

## A Qualitative study on the Palestinian Undergraduates' Communicative Competence in the Palestinian Universities

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### ABSTRACT

*This study examines the role of motivation among Palestinian undergraduate's students in the Palestinian universities regarding the English teaching strategies. In order to perceive the student's level of communicative competency, the students were asked open-ended interview questions. Further probing was used when necessary. This study looks into the motivation of the students. With regard to 'motivation', the strategic theoretical framework used is Gardner's (2001, 2004, 2006) socio-educational theory. The findings indicated that participants' realise the importance of English communicative competence. Besides that, the results also indicated that teaching strategies affects student's motivation.*

**Keywords:** *Motivation, Palestinian undergraduate students, socio-educational theory*

### INTRODUCTION

English language is an internationally and globally used language in Palestine and countries all over the world (Smith, 2010; Hyland 2015). In this era, the English language is medium of the international communication as it is used in fields such as science, international trade, politics, international media, technology, and economics (Al-Eiadehet al., 2016). Due to the importance in English language, it is essential for Palestinian students to be efficient in this language. Even though, numerous studies and steps have been carried out to improve Palestinians proficiency in English Language, yet, issues especially on speaking skills have remained critical among the Palestinian EFL learners. This is supported by other research findings, within the Palestinian context, whereby, the insufficiencies of the undergraduates in EFL speaking skills remains a challenging task for many Palestinians (Abu-Ghararah, 1998; Ahmed, 2016; Al-Masri, 2016; Basha et al., 2016). Therefore, the present study views that English teaching strategies must be understood in controlling the motivational effects on the Palestinian EFL learners (Basha, Drane, & Light, 2016). This is in accordance with arguments from various researchers that motivation infuses reasons and motives among English learners within the terrain of second language learning (ESL) or those within the

EFL academic discourses that sustain their interest in ESL/EFL learning and paves ESL/EFL learners with a way to attain positive outcomes by developing reasonable skills in the target language (Dörnyei, 2001; Jalambo, Shuib, & Shakfa, 2016).

### RELATED STUDIES

The development of L2 motivation research from the first three decades until the early 1990s was inspired by the innovative work of social psychologists in North America, most particularly Richard Clement, Wallace Lambert, Robert Gardner and their associates (Dörnyei, 2003). The objective of most of the empirical research during this time was to measure the association between many functional aspects of motivation and the language achievement of learners through the application of versions of the standardized motivation test, which was developed by Gardner's team at Western Ontario University. This form of studies confirmed motivation as the significant factor in acquiring an L2.

Hernandez (2006) further examined the use of integrative motivation paradigm of Spanish as an L2. The factor analysis of the learners' responses confirmed on three motivation factors: (a) integrative motivation, (b) motivation provided to fulfill a foreign language requirement, and (c) instrumental motivation.

Palestinians nowadays need to attain the English Language to fulfill their everyday lives without problems. Many situations in Palestine such as health services, travel, business, and managing technology require English proficiency. Moreover, in recent years the Palestinian government has been offering scholarships to students to study in English-speaking countries (Ministry of Education and Higher Education, 2010). Therefore, many Palestinian students need to master English to do well in their studies abroad. In looking at motivation of Palestinian students the students' opinions with regard to the value of the language have to be considered. The mentioned aspect is studied using Gardner's (2001, 2004, 2006, 2007) socio-educational model. In Palestine, the ability to use English is vital if an individual is to live with no obstacles. Palestinians learn English for either integrative or instrumental objectives or both. Some of the motivational factors that share great relevance with the present study are further explained as follows:

### **Instrumental Motivation**

The instrumental motivation in both ESL/EFL contexts refers to learning of language due to certain practical reasons, such as for job purposes (Crookes & Schmidt 1991). The instrumental motivation appears in those contexts in which the learners have a low desire to integrate with the appropriate target language. As such, by its objectives, the instrumental motivation takes into account requirements for individuals' education, getting higher salaries, finding jobs, or higher status in the society.

### **The Integrative Motivation**

Researchers have noticed integrative motivation as a significant factor in predicting the achievement of learners in the second or foreign language classroom across many diverse learning situations (Dörnyei & Clement, 2000; Dörnyei & Schmitt, 2001; Ely, 1986; Gardner, 2000, 2001, 2004, 2006, 2007; Gardner & Lambert, 1972; Hernandez, 2006). The results reveal that students who studied abroad achieved higher integrative motivation as they had more contact with the Spanish language outside the classroom via participation in reading, writing, listening, and speaking tasks than the students with lower integrative motivation did. Thus, this shows that it is necessary to integrate learning motivation with out-of-the class learning environment in order to achieve the desired learning outcome.

### **Attitudinal Motivation**

Attitudes influence students' motivation and therefore might be guided with regard to the instructor in particular and language program in general. For instance, classroom motivation is a significant factor in a classroom situation or in any particular situation that is clearly influenced by a number of related factors as class atmosphere, teacher, materials and course content (Gardner, 2006). Attitudes on motivation comprise:

- Attitudes on the Materials
- Attitudes to Anxiety
- Attitudes on the Teachers

### **Motivational Intensity**

Motivational intensity is the third top variable in Gardner's socio-educational model. Gardner (2004) suggests attitudes toward the learning situation and integrativeness are two interconnected variables which prove learners' motivational intensity in the direction of an L2 achievement; it is "motivational intensity" which is controlling L2 success. This aspect indicates that attitudes toward the learning situation and integrativeness are related to L2 achievement, still, the impact of those aspects is indirect, performing within motivational intensity (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003).

## **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

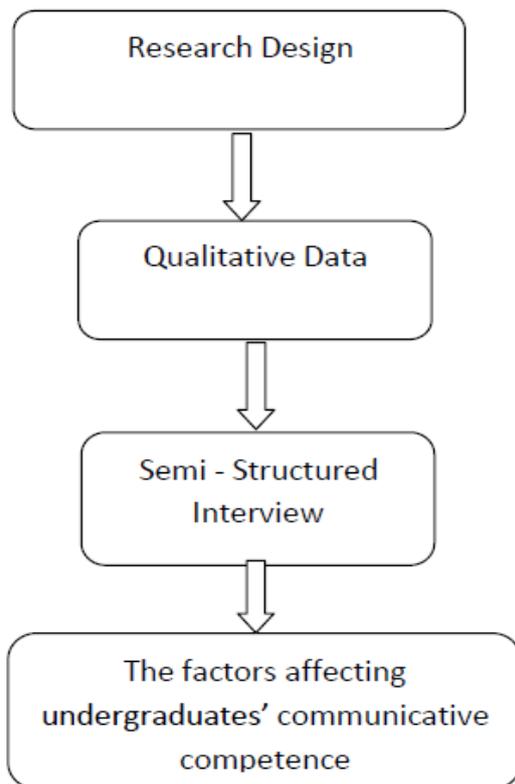
The participants of the study are the first year English and Fourth-year major Palestinian undergraduates who have studied English in the English Department for nearly three years from three Palestinian West Bank universities, namely; Hebron University, Bethlehem University, and Birzeit University.

The researcher of the present study adopts the Qualitative research design. This method best suits the designed research objectives, research questions, as well as the hypothesis designed for the conduction of the present study (Gay et al., 2012; Tavakoli, 2012). The research design used in this study to identify the student's level and the factors affecting the students is shown in Figure 3.1.

### **The Semi-Structured Interview**

Considering the exploratory nature of the current study, interview is designed to support respondents to present their perspectives easily in the semi-structured interview. The guidelines

for the adaption of the interview were based on Puvnesvary et al. (2009).



**Figure 3.1.** *The research design structure*

Consequently, 5 items are organized in an open-ended manner to ensure that learners possibly will provide essential details about the issues influencing their competence. To improve the quality of data generated, investigative and comparative type of questions are included, for example, 'Which do you think is better? Why?'. Furthermore, probing questions are asked when appropriate, depending on the interviewees' responses. The aim is to ensure the researcher obtains insiders' (respondents) views about the phenomenon and that they provide rich data to enable the researcher to have a comprehensive understanding of the problem investigated.

The interview schedule was structured around two main categories and six sub-categories suggested by the conceptual model:

- Motivation
- English learning motivation in Palestine
- Integrity
- Attitudes toward the learning situation
- Motivational intensity
- Teaching Strategies Supporting Motivation
- Teacher communication style
- Language class activities

### ***Validity and Reliability of the Semi-Structured Interview***

An interview protocol which proved to have a good structure, was a measure to ensure validity (Cohen et al., 2007). Intra-coder and inter-coder reliability checks are equally important to ensure the reliability of the interview data. Therefore, it is important to accurately explain in detail the procedures that were implemented from the pre-interview stage right to the interview data analysis stage to enable the reliability of the study. In order to minimize misunderstanding and reduce any reliability and validity problems caused by the language factor, a certified Palestinian English teacher who is proficient in both English and Arabic and has studied in the United States for five years translated all of the interview questions from English into Arabic. Lastly, the translated Arabic version was refined, based on deliberations between the researcher and the English teacher to make sure that Arabic versions truthfully reflected the intentions of the original version.

### **RESEARCH METHOD**

To obtain results for the qualitative phase, the interview questions were thoroughly tested for clarity in wording, using five Palestinian undergraduates. The researcher provided a context for the interview by briefing the respondents before the interviews and debriefing them at the end of the interview sessions as suggested by Kvale (1996). The interviews took approximately thirty minutes and were conducted in a quiet room. The interviews were audio taped, and the researcher took notes during the interviews, probed for more information and sought clarification when the responses received lacked clarity. The researcher signaled the end of the interviews and allowed the interviewees to ask questions or to raise issues. In order to analyze the interview, each participant's recording and transcript was analyzed. The aim of the qualitative analyses was to provide a set of empirical findings about the motivation of Palestinian learners of English in Palestine in order to understand from Palestinian's pedagogic settings. The findings are reported in the next section.

### **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The result of the interview indicates some similarities and differences among the three Palestinian University students on learning

English, motivational factors and teachers support to improve their communicative skills. Altogether there were six students involved in this interview.

The following excerpts show the reasons given by the students when asked about **the need to use English language outside the classroom**. The research questions asked were;

**Do you speak English outside of the classroom?**

From the six students, four students said that they don't speak English language outside the classroom. Two students said they speak English outside the classroom. Further probing questions were asked for the reasons, such as 'when do you speak English?' and 'why do you speak English outside the classroom'?

**When do you speak English?**

The four students which answered 'No, they don't speak English outside the classroom' further elaborated reasons. The excerpts below show some of their reason;

*"No. I do not have much chance to use English outside. Only use it in English classroom. In classroom, I only homework. I memorizing words. That's it."* (R1)

*"Not much. Except for in the college and when I meet some international friends online."* (R2)

*"No. I only use English when essential. Sometimes with my professors."*(R5)

*"No it takes time but not effort."* (R6)

**Why do you speak English outside the classroom?**

The two students which answered "Yes" further elaborated their reasons. The excerpts below show their replies;

*"Yes. I speak English with my parents and some relatives. Sometimes I speak it with tourists."*(R3)

*"Yes. I speak when I try to sell things online. Mostly through skype. Especially when I have to explain about the things and negotiate price with the customers, I speak English."* (R4)

These are the responses given by the respondents from three universities in Palestinian. From this interview, it shows that there are different needs to learn English the researcher could see that the differences in the needs.

Next, when asked regarding '**Teacher's focus on the pedagogical aspect regarding spoken English**', three questions were addressed;

**What teaching strategies will motivate you to learn English?**

Collaboratively, the students replied that, the current learning style was to learn English through memorizing. However, all six students prefer varieties of teaching methods being used in teaching and learning English. These are excerpts from their answers;

*'Working in small groups'* (R1)

*'If I can learn English by watching movies, it will be good'* (R2)

*'Small groups, movies, grammar games, ...no text books anymore.'* (R3)

*'...use real life materials in the classroom'.* (R5)

*'...more, communicative learning activities'.* (R6)

**Do you think the teacher put in much effort to teach English in the college?**

When asked about putting in effort during learning English, overall, the respondents think that learning English language doesn't need much effort. This is because, the students are not asked to do any extra exercises and they only depend on the textbooks to do their homework.

*"Now, we only use textbooks. Nothing else."* (R2)

*"...teacher only focus on exam. She wants us to get high grades in exam, but our spoken English she never care. Just pass exam enough."* (R3)

*"Not much. Teacher always, talk, talk, talk, give instructions and we do the work."* (R4)

However, three respondents said that, learning English language needs effort from teachers.

*"Now, we only use textbooks. Nothing else. It's boring. Need to have extra effort from teacher and work because it is a foreign language to us."*(R2).

*"Although she is helpful, but she should put more effort in guiding us to use English in classroom and outside"*(R1).

*"Teacher must try to understand our likes and dislikes when carrying out the lessons. My teacher comes in and talks about footballs all the time. We are 80% girls in the classroom. It's*

*so boring. Will be nice if can learn something that we like in English. I will feel less self-conscious when I talk about something I like and know.” (R4)*

Besides that, their focus which is more on memorizing does not need much effort to acquire English language.

*“Now, its just memorise, memorise, memorise.....i do not understand what I am reading when I memorise.” (R5)*

*“ I do homework. Yes. But, only memorise and do. It will be nice if I know the word like my mother tongue.” (R6)*

The findings of this study are almost similar to the study of Warden and Lin (2000), “who suggest that motivation determines the level of active personal involvement in second language learning.” When students are motivated, they will be interested in their learning. However, in this study, most of the students seem to lack the motivation which leads them to be unable to develop the L2 skills. Motivated students are interested to acquire information in order to increase their ability to understand, speak and write the SL (Engin, 2009).

### **Do you think English is paid enough attention by teachers in the in the college? To what extend does your teacher guide you to learn English?**

Overall, the respondents say that their teachers don't emphasize much on speaking skills in the classroom. Four of the respondents said that, the teacher did not focus on the importance of English language. Thus, they were not aware about the essentiality of mastering the language especially the spoken skills. They felt that the teachers were more focused on passing the exams than applying English language to real life. With some probing, very lengthy responses were given by the respondents to these questions. The following excerpts show the teachers emphasize on teaching English. Out of the six respondents, only two respondents said that the teachers showed some concern to their communicative competence.

*“I feel that not much attention is being given in the in the college on English language....but, my teacher was good. She tried her best to teach us English. Now, I can speak a little bit of English because of her. I still remember when I was an English class, teacher called me to come in front and spell the word 'which' because I was writing*

*'wich'. I confidently answered 'wich'. Twice three times she repeated the question, I answered the same thing. I could see the sadness in her eyes.” (R1)*

*“The teaching method is not interesting. I wish teachers will use more materials when teaching English. They just use the text book. If can use movies, or comics will be good... however, my teacher listens to us when we try to speak English. Patiently, she will correct us.” (R2)*

The other four respondents had an opposite answer. These excerpts show their answers;

*“Teacher doesn't use much English in speaking lesson. They always translate into Arabic and does most explanation in Arabic so that we can understand the content. Maybe he feels, that is his way of guiding us to use English a language, but, communication, speaking and listening skills doesn't improve if the lesson is carried out mostly in Arabic.” (R3)*

*“My teacher is always speaking. He speaks too much and we students most of the time do not have the chance to talk. If he is not talking, he will ask us to just open the book and read. Then, answer the questions in the book. I want chance to just try to talk and practice. But, end up just listening most of the time.” (R4)*

*“My teacher teaches English only to pass exam. It's all textbook, repetition and rules. I learn grammar, but, I do not really learn to use it. A lot of memorizing technique. It's really boring. How am I supposed to be motivated when the lesson flat? What can I speak when all we do is follow the textbook and repeat and memorize? I do not find the lesson interesting.” (R5)*

*“Teachers don't pay much attention to teaching English language to students. Their action never motivate us to want to learn the language. They don't realize that, it takes a lot of effort from us students by ourselves because it is a new language and we have to not just only do your homework, we have to communicate to other people, have to attend seminars.....have to seek different approach how to improve your English and skills.” (R6)*

Based on the responses above, it clearly shows that teachers have not done much to motivate students to be proficient in English language. There is difference between studying for exam and studying to improve spoken proficiency. This finding supports Gardner (2006) from the literature, whereby teacher's influences plays a

big role in building students motivation to improve their communicative competence.

Even though, English examinations in Palestine does not include spoken test, it should be paid attention by the teachers to help the students to survive in the outer world. Lepper(1998) stresses that, when teachers explain the reason students need to learn a language, indirectly it enhanced student's interest to learn the language.

This is further supported by Wyatt (2009)in the study whereby, frustrated students show do not

### **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Based on this finding, 3 out of 5 students do not use English outside of the classroom. They have very minimal needs to use the English language. However, 2 students tend to use English language outside of the college solely for business purpose and for family interaction. The first respondent said that, he does not use English much in the college, however, he is motivated to use it outside of the in the college to do some sales. He stated that he uses English *"to communicate with the people in Palestine especially in the town area and also to communicate with the students and the teacher...um... also to finish my study. Besides that, English has also become a language to do business."* [P4].

With respect to the first finding, the students in Palestine indicate that they have more need to speak English, both within and beyond the classroom. Specifically, 2 students in Palestine who are from the rural area, said they had no need to use English outside of the college, while one did have a reason to use the language. In contrast, all the students from the town area, said they needed to use the language outside the classroom. However, one of the students gave emphatic answers ("of course") or elaborate answers citing one or more reasons to use the language. The following excerpt captures, in a single turn, the range of reasons given by the students in Palestine.

Asked about the need to use English outside the classroom, except for 1 student, overall, they said that they required the language. they believe that, English proficiency is not only important to ensure opportunities for a successful career, but also important to ensure a strong relationship in business. If the English language is not controlled, individual, company, and state businesses will be limited. When business opportunities are limited, this not only

see the point of learning a language when they are unable to actually use them for speaking purposes. The Omani teachers in Wyatt (2009) study also said that, they emphasized more on memorizing the language rather than on student's competency because that was how they were taught to learn English during their time. They were not in the trend to use the language to make daily conversations during their school days which is still being applied to the current generation.

affects the country's economy but it also affects the diplomatic relations and reputation of the nation. Therefore, English is very important in business.

Besides that, 2 students thought that English language is very important in furthering their studies. They were aware that in other countries English language was the language of knowledge. They said that, English is important source of language in the era of globalization and modernization, for example, most encyclopedic books, reference books, information, research and other treasures are revealed in English. Even most of the sources in the internet are in English. They will be left out knowing what is happening around the world if they can't read or write in English language.

From motivational aspect, all the students said that they did not receive much motivation in the classroom. Overall some common reasons were extracted from the interview regarding their motivation in the classroom. The reasons are:-

- Teacher's focusing only on textbooks
- Learning English is only for examination purpose
- No emphasize on speaking in classrooms.
- Only focusing on grammar rules in writing.
- No varieties in activities.
- Using mostly memorizing technique.
- No extra effort from teacher to help students to succeed in English.
- Teachers do not explain to the students the importance of learning and using English.

Overall, Palestinian students feel that teaching and learning of English is very important for them. However, they do not receive enough motivation to learn the language from the teacher and the schools that they are in.

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## A Qualitative study on the Palestinian Undergraduates' Communicative Competence in the Palestinian Universities

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