

Novice Scholars and Speaking for Academic Purposes Course

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ABSTRACT: *This paper examined the viewpoints of novice scholars on the significance of English for academic purpose course. A mixed methodology was adopted and two tools were used for data collection: an interview and a questionnaire. The results of the data collected showed a largely unanimous agreement among the participants on the importance of the skill of speaking for academic purpose and the necessity of attending the training course on it. The participants began and ended the course with the same positive attitudes. A number of factors had led to such a unanimous attitude towards the course. Offering beforehand promotional sessions to acquaint the participants with the contents and nature of the course and/or making the contents and the objectives of such a course accessible to the novice scholars were the most prominent factors.*

KEY WORDS: novice scholars, academic presentation, professional development

INTRODUCTION

The Centre for Academic and Professional Development offers training courses to teaching assistants, lecturers, and assistant professors at Khartoum University before they can apply for promotion. Speaking for Academic Purpose is one of three English modules offered among the required courses for promotion. As the first batch did not receive enough information about the contents and the nature of these courses, especially Speaking for Academic Purpose, there have been different views and divergent opinions on the courses. Some faculty have accepted the justifications for these courses and welcomed the resolution, others rejected them all together and third group held the stick about middle, see Gubair (2023). A second batch has been enrolled. This batch differs from the previous one, in that, they have ample information about the contents and the nature of the course. Examining the opinions of this new batch on the course is the focus of the current research.

Statement of the problem

Most of the faculty members at the University of Khartoum came from the highest-ranked graduates, with first or a minimum second upper class degrees. The recruits joined the university as teaching assistants and got promoted along their career paths after getting higher qualifications within a period of not more than ten years as stipulated in the contract signed when they accepted the job offer. However, most of the recruits were graduates of faculties other than the faculties of education although their primary work is teaching in their fields of speciality, be it medicine, veterinary sciences, law or any other discipline. Getting a degree in specific discipline does not qualify one to be able to teach that discipline. Teaching is a profession that requires certain training on how to do the job. As well it requires an acquaintance with the various teaching approaches and theories, an acquaintance of the academic research and its ethics, and the acquisition of academic presentation skills. In addition, the novice scholars need a continuous-on-the-job training. However, the training of the young teaching staff is the loop hole in the novice scholars' profile as the majority of the faculty members get their teaching Knowledge by trial-and-error practices. To compensate for the training gap in the novice scholars' professional development paths, a number of courses were imposed as requirements for academic promotion. The first batch were enrolled in these courses and a study investigating the novice scholars' attitudes towards these courses was carried out. A second batch was also enrolled. In the current study, the attitudes of the second batch of the novice scholars towards these courses are being investigated.

Research Questions

The study aims to investigate the attitudes of the novice scholars of the second batch towards the training courses they attended as part of the requirements of their professional developments. The study tries to answer the questions below:

1. What attitudes do novice scholar of the second batch have towards the course: 'Speaking for Academic Presentations'?
2. To what extend does the course meet the novice scholars' expectations?
3. What additions or modifications need to be considered so that the course can provide the maximum benefits for the trainees?

Research hypotheses

The research questions were based on the following hypotheses:

1. The required courses provide both knowledge and professional training that novice scholars need in their professional career.
2. The courses were expected to meet most of their expectations.

3. Novice scholars were expected to attain an awareness of the different types of academic presentations, skills of presentations and general knowledge of what the profession of teaching requires.

Objectives of the study

The current study aimed to investigate the novice scholars' attitudes towards the required courses offered at the Centre for Academic and Professional Development of the university of Khartoum and the gains they were expected to get on attending them. The ultimate objectives of the study were to help in improving such courses.

Scope of the study

The English department of the Faculty of Arts, University of Khartoum prepares and offers three English courses as part of a training program for novice scholars managed and run by the Centre for Academic and Professional Development. Speaking for Academic Presentation is one of these English courses. The current study will be limited to studying the scholars' attitudes towards that specific course and the expected gains the participants might get on attending the course.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Requirements of teaching in higher education

To teach in higher education, one must undergo years of training in both research and teaching. Nevertheless, teaching is left for university teaching staff to develop on their own (Heather Fry, et al 2009). Teachers learn what works and what does not work in teaching mostly by trial and error. Until they get the disciplinary knowledge necessary for being a disciplinary specialist, most higher education teachers remain specialists with some knowledge of teaching rather than disciplinary specialists who know how to handle the process of teaching within their disciplines (Heather, et at 2009; Berthiaume, 2007; Lenze, 1995).

Pedagogical knowledge and disciplinary knowledge are two lines of research in higher education. Pedagogical knowledge includes the teacher's knowledge about teaching, his or her beliefs, and his or her goals relating to teaching; while disciplinary knowledge consists of the sociocultural characteristics of the discipline and the epistemological structure of the discipline (Hiebert et al., 2002; Munby et al., 2001; Becher and Trowler, 2001).

Objectives of speaking in academic settings

McEvedy et al (1986) lists two sets of aims for speaking in academic settings, one being instrumental and the other being acculturative. The instrumental objectives include a) planning and researching material for presentation, b) preparing an oral version of the written material, c) rehearsing, d) using appropriate visual aids, and e) explaining various types of preparations.

The acculturation objectives include a) raising students' awareness of their expected roles in an academic presentation, b) explaining the roles of the leader and other participants in presentations, and c) clarifying the researchers' roles when interacting with their supervisors (Kutz and Salzman 1995).

Studies in speaking in academic settings

Edna F. Lima (2016) investigated the effectiveness of training foreign learners on prosody and oral presentation skills. The study included four Chinese speakers and 64 listeners, natives of 14 different languages. The findings show that training in oral presentation skills is effective and has the potential to lead to academic success.

Carrie Cameron, et al. (2013) carried quantitative research investigating the trainees and their mentors' perceptions of the process of learning scientific communication skills, their feelings about the challenges, and their mentor's role in the process. Semi-structured focus groups and interviews were used as tools for data collection. Forty-three trainees and 50 mentors took part in the study. The results showed diverging views among the participants on the role of mentoring in fostering communication skills development. While the trainees expressed interest in learning scientific communication skills, the mentors reported a lack of motivation and guidance resistance among the trainees. The outcomes indicated a degree of discontent, dissatisfaction, and a lack of understanding between the mentors and trainees.

Ohnishi, S., Ford, J. H. (2015) Carried out a study entitled 'Academic presentation skills for Ph.D. students'. The study investigated the extent of improvement that regular seminar presentation opportunities have on the academic presentation skills of Ph.D. students. Data from around sixty of the participants were used for detailed analysis. Three presentation skills: structure, visuals, and delivery were scored for each seminar, and the scores were statistically analysed. The participants' academic presentation skills were found to have improved based on the results.

Research on group oral presentations in an EAP context was carried out by Mu-hsuan Chou (2011). The author investigated among other things, the benefits of cooperative learning on students' English speaking ability improvement. Questionnaires, interviews, and oral presentation assessments were used for data collection. Fifty-two college students majoring in French participated in the study. Participants delivered oral presentations on the topics taught in class. The findings showed positive impacts on the students' language performance in some types of presentations. The findings also showed that group oral presentation had a noticeable influence on improving students' speaking ability.

The current study

The previous studies and the current one had much in common, in that, these studies investigate the skill of presentation as an important skill necessary for survival in higher education institutions. However, the current study differs from the previous ones in a number of ways. It differs in the context where the study took place (University of

Khartoum); it differs in the sample of the study (novice scholar); it differs in the objectives (novice scholars' attitudes towards certain courses related to speaking for academic purpose); it differs in the methodology adopted. The expected results of the study will somehow differ from the previous studies as a result of these differences. The aim of the study was to contribute to the development of speaking skills for academic presentations at higher education institutions.

Methodology of the study

The current study examines how novice scholars perceive the courses offered by the Centre for Professional Development of the University of Khartoum. The paper seeks to find out what these scholars think of the courses, what needs they expect the courses to meet and to what extent the courses really met these needs. The study adopts a mixed methodology using two tools for data collection: an interview and a questionnaire.

Technique of data collection

The interview focuses on the novice scholars' attitudes towards the course. It seeks to find out the participants' attitudes towards the course, their expectations and whether the course meets their needs and expectations. The questionnaire aimed to collect data to answer the three questions regarding the novice scholars' attitudes, needs and expectations. It consisted of two parts. Part A was concerned with the demographic information of the subjects, and part B sought to generate data to answer the research questions. Part B consisted of ten questions. Questions (1&9) aimed to collect data for the research question no.1. Questions (2,3,7&8) collected data for the research question no.2. Finally, questions 4,5, 6, and 10 were designed to collect data for answering research question 3.

Participants

The subjects were a second batch of novice scholars attending training courses in different disciplines at the Centre of Professional Development of the University of Khartoum. The participants were 22 university teachers including teaching assistants, lecturers and assistant professors at different universities, though the majority were from Khartoum University. They were of different specialties in both hard and soft sciences. The participants, unlike the previous batch, appeared to have some understanding of the course's nature and contents.

Procedures

The course began with the participants being individually asked two questions. The first question was about their attitudes towards the English component in the required training programme. The second was about what they expected to learn from the course.

At the end of the course, the participants were asked to complete a questionnaire. They were also told to feel free to ask for clarification if they found any point in the questionnaire which was not clear or needed explanation. Fortunately, the researcher

received no enquiry about the contents of the questionnaire. At the end of the last training session, the completed copies were picked up.

DATA ANALYSIS

The results of the interview

The study investigated the novice scholars' attitudes towards the course of Speaking for Academic Purposes offered among other English courses in the training programme of the Centre for Professional Development of the University of Khartoum. The study attempted to find out what the novice scholars thought of the English component in general and the course of Speaking English for Academic Purposes in particular, what needs they expected the course would meet, and the extent to which the course really met their needs. Unlike the participants in the first batch who had divergent and conflicting views on the course, the participants of the second batch have positive attitudes towards it. They also unanimously welcomed the English courses and thought that attending such courses would be a chance for them to improve their English in general. They also said that attending the course would help in improving their academic writing, enhancing their communicative ability and enriching their linguistic repertoires.

The results of the questionnaire

The questionnaire aimed to collect data to answer the research questions regarding the novice scholars' needs and expectations. The questionnaire consisted of two parts A and B. Part A aimed to collect demographic information of the subjects, while part B sought to generate data to answer the research questions.

The participants' Demographic Information

Gender			Discipline			Training on presentation			Presentation at academic forums		
Category	No	%	Category	No	%	Category	No	%	Category	No	%
Male	9	40	hard science	12	55	trained	8	36	Yes	8	36
Female	13	60	soft science	10	45	not trained	14	64	No	14	64
Total	22	100	Total	22	100	Total	22	100	Total	22	100

Table 1: Demographic information

As shown in Table 1 above, the participants were 22 individuals from both sexes. They came from different academic backgrounds, including arts, education, medicine, health, nursing, agriculture and others. About 55% of the participants specialized in hard science and 45% in soft sciences. The majority of the participants had neither received training in academic presentation nor had experiences of presentation at academic forums.

Part B consisted of ten questions. Questions 1&9 aimed to collect data for the research question no.1. Questions 2, 3,7&8 collected data for the research question no.2. Finally questions 4, 5,6 &10 were designed to collect data for answering research question no.3.

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Four aspects were covered by the questionnaire. The aspects included novice scholars' attitudes towards the course, their needs and expectations, the extent to which their needs and expectations were met, and an overall evaluation of the course.

The total number of scholars who responded to this questionnaire (sample size) was 22. The questionnaire used a five-point scale (Likert scale), and the mean and orientation were calculated for each item. The orientation (degree of agreement) was based on the weighted average as follows: Less than 1.80 is very low, from 1.80 to less than 2.60 is low, from 2.60 to less than 3.40 is average, from 3.40 to less than 4.20 is high and more than or equals to 4.20 is very high.

The novice scholars' attitudes towards the course

Statement	No. of responses	Strongly Agree		Agree		Not Sure		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		% of agreement	Weighted Average	Degree of agreement
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%			
1. Presentation skill is an index of excellence in work place	22	16	73	4	20	2	7	0	0	0	0	93.2	4.66	Very high
2. The presentation skill is a necessity that the nature of our work dictates.	22	10	46	10	46	2	8	0	0	0	0	87.6	4.38	Very high
Overall result of the theme												90	4.52	Very high

Table 2: Novice scholars' attitudes.

The summary results in the table 2 above showed that 93.2% of participants were satisfied with (the presentation skill as an index of excellence). The weighted overall average was 4.66 which means that the degree of satisfaction was "very high" and about 87.6% of the participants think that (the presentation skill is a necessity that their work place dictates (. The degree of satisfaction with these statements was "very high "with the weighted average of 4.66 and 4.38 respectively. The overall satisfaction level with all data was very high.

The novice scholars' needs and expectations

Statement	No. of responses	Strongly Agree		Agree		Not Sure		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		% of agreement	Weighted Average	Degree of agreement
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%			
3 My presentation skill needs improvement	22	16	71	5	21	2	8	0	0	0	0	92.6	4.63	Very high
4 I need to learn more about what makes an effective presentation.	22	11	48	9	42	2	10	0	0	0	0	87.6	4.38	Very high
5 Presenting a topic before the other participants enabled me to realize how far or close I was from being an effective presenter	22	9	43	11	52	1	5	0	0	0	0	87.6	4.38	Very high
6 Being observed and assessed by the other participants encouraged me a lot to work hard to satisfy their expectations.	22	11	50	9	43	2	7	0	0	0	0	88.6	4.43	Very high
Overall result of the theme												89	4.46	Very high

Table 3: Novice scholars' needs and expectations.

The summary results in the table 3 above showed that 92.6% of the novice scholars were satisfied with the importance of improving their presentation skills with weighted average of 4.63, which means the degree of satisfaction, was very high. About 87.6% thought that their presentation skills needed

improvement, 88.6% were satisfied that the participation in the course would enable them to assess their presentation skills and about 89 thought that peer observations work helped them aspire to enhance their presentation capacities. The weighted overall average was 4.46, which indicates that there was a high level of satisfaction.

Meeting the scholars’ needs and expectations

Statement	No. of responses	Strongly Agree		Agree		Not Sure		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		% of agreement	Weighted Average	Degree of agreement
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%			
7 The course in presentation skill enhanced my awareness of the necessary elements of an effective presentation.	22	13	61	7	31	2	8	0	0	0	0	90.6	4.53	Very high
8 The course provided a hands-on experience of practicing the necessary elements of an effective presentation.	22	13	58	7	34	2	8	0	0	0	0	90	4.50	Very high
9 I learnt a lot by observing other participants presenting their selected topic, commenting on and giving feedback on the presentations of the participants.	22	9	43	10	46	2	11	0	0	0	0	86.4	4.32	Very high
Overall result of the theme												89	4.45	Very high

Table 4: Meeting scholars' needs and expectations.

The summary results in the table 4 above showed that 90.6% of the novice scholars were satisfied with the necessity of improving their presentation skills because of their increased awareness due to attending the course. The weighted overall average was 4.53, which means that the degree of satisfaction was “very high”. About 90% agree that the course provided them a hands-on training experience. The degree of satisfaction with this statement was “very high” with the weighted average of 4.50. As well, about 86.4 agreed that they benefited from attending the course. There was a high level of satisfaction across all data.

An overall evaluation of the course

Statement	No. of responses	Strongly Agree		Agree		Not Sure		Disagree		Strongly Disagree		% of agreement	Weighted Average	Degree of agreement
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%			
10 I think the training course on effective presentation skill was useful and I recommend it to novice scholars.	22	12	54	9	42	1	4	0	0	0	0	90	4.50	Very high
Overall result of the theme												90	4.50	Very high

Table 5: An overall evaluation

The course was highly agreed upon by 90% of the novice scholars with a high weight of 4.50.

DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

Summary of the findings

Unlike the case of the first batch of the novice scholars where the results of their introductory interview showed diverging views and conflicting attitudes among the participants towards attending the course, the participants in the second batch seemed to have unanimously positive attitudes. As well, the results of the questionnaire at the end of their course showed a considerable agreement among them on the importance of attending the course for improving their presentation skill, considering the skill of presentations an index of excellence, and believing that the course helped them assess and evaluate their presentation skills.

DISCUSSING OF THE RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to investigate how a new group of novice scholars feel about the English component, which was designed to improve presentation skills. It also sought to find out about the participants' expected gains and the needs the course might satisfy. At the threshold of the course, there was a complete agreement among the participants on the importance of the course and the expected gains. So, what were the causes for that unanimous agreement in the participants' attitudes towards the course? There might be some reasons behind that unanimity of the attitudes. One of these was that at the beginning of the course the second batch participants have had prior ideas about the contents of the course. Some of the second batch participants admitted that their colleagues from the first batch have recommended the course to them. Another reason might be that they really needed to be trained in academic presentation as the majority of the participant have never had such experiences. One more reason might be the strategies and methods adopted in executing the training course. These and other reasons have led the participants to express their satisfaction with the course.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the study confirmed the necessity of the English component among the required courses for novice scholars. Such courses compensate for the training gap in the novice scholar's academic life. The findings also confirmed the importance of making the participants acquainted with the contents of the courses before joining it. Gubair (2023) proposes either holding promotional sessions beforehand to familiarize the attendees with the course's content and nature, or making them readily accessible to potential attendees.

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