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Insufficient language Exposure and Learning Difficulties : A Case of the Palestinian Learners in the Gaza Strip

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It is widely acknowledged that Palestinian university students learning English as a foreign language face many learning difficulties as a result of a variety of reasons. This paper assumes that insufficient exposure to English is one of the main reasons for students' learning difficulties. However, after distributing a survey questionnaire among 50 male and female students at the IUG English Department, results revealed that all the students are moderately exposed to English, and that male students are more exposed to English than female students. Further research is suggested, and some recommendations are presented on how to increase language exposure among and teach English for Palestinian EFL learners.

Introduction

In the age of Internet, information technology and globalization, English has become so important. In Gaza, students study English for twelve years. However it has become widespread among both EFL instructors and learners that many Palestinian EFL learners in the Gaza Strip are weak in English. It seems that the notion is also true about all Arab EFL learners in general. But, does it mean that twelve years of studying English as a foreign language are not enough? In his M.A. thesis, Abu Gazala (2010) stated that the curricula *English for Palestine* are full of activities, and that such activities are important, but they do not help as most learners are unable to produce short sentences, paragraphs and letters to friends. This article sheds light on the issue of "insufficient language exposure" as a cause of the different learning difficulties Gaza EFL learners encounter. In fact, Gaza EFL learners face difficulties in all language skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking, and sub-skills, and this can be attributed to insufficient exposure

to English.

The Problem of the Study

As an EFL instructor at the IUG English department since 1993, the present researcher has realized that many students face difficulties in different language skills and sub-skills. In speaking, for instance, some students are unable to express themselves in English; therefore, they resort to their first language(Arabic) in the classroom. Others feel shy to use English for being afraid of committing errors. In writing, many of them commit a variety of serious and systematic errors such as errors in the use of articles, verb tenses, comparative and superlative adjectives, etc. In reading, some students are very slow readers and mispronounce many words. In fact, many previous researchers referred to such problems such as Al-Abdan, 1993; Jdetawy, 2011; Kharma and Hajjaj, 1989; Nation, 2003; Al-Nofaie, 2010; and Alam et al, 1988. Thus, the purpose of this study is to investigate whether our students are sufficiently exposed to English. In this regard, the researcher hypothesizes that insufficient exposure to English is a main reason for students' learning difficulties.

The Need for the Study

As mentioned before, many studies tackled the issue of learning difficulties, and they attributed these difficulties to a variety of causes. In these studies, insufficient language exposure was one of these causes but not the main one. Such studies include Jdetawy, 2011; Jia, 2003; Ji, Zhang, & Nisbett, 2004; Kim & Margolis, 2000; and Magno, et al , 2009. Most often, researchers dealt with language exposure in relation to child language development. However, the present study will be the only one that investigates the issue of language exposure assuming that it is the main cause for EFL adult students' learning difficulties in the Palestinian society.

Literature Investigation

The literature of EFL learners' difficulties is rich of studies in which scholars tackled this topic and pointed out that EFL learners face many learning difficulties in all skills and sub-skills due to a variety of reasons, and that remedial measures should be taken immediately. Such studies include Kannan (2009); Jdetawy, (2011); Mourtaga (2006); Mourtaga, (2010); Abdul Haq (1982); Wahba, (1998); Abbad, (1988); Rabab'ah, (2003); Zughoul and Taminian, (1984); Zughoul, (1983); Mukattash, (1983); Suleiman, (1983) etc.

Mukattash (1983), for instance, points out that Arab EFL learners keep committing errors

in syntax, morphology, pronunciation, and spelling, and that they are unable to express themselves “comfortably and efficiently”. Al-Shormani (2010) investigates semantic errors of Arab learners and points out many errors committed by these learners in semantics. Kambal (1980) points out that Arab EFL learners make errors in the verb phrase: verb formation, tense, and subject-verb agreement. Al-Jarf (2007) states that Arab EFL learners face several spelling difficulties in English particularly in the early stages of spelling development. Tahaine (2010) states that EFL Arab students encounter serious difficulties in using the appropriate prepositions in their writing. Al-Khasawneh, (2010) indicates that Arab EFL students face problems in vocabulary, grammar, organization of ideas, spelling, and referencing. This, he adds, affects their ability to communicate in writing and speaking. Finally, Mahmoud (2005) states that Arabic-speaking students commit errors when they produce collocations in English, especially the English lexical combinations.

In listening and speaking, Jordan (1997), Clennel (1999), Ferris and Tagg (1996), Zughoul & Taminian (1984) and Abdul Haq (1982) state that EFL students commit serious lexical errors while communicating in English and that they are unable to express themselves adequately in the spoken language. Schaub, (2000) reveals that EFL learners usually try to communicate in English, but they always slip into Arabic because of certain difficulties. Finally, Wahba (1998) states that Egyptian students face certain problems related to pronunciation.

As for the causes of these difficulties, Kannan (2009) summarizes them in the following points:

1. English is not taught properly in the classroom.
2. Students ask for more explanations in Arabic but not in English which makes instructors to adapt a bilingual method.
3. EFL instructors believe that learning English requires constant practice and patience.
4. Learners seem convinced that it is almost impossible to achieve mastery over English language.
5. Learners are weak because they study subjects in English from the examination point of view only. This means they study to pass the test but not to face real life situations.
6. EFL instructors' deviation from the topic
7. Using physical or verbal punishment in class which makes learners look at their instructors as their adversary.

In addition, Jdetawy, (2011) offers other reasons of Arab EFL learners' difficulties:

English is not the mother tongue of the Arab EFL learners, Arab learners use Arabic as their formal language of communication, the

lack of the target language exposure as spoken by its native speakers, the Arab EFL learners' preference for using Arabic in EFL classrooms rather than English, the lack and weakness of the input in their language teaching context, the lack of the Arab EFL learners' personal motivation, the inappropriateness and weakness of the English language curricula adopted by some academic institutions, etc. (10).

It is very important to mention that there is a tendency on the part of both teachers and students towards **using Arabic in EFL classrooms** (Al-Abdan, 1993), and this means minimizing the amount of English language exposure. As for EFL instructors, Jdetawy, (2011) reveals that their use of Arabic depends on specific students' needs such as understanding the new language by beginners. EFL learners, on the other hand, prefer to use L1 in EFL classrooms, especially when they could not express their ideas in second language (Kharma and Hajjaj, 1989), and when they are shy, not proficient or unmotivated to communicate (Nation, 2003). However, this use, according to Al-Nofaie, (2010), is always unavoidable and systematic, and most students prefer it in their EFL classes (Alam, *et al* (1988).

Finally, Zughoul (1983), Mukattash (1983), and Suleiman (1983) state that Arab EFL learners face difficulties because of the lack of learners' personal motivation, inappropriate and weak English language curricula, inappropriate and ineffective language environments, and ineffective teaching methodology.

Language Exposure and Learning Difficulties

Exposure, as defined in the study of Magno et al (2009), refers to

the total amount of time in which an individual has contact with a language, may it be in verbal or written form, formal or informal ways of communications and in which the individual may have either an active or a passive role. Adopting this definition, exposure to a second language occurs whenever individuals engage in conversations in the second language with family members, friends, classmates, and colleagues; whenever they read books, magazines, and newspapers written in that

language; whenever they come across information being disseminated in different multimedia sources; or even when they are mere passive listeners in any activity or place in which the second language is being spoken (2 – 3).

As hypothesized before, many IUG English department students are facing many difficulties in English. The present researcher believes that one of the causes of this low level is the insufficient exposure to English. It is through exposure to English, according to many studies, learners can develop language proficiency ((Jia, 2003; Ji, Zhang, & Nisbett, 2004; Kim & Margolis, 2000), enhance language skills (de Carvalho et al, 2006) especially speaking ones (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Chen, 1993; Levine, Baxter, & McNulty, 1987), and develop motivation to learn the language (Kim and Margolis, 2000). Hence, it can be safely concluded that, when learners develop their language proficiency, their learning difficulties will gradually disappear because it is through exposure to the language, learners will read and write effectively, listen with understanding and speak fluently. Since more opportunities for exposure to the language are offered in an ESL setting, ESL learners develop their second language much faster than learners in an EFL setting.

Methodology

Sample

The sample of the study consists of 25 male and 25 female students selected randomly from a total population of 410 students enrolled at the IUG English department in the second semester of 2011 (Islamic University of Gaza, 2011). All the participants are around 20 years old and live in the Gaza Strip with little differences in their socio-economic status as some of them are from refugee camps and others are from cities.

Instrument

An English language exposure survey questionnaire was adopted from Mango et al (2009), and adapted by the present researcher (appendix I). The 24 items of the English exposure questionnaire reflect different situations where students are exposed to English such as home, friends, university, and media. After reviewing the questionnaire by the present researcher and two of his colleagues at the IUG English department, the three professors agreed to make slight adaptations. For instance, the word school situation was changed into university; a new item (item 9) was added to include writing, and some other slight language changes took place.

As for the questionnaire's internal consistency, Mango et al (2009:67) indicate that

The exposure checklist was pre-tested in 67 students taking courses in general psychology in two different universities. The internal consistency using Cronbach's alpha from all participants indicated high reliability of scores with a value of .91. This shows that at least 91% of the total within-test score variance was due to true score variance rather than to item content heterogeneity or poor item quality.

In both studies, the questionnaire is used to determine how much an individual has contact with English (see appendix I), and the samples in the two studies are university students. Therefore, the present researcher believes that this questionnaire is an excellent tool to achieve the intended objectives.

Procedures

In the second semester of the academic year 2011, the researcher distributed a questionnaire among 50 male and female students at the IUG English department. The researcher first debriefed students about the purpose and objectives of the questionnaire. He made it clear to them that it has nothing to do with tests and evaluation whatsoever. Before checking in the 5-point scale, the participants were told to read each statement carefully before checking how often the situation applies to them. At the same time, the researcher made sure that all the questionnaire sheets were handed in with all items checked in.

Analysis, Results and Discussions

The process of analysis was easily accomplished by the researcher as all of the questionnaire items were clear and easily marked. Then, the researcher input the data and ran the test of statistics with the help of a professor of statistics from the IUG School of Business. The statistical tests yielded the following results:

A) Overall Results

Table (1) shows that the average scores range from 2 to 4.21, and the mean of the scores is 3.07, with standard deviations 0.48.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Scores	50	2.00	4.21	3.07	0.486

Table (1): Descriptive Statistics for overall test

Based on Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test, P value = 0.896, and accordingly, one sample T-test is used to examine whether the average scores exceeds the middle point "sometimes".

	Test Value = 3		
	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Scores	1.058	49	0.295

Table (2): One Sample T-Test Result

Table (2) shows that the one sample T-test results indicate that the average score is significantly different from the middle point "sometimes" ($t=1.058$, $p\text{-value}=0.295$). In other words, there is sufficient evidence to conclude that the mean scores for the students are greater than the middle point "sometimes". This means that the hypothesis stated above is disconfirmed. This result is undoubtedly different from results revealed earlier by the present researcher (Mourtaga, 2010, and Mourtaga, 2006). In the first study on Arab EFL writing problems, the questionnaire results showed that our students write only 2.15 page a week, while in the second one on reading

difficulties, results revealed that our learners read only 3.1 page a week. Therefore, further research is needed to investigate in depth the issue of language exposure and other possible reasons for students' difficulties in English.

B) Differences between Males and Females

Table (3) shows the average scores ranges from 2.42 to 4.21 and 2.00 to 4.21 for males and females, respectively. The means scores for males and females are 3.26 and 2.88, respectively, with standard deviations 0.41 and 0.48, respectively.

Gender	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Males	25	2.42	4.21	3.26	0.41
Females	25	2.00	4.21	2.88	0.48

Table (3): Descriptive Statistics for Males and Females

Based on Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test, P-value = 0.926 and 0.609 for males and females, respectively, and accordingly, independent samples T-test is used to examine the difference between the mean scores for males and females.

Table (4) shows the independent samples T-test results which indicate that there is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores for independent samples T-test ($t = 2.997$, $p\text{-value} = 0.004$).

t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
2.997	48	0.004*

Table (4): Independent Samples T-Test Result Equality of Means

* The difference between means is statistically significant at 0.05 levels

Since the sign of the T-test is positive, we conclude that the mean scores for males is significantly greater than the mean scores for females. In other words, Palestinian male students

have more contact with or exposure to English than females have in their daily life whether at university, at home, in the street or in the media.

The question that might be asked is, why do Palestinian male students have more exposure to English than females have? In their research of female and male learners' differences in terms of autonomous language learning activities they adopt both inside and outside the class, Varol and Yilmaz (2010) studied 80 seventh grade primary school learners using a likert-scale questionnaire and a teacher interview. The researchers reported that their data analysis revealed similar results for both female and male learners. However, Maubach and Morgan (2000) stated that male students seem more willing to take risks; speak spontaneously, ask questions, and happy to dominate whole-class attention. In other words, male students are expected to have more exposure to English.

As for Palestinian students, it is important to remember that these students live in a conservative and male dominated society. Therefore, males seem to have more freedom in their language contact at home, especially when dealing with the media. For instance, males may spend long hours in contact with English through watching movies, programs, news, and through browsing different Internet sites. In some cases, they are the decision makers in the family, and in other cases, they have the ability to challenge their parents. Such freedom may not be given to females because of many reasons such as keeping their morality and values, protecting their honor, not being decision makers and weak to challenge their parents.

At university or in the street, Palestinian males have more contact with English than females have. The present researcher agrees with Maubach and Morgan's findings (2000) stated above that males seem more willing to take risks; speak spontaneously, ask questions, etc. Palestinian female students, on the other hand, are much shier than males. Therefore, many of them hesitate to ask questions in class or make comment on issues under discussion. The present researcher remembers that in previous semesters, some shy female students abstained from presenting their papers in front of the class sacrificing 10% of the total course grade.

Conclusion

Like most of the Arab EFL learners, Palestinian EFL learners face many learning problems for many reasons. While this article assumed insufficient language exposure as a main cause for students' difficulties, results revealed that while IUG English department students have, to a some extent, some contact with and exposure to English, male students have more contact than

females. Therefore, further research is needed, taking into consideration a larger sample from many academic institutions in the Gaza Strip. In addition, other possible causes of students' learning difficulties should be investigated such as the teaching methods used at the IUG English department, the curricula used, and the courses and their sequence in the department plan.

Pedagogical Suggestions

In spite of the positive results about language exposure, the present researcher believes that more exposure and practice is the solution for most of the students' learning difficulties. Many scholars point out that exposure to English provides more practice (Bongaerts et al, 1997; Fullana, 2006; Magno et al, 2009, etc). In addition, Bongaerts et al (1997) state that through more and more exposure to and practice of English, FL learners can attain native-like phonological skills in the target language despite the late age of learning. Of course, this exposure and opportunity to practice the language will increase within an English-speaking context, which enable EFL learners to imbibe and internalize the English language through communication (Magno et al, 2009). Therefore, the present researcher found that the following suggestions stated by World, Language and Culture, (2011) are wonderful and can be adopted in the Palestinian context to increase language exposure to and contact with English:

1. Find a pen pal suitable to your language needs, age, and interests. This might be through the E-mail, fax, text chat or voice chat, text messaging, or video conferencing via the Internet.
2. Rent and watch a foreign film: Foreign films are common nowadays. They can be found on TV, on the Internet, and in many academic and cultural institutions. The Internet might be the best as there are many sites that provide special short films for EFL learners, and many of them are available for download for free. Make sure that these films do not violate your culture, belief, and values. In addition, make sure that these films are not dubbed, but rather in the original language. If you do not understand much of the language in the movie, do not bother. At least you will attune your ear to the sounds of the language, and by the end of the film, you'll be able to understand bits and pieces of what you hear.
3. Read or watch foreign news online: If written newspapers are unavailable or expensive, the Internet and the TV give access to 1000s of international news sources within seconds. In this

respect, the current researcher believes that Al Jazeera English channel might be a best choice. Be aware of the biased news sources which may not reflect the truth.

4. Find native speakers in your community
5. Join or start a conversation group
6. Find a book or magazine in your library
7. Use a foreign language search engine to explore your interests
8. Join a foreign language discussion board
9. Visit a foreign language chat room
10. Explore a foreign language magazine

In addition to language exposure and practice, it is essential for both EFL instructors and learners to realize that acquiring language proficiency means acquiring a set of skills and a subset of skills. Specifically, learners need to acquire the ability to speak, comprehend, read, and write; and they need to possess knowledge of vocabulary, the command of grammatical structures, understanding of cultural contexts in which language appears, etc. Such skills and sub-skills are interrelated and affect each other. This means improving one's ability in one skill or area will cause some improvement in other areas. Therefore, it is helpful and essential for EFL learners to be exposed to and to practice language in various ways.

Using effective teaching methods and techniques, and dealing with students in a human fashion are as important as language exposure and practice. For instance, good EFL instructors should be able to handle whole classes and, at the same time, be able to deal with individual learners. In this regard, Kannan (2009) states that teachers' responsibility lies not only with the average and above average students, but this should depend on learners' needs. Slow learners, for example, should be given extra coaching and counseling. Such counseling can be in private in order not to embarrass learners. For instance, it is not good to criticize or repeatedly correct a learner's errors in front of his or her classmates.

Finally, EFL instructors should encourage and motivate their learners to participate in class using English only. If this step is taken early in the first class session, learners will get used to this and therefore, their language exposure and practice will increase. As for shy learners, it is up to the instructor to use effective ways to attract them into the discussion such as using groups, asking opinion questions, etc. In this way, learners will learn, know and understand, but not memorize for the exam.

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Appendix (I) : Items for the Checklist for English Language Exposure

Gender: ___ Male ___ Female

Instruction: Read each item and check how often is the situation applied to you. Shade the bubble corresponding to your answer

	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Home					
1. My parents talk in English.	<input type="radio"/>				
2. English is spoken at home.	<input type="radio"/>				
3. I converse in English with my family.	<input type="radio"/>				
4. I engage in activities where English is used.	<input type="radio"/>				
Friends					
5. My friends speak English.	<input type="radio"/>				
6. I attend social gatherings where English is spoken.	<input type="radio"/>				
7. I talk with my friends in English.	<input type="radio"/>				
University					
8. My professors speak in English	<input type="radio"/>				
9. My professors encourage students to write in English	<input type="radio"/>				
10. The activities in my school are conducted in English.	<input type="radio"/>				
11. My classmates speak in English.	<input type="radio"/>				
12. My school encourages students to speak in English.	<input type="radio"/>				
13. The medium of instruction used in the lecture room is English.	<input type="radio"/>				
Media					
14. I chat online in English.	<input type="radio"/>				
15. I send text messages in English.	<input type="radio"/>				
16. I receive text messages in English.	<input type="radio"/>				
17. I browse WebPages that are written in English.	<input type="radio"/>				
18. I listen to songs in English.	<input type="radio"/>				
19. I watch movies in English.	<input type="radio"/>				
20. I watch TV shows in English.	<input type="radio"/>				
21. I read magazines written in English.	<input type="radio"/>				
22. I read newspapers written in English.	<input type="radio"/>				
23. I read books written in English.	<input type="radio"/>				
24. The information I read around is in English.	<input type="radio"/>				

Adopted from Mango et al 2009 and adapted by the researcher