
A Cognitive Model for Developing University Students' Communication Skills

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to investigate the effectiveness of a learning model in developing students' communication skills and reducing their communication apprehension level. This model consists of three main elements, each of which has sub-elements. It takes the students through three different phases starting with raising awareness and reaching autonomy. A training program and an assessment battery were developed and administered. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to analyze data. There were significant differences among the pre, post, and follow-up measurements. The pedagogical implications of the study have been discussed.

Keywords:

Verbal Communication Skills; Cognitive Learning; Metacognitive Strategies; Affective Strategies.

ABSTRAK

Makalah ini bertujuan untuk menyelidiki keefektifan model pembelajaran dalam mengembangkan keterampilan komunikasi siswa dan mengurangi tingkat ketakutan komunikasi mereka. Model ini terdiri dari tiga elemen utama yang masing-masing memiliki sub-elemen. Dibutuhkan siswa melalui tiga fase yang berbeda dimulai dengan meningkatkan kesadaran dan mencapai otonomi. Sebuah program pelatihan dan penilaian dikembangkan dan dikelola. Metode kualitatif dan kuantitatif digunakan untuk menganalisis data. Ada perbedaan yang signifikan antara pengukuran pra, pasca, dan tindak lanjut. Implikasi pedagogis dari penelitian ini telah dibahas.

Kata Kunci:

Keterampilan Komunikasi Verbal; Pembelajaran Kognitif; Strategi Metakognitif; Strategi Afektif.

1. Introduction

English language communication skills are considered one of the most important basics of the learning process as a whole. The development of learners' communication skills is one of the most important goals of English language study. However, in most EFL situations, learners have few opportunities to communicate in the English language rather than in the academic situation. Moreover, most EFL learning experience presented to the students emphasizes accuracy rather than fluency (Brown, 2001).

Some traditional methods of teaching and learning English in our educational system ignore the learning of functional usage of the language because it mainly attempts to encourage students to pass examinations. Consequently, students may know the rules of language structure well but need help to use the language appropriately and effectively. This encouraged many researchers like Baranett, & Miller (2009) to look for alternative ways and methods for developing students' language skills. Those new methods deal with learning a foreign/second language from a functional perspective, such as the field of psycholinguistic Research in which two fields are related together. One example of this is the Cognitive language learning approach. This approach deals with language learning as a continuous or permanent change in the learners' knowledge. However, more than changing the learner's knowledge is required as many studies show that EFL\ESL students may suffer from another problem: communication apprehension. This means that the student may have the acquired knowledge but he\she can't apply it or use it as he\she should due to their own inner feelings towards communicating in English. This indicates that there is a real need to move further than the cognitive level of learning towards the affective domain of learning and combine both of them, guiding the student toward autonomy.

Learning a language is one of the most important elements of the learning process; moreover, language plays a vital role in developing learners' abilities and achieving learning goals. The traditional way of learning and teaching English as a foreign\second language which is a teacher-focused method, has been criticized recently. This led to students' low-level of English language communication skills (listening- speaking-writing). The present study investigates the effectiveness of the proposed model based on the cognitive academic language learning approach for developing English language communication skills and lowering communication apprehension levels. This model drives its principles from the cognitive approach as a learning theory. Haines (2003) refers to it as a theory of learning describing how the learners' minds create knowledge and how students' knowledge structures and deeper conceptual understanding come about. This approach encourages the learner to engage in the active process of meaning construction in real authentic situations, where learners are able to construct knowledge socially with others. On the other hand, this proposed model emphasizes utilizing higher thinking abilities and developing learning skills with a strong emphasis on Metacognitive and affective learning strategies. Recent Research draws attention to the importance of effective education that should be continued with the help of innovation, collaboration, and creating connections to the students and their environment by applying efficient and effective learning

approaches that support and provide a safe learning environment and enhance the flexible abilities in processing the skills and knowledge (Arifianto et al., 2021).

The learning process should create opportunities that make language learning a vivid process, not just memorizing rules or words. And linguistic communication situations included in the learning process are as a training stage. However, going through situations of actual communication in real situations is something that may not happen in foreign language learning programs because the language communication included in traditional learning experiences does not aim to convey real meanings between students or a desire to exchange their experiences and information in English as much as it is training them to memorize a set of words and structures that the teacher thinks are necessary for them.

Regarding this aspect, Gomez de Matos (2006: 50-63) indicates the importance of taking into account a number of elements, including:

- (1) The process of communication may include various forms of the relationship between language and culture and between language and society. Communication does not occur in a vacuum but rather between individuals and in a specific social context. Perhaps one of the reasons for the inefficiency of the learners' communication using a foreign language is the existence of a conceptual cultural difference between the mother tongue and the foreign language, each of which has a different background than the other, and the learning experience should clarify this relationship when teaching the language to speakers of other languages.
- (2) Acquiring the ability to communicate efficiently is a process that goes through gradual stages, and at each stage, the learner gains something. This acquisition only happens through complete control over the language, as no one owns it. Rather, they are stages in which the processes of right and wrong overlap. The deficit is as much it is an overlapping and necessary step on the road.
- (3) Acquiring the ability for efficient communication also does not take place through the process of simulation and remembrance as much as it is through mental processes in which the individual, speaking in other languages, realizes the characteristics of the structures that are used in a social context. This means that understanding language is a condition for its production.

The emergence of the cognitive language approach began with the beginning of Chomsky's work at the beginning of the sixties of the twentieth century through a combination of cognitive psychology and linguistic psychology. Ellis (2005: 12-26) indicates that the study of the language learning process from a cognitive perspective that deals with the mental representation of the information processing process and seeks to develop a psychological description of the learning process through exposure to real learning experiences that result in the growth and development of knowledge and that both the processes of learning a mother tongue or a foreign language are seen as using the same general mechanisms of the information processing process that are responsible for all

forms of knowledge growth and skill development. Which places the language learning process within the context of an individual's cognitive development.

The importance of the cognitive approach to language learning is clear in light of the problems that have arisen in other approaches to language learning, which depend on theories that distinguish between the two processes of language acquisition, a process that takes place without awareness or intention, and the language learning process as a conscious or intentional process, and therefore focuses on the formation of the language, its structures, and vocabulary and not its function. It considers language as a study subject and not as a goal in itself or as a means of communication (Essa,2019).

Learning the language through these approaches negatively affects the learners and their ability to employ and use the language and consequently their communicative abilities, as the focus on the grammar and structures of the language does not allow the learners to experience real communication experiences and the focus is on the structural accuracy for sentence and passing achievement tests in the subject, not language fluency. Therefore, the language learning process is viewed from a cognitive perspective in the context of skill development in general, not as a separate mental ability, but as an interwoven fabric of cognitive, social, and communicative activities that interact with the individual's psychological traits in a strong way.

Therefore, the proposed model is viewed as an integrative view that combines components from a variety of sources from both theory and practice in a complex format that represents what language learners need in order to have a space of freedom to employ that format in a way that serves their own goals and clarifies their views. The present study aims at the following:

- (1) Development of English language communication skills of student\teachers in the Faculty of Education through training them on the training program which the researcher prepared specially for the study.
- (2) Verification of the effectiveness of the proposed model provided by the current study in developing university students' English language communication skills.
- (3) Verification of the effectiveness of the proposed model in reducing students' communication apprehension levels.

These aims are addressed by answering the following research questions:

- (1) To what extent will the proposed program improve student\teachers English Language Communication Skills?
- (2) To what extent the proposed program will reduce students'/teachers' English Language Communication Apprehension levels?

2. Methods

2.1 Research Design

The study used the quasi-experimental per-test post-test control group design to investigate the effectiveness of the proposed model for developing English language communication skills of a sample of students/teachers in the Faculty of Education.

2.2 Sample of The Study

The sample of the study consisted of third-year university students (males and females) from English Language Department. The sample consisted of (40) students who were randomly divided into two groups: an experimental group (20) and a control group (20) students.

2.3 Procedures

A student-centered practical model was developed to help EFL student teachers reduce their communication apprehension level and develop their communication skills. The model makes use of different application strategies and techniques to enable students to take responsibility for their own learning and overcome CA. It addresses students' self-perceived communication competence, communication proficiency, and communication apprehension.

2.4 Data Collection

An experimental research design was used to investigate the effectiveness of the model. A multi-trait method was used for collecting data. Both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to analyze data. An assessment battery (three tests and two questionnaires) was developed and administered. As for the qualitative methods, both “think aloud” and “talk about” protocols was used.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 The Proposed Model

This model consists of three different components. These three components are integrated together in a continuous interactive process. Those components present knowledge, the process, and the learning strategies. Each of the components of the model has sub-elements. The model deals with communication skills from a holistic perspective so as to address both external and internal components included in the communication process. An intensive training program based on the theoretical model was designed and used in this Research. The application of the model goes through three different phases, each of which leads to the other. These stages are; raising awareness, procedural restructuring, and autonomy phase.

3.2 *Raising Awareness*

This phase includes a set of procedures and activities which raise learners' awareness of what is involved in the process of learning and communicating in English, which encourages learners to become more responsible for their own learning and which enables students to strengthen their awareness of their mental processes and the ability to reflect on their own performance.

The raising awareness phase includes a conscious mental activity in which the learner understands how to perform and manage the intended task. In this phase, the teacher makes sure that the learner has this knowledge which is defined as the declarative knowledge needed for the task. Teachers do this through direct and indirect teaching procedures.

3.3 *Procedural Restructuring*

In this phase, the declarative knowledge turns into procedural knowledge. In other words, what the learner knows about the task turns into knowledge about how to perform it. Procedural knowledge means dynamic active knowledge in the learners' memory and what he knows about the task and how to process in addition it includes the ability to choose and apply strategies that are suitable for the task. The procedural knowledge can be modified according to the task and the learning experience. This phase is very important as the learner starts monitoring his own performance and takes responsibility for choices and decisions related to the learning task. Also, this phase contains the processes of mistakes correction, refining the performance in addition to modifying the declarative knowledge. In this stage, the role of the teacher starts to decrease, and the role of the student starts to increase.

3.4 *Autonomy Phase*

In this stage, difficulties start to disappear. Learners start to take full responsibility for their learning and being to be skillful. This gives more space in the working memory of the learners' memory and allows more processing of newly acquired knowledge. Also, in this phase, learners should be able to transfer what they have already learned to new learning experiences.

3.5 *Communication Competence*

Jensen (2004) defines communication competence as "the ability to communicate in a personally effective and socially appropriate manner" (p. 10). To develop this ability, many researchers tend to focus on two different levels of communication competence (Babii, 2010) the surface level and the deep level, or as the researcher defines them, the external level, which refers to the performance of the learner during any communicative situation, and the internal level, which includes all the hidden processes that take place inside the learners' minds while communicating with others. Developing communication skills from this perspective means addressing all of the elements that contribute to it.

3.6 Communication Apprehension

According to James McCroskey, communication apprehension is the broad term that refers to an individual's "fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with others." Communication apprehension is a psychological response to the evaluation. This psychological response, however, quickly becomes physical as learners' bodies respond to the threat the mind perceives. CA is considered one of the most important affective factors influencing EFL. Different studies referred to the relationship between anxiety and achievement in learning of foreign language. For example, MacIntyre (2007) found that anxiety and achievement are correlated. According to McCloskey (2000), many students experience some level of fear and anxiety when asked to communicate. This communication apprehension is linked to both cognitive processes (Chan, 2002), (Chaudron & Crookes, 2003) and psychological perceptions. This means that the learning experience presented to the students should create a conducive and authentic learning environment to help reduce students' communication apprehension levels.

3.7 Learning Strategies

Learning strategies are the conscious thoughts and actions the learners take so as to achieve a learning goal. Learners who have this ability have metacognitive knowledge about their own learning approaches. (Chamot, 2005) refers that strategic learners are having a better understanding of the learning tasks and how to choose the appropriate strategies to accomplish them. Various classification systems have been developed to group individual strategies within larger categories. However, in most of these different classifications, there was little weight given to students' learning goals and to the instructional goals (Alanis, 2008). Many researchers like (Hamouda, 2013) indicate that it is important in the language learning environment to develop learners' own meta-cognition. Developing learners' meta-cognition helps them to identify and use the strategies suitable for the learning task. Learners need to learn how to transfer their thoughts into actions. That's why this study focuses on changing the students; declarative knowledge into procedural knowledge. In the model discussed in this Research, we focused on three types of learning strategies cognitive, meta-cognitive, and affective strategies.

3.8 Learners' Autonomy

(Lamb, 2009) refers to autonomous learners as the ones who understand the purpose of their learning, accept responsibility for their learning, share in the setting of learning goals, take the initiative in planning and executing learning activities, and regularly review their learning and evaluate its effectiveness. This means that the practice of learners' autonomy requires insight, a positive attitude, the ability to reflect, and the willingness to be involved in self-management. This means that we need to develop students' skills through a holistic perspective in which all cognitive, metacognitive, and affective dimensions are addressed. In this way, learning is considered to be a matter of supporting performance and emphasizes the interdependence of the cognitive and the

interactive dimensions of the learning process. According to that model, the teacher's role is to create and maintain a learning environment in which learners can be autonomous.

The instruments of the study (Communication Skills Battery-Perceived Communication Competence Questionnaire- Communication Apprehension Questionnaire). were administered to each of the two groups twice before applying the model and after applying it. A descriptive analysis was performed to compute the means and the stander deviations for each item. The results came as follows.

As presented in the previous table and chart, the results of both the experimental and the control group in the post-measurements for communication skills as well as communication apprehension level show that there are statistically significant differences between the means of scores of experimental group and control group in the post- test on the English Language Communication Skills and communication apprehension variable favoring the experimental group. This is consistent with Brown (2001) study, which emphasized the importance of focusing on making educational activities communicative by linking new knowledge with those already existing in the learner. Strong links are formed between them. The main goal here is to communicate effectively using language and to employ it through an interactive social context and employing verbal and non-verbal strategies to overcome communication obstacles, not focusing on structure and rules.

Table 1. Differences between means of post-measurements of the experimental and control groups (Communication Skills-Communication Apprehension)

Variable	Group	N	M	SD	T	Sig
Speaking	Exp.	20	64.30	12.781	7.214	0.01
	Con	20	42.05	5.185		
Listening	Exp.	20	17.85	3.869	10.726	0.01
	Con	20	11.70	2.473		
Writing	Exp.	20	16.800	3.237	9.533	0.01
	Con	20	8.750	1.943		
C A	Exp.	20	57.200	4.396	13.282	0.01
	Con	20	76.40	4.739		

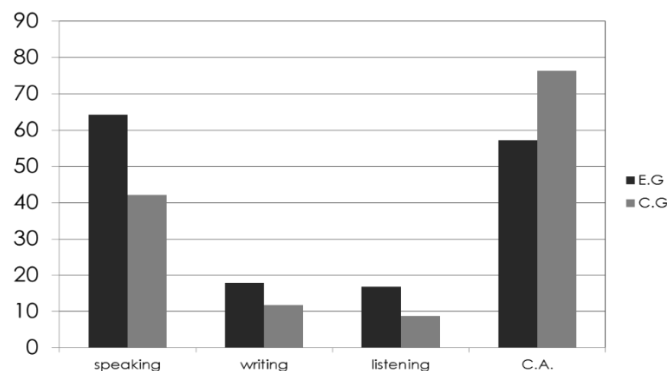


Figure 1. Differences between means of post-measurements of the experimental and control groups (Communication Skills-Communication Apprehension)

Table 2. Differences between means of post-measurements of the experimental and control groups (Perceived Communication Competence)

Variable	Group	N	M	SD	T	Sig
Interacting	Exp.	20	20.700	2.921	7.272	0.01
	Con.	20	15.20	1.704		
Sending	Exp.	20	17.40	2.438	6.360	0.01
	Con.	20	13.05	1.904		
Receiving	Exp.	20	18.750	1.802	11.299	0.01
	Con.	20	13.05	1.356		
Comprehension	Exp.	20	23.300	3.062	9.199	0.01
	Con.	20	15.50	2.236		

As presented in the previous table and chart, the results of both the experimental and the control group in the post-measurements of the perceived communication competence scale. Shows that there are statistically significant differences between the means of scores of the experimental group and control group in the post- test on the Self- Perceived Communication Competence variable favoring the experimental group. This agrees with the study of (Harmer., 2007), (Lazaraton, 2001), and (Matsuura, 2012) that indicate that the practice of communication and the use of language to suit the different modes of communication through debates, presentations and create situations for communication and discussions are more important and the learner cooperates more effectively in performing communication tasks more efficiently than those that require careful use of linguistic structures, and we allow the learner to reach a higher level of proficiency in the long run whenever the focus is on his language as a means of communication.

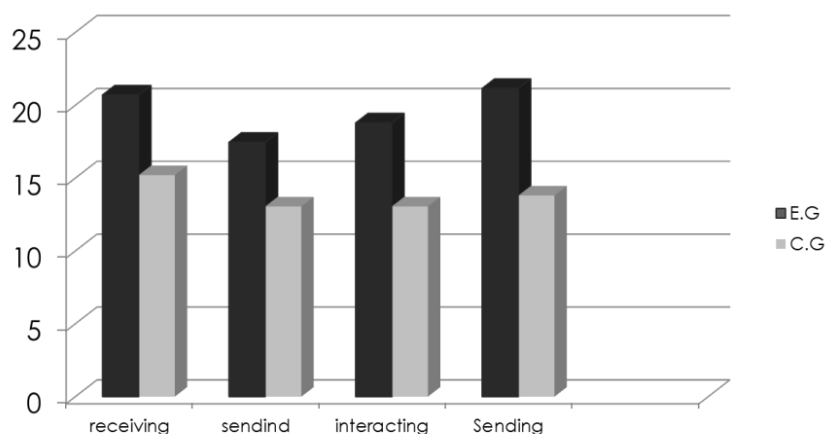


Figure 2. Self-Perceived Communication Competence

Both tables (3) and (Figure 3) represent the comparison between pre and post-measurements of the communication skills assessment battery. It shows that there are statistically significant differences between the means of scores of the experimental group in the pre and post-test on the English Language Communication Skills variable favoring the post -test.

Table 3. Differences between means of post and pre- measurements of the experimental groups (communication skills assessment battery.)

Variable	Group	N	M	SD	T	Sig
Speaking	Pre	20	41.450	4.489	9.742	0.01
	Post	20	64.300	12.781		
Listening	Pre	20	6.700	1.809	18.789	0.01
	Post	20	16.800	3.237		
Writing	Pre	20	12.400	2.542	26.120	0.01
	Post	20	27.850	3.865		

As represented above, the comparison between the post and the pre-measurement of the communication apprehension scale and the self-perceived communication competence scale of the experimental group shows that- There are statistically significant differences between means of scores of the experimental group in the pre and post-test on the English Language Self Perceived Communication Competence variable favoring the post–test. It also shows that there are statistically significant differences between the means of scores of the experimental group in the pre and post-test on the English Language Communication Apprehension variable favoring the post –test. This is in agreement with the study (Chan, 2008), which emphasized the effectiveness of hidden modeling and attention modification and creating an interactive learning environment based on the use of metacognitive and affective language learning strategies to help learners overcome negative trends toward language learning so that attention is focused on the content of the language. Learning and then interacting with it Learning practices include two types of strategies: interaction between groups and simulation and group discussion and open questionsthat encourage learners to participate. It also agrees with the study (Tsui et L., 2007) as well as with the study of (Leki, 2001), which showed that teamwork provides learners with greater opportunities to initiate and control the interaction process, produce a variety of phrases, and engage in a negotiation process about meaning more effectively and actively.

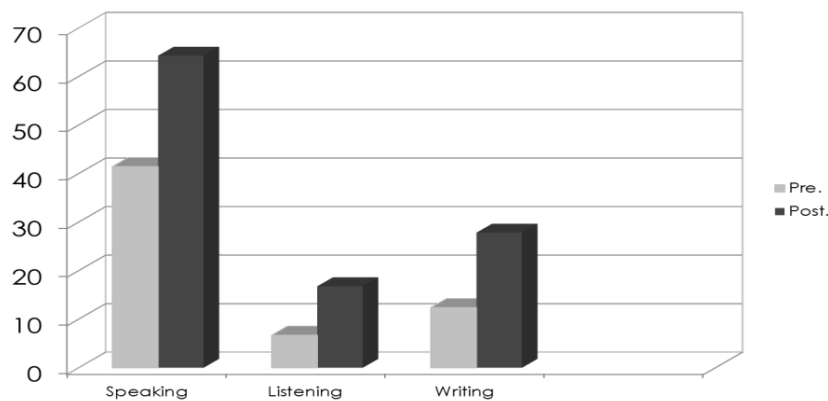


Figure 3. Differences between means of post and pre- measurements of the experimental groups (communication skills assessment battery)

Table 4. Differences between means of post and pre- measurements of the experimental group of (self-perceived communication competence-communication apprehension)

Variable	Group	N	M	SD	T	Sig
self-perceived communication competence	Pre	20	68.95	8.568	41.987	0.01
	Post	20	100.810	9.203		
communication apprehension	Pre	20	78.122	5.954	22.344	0.01
	Post	20	57.213	4.395		

Figure 5 represents the overall development of communication skills, self-perceived communication competence, and the communication apprehension level of the experimental group. The development ranged from 23% to 83%. The results show the effectiveness of the model in developing the students' communication skills as measured by the research instruments. In addition, it shows that there is development in students' self-perceived communication competence for both the total mark and items included in the scale. The chart also shows the decline in communication apprehension marks which indicates the effectiveness of the model in reducing the level of communication apprehension of the students.

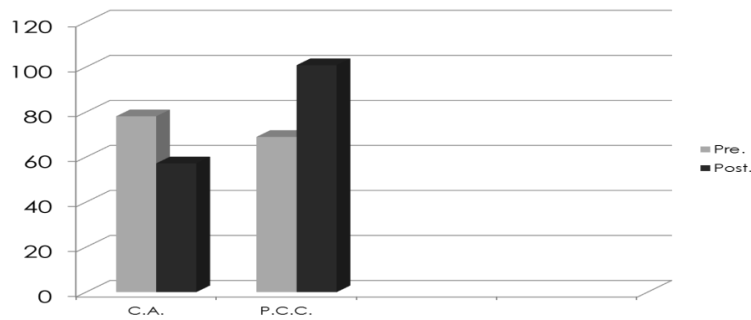


Figure 4

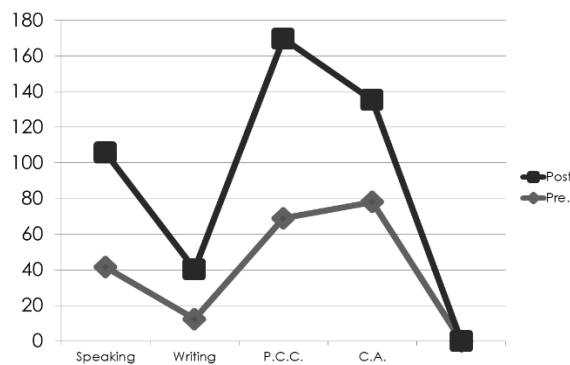


Figure 5

Data analysis received from the think-aloud protocols that were used during the training of the students as well as the analysis of the written protocols in which students talked about and evaluated their experience during the training showed that the model that was applied was effective in students' understanding the nature and the elements of the communication process and their role as communicators. Also, it was effective in raising their awareness of their feelings and fears during communicating in English. In addition, it helped them to learn how to deal with these fears and control them using different affective strategies. This is in parallel with the results obtained from the statistical analysis of the data obtained from the instruments of the study. When the means of the post-test scores that the groups received from the Self-Perceived Communication Competence Scale were compared, it was found that there were significant differences in favor of the experimental group. The model was effective in raising students' self-esteem as well as their communication awareness. Creating a safe learning environment helped lower students' communication apprehension levels. This was fulfilled through the model as it depends on cooperative learning principles. This helped develop the students' abilities to work successfully with their peers in a social context. Learning through hands-on, inquiry-based, and cooperative learning tasks increased students' motivation to participate in the communicative tasks as well as increased their confidence in their ability to communicate. This helped decrease their communication apprehension levels.

As a result of the study, it was found that focusing on the three main elements of the model and training the students through its phases had a significant effect on the students' communication skills as well as communication apprehension levels. Learning strategies training increased students' awareness of learning strategies. This is parallel to the findings of many studies (Kirsch, 2008). (Chalmers & Fuller, 2009) on strategy teaching, indicating the strategies can be taught and that students' knowledge of strategies can be developed. This also goes with the results of (Esquinca, 2011) which refer to the effectiveness of raising students' awareness towards choosing and using meta-cognitive and affective strategies. Training students on using these strategies enable meta-cognitive and affective strategies to work as an effective part of the students' cognitive schemata. This helps develop students' communication skills and language skills in general. Raising students' awareness of the nature and components of the communication process and of the communication situations helped students to be able to transfer and modify the acquired knowledge according to any new communication situation or learning experience. Placing error correction in the second phase of the model helped students to be able to evaluate their own performance as well as monitoring it. This is in parallel with the findings of (Namaghi, 2010) (Alore, 2011) which indicate the importance of correcting students' mistakes so as to give the students the chance to reform their performance. Most students experience anxiety in classrooms due to their fear of negative evaluation. That's why the error correction process is a very crucial factor in communication apprehension level. Learning experiences and communicative tasks should be presented to students through tension free environment, in which students learn how to evaluate their own learning and how to become more effective and dependent learners.

In light of the findings of the current study, some of the following recommendations and suggestions can be made:

- (1) The importance of evaluating the linguistic communication skills of student teachers in the faculties of education periodically and continuously during the school years.
- (2) The necessity of including programs for the development of language communication skills in English for student teachers in English language departments in general and for all other disciplines in general, taking into account the objective of learning communication and the different levels of students.
- (3) The necessity of switching to learner-centered teaching methods for the stability of their effectiveness in various stages and various skills due to their relevance to the individual differences between learners and taking into account this to a large extent.
- (4) The need to pay attention to the psychological aspects of learners because of their clear impact on their academic educational performance as well as on the personal level.
- (5) Continuous evaluation of the educational linguistic content taught by learners in faculties of education and its relevance to the levels of foreign language learning that correspond to it globally.
- (6) The need to ensure that the learning environment provides a safe learning environment that allows the learner to practice his language skills, especially because there is no opportunity for the learner in our society to activate and employ linguistic knowledge of the foreign language on a daily basis outside the study communities. This requires providing intensive training opportunities during the academic study.
- (7) The necessity of activating learning approaches based on psychological foundations, especially cognitive psychology, where the learning process represents a process of development for the learner at the mental, intellectual and academic levels.
- (8) Training teachers periodically and intensively on communication skills and social interaction techniques in a way that allows them to transfer them to their students and develop their skills in a way that enables them to reach mastery and self-performance.

4. Conclusion

The main aim of the present study was to investigate the effectiveness of a learning model in developing university students' communication skills. The model focuses on three main elements to develop students' communication skills which are the knowledge, the process, and strategies included in the communicative situation. After analyzing the data obtained through this study, it was found that Interactive pedagogy is an essential demand in order to ensure the possibility of reaching and develop a high level of communicative ability. This efficiency and interactivity should be based on the importance of transferring the language input into language intake. The use of interactive learning strategies can enhance not only the development of students' communication skills but also affect the students' knowledge schemata and thinking abilities. This was clear as the results show improvement in students' self-esteem, autonomy, and personal organization as well as motivation. The model discussed in this Research aims at developing and heightening students' awareness of themselves as learners and the language learning process as well. The development is meant to contribute to both learners' cognitive and affective domains. EFL students should learn how to value their own prior knowledge and make use of their cultural experiences. This can be developed through learning both

content knowledge besides language skills. Raising language awareness and critical thinking is fundamental to helping students develop their communication skills.

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