



## **‘Good Teacher, Bad Teacher’: Investigating Gossip in a Women’s College in Kuwait**

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### **1.0 Introduction And Background**

#### **1.1 Evaluative Discourse at the English Department**

The socio-cultural notion of subjective evaluation often permeate into all aspects of the Kuwaiti lifestyle, including academic institutions, as is the case in the English Department (TED) at the College of Basic Education (CBE) being explored in the present study. Being an all-girls institution with a majority of female faculty members seems to suggest a setting where engaging in evaluative talk is highly likely<sup>1</sup>. In fact, according to the observations of the researchers involved in this study: verbal evaluation and gossip-like talk carried out by both professors and students about other professors are typical non-academic interactional practices that take place regularly at TED. This promoted the researchers to pursue this issue and conduct the present study.

The number of students in the department is approximately 4000 female students. TED offers a four-year program, which leads to a BA in English education and in turn equips students to become English teachers at the primary level in public schools. Thus, for these students concentrating merely on grades is their sole vocation at college and, thus the process of learning itself becomes visibly marginalized for them.

#### **1.2 The Academic Aspects Prompting Evaluative Discourse**

For most students, engaging in evaluative discourse about professors seems to be their life-support system during their academic years at TED<sup>2</sup>. Evaluative information on any given professor is usually “processed” through two typical channels. A group of students spreads it and another group seeks it. This behavior takes place all throughout the students’ college years. In light of this circulation of evaluative information, students are able to predict what to expect when attending classes with a certain professor in terms of: required course effort, academic difficulty of exams, and the type of final course grade that a student is likely to receive. A very large number of students consider the final grade to be the most important end goal<sup>3</sup>. Coincidentally, the grade-obsessed students do not usually attend college in order to “learn” as much as being there merely to receive a credential, which securely sends them into the workforce (Cote and Allahar 2011). The grade factor is also subjected to internal influences such as grade inflation and grade negotiation between student and professor (see Cote and Allahar, 2011: 104-108). Moreover, many professors reinforce the circulation and processing of evaluative information about other professors by taking part in gossip talk with students. However, for the present study the focus will remain mostly on how students evaluate professors (an area which is extensively studied, see review by Wachtel 1998; also see McPherson 2006). This study, therefore, explores the nature of student evaluative discourse about professors on two levels: 1) features and patterns of this type of evaluative discourse, 2) its purpose and its outcomes on both students (its tendency to affect performance) and professors.

### **2.0 Methodology**

In the present study we employ sociolinguistic and ethnographic methods in order to answer the following questions: 1) Why do students regularly engage in evaluative talk about their professors? 2) What are some of the important features of such talk? 3) What purpose does evaluative talk serve? The sample of students chosen for the present study consists of 200 female students from different college years, attending 4 different subjects, and taught by 3 different professors (who are also the researchers conducting this study). The data collection methods were administered at intervals during

<sup>1</sup> Although see Coates 2004; Cameron 2007 and Coates and Cameron 1989 who argue that men, too, engage in gossiping especially in all-male contexts.

<sup>2</sup> See Dunbar’s discussion on gossip (1996: 78-79).

<sup>3</sup> See discussion on grades and grade inflation in Cote and Allahar (2011: 55-57).

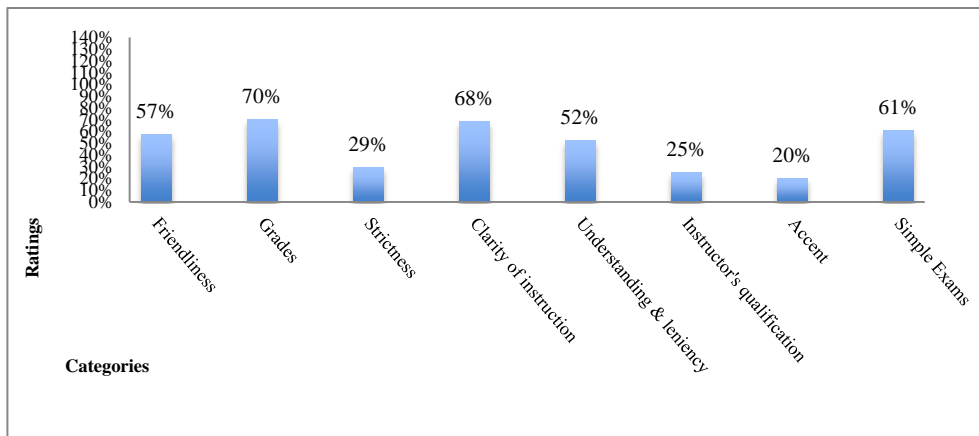


a period of 6 months (5 days per week, 5 hours per day) in which the 3 professors involved also observed students' behavior in terms of engaging in evaluative talk about professors.

## 2.1 The Questionnaire and its findings

A pilot questionnaire was filled out anonymously by students and consisted of 5 questions in total. One of the main questions was targeted towards finding out what students perceive as the most fundamental aspects of their college experience. This experience essentially revolves around aspects, such as the learning experience, the students' preferences, the professor as the agent imparting knowledge, the academic challenges faced by students, and so on. The chart below shows the percentages of students' priorities and preferences.

Figure 1: The students' academic priorities and preferences at TED.



As the chart in figure 1 shows, the highest percentage of students prioritized a group of three items which seem to logically correspond to each other. These items are: 'grades' (prioritized by 70%), 'clarity of instruction' (prioritized by 68%) and 'simple exam' (prioritized by 61%). A reading into these results tells us that students' anticipation of earning high grades is contingent upon clear delivery of the content of the course followed by simple and unchallenging tests. The students' priority in their choice of instructor seems to revolve around easy attainment of good grades without their abilities as students being taxed or challenged. The results are therefore strongly indicative of preferences peripheral to the learning experience when it comes to the choice of the professor. More importantly, these results clearly indicate that students seem not to be interested in any academic gains, such as knowledge and improvement of their thinking skills.

## 2.2 The Postcard and its findings

Inspired by Frank Warren (2005), we distributed to students 'Express Yourself Postcards' to be filled out anonymously at their own convenience. The postcards had a cartoon figure image that was in alignment with our context of study (see Appendix 1). The other side of the postcard had been designed like a typical postcard with the comment: 'Say what you like about your professor' printed on the top center of the postcard. The idea behind the postcard was that it would elaborate on students' perceptions and experiences. The adjectival nature of the data found in postcards enabled us to undergo a two-pronged analysis, consisting of quantitative and qualitative methods.

Interestingly, the students capitalized on the non-academic characteristics of their professors more than the academic qualifications. For instance, nonacademic adjectival attributes, such as 'kind' and 'interesting' had a much higher ratio of occurrence in students' comments in the postcards than more academic oriented adjectives, such as 'clear', 'inspiring', and 'intelligent'. Data from the postcards shed light on what is considered a "good" versus "bad" teacher from the students' viewpoint (i.e. a focus on positive and negative teacher attributes), which necessarily relies on their background experiences and the nature of the motivation behind their enrollment to the English Department.

## 2.3 Other Data and Findings

We were able to make use of other already available sources of data in two contexts: 1) archival information in the form of specific questions and answers about professors and subjects, set up in an



online forum for students, 2) a few instances of classroom tabletop graffiti which show caricatures and humorous comments drawn by students about their professors, and 3) three short interviews with students regarding the sources of gossip leading to evaluative information that students seek about professors.

Protected by nicknames (of course), many students air out their experiences after completing the semester for other students to learn from the reservoir of these past experiences. However, this forum is not simply a “safe space” to broadcast public warnings about professors in TED, but also a space where many students provide recommendations and tips and others seek advice about academic and administrative matters. Professors do have access to the students’ online forum and can easily find out what students have said about them, but the question that presents itself here is: do professors care what students say about them? To a certain degree, only a few professors may care about how they are perceived by students. A professor’s career at CBE is not affected by students’ evaluations since the tenure system disregards students’ views of their professors.

Another source of students’ evaluative outlet is classroom tabletop graffiti, which – although scarce – is an important insight into images that students have of their teachers. Tabletops (according to students at TED) are commonly an ideal, recreational space onto which to doodle when a student is feeling bored or incapable of following the teacher in class. After frequenting several classrooms during one complete semester, we noted that tabletops graffiti typically consisted of: piles of small print subject-related information used for cheating in tests, lyrics of love songs, and more importantly, caricatures of professors and humorous comments either praising or condemning these professors.

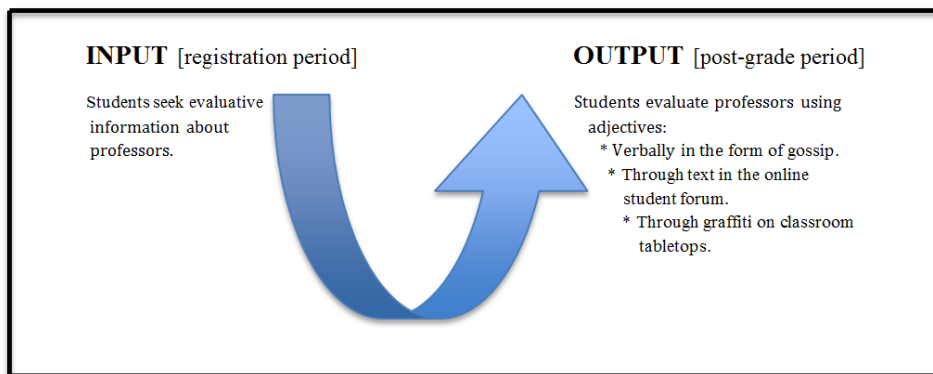
Finally, to establish credibility to the issue of students’ evaluative discourse, short interviews were conducted with a few students regarding the source of evaluative information about teachers. The following was concluded: firstly, seeking advice from academically poor students is strictly avoided because their feedback is usually skewed by their non-committal to student responsibilities and duties. Secondly, students almost always seek a second and third opinion about a professor. And finally, students assume that an overpopulated class is an indication that the professor of this class is a “good” teacher.

### 3.0 Discussions and Conclusion

The results essentially indicate the priorities students have in mind when they engage in evaluative talk of their professors as well as the way they view their learning experience in CBE. The attainment of high grades with the least effort seems to lie at the center of the learning experience. In addition, it seems that the educational environment at CBE is one that promotes grades at the expense of learning too, since grade inflation is a common practice by many professors. Grade inflation, by its very nature undermines learning. Ultimately, students tend to lose interest in whatever they are learning. As the motivation to obtain good grades increases, motivation to explore ideas and gain knowledge tends to decrease. Students also try to avoid challenging tasks whenever possible. More difficult assignments, after all, would be seen as an impediment to getting a top grade. Eventually, the students’ critical thinking skills diminish.

Additionally, the use of adjectives as a venting and advisory strategy across different methods allows students to re-contextualize these adjectives by creating new shades of meaning and adding strength to them. In fact, the whole concept of good/bad teacher is reinforced. It is also worth mentioning that interestingly, the more this evaluative adjectival discourse is ignored by professors, the louder it seems to be getting, mostly by the evaluative discourse itself being recycled among students (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 2: The evaluative discourse is processed and recycled among students.



The results also seem to indicate that most patterns of evaluative discourse about professors tend to reveal an asymmetry in power. According to many students, the evaluative discourse they utilize serves the goal of delivering justice by suggesting strategies to overcome academic injustice or difficulties that they perceive are created by some professors. The institutional power enacted in TED gives professors the prerogative to impose stringent classroom rules and evaluate students' performances quiet harshly in order to maintain a high educational standard. But evidently, once outside the classroom context, the power appears to shift towards the students; and the evaluator becomes the evaluated.

The way in which evaluative discourse is processed through the college's speech community is enmeshed in the society at large. The Kuwaiti society tends to regard evaluative talk as an important part of its socio-cultural fabric. This study has attempted to open up a relatively unexplored area of research in this part of the world (the Arabian Gulf region), which is at the intersection of education, language and socio-culture.

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**Appendix 1**



*"My composition is called 'Mrs. Torrence Is a Big Fat Idiot.'"*

	
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