Challenges of Oral Participation in English Classrooms: A Study of Libyan Undergraduate Learners in the English Department

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Abstract

Oral participation plays a significant role in English learning classes. This is because language is fundamentally rooted in speech, and other skills like reading and writing can only be developed once a certain level of oral proficiency has been attained. Despite its importance and the awareness raised by recent studies, there is still sufficient evidence to suggest that learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) still struggle and show lower participation and less involvement in classroom activities. This study, therefore, attempts to explore the factors affecting Libyan EFL learners of English in their oral classroom participation. The study aims to more specifically understand and delve into the most highlighted factors by those learners. Accordingly, a qualitative approach was used where a number of EFL Libyan undergraduate learners (n=25) from a public university were purposely selected for this study. Based on the results, the study revealed that the learners generally consider the role played by their teachers as the most significant factor in facilitating their learning and participation. This is because learners see their teachers as experts as well as role models. The findings also indicated that the role of the target subject in terms of acquaintance is another considerable factor in supporting their participation. That is, the more background knowledge learners have, the more likely they are to be engaged by providing them with a solid foundation of knowledge that could help them comprehend new concepts more easily, boosting their confidence, and motivating them to learn more. This increased engagement leads to a deeper understanding of the subject matter. Based on the above findings, therefore, this paper suggests that a careful consideration of learners' characteristic and deliberate implementation of suitable strategies and approaches can help to promote the level of learners' oral participation, guaranteeing successful learning in EFL classes.

Keywords: Background knowledge, Factors, Libyan EFL learners, Oral participation, teacher's role,

1. Introduction

In English learning classes, students' participation is essential and highly required as one of the preconditions for successful learning. As Tatar (2005) pointed out, active classroom participation matters in developing learners' education as this aid them to achieve success. In fact, teachers and students are both expected to engage in numerous types of actions to produce interactive and classroom activities. Classroom participation is among the anticipated actions, which is vital as it signifies students' engagement. Many language teachers and ELT practitioners have over years emphasized the belief that oral participation indicates students' successful learning (Trila & Anwar, 2020). Despite the emphasized significance of speaking at the academic level, English speaking ability poses challenges to many learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) in general (Shen & Chiu, 2019), and for Arab EFL learners in particular (Rababah, 2005). In his submission, Hosni (2014) stressed that EFL learners still

encounter the difficulty with speaking regardless the level of their English. Scholars have also stated that learners admit the difficulties associated with speaking in English as a challenge that is manifest even among those who had the opportunity to study and interact with native speakers for years (Sawir, 2005). That is, spending many years in a country where English is a native language does not seem to alleviate this deficiency to the desired level (Lee 2009). EFL learners still feel that the speaking skill is quite demanding, especially when it comes to classroom participation.

Based on a previous personal experience as an EFL learner, currently as an EFL instructor, and in preliminary observation during my classes, it can be asserted with a reasonable degree of confidence that the majority of students struggle in delivering their learning output especially in the speaking courses. In other words, students show less involvement in classroom activities. Many students do not contribute effectively as they remain passive listeners in the class rather than active learners. Unfortunately, there is a consequential effect of this on their academic performance evidenced in their sluggish progression over the years. They are mostly more comfortable and confident speaking in their native language (i.e., in Arabic - as in the case of this study).

Despite the increasing concern about the matter among researchers, the Libyan EFL context has yet to receive significant attention from researchers. There is a dearth of literature on this topic, with only two studies examining the factors that impact the oral participation of Libyan English learners. One study was conducted by Ellabiedi, Ben Saleh, and Atturky (2017) at the University of Misrata, which found that low English proficiency, shyness, lack of confidence, fear of making mistakes, and other factors are some of the main reasons for learners' reticence in the classroom. The study also revealed that there are several demands that can be satisfied by teachers

through the use of group projects, group work, proper teaching methods, and longer wait times, among other strategies. The other study was carried out by Algamati and Hamuda in Misurata city (2020), but focused on secondary students. It revealed that lack of motivation and fear of making mistakes, limited vocabulary, poor background experience, and lack of self-confidence were behind the anticipated factors affecting students' oral participation in classroom activities.

Therefore, this study intends to pay more attention to the Libyan context. This study initially aims to investigate the reasons behind Libyan EFL learners' difficulty in participating in oral tasks within the classroom, looking for any new factors. Additionally, the study intends to delve deeper and explore how and why such factors can affect learners' oral participation in class. In fact, the Libyan situation is still ripe and eager for such investigation. So, the findings from this research will provide valuable insights and increase awareness among EFL teachers. Therefore, this study seeks to address the following four questions:

Q1.What factors influence Libyan EFL learners' capability in their oral classroom participation?

Q2.Do Libyan EFL learners consider their teachers as dominant motivators?

Q3.Why do Libyan EFL learners consider their teachers as dominant motivators?

Q4.How does background knowledge impact Libyan EFL learners' oral classroom participation?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definition of Oral Participation:

Oral participation refers to actively engaging in a conversation or discussion by speaking and expressing one' thoughts, ideas, opinions, and questions. Oral participation can take place in various settings such as classrooms, meetings, interviews, debates, and social gatherings. Specifically, in regards to classroom settings, Delaney (2012) stated that "oral

participation is generally where oral production occurs" (p. 469). Therefore, oral participation is the indicator for students' engagement. In fact, teachers frequently use oral participation as a gauge of their students' engagement.

The concept of oral participation was first introduced by educational theorists such as John Dewey and Maria Montessori in the early 20th century. Oral participation was the core of Dewey's theory (1938). Put more simply, experience, inquiry, reflection and collaboration are among the main principles of Dewey's theory by which oral participation is stimulated. According to Dewey, learners acquire knowledge most effectively when they are actively involved in the learning process, and he emphasized the importance of inquiry-based learning, where learners are motivated to inquire and search for solutions through exploration and experiments. Dewey also encourages students to reflect on their experiences and think critically about what they have learned, and believed that learning should be a collaborative process, where students work together to solve problems and share their ideas (Pacho, 2015).

Oral participation is truly supported in Montessori theory (Montessori, 2004). In fact, communication is an essential part of the Montessori method, where teachers often use group discussion, circle time, and other activities that require learners to speak and share their thoughts and ideas with others. The Montessori approach fosters the development of communication skills, boosts confidence and encourages peer learning. As a result, students learn to collaborate effectively and communicate with ease in the classroom. (Bhat, 2021).

2.2. Factors affecting Oral Participation in English Classrooms

Establishing a welcoming classroom atmosphere, where students feel truly engaged, is essential and required. However, this goal might be unattainable for many students. Scholars documented several factors with regard to classroom participation. For instance, numerous problems have been cited such as feeling embarrassed and having nothing to say (Ur, 1996), feeling worried about making or committing grammatical or phonological errors, or perpetual fear of criticism from course mates as well as overbearing correction from some teachers as stated by Zhan (2009). In addition to this, Zhang (2009) also stated that welcoming atmosphere is linked to the kind and nature of the activities designed and implemented in an EFL classroom.

Another study conducted by Al Hosni (2014) in Oman emphasized that difficulty in speaking may stem from various sources, such as inhibition due to fear of making mistakes, being criticized or simply being shy. Another factor is the lack of intrinsic motivation on the part of students to express themselves orally or participate in classroom interaction. Additionally, low or uneven participation can occur when only one student dominates classroom interaction and denies others the opportunity to participate, which is often seen in large class sizes. However, the most significant factor affecting students' oral participation in an EFL classroom is the dominant use of their mother tongue (as noted by Al Hosni, 2014).

Similarly, Baktash and Chalak (2015) carried out a study on Iranian EFL university students to investigate the factors contributing to the students' non-participation in class. They applied two ways to elicit students' response: a questionnaire with some of the students and interviews with others. The study revealed that there are different factors involved in this issue; one of them is related to their teachers' practices, while others are related to the students' personalities and level of education. More precisely, the study discovered that teachers' evaluations, low confidence, and low English proficiency were contributing factors.

2.3 The Typical Undergraduate Classroom Setting in Libya

Libya, which is located in the north of Africa, is a developing country, and consequently education is not fully supported. Public universities do not receive an adequate budget. The number of students differs from subject to subject, from department to department and from class to class. It may vary from 1 to a whopping 200. The conditions of the classrooms are decent in many cities, and pretty good in others. Most of the university classes are 2 hours in length, while science classes often exceed 3 hours length.

With regard to student behaviors, there are different types of personalities. Mostly, first year students (freshman) are not attentive. However, for those who pass to the second year they start to have a more concentrated character; this is true across many subjects. The different atmosphere between secondary schools and university classes may have an influence on that. Technology is also a factor. Cellphones, for instance, are used by the majority of students in class, regardless of the fact that it is not acceptable practice. Students are mostly not disciplined for not attending classes, and there are just 5% of marks assigned for attendance.

Finally, the relationship between professors and students and among students varies. There is no strong connection between professors and many of their students; professors are trying to pave the way for their students to be engaged, though. However, exceptions exist. In fact, we cannot repudiate that some professors and students have a good relationship with other students and peers, or at least with some of them. However, the relationship among students is good in terms of helping each other, and this is the most positive thing in the academic setting. But there are still some exceptions.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

Specifically, this study is a phenomenological study that employed a qualitative method to understand students' feelings and perceptions about their learning and the factors influencing their participation in the classroom. According to Creswell (2012), a phenomenological study aims to understand the shared understanding of a concept or phenomenon among a group of individuals based on their personal experiences. In order to obtain the desired information, purposive sampling was employed, in which "elements are selected based on the researcher's judgment that they will provide access to the desired information" (Dattalo, 2008, p. 6). In particular, the researcher selected those who were not regularly participating in class activities.

3.2 Participants

Twenty-five learners from a public university were selected for the purpose of this study. They were all undergraduate learners and studying English as their major. They were recruited from different academic years; (14) freshmen, (2) sophomores, (5) juniors, and (4) seniors. Regarding their gender, males were a smaller representation (8%), while females were represented by 92% of the sample. The age of the learners ranged from 18-22. None of the participants reported being impaired. Subjects gave their permission verbally while their withdrawal was acceptable at any time.

3.3 Data Collection

Data was collected through an interview-guide sheet through a task of writing. The questions were written in both Arabic and English in order to avoid any misunderstanding or confusion. Similarly, the participants had the choice to answer in either. The data collected in Arabic was translated to English and was back-translated to Arabic to construct the original and validate the translated copy.

Initially, a note was posted on an advertising board indicating the assigned times and the selected rooms. The interview questions were passed to the students in their free schedule days (two days). Students were informed about the nature of the study and what type of information the researcher was looking for. They were informed that the interview required about 10 minutes to respond. Once they returned the completed interview-guide sheet, they were thanked for being cooperative and helpful, with appreciation for their effort and time.

3.4 Data Analysis

Initially, the data corpus was coded entirely in an Excel coding sheet. Then it was identified based on the ideas that emerged in learners' responses written on their individual interview sheets. Different themes ran through the responses such as inhibition, making mistakes, shyness, lack of motivation, teachers' criticism, and background knowledge about the topic. So, thematic analysis was the applied method of analysis.

4. Results and Discussion

Based on the results, learners commonly agreed on or considered the teacher as the dominant motivator for them to speak up and background knowledge as one of the factors impacting Libyan EFL learners' oral classroom participation. Additionally, learners reported that they felt upset at making errors, especially in the wake of unwarranted criticism or stigmatization either from course mates or teachers. It is an uncontestably fact that criticism is one of the factors that diminishes learners' motivation and degrades their ambition in the classroom. Hesitation was reported as another by-product of committing errors and getting bullied.

With regard to the teacher as the dominant motivator, learners reported that teachers' kind of behaviour, their interesting methods of teaching, and their respectable feedback play a motivating role that stimulate their interest to participate in classroom activity.

In fact, teachers' feedback was the most highlighted factor among those related to their teachers' practice. And similar findings were found in literature (Al Hosin, 2014; Baktash & Chalak, 2015). As human beings, receiving kind words from others is uplifting; it not only makes us feel good about ourselves, but also can make the impossible seem very possible. In other words, giving students feedback is important in the teaching and learning process. However, the way in which it is used can either enhance students' learning or shut them down. Harmer (2007) argues that "feedback on students' work probably has more effect on achievement than any other single factor" (p. 137). And this is entirely true as the study articulates through its findings. Because once learners understand what is expected by the teacher, what is required from them, and receive positive feedback even when their response is incorrect this can assist and build their self-esteem and confidence. As result, they become confident and feel that they are part of the classroom community and take part and invest in their learning process through very active and participatory classroom activities. From another point of view, a safe and constructive learning environment encourages and supports high achievement. On the other hand, lack of confidence can disable a person, especially when it comes to oral language class participation as revealed and supported by Baktash and Chalak's study (2015).

Regarding implementing interesting methods of teaching, the findings of this study was consistent with the previous studies (Zhang, 2009). Experiencing enjoyment, appreciation, and a conducive learning atmosphere have the most significant impact on active participation in oral discussions during class (Tepfenhart, 2011). No one can deny the fact that an enthusiastic method of teaching can support students' learning (Zhang, 2019). Scholars indicated that interesting and engaging methods of teaching can scaffold

individuals in their learning (Hattie & Yates, 2013). So, the more effective the methods are, the more engaged the students become. And this serves both teachers and learners, as teachers can evaluate their students, and learners can develop and enlarge their knowledge.

Concerning background knowledge, the nature of the class subject in terms of difficulty was reported as an inevitable aspect in determining learners' motivation and participation. Learners believe that having a background knowledge about the lesson could help them to be orally involved in the class activity. The learners stated that the more they are familiar with the class topic, the more they participate even with less speech. What is interesting is what some students revealed about lesson theme familiarity. They revealed that even with unfamiliar vocabulary, they believe that topic familiarity helps to boost their confidence and enable them to participate orally. However, this result is contrary to the results in Baktash and Chalak's study (2015) because they believe that low English proficiency is an obstacle for learners in the classroom and lead to silence: "Low English proficiency was one of the main reasons that lead to silence in EFL classes" (p.5). But even with low English proficiency, learners in this study believed that background knowledge supports their involvement in classroom discussion. However, this might not be the case; it is expected that will encounter new and unfamiliar information as part of the learning process.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the study, it can be safely concluded that the teacher's role, including classroom environment and subject familiarity in terms of background knowledge, are among the most impactful factors behind learners' motivation in oral participation in classroom activities and interaction. Once teachers are well-prepared, classroom environment is blended with the conducive and enhanced

social, emotional, and instructional elements, along with high level of awareness of the topic, successful learning with active oral participation of students in an ELF classroom can be achieved. On the other hand, less participation occurs when teachers allow bad habits to interfere with their task of teaching and learning processes. A poor classroom environment is also seen as quite frustrating which hampers participatory learning process in an EFL lesson.

The findings of this study will be of support to English teachers, especially those who are FL teachers. It would be helpful as teachers may apply suitable strategies so that students are more involved and to enhance their oral skills as well. However, this requires teachers to be more knowledgeable about the best strategies that meet students' needs and targets as EFL learners. It is necessary that teachers deeply concentrate on their students' feelings and perceptions. The first step that must be taken to educate students well and efficiently is to determine their needs. Echevarria and Graves (2007) state, "In order to educate all students appropriately, a systematic process for determining their needs includes gathering data, conducting assessments, and implementing instruction" (p. 29).

Recommendations for further investigation are made here. As the teaching-learning process represents both teachers and students, it would be reasonable and supportive to have teachers as the target population for future investigation. Involving the teachers in charge of the same group at first and interviewing them would help in knowing their insights and suggestions about the issue and how the situation can be solved. Also, other angles might be investigated with different characteristics or specific grouping.

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