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Exploring the Role of Functional English in Enhancing Academic and Professional Communication among Engineering Students: A Qualitative Case Study at Quaid-E-Awam University of Engineering, Sciences & Technology, Nawabshah

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ABSTRACT

The focus of the proposed qualitative case study was to understand how the Functional English course could enhance the academic and professional communication skills of engineering students at Quaid-e-Awam University of Engineering, Sciences, and Technology, Shaheed Benazirabad. The research examined how students perceived English language teaching and how they acquired language competence upon taking the course.

Ten first-year undergraduate students from the Civil Engineering and Environmental Engineering departments were used as participants. Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data and analyze them thematically.

The results showed that there was an improvement in the perceptions of students concerning the English language. The respondents said that they had better language skills and were more confident in their abilities to communicate in English, both academically and professionally. The paper highlights the efficacy of courses in Functional English, and it also points out the necessity of having practical pedagogical strategies and institutional assistance in improving the communication skills of the students.

Keywords: Functional English, Engineering Education, Academic Communication, Professional Communication, Qualitative Case Study.

Introduction

English has become the global academic language of communication, science, and even employment, especially in engineering and technology (Crystal, 2003; Graddol, 2006). English in higher education plays an important role by being an entry way to textbooks,



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research articles, technical documentation, and knowledge networks worldwide (Hyland, 2006; Jenkins, 2015). Effective communication in English is a compulsory academic and professional need among engineering students (Darling and Dannels, 2003; Spence and Liu, 2013).

In countries where the English language is not a mother tongue, like Pakistan, most engineering undergraduates have difficulties with the use of the English language in academic and professional life because of poor exposure, instruction of the language based on grammar, and a lack of communicative practices of the language (Rahman, 2002; Mansoor, 2004; Shamim, 2011). They frequently lead to lack of confidence, anxiety, and deficient communicative competence, which in turn influence the academic achievement and employability of students (Ahmed, 2015; Khan, 2011). In response, Pakistani universities have been making efforts to roll out courses on Functional English as undergraduate subjects, especially in engineering subjects (HEC, 2017).

The basis of functional English classes is English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which puts more focus on the practical use of the language, instruction centered on the learner, and communication requirements in real life (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Richards, 2006; Nation and Macalister, 2010). The goals of the courses are competence in reading, writing, listening, and speaking, which are inclined towards academic activities, i.e., a presentation, writing reports, and group discussion, and writing of professional letters (Hyland, 2007; Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998). It is proposed that the functional and task-oriented language teaching may promote a great deal of communicative and confidence among learners (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Littlewood, 2007).

The perception of students is a key indicator in the learning outcome, as a positive attitude is highly related to motivation, engagement, and successful acquisition of language (Gardner, 1985; Dornyei, 2005; Brown, 2007). Qualitative research emphasizes that the insight into the experiences of learners can be considered a more comprehensive understanding of the intervention level (Creswell, 2013; Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). Past research in engineering and ESP settings indicates that the attendees of the courses in Functional English are appreciative when they perceive that the courses are applicable to their academic and professional requirements (Fareh, 2010; Rao, 2019; Al-Haq and Smadi, 1996). Nonetheless, the studies on the perceptions of the students in certain institutional and disciplinary settings in Pakistan are sparse.

The paper is thus an inquiry into how the course in Functional English helps in improving the academic and professional communication skills of undergraduate engineering students at Quaid-e-Awam University of Engineering, Sciences and Technology, Shaheed Benazirabad. The research will make contributions to the emerging body of research on the topic of teaching Functional English and ESP because the students pursuing the Civil and Environmental Engineering major will be studied in order to offer some insights into teaching both subjects to teachers and policymakers.

Statement of the Problem

Although all the engineering programs in Pakistan include the course of the Functional English language, still, a lot of students face problems in effective English communication both in education and professional spheres (Mansoor, 2004; Rahman, 2002). Traditional teaching approach, insufficient engagement in the use of meaningful language, and inability to match course materials and disciplinary requirements of students are problematic factors (Shamim, 2011; Ahmed, 2015). Even though Functional English courses are supposed to resolve these problems by using practical and communicative



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methods, there is a lack of empirical evidence on the subject based on the perspective of the students, especially in universities providing engineering courses in the public sector (Fareh, 2010; Rao, 2019). It is necessary to examine the perceptions of engineering students towards Functional English courses and how they perceive that they have developed communication skills, in this case, Quaid-e-Awam University of Engineering, Sciences and Technology, Shaheed Benazirabad.

Research Questions

How do engineering students perceive the Functional English course at Quaid-e-Awam University of Engineering, Sciences & Technology, Shaheed Benazirabad?

How do engineering students perceive the role of the Functional English course in developing their academic and professional communication skills?

Literature Review

The use of English in engineering education is essential as it would help students to understand technical knowledge, communicate effectively, and interact with knowledge networks across the globe (Crystal, 2003; Jenkins, 2015). Researchers show that most non-native engineering students in non-native English-speaking countries such as Pakistan have difficulties with the functional use of language, despite the initial education in English (Rahman, 2002; Mansoor, 2004). Conventional grammar-based approaches do not usually prepare students with the communicative competence needed to accomplish academic assignments, presentations, and business correspondence (Shamim, 2011; Ahmed, 2015). The challenges are to be solved with the help of functional English courses based on the principles of ESP and CLT with the purpose of practical language use, task-based learning, and student-centered instructions (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Richards, 2006; Nation and Macalister, 2010). It has been shown that these strategies contribute to the development of all four language competencies and make students feel more confident in their academic and professional situations in real life (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Littlewood, 2007).

The attitude of students towards language courses has a great influence on the outcomes of learning. Motivation, engagement, and achievement are associated with positive attitudes (Gardner, 1985; Dörnyei, 2005). The qualitative research demonstrates that the investigation of the students' experience is a good source of information about the effectiveness of teaching tools and the relevance of the curriculum (Creswell, 2013; Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). Students in engineering and ESP appreciate the courses that match their academic and professional requirements (Fareh, 2010; Rao, 2019). Nevertheless, research work has not been done on perceptions in Pakistani public-sector engineering universities, which forms a gap that is met by this study.

Research Methodology

Research Design

The qualitative case study design was used in this study as it aimed to investigate the importance of the Functional English course in improving the academic and professional communication skills of engineering students. The qualitative research is appropriate when it is necessary to gain insights into the perceptions, experiences, and attitudes of the participants (Creswell, 2013; Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). The case study method enabled the researcher to analyze the experiences of students in the background of the Civil and Environmental Engineering programs in Quaid-e-Awam University of Engineering, Sciences and Technology, Shaheed Benazirabad



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Population and Sample

The study population comprised undergraduate engineering students in the Civil Engineering and Environmental Engineering departments who had attended the Functional English course. Ten students were chosen through purposive sampling as a sample to make sure that the participants had enough experience relevant to the course and could present rich and detailed information about it (Palinkas et al., 2015). Male and female students were represented to capture different points of view.

Research Instrument

A semi-structured interview guide was used to collect data, giving the participants flexibility to express their perception and the interviewer flexibility to dig deeper into a particularly important answer (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). The interview guide was a ten-item/ten-question questionnaire that highlighted the students' experiences, perceptions, and skills that they acquired during the course of the Functional English.

Example Interview Items:

What do you think was your general experience with the Functional English course?

What do you believe were the best English language skills that you had developed (reading, writing, speaking, and listening)?

What is your experience with the Functional English course with respect to academic tasks in terms of assignments, presentations, or projects?

Does the completion of the course help you feel more confident in communicating in English? Please explain.

What do you consider the most useful parts of the Functional English course?

Did you experience any difficulties in this course when learning English?

To what extent do you believe the Functional English course would be pertinent to your future career?

What was the effect of the teaching practices and activities on your learning?

What would you recommend to fix the Functional English course?

How do you use the acquired skills in Functional English in your day-to-day academic or professional activity?

Data Collection Procedure

Formal communication with potential participants was conducted during research, and they were given comprehensive information on the objectives, importance, and procedures of the research. The participants were guaranteed confidentiality, anonymity, and their right to withdraw from the study at any point without incurring any repercussions. All the participants signed the informed consent before the data collection. Individual semi-structured interviews were also used to collect data, and this enabled uniformity in the data collected and, simultaneously, more freedom to delve deeper into the issues emerging. The interviews were about 30-45 minutes long and took place in a very quiet and cozy environment to make the respondents feel free to be candid. All the interviews were tape-recorded with the consent of the participants in order to be accurate with the data. The transcription was then done verbatim by keeping the original words of the participants in order to uphold the integrity and richness of the qualitative data.

Data Analysis

The data obtained were analyzed through thematic analysis, a popular qualitative method of analysis which emphasizes identification, analysis, and reporting patterns or themes within data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Analysis was done in a systematic, multi-stage



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process. First, all the transcripts of interviews were read several times to ensure familiarity with the data and to obtain a general idea of the participants' point of view. Second, the data segments were coded in meaningful events, and the focus was on the statements concerning perceptions of students and their experiences and skill development. Third, the similar codes were coded and clustered under larger themes, which reflected repetitive patterns in the data set. Lastly, the identified themes have been reviewed, refined, and defined well to ensure that they were able to capture the responses of the participants well and according to the objectives of the research. This intensive and repeated exercise contributed to the validity and reliability of the results.

Major Themes and Discussion

Theme 1: Academic and Professional language skills development.

The participants claimed that they had developed all four language skills, the most noticeable being writing and speaking, especially report writing in the classroom presentations and discussions. This is in line with the ESP and Functional English goals that focus on practical and discipline-specific language application (Hutchinson and Waters, 1987; Hyland, 2006). Practical and vocational teaching fills the gap between the theoretical and practical needs of communication (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Rao, 2019).

Theme 2: More confidence in the use of English.

Participants felt more comfortable talking in the classroom, presenting and discussing, as well as interacting with classmates and teachers. The trust was expanded past the classroom, which improved future professional communication. This is in line with studies that reflect the role of affective factors, motivation, and learner-centered approaches in alleviating language anxiety (Gardner, 1985; Dörnyei, 2005; Brown, 2007; Littlewood, 2007).

Theme 3: Applied Generosity to Engineering Learning and Practices.

Students stressed the importance of Functions English activities (technical reports, presentations, emails, and group discussions) to engineering assignments and communication at the workplace. Discipline-specific teaching is more engaging and motivating, which fosters employability when contextualized (Dudley-Evans and St John, 1998; Hyland, 2007; Fareh, 2010; Spence and Liu, 2013).

Theme 4: The Interaction with Task-Based and Interactive Instruction.

Role plays, group work, and collaborative tasks, which were interactive and task-based strategies, were more attractive compared to traditional instruction. These approaches improve language proficiency and development of positive attitudes towards studying English, which is relevant to the preference of the engineering students to applied learning (Richards, 2006; Ellis, 2003; Littlewood, 2007; Nation and Macalister, 2010).

Ethical Considerations

The research process was followed to the letter in terms of ethical principles. The participants were assured that all the information they would give would be handled on a very confidential basis and that their identities would not be named in any report or publication that would come out of the research. The involvement in the study was voluntary, and the subjects were notified that they could withdraw at any point in time without being disadvantaged. Special attention was paid to working with sensitive information to reduce the risk of possible harm and embarrassment to participants. The



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data that were collected were safely stored in password-protected digital files, and only the researcher had access to it, hence safeguarding and maintaining the data integrity.

Trustworthiness

The credibility and reliability of the study were attained through the use of strategies to improve the credibility and reliability of qualitative research. Member checking was also applied as one of the major validation methods, in which an initial set of findings and interpretations was provided to participants to make certain that they were accurate, as well as to make sure that the findings were a true reflection of their point of view and experience. Moreover, the triangulation was realized by the comparison and cross-checking of the received data of the various participants to determine the common themes and regular trends of the entire data. These plans helped in the rigor of the study and enhanced the credibility, dependability, and conformability of the research findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Results and Findings

The study research and findings are that there are a number of significant consequences of the effects of the Functional English course on the engineering students. To start with, the interviewees made considerable progress in language skills such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking, the latter two being most evident. Second, the students have stated that they had more confidence in the use of English, both in the classroom activities and when conducting professional communication. Third, the course was deemed as being practically relevant, and tasks like report writing, presentations, and professional correspondence were all directly related to their future careers. Fourth, task-centered and interactive engagements worked well to enhance engagement and motivation, thus motivating the students to be engaged in their learning. Lastly, certain issues were also discovered, such as the huge sizes of the classes and the lack of the opportunity to focus on the students personally, which sometimes impaired the learning process of the students.

Conclusion

The course of Functional English is important to improve the communication skills of engineering students, and it acts as an intermediary between the theoretical engineering knowledge and the practical one. The research indicates that the course not only makes students develop reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills but also helps them to have significant confidence in using English in both academic and professional situations. Task-based, interactive, and discipline-specific activities of the course help the students to use their language skills in real-life situations, including report writing, presentations, email correspondence, and collaborative projects. Besides, the Functional English course can reduce language anxiety in students and help them gain a positive attitude towards studying English, which is paramount to their academic activities and future employability. All in all, with the help of the course, the engineering students will be provided with the linguistic and communicative means that they will need to succeed in their studies and in professional life, which is why practical and learner-centred approaches to teaching the language in higher education should be prioritised.

Recommendations

In order to make the study of a functional English course more effective among the engineering students, teachers should introduce both task-based and interactive pedagogies, which are fully related to academic and professional communication needs.



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The exercises are supposed to be modified to suit the needs of the Civil and Environmental Engineering students, and the language practice process in question is supposed to be as related to the sphere as possible. Individual writing and speaking may be reinforced by means of organised assignments, presentations, and real-life communication tasks and give students valuable chances to practice what they have learnt. It is also important that the size of the classes should be managed effectively because small or even small classes can be guided and instructed more individually. Also, the feedback should be given continuously to track progress, solve learning difficulties, and provide specific assistance when it is needed. Lastly, course content must also be checked regularly and revised to remain in line with industry standards and the changing academic requirements so that the students are well prepared to take up their future careers.

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