According to the total score it can be observed that there is no beginners rank among the students who participated in this test. 12 students got low intermediate rank, 35 students got the intermediate rank which is considered as the highest score, 10 students got the high intermediate rank and 3 students got the advanced rank. So according to these results it can be noticed that the highest rank was between low intermediate and intermediate and this is considered to be so low for students in the advanced levels in the Faculty of Education. This also shows the low degree of communicative competence of the students. The researcher also calculated the mean of the students with the Std. Deviation and theoretical mean according to their levels (3rd and 4th year) and this is shown in table (2):

Table 2. *The Level and Statistical measurement of the Participants*

Level	Means	Std. Deviation	Theoretical Mean
3rd year students	28.2400	7.98060	37.5
4th year students	38.6288	12.24285	37.5
Total	34.3000	11.78810	37.5

It can be noticed from the table above that the mean of all students is 34.3 with Std. deviation 11.78 and the theoretical meanwas 37.5. This indicates a decrease in the level of communicative competence. So the figures displayed in table (1) and (2) clearly answer the main question of the study.

In order to find out the level of students according to the criteria of fluency and accuracy, the researcher calculated the mean with Std. deviation and the theoretical mean for this discipline as shown in table (3)

Table 3. *The Fluency and Accuracy Level of the Participants*

Level	Means	Std. Deviation	Theoretical Mean
3rd year students	9.4400	2.59936	12
4th year students	10.7429	3.76	12
Total	10.2000	3.36	12

It can be noticed that the mean for all the students in this discipline was 10.2 with Std. deviation 3.36 and the theoretical mean was 48.57. It can also be noticed that third year students' mean was 9.44 with Std. deviation 2.59 and the theoretical mean was 12. The mean of fourth year students in this discipline was 10.74 with Std. deviation 3.76 and the theoretical mean was 12. This indicates the low level of students in this discipline.

Table 4. *The Pronunciation and Vocabulary level of the Participants*

Level	Means	Std. Deviation	Theoretical Mean
3rd year students	7.4000	3.82971	12
4th year students	11.8000	4.63237	12
Total	9.9699	4.8080	12

So it is clear that the total average score for all the students regarding pronunciation and vocabulary was 9.96 with Std. deviation 4.80 and the theoretical mean was 12. Also, it can be noticed that 3rd year students have the mean 7.40 with Std. deviation 3.82 and the theoretical mean was 12. For fourth year students the mean was 11.8 with Std. deviation 4.63 and the theoretical mean was 12. This indicates that the level of pronunciation and vocabulary of the students in the advanced level is very low.

In order to find out the level of structural and grammatical sentences of the third and fourth year students as framed in question (c) earlier, the same procedure was followed and the answer is displayed in table (5):

Table 5. *Structural and Grammatical level of the participants*

Level	Means	Std. Deviation	Theoretical Mean
3rd year students	11. 4000	3.81881	15.5
4th year students	16.0808	5.85798	15.5
Total	14.1381	7.57543	15.5

It can be noticed from the table above that the mean of all the students in this discipline was 14.13 with Std. Deviation 7.57 and the theoretical mean was 15.5. In isolation, third year students' mean was 11.400 with Std. Deviation 3.81 and the theoretical mean was 15.5. Regarding fourth year students it can be noticed from the table that their mean score was 16.08 with Std. Deviation 5.85 and the theoretical mean was 15.5. These results show the weak level of students in framing grammatical sentences though they are in the advanced levels in the Faculty of Education.

Finally, to answer the last question in this study which is: Is there any difference in the level of communicative competence between third and fourth year students in the Faculty of Education? The researcher used the T.TEST technique to point out the differences, if any, between third and fourth year students in the Faculty of Education as shown in table (6).

Table 6. *The Difference between Third & Fourth Year Students*

Discipline	Level	Means	Std. Deviation	T. Test	Sig.
Part 1	3rd year students	9.4400	2.59936	1.492	.062
	4th year students	10.7429	3.76784	1.585	
Pronunciation & Vocabulary	3rd year students	7.4000	3.82971	3.891	.029

	4th year students	11.8000	4.63237	4.017	
Grammar &Structure	3rd year students	11.4000	3.81881	3.499	.077
	4th year students	16.0857	5.85798	3.747	

It can clearly be noticed that there is no statistical differences in the average score of the students in the advanced levels and this answers question number (d) which the researcher framed earlier. So, the communicative competence of the students in the advanced level in the Faculty of Education majoring in English is not strong enough to attain their goals as English language teachers. In fact there is a serious problem regarding the speaking ability of English majors in the Faculty of Education.
 The main reason of these weakness is that the English language department accepts high school graduates without taking into consideration their proficiency level and whether or not they will be able to manage in a program of English studies. In other words no oral assessment is conducted to measure the proficiency level of the applicants. They are accepted into the department through written proficiency tests. Moreover the large number of students admitted to the English department around 200 students in each level without enough facilities also makes the problem more complicated. As a result it is very difficult to have competent users of English to help in the development of the society. Furthermore many course designers plan and design language courses to end up with students' development of communicative competence. However, the realization of this objective is not feasible for all language learners, especially the foreign ones. Many of them end their language courses without developing the required level of the communicative competence. Different factors may contribute to this failure including teachers' and students' low language proficiency, the traditional teaching methods with teacher-centred instruction, the lack of opportunities for active language practice and the high expectations regarding the development of the communicative competence in comparison with native speakers.

Conclusion
This study has demonstrated that students need a sound knowledge of English to practice their roles as English language teachers in Yemen and this can be attained with emphasis on improving learners' communicative competence; hence, instructors involved in the teaching training programs in Yemen are recommended to self – evaluate their teaching performance on a regular bases in order to ensure quality performance. Moreover to develop our students' communicative competence there is a need to have intensive exposure in spoken English courses

with periodic oral assessment exams which emphasize on improving learners' communicative competence in formal and informal contexts of usage to exceed with the speed of the modern world development.

About the Author:
Dr. Shameem Ahmad Banani works as an Assistant Professor of Linguistics in the English department at the Faculty of Education in Hodeidah University, Yemen. She is currently teaching spoken English. Her areas of interest include phonetics, phonology, morphology, speech recognition, contrastive linguistics and pronunciation issues.

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