

The Role of National Conversation Forums (NCFs) in Developing Critical Speaking Skills of EFL University Students

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Abstract:

T*his quasi-experimental study of one group design attempted to explore how far National Conversation Forums (NCFs) – as a proposed teaching strategy – can develop EFL university students' critical speaking skills. It investigated how the discussion of social issues in well-organized forums with specific ethos and ethics in university campus can tackle divergent perspectives, conflicting views and diverse positions in reasoned discourse. Nine Saudi EFL students at KKU, Saudi Arabia constituted the participants of the study. Data was collected from one source: a public speaking test for assessing critical speaking skills. The findings revealed a positive significant impact of NCFs on developing critical speaking skills in social issues-based language contexts. The study includes insights into how to cultivate critical speakers, including the procedures and steps that could be incorporated in EFL university education program.*

Keywords:*National Conversation Forums (NCFs), critical speaking skills, public speaking.*

Introduction

The mission of higher education seems to be widely changing due to concurrent changes indifferent areas of life. This urged Carcasson (2013) to state that

“colleges and universities need to renew their connection to the community and clearly present their value” (p.47). And owing to the fact that university life cannot be divorced from the public life, it seems so important to burden its responsibility to reconstruct the public life. In an interview with Thomas Bender, David Brown – coeditor of the *Higher Education Exchange* (2013:p.10) argues that “academic disciplines and professional communities have become self-referential.” Bender stresses Dewey’s notion of the public : to be pertinent to the public life of their communities. He, then, holds the view that, “we need to listen to the framing of questions by the world around us and then draw upon our social knowledge that may help examine those questions”(p.10). Therefore, responding to the questions of the public (including university students), intellectual communication takes place. In the same stream of thought, Barr and Tagg (2013) stress that the higher education institutions do not exist to provide instruction, but to provide learning. Without learning-centered approach, Barr and Tagg write, “the college’s purpose serves not to transfer knowledge but to create environments and experiences that bring students to discover and construct knowledge for themselves, to make students members of communities of learning that make discoveries and solve problems” (p.56).

After John Hanna, president of Michigan State College had declared in 1944, “our colleges should not be content with only the training of outstanding

agriculturalists, or engineers, or home economists, or teachers...”, Peters (as cited in Boyte, 2013, p.17) put it clearly and practically as thus: “The first and never-forgotten objective must be that every human product of educational system must be given the training that will enable him to be an effective citizen, appreciating his opportunities and fully willing to assume his responsibilities in a great democracy”. Avila (as cited in Boyte, 2013) has given a vivid account of what this means: “The medicine of our predicament in higher education requires efforts to restructure the way we think, act, behave toward each other, and the way we act as a collective to restructure power and resources... culture changes come first, leading to structural changes later... .For academic institutions to partner with community groups, institutions, and organizations for a better , as society requires countless opportunities for conversations and organizing campaigns with community partners engaged in power restructuring” (20). For this, university education programs can take the job and fill the gap as it is sensitive to the larger context.

As it is stressed by Brumfit (2001), “ teaching does not take place in a vacuum, and too few certificating courses address the underlying ideologies and philosophies of current practice”(140). Language – specifically in university education EFL programs – is for communication which is crucial because of EFLers’ areas of misunderstanding and difference, not because

of their shared comprehension of each other, and it is their ability to communicate difference that needs to be central to their thinking. Language, therefore, can be said to perform a pragmatic function as means of getting things done in the world, and a learning and conceptualizing function, as a means of understanding the world, of making sense of ideas and evidence. To Brumfit, “the following set seems better: conversation, discussion, comprehension (either speech or writing...” (40). The need for exposure to good teaching allows good learning. Thus, good teaching – according to Edwards and Mercer (2010:p.167) – “will be reflective, sensitive to the possibility of different kind of understanding.”

Departing from Brumfit’s (2001) notion that education needs language, language needs education so that we should not be alone. A thoughtful view framing and conscious reflection about Brumfit’s notion stresses that language is intimately bound up the process of education at all levels. There, teachers need to be sensitive to this and informed about the way language operates in society. All teachers, then, require some knowledge of language; and teachers of English particularly require specific work on language if they are not to mislead the public about their own expertise.

Taking the long view, Saudi Arabia has been facing some sociopolitical gridlocks since last political changes in the Arab world. Therefore, the current

scene is featured by a lot of hurdles which in their turn affect social and economic aspects. Conflicted views and unreasoned perspectives in public life as well as academic life have arisen. A problem seems to be there! Ehrlich and Fu (2013a) see that “campuses are the one of the few places where reasoned debate can and should take place on tough political [social or economic] issues and students need education in grappling with those issues” (p.34). Ehrlich and Fu seem to tap on the role of language in schemata changing within a communicative context. Particular purposes of language use is as deriving from the operation of particular modes of thinking rather than simply a matter of matching style to audience. Widdowson(as cited in Brumfit, 2001) suggests that language knowledge is organized at two levels: systematic and schematic, corresponding to linguistic and communicative competence. Widdowson holds the belief that,

interpretative procedures are required to draw systematic knowledge into the immediate executive level of schemata and to relate those schemata to actual instances. The ability to realize particular meanings, solve particular problems, by relating them to schematic formulae stored as knowledge, constitutes ...capacity. Capacity... can be understood as the ability to solve problems and, equivalently, to make meanings by interpreting a particular instance ... as related to some formulae, thereby assimilating the instance into a pre-existing pattern of knowledge (p.26)

More clearly, injecting innovative teaching strategies in university education programs might promote students' reflection, critical speaking skills and

positive thinking. Critical speaking might explore areas of difference, and opposing views, and then find a reasoning way to construct new knowledge and build new schemata.

Context of the problem

The recent revolutionary changes in the Arab world known as *ArabSpring* have created opposing views and multiple perspectives in every Arab country. They, therefore, are reflected between and among different ideologies, beliefs and values. This – in the researcher’s belief – requires constant communication, mutual understanding, and adjustment. Saudi community must be in constantly conversation concerning how to best negotiate the social issues and make various adjustments along the way. The better the conversation, the stronger the community likely will be. This is because the zero-sum, winner-take-all nature of adversarial tactics tends to incentivize problematic communication patterns that cause polarization, misunderstanding, cynicism, already-wicked problems much more diabolical.

Claiming that most social problems in Saudi Arabia – unemployment, violence against women, how expats are treated in Saudi Arabia, national security, social stability, etc.,- are wicked problems, there should be some sort of organized forums in the university to discuss national issues in an academic, non-threatening atmosphere. Therefore, National Conversation Forums (henceforth NCFs) is suggested by the researcher to be

an innovative teaching strategy for EFL university students. It might be a guarantee with specific procedures, techniques and ethics to develop critical speaking skills of those students. Developing such skills may lead them – when being teachers in field practices – to discuss problematic situations concerning national issues in an objective way.

Statement of the Problem

Having reviewed the related literature and previous studies, there seems to be a research gap – to the best knowledge of the researcher – to be filled in about national conversation forums, as an innovative teaching strategy for advanced students, namely EFL university students. Such a strategy might provide them with opportunities to be engaged in expressing ideas, exchanging thoughts, debating on issues, and consequently developing their critical speaking skills.

Questions of the Study

The researcher addressed a main question for the study: *Can National Conversation Forums (NCFs) be an effective innovative teaching strategy to develop critical speaking skills of EFL university students?*

Sub-questions were derived as thus:

1. What are the critical speaking skills that EFL university students should have?
2. To what extent do EFL university students master critical speaking skills?

3. What are the main features of the teaching strategy proposed (NCFs) for developing critical speaking skills?
4. How far is the teaching strategy proposed (NCFs) effective in developing critical speaking skills of EFL university students?

Objectives of the Study

The current study aimed to:

- a. identify critical speaking skills that EFL university students should master,
- b. assess how far EFL university students master critical speaking skills,
- c. develop a teaching strategy – named National Conversation Forums (NCFs) to develop critical speaking skills of EFL university students, and
- d. assess the impact of using NCFs in developing critical speaking skills.

Significance of the Study

Conducting such a study :

- a. clarifies how far academic university life can be mirrored in daily life situations.
- b. strengthens the close relationship between NCFs and critical speaking skills, resulting in reaching a compromise as for competing views, specifically among university students.
- c. asserts Deetz's view (2014) that "public decisions can be formed through strategy, consent, involvement and participation...[and] meaningful

democratic participation creates better citizens and social choices”.

- d. can develop the rules for rational discussions or discourses to attain the goal of resolving disputes in what is referred to by Lumer (2010) as ‘dialogic logic’ – that “conceives logical proofs as dialogue games, where a proponent *defends* his thesis in an exactly regimented way against an opponent’s *attacks* by logically composing it into formulas already accepted by the opponent.”(p.54)
- e. fosters deliberative learning where “deliberation is not *debating*, since the goal of debate is to win an argument and silence the other, whereas the goal of deliberation is to find a creative solution to a practical problem,”(Demirbulak,2012:p.232).
- f. boosts the relationship between deliberative pedagogy and the community since...

deliberative pedagogy most often occurs inside the boundaries of the classroom ...Deliberative pedagogy in the community connects - and transforms - deliberative dialogue and community engagement by attempting to create space for reciprocal conversations, grounded in real-world experiences, which lead to the public judgment and collective action.(Longo,2013:pp.51-52)

Delimitations of the Study

The current study was delimited to the following:

1. Nine EFL university students at College of Science and Arts, King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia.

2. Eight critical speaking skills: (a) mastering the subject matter with rich data and credibility of analyses and interpretations, (b) delivering oral presentation that is lucid, polished and well-organized,(c) finding some common ground with listeners,(d) using different types of reasoning (casual, inductive, deductive), (e) examining counterarguments related to the issue in focus and refuting them logically, (f) comparing and contrasting conflicting personal views presented on different occasions, (g) posing hypothetical questions and queries related to the issue in focus and answering them, (h) providing alternative, creative, and feasible solutions to some existing and other predictable problems.
3. Five debatable national social issues:(a) *How expats are treated in Saudi Arabia*,(b)*Private education: a bless or a curse*, (c)*Social stability*,(d) *Terrorism and its effects on social development*, and (e) *High rates of divorce among Saudi women* as the content material of the strategy.

Instrument of the Study

In order to accomplish the objectives of the study, the researcher developed and used a study instrument called *Public Speaking Test* for assessing critical speaking skills.

Review of Literature

National Conversation Forums (NCFs): Definition and characteristics

National Conversation Forums (NCFs) are seen as academic conversations - referred to by Wright (2014) -

that are characterized by being sustained, purposeful and content-rich, and they contain core skills: elaborate and clarify, support ideas with examples, build on challenge a partner's ideas, paraphrase and synthesis. For the academic conversations to succeed, Wright presents some recommendations for teacher talk. Stressing that Initiation-Response-Evaluation (IRE) discourse often dominates classroom interaction; the teacher needs to : (a) move IRE to IRF(Initiation-Response-Feedback) to offer students alternative interactional moves(e.g., repetition, recasting, reformulation, prompting), and (b) provide greater independence to students and opportunities for greater output.

In a wider view, NCFs can be seen as a combination of National Conversation (NC) and National Issues Forums (NIF) referred to by Osborn and Osborn (1995). The researcher, therefore, sees NCFs as “planned, face-to-face, systematic, argumentative, reflective, deliberative, transformative, cooperative meetings focusing on the empowerment of the public voice by exercising citizen responsibilities (EFL student teachers in this case) on specific national issues.”Those characteristics can be verified as thus:

- a. NCFs group discussants meet *face-to-face* in the same context in order for each one to follow others' verbal and nonverbal communication.
- b. NCFs are *systematic* since they follow certain rules and procedures: they first begin with a

constructive speech which outlines a position and a supporting argument on an open-ended question about a specific national issue; second, there is a *critique* in which arguments are subject to close inspection. Third comes a *speech of negotiation*, in which arguers explore how and whether the best features of each position might be combined into a transcendent stance upon the question.

- c. When NCFs are *reflective*, participants are involved in some sort of a reflection level of (analysis/synthesis/judgment) with an orientation of (theory/practice/values) and a style of (technical rationality/reflection in action) , Burbank, Bates and Ramirez (2012).
- d. NCFs are *deliberative* when the conversers find common ground, share concerns and interact effectively towards the complexities of the given situation.
- e. When the conversers change their habits of mind and frames of reference voluntarily owing to the reasoned claims offered, NCFs must be *transformative*.
- f. NCFs seem also to be *cooperative* since the participants get involved in a “ process of reasoned interaction on a controversial topic intended to help participants ... make the best assessments or decisions in any given situation” Macau (as cited in Osborn and Osborn, 1995:p. 252).

NCFs: Objectives

National Conversation Forums -to many researchers' belief as well as the current researcher's - achieve many objectives. Among them are:

- a. NCFs may foster deliberative learning, and promote democratic practices, which in their turn, “ assist students in learning how to solve controversial issues in a democratic way” (Hu,2012:p.31).
- b. In a NCFs-based context, students can communicate using reason and mutual respect, “ forming consensus and resolving public issues” (Lanir, 1991, p.11).
- c. Within a context of tolerance and neutrality, rational students should be able to discuss public affairs in a deliberative way. They – then - are able to assess the various options for action and come to a consensus acceptable to the public at large, (Elster,1998).
- d. NCFs can instruct students in skills of analysis and in taking an objective point of view. Besides, they are encouraged to accommodate, even participate, the diverse views of others,(Ashhworth,2010; Chandler and Hobbs,1997; Chang, 2005; Mills,2012).
- e. In NCFs, students can enjoy expressing personal opinions, and improve their ability to verify and criticize different viewpoints.
- f. NCFs can function as a hands-on democratic practice generating critical exploration of

ideological dimensions coupled with respectful reading of the experience of another, (Thyberg, 2012).

- g. Because NCFs are sometimes begun with heated debates before common grounds are found and a systematic and deliberative policy takes place, integration or synthesis of knowledge, logical reasoning, listening and persuasion gradually develop ,which in their turn, help one develop social maturity, open-mindedness, ethics, and a knowledge of current national issues.
- h. When argumentation is used in NCFs context, its goal is to enhance personal, intellectual development and to understand, perhaps even to lubricate, the friction of contending arguments, thus causing the evidence to be brought to life and to shape that evidence into formidable proofs that convince and arouse.
- i. When participants sharing in NCFs are ready to change their thinking habits - when finding others' arguments are right on target - the win-to-win approach prevails away from rigid, predetermined positions in which the willingness to change, evolve, and improve through the interaction of alternative perspectives is regarded a weakness, (Willig,2008).
- j. NCFs can provide students with opportunities for critical views, activelearning of the target language through a well-versed dialog, and a positive learning environment where a prevailing

community is built and mutual respect for others and their ideas is celebrated.

- k. NCFs can not only tackle tame problems, but wicked problems as well. The difference is that tame problems are particularly data-dependent and essentially can be solved by experts armed with good information. Wicked problems – on the other hand – have several characteristics that distinguish them, keeping pace with what takes place in NCFs:

l.

Wicked problems are systematic, thus require systems-level thinking due to the inherent interconnections between issues...

Wicked problems inherently involves competing underlying values and paradoxes...

Wicked problems often require adaptive changes from key audiences...

Addressing wicked problems demands effective collaboration and communication across multiple perspectives...

Wicked problems often require creativity, innovation, and imagination... (Carcasson, 2013: p.38).

- m. It can also be said that NCFs use different discourses as social interaction settings within social systems of different levels for causing change and development.

NCFs: Procedures

Considering the recognition of richer diversity leads to an acknowledgement that the process of interpretation and comprehension requires us to respond to many different features of language, and

their interaction with world knowledge, EFL university students – as Saudi citizens – come together in formal conversations on national issues. They, then consider relevant facts and values from multiple points of views, listen and react to one another in order to think critically about the various options before them, and ultimately attempt to work through the underlying tension and tough choices inherent to wicked problems and arrive at a more nuanced public judgment.

But the primary hindrance with NCFs is the need to build capacity for it, and ultimately make it a habit in our communities. In order to support all the various process points that NCFs require broad and inclusive research that identifies both tensions and common ground, issue framing, genuine engagement across perspectives, and support for the move to collaborative action, deliberative practice generally requires the assistance of colleges and universities that improve the quality of communication. College students, with instruction and support from professors and staff have potential to fill this role in their local communities since colleges and universities also offer numerous opportunities for training in adversarial politics, generally outside of the curriculum. There, they have what is called ‘free-speech zone’, (Carcasson, 2013).

Critical speaking skills

The role of communicative skills including critical speaking has been radically altered in all societies

including the Saudi one. The ability to manage or adapt to diverse communicative situations has become essential and the ability to interact with people whom one has no personal acquaintance is crucial to acquiring a small measure of personal and social control. When we are at a situation that needs to be settled, we often rely on interactive and persuasive skills to get things done. Therefore, critical speaking can be defined as “ the ability of a student to carry out, in appropriate ways, some communicative tasks which are typically encountered in formal conversations where language is actively spoken. Teaching critical speaking skills – referred to before - seems to be considered the way for such purposes.

Due to the importance of critical speaking skills required for English language learners, Musacchio (2007) reported a critical speaking skills seminar for university students. Besides, *Communication Within the Curriculum* (CWiC) program in the University of Pennsylvania (2008)- which is a public speaking tutoring program – tends to train undergraduates to assist their peers with presentations assigned to them by their professors. Those presentations are delivered in what is called *Critical Speaking Seminars*. Their goals include improving undergraduate teaching, creating an intellectual community through speaking and creating a forum in which students can become public speakers.

In CWiC Critical Speaking Seminars, critical speaking and listening skills are improved through

class discussions, debates, storytelling, and other types of presentations. In order to improve critical speaking skills, the seminars focus on developing the following skills: analyzing speaker's arguments, giving coherent, lucid and polished oral presentations and developing, and debating positions.

In a similar stream of action, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, Wisconsin University (2008) provided a portfolio named *Wisconsin Cooperative Education Skill Certification for Youth Leadership*, including many skills to be developed. Among them are some critical speaking skills: discussing an issue with a supervisor, teacher, or colleague, elaborating on others' ideas, giving constructive oral feedback to others, using different formats orally to convey ideas, opinions, or feelings and engaging in an open exchange or ideas with others.

Some educators have recently viewed that critical speaking is the core of public speaking (e.g., Hilton, 2013; Marshal, 2012; Stevens, 2013) for many reasons. Via public speaking, the speaker's personal and professional life can be enriched, and opportunities to influence the outside world can be provided. In 2013, Hilton presented key points about public speaking: public speaking can be a great self-esteem booster; public speaking engagements are great places to meet new social and professional contacts, and if you would like to change the world, remember public speaking is an effective platform for spreading revolutionary ideas.

Stressing that critical speaking can be displayed in a public speaking context, Marshal (2012) proposed 17 quick and dirty tips to help public speakers. The first two – in the researcher’s belief – are the mostly connected ones to what can be applied to university students of EFL:

a.Learning about one’s audience. This can help understand exactly what it is that different audience members want to know, say, or do differently as a result of hearing you speak. And it is important to meet the needs of a majority of your audience.

b.Learning about the organization and effort. The public speaker has to find out who and what was presented in the past, find out what has worked and what has not, and ask about what would be considered an ideal outcome. (3)

Stevens (2013) seems to go in parallel with Marshal. She surveyed critical communication skills including public skills and found that everyone should strive to possess certain skills , listen carefully, communicate clearly and assertively, give positive feedback, manage effectively, educate without arrogance, build rapport, know your audience, be congruent in tone, nonverbal communication skills and words, select your words carefully, and remove distracting barriers.

In 2006, Fredrick Knapp Association, Inc. arranged a comprehensive two-day seminar to develop and sharpen management speaking skills called “Excu-Speak”.This seminar is featured by some characteristics that seem to be its real objectives. Although the seminar

is designed for the business person who needs to give credible, convincing and dynamic presentations, it can also be suitable for EFL university students who need such critical speaking skills in a public speaking context. They state:

** You learn how to project the strength and enthusiasm in your speaking voice.*

**You will learn word power and to choose phrases and words that will stimulate and persuade your audience.*

** You will learn proved ways to overcome apprehension so you can project self-confidence and professional poise. (p.2)*

In his article Thinking Critically, Speaking Critically , Klauda (2004) refers to the content of the issues raised/discussed in public speaking. He claims that it is extremely difficult for people to criticize their own social environments. This is because if you try to criticize your own social environments, you are essentially criticizing yourself for whom you are, your identity, your aspirations to be with a particular group, the need you have for moral and other support from others. Klauda goes backward and suggested a solution. Hestresses his belief on “stimulation of people to review their political and social environments so that they will take action to remedy them and improve their own personal positions in terms of power and equality” (p.4). Critical speaking, in such a situation, is the departure point towards accomplishing such a function.

The latest two attempts – to the best knowledge of the researcher –to inject critical speaking skills in

TEFL/TESL teaching/learning contexts are currently being done by ICAL TEFL Center affiliated to ChungdahmPhils Inc. (2014) and the English Language Center in Shantou University, China (2014). The first center is running forums and discussions on TEFL/TESL and looking for a critical speaking tutor working for Chungdahm Critical Speaking Learning Program. On the other hand, the English Language Center of Shantou University is presenting a course entitled "Critical speaking and creative writing". That course is designed for advanced learners of English to improve their oral and writing skills. It provides opportunities to engage learners in expressing ideas, exchanging thoughts, composing essays, debating on issues and also developing their interest and abilities in creative thinking and critical thinking through task-based instruction.

Examining what has been discussed before, one can find that those are involved in critical speaking-based public speeches face challenges internally or externally. And they find themselves obliged to explore and to cope with those challenges. Therefore, critical speakers can be characterized by being challengers who inspire/cause social change to occur. They – according to Klaude (2004:p.10) –

- (a) talk not only with powerless people, but also with those in positions of power so that they can understand the dynamics of the situation in a more holistic way,*
- (b) state very clearly their own beliefs, biases, prejudices,*

and try to define their own cultural and social contexts and the extents to which they can truly challenge their own social environments, and

(c) leave it open to people to decide the type of action they want if they do choose action: preventive, palliative or curative.

Relationship between NCFs and critical speaking skills

As NCFs can have different forms/styles (e.g., oral presentation, public speaking, open discussion, debate, critical incidents, role playing, and problem solving) since they have many things in common, public speaking seems to be the most appropriate style for managing and accomplishing NCFs in a satisfactory, critical way. Public speaker, then, can use two imperatives of speech, find some common grounds with listeners, focus on ideas to develop confident delivery, suggest multiple paths to goals, tap on the beliefs, attitudes and values of listeners, start speech with ideas of agreement when handling hostile audiences, use statistics and testimonies to enhance credibility, stress the factors of attention, deploy gender-neutral language, varyate method of speech delivery (memorized, manuscript, prompt) , and utilize pauses effectively.

The view that NCEs use discourse as a social interaction setting that tackles the social system as a complex dynamic real-world system, such a system has the potential for further change and development. Critical speaking – in the researcher’s belief – plays

such a role. It might start the process of thought modeling a complex dynamic system by:

- *identifying the different components of the system, including agents, processes, and subsystems*
 - *for each component, identifying the time scales and levels of social and human organization it operates*
 - *describing the relations between and among components*
 - *describing how the system and context adapt to each other*
 - *describing the dynamics of the system*
 - *how the components change over time, and*
 - *how the relations among components change over time.*
- (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron,2012 : p.41)*

To put it clearer, a pair or group of people engaged in speech communication or talk-in-interaction or social issues – as in NCFs – are seen as a coupled system with the individuals as component subsystems. The talk of each individual is seen as a complex dynamic system that emerges from the interactions of subsystems of body, brain and mind with language resources that help cope with those social issues. At the same time, the discourse emerged is seen as a dynamic adaptive system. By focusing on face – to – face conversation as the primary site of discourse action, critical speaking skills have something to do to unveil discourse settings beyond conversations. But still remains an essential point: *Does it require practice or not? If Yes, on what basis?* Clark (1996) answers the first question: “face-to-face conversation ... is universal, [it] requires no special training, and is essential in

acquiring one's first language. Other settings [NCFs in our case] lack the immediacy, medium, or control of face-to-face conversation, so that they require special techniques or practices" (p.11). At the same time, NCFs are featured by the discussion of social issues which talk-in-interaction – to Schelgloff(2001)-is fundamental to social life and action and to language learning. Change in such areas cannot be systematically operated and managed unless there is critical speaking analyzing social issues, examining counterarguments, using different types of reasoning and providing feasible solutions to social issues in focus.

Research Method

This study adopted quantitative and qualitative approach to analyze the data, since such an approach seems to be the most appropriate one: first, to show the multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary activity between NCFs and critical speaking; second, when they are integrated and applied to real-world problems, issues and challenges involving language, they will be embedded in all aspects of society and social life.

Research site :

The study took place in College of Science and Arts at Balqarn, King Khalid University, Saudi Arabia, during the second semester of the academic year 2013/2014 , where – like other universities in the Arab World – there are a lot of social issues or problems discussed.

Because the researcher had recognized that the challenge is imposed by the status quo of calls and

hopes for maintaining social stability in Saudi Arabia, he decided to keep boundaries, and not to allow polarization to take place, since polarization is not fair. And it is not that time to recall, retrieve or reveal a mismatch between the theoretical calls of any group including policymakers and its practices. The main goal of NCFs is then purely academic. It was also taken for granted that conceptual tensions and confusions were consequently liable to appear. In order for the NCFs to succeed, the researcher had to set a code of ethics and simplify the content resolving any tensions and confusions. Everything was open for discussion except that threatens social solidarity, national security or discrimination on the ground of color, profession, or tribal descent. Good ideas had to be accepted; effective positive communication had to prevail, and above all, common good and stability of the country has been the ultimate goal.

Participants:

Nine voluntary EFL university students – who were randomly drawn from seniors (Level 8) – constituted the sample of the study. They were seen linguistically proficient and had some sort of interest in national issues. They were told , during the orientation session, that they were free to communicate their views, but following the regulations and ethics of NCFs.

Data source:

One source of data informed the study :a *Public Speaking Test* focusing on critical speaking skills. It was administered before and after using the strategy

proposed. It required the participants to deliver a public speech on *Unemployment in Saudi Arabia* for 20 minutes each. The total score of the test was 24 marks: 3 marks for each critical speaking skill practiced. For that purpose, a rubric of a three point scale was developed(Appendix B).

Procedure

NCFs is an innovative teaching strategy proposed to develop transferable skills, namely critical speaking skills. That three phase-strategy (Appendix A) revolved round discussing five social issues: (a)How expats are treated in Saudi Arabia, (b) Private education: a blessing or a curse, (c) Social Stability, (d) Terrorism and its effects on social development, and (e) High rates of divorce among Saudi women. The discussion/conversation within the study group (N=9) forums provided two way communications among the participants and between the participants and the moderator over seven weeks period. However, more importantly, the participants were able to take the time they needed to prepare themselves for the weekly forum expanding scope or content of the issue raised in that forum, then to provide a coherent, objective discussion.

In NCFs, the participants got familiar with each other, a positive, informal and relaxed learning climate was set and a code of ethics was established. Although each person has his own 'measures', legal rights and moral rights had to be accepted: legal rights are

relatively straight forward, providing that there is an agreed legal system to refer to while moral rights are much more complicated, because there is no single moral code accepted by all human beings.

Dialectical reflection-based critical speaking was the objective for the participants to share, transform, or reconstruct their experience and knowledge. They were asked to project how the learnt knowledge and skills could be utilized in a possible professional situation. The participants were also encouraged to learn from each other, to share their experiences, and to respond to the forces which shape their personal and professional lives. At the same time, shared interests, mutual understanding and positive communication were highly appreciated. Diverse interests, different perspectives and conflicting views had to be tackled objectively. The golden rule is: Resolving social issues is a central need for all participants.

Four questions were addressed in each session of NCFs:

- *Whether (and to what degree) a problem is existing;*
- *Whether (and to what degree) a solution is possible and feasible in virtue of the means of implementation available;*
- *Whether (and to what degree) a specific action is appropriate in relation to a context in which it is used and evaluated;*
- *Whether (and to what degree) a similar action is in fact done, actually performed, and what its doing entails.*

Before the intervention, which lasted for five weeks (three hours/week), the study participants were tested on critical speaking skills. They were asked each to present a public speech on *Unemployment in Saudi Arabia* for twenty minutes before their peer study participants. Then, the intervention took place following the procedures previously defined. Having finished the intervention, the post-test was administered. Both the pre-test and post-test responses were recorded and transcribed. Data was, then, collected and treated statistically.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Having collected the data, they were processed statistically using SPSS, Version 18. Since the sample number was small ($n=9$), Wilcoxon T test was used. Following are the results in table 1.

Table 1: T-values for the mean differences of the study participants on critical speaking skills pre-post testing

NO	Skills	MEAN		SD		DF	T-VALUE	SIG.
		PRE	POST	PRE	POST			
1	SMS	1	2.56	.000	.530	8	14.55	.000
2	DOB	1.22	2.44	.440	.530	8	8.32	.000
3	FCG	.333	2.22	.500	.440	8	2.00	.081
4	DTR	.778	2.56	.667	.527	8	3.50	.008
5	ECA	.444	2.22	.527	.441	8	2.53	.035
6	CCV	.778	2.67	.440	.500	8	5.29	.001
7	PHQ	.444	2.56	.527	.527	8	2.53	.035
8	PAS	.556	2.56	.013	.000	8	3.16	.013
TOTAL	CSS	5.56	19.78	1.60	1.39	8	10.48	.000

As table 1 shows, there are statistical significant differences between the score means of total skills pre-

post- using NCFs at the level of 0.01 in favor of post testing, highlighting a highly positive impact of NCFs on the study participants' critical speaking skills.

Besides, the researcher had to get the effect size of the proposed strategy in order to find out whether it had a practical educational implication. Following is table 2 showing the results.

Table 2 : Level of the effect size of NCFs on critical speaking skills

NO	Skills	T-VALUE	SIG.	η^2	D value	Effect Size
1	SMS	14.55	.000	10.28	0.96	Large
2	DOB	8.32	.000	05.88	0.89	Large
3	FCG	2.00	.081	01.41	0.33	Large
4	DTR	3.50	.008	02.47	0.60	Large
5	ECA	2.53	.035	01.78	0.44	Large
6	CCV	5.29	.001	03.74	0.77	Large
7	PHQ	2.53	.035	01.78	0.44	Large
8	PAS	3.16	.013	02.23	0.55	Large
TOTAL	CSS	10.48	.000	07.41	0.93	Large

As table 2 shows, d value is 0.93, which is bigger than 0.08 (Mansur: 1997,p.59). This means that 7.41% (η^2) of the total variance in the score means of post testing of dependent variable (critical speaking skills) is fairly high and can be attributed to the proposed strategy (National Conversation Forums).

The results shown above can be attributed to one or more of the following:

First: Because the forums were academic and featured by being sustained, purposeful, and content-

rich, the participants shared ideas across an extended period of time , though they had conflicting views and opposing perspectives. At the same time, the tasks – whether those used in the intervention or pre- post-testing – were appropriate to the participants’ cognitive and linguistic ability; they were integrated with the broader social context , and the participants seemed to have expectations about exploratory versus performative oral language use.

Second: The forums in which the oral discourse proceeded, followed a particular logic of communication, and the procedural rules created a common set of understanding among the participants, even when they lacked consensus. That atmosphere might have given them power to air their ideas in case each one has his time and right to participate.

Third: The participants might have felt as if they were an interest group acting as opinion makers through their own “everyday talk which can play an important role not just in the forum of *opinion formation but also in that of will formation*” (Mansbridge, 2009). Besides, because they were engaged in social issues-based communicative actions, they might have seen themselves involved in communication going not only from top-down but also from bottom-up, with the aim of participating in resolving their own problems.

Fourth: The participants seem to – unintentionally - follow Marshall’s tip (2012) regarding *deep breathing* by which she might mean – in the researcher’ belief -

deep insight or deep thinking.She states: “ for me, deep breathing is a critical speaking skill that should be included in everyone’s tool belt... It helps develop a strong voice and it helps to strengthen personal intensity. It is important for our energy, our focus, and our concentration. Deep breathing also improves your ability to be effective wherever you are facing a particularly stressful situation, from delivering presentations, to delivering bad news, or even when you need to ask for something important.”

Fifth: The deliberate practice – referred to by Thesis Whisperer (2012) and Brett and McKay (2010) - in which the study participants were involved during the sessions of NCFs might have helped them to repeat the same activity over and over, striving to be better each time. Besides, shifting backwards and forwards between positive and negative stances seem to have helped them to move their thinking around and make it more flexible and visible in their critical speaking. And because the deliberate practice is specifically designed to improve performance often with a teacher’s help, feedback was, then, provided on a continual basis. Critical speaking skills, therefore, had found their way to improve.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study overwhelmingly supports the idea that participation in national conversation-based forums in university campus provides significant benefits for those entering the profession of teaching - since teachers are in direct contact with all sectors of

society and have some sort of daily communication with. And universities that want to provide the best possible education for future professionals should seriously consider undertaking efforts to promote and broaden the national conversation experience for their students. Certainly, to increase university students' participation, we must convince them that their participation matters, that they can make a difference, specifically when it banks on social problems or social issues. Resolving them in a democratic and deliberative way is not limited to government. All should participate. Furthermore, when sustaining national conversations on social issues, critical speaking skills can be developed.

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