

Oral Participation in Class, Problems, and Solutions: A Case Study of the English Department at Cihan University-Erbil

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Abstract—In this paper, the focus is on oral participation during lectures. Oral participation refers to the active engagement of learners in the lecture by speaking, asking, giving comments, and participating in pair or group discussions. The students are supposed to participate and practice the language to improve their speaking skills. The main question in this study is: Why students do not speak and engage during lectures? Hence, the aim of the paper is to find out the factors that affect their performance. In this study, the researcher examined the main reason behind the lack of participation of English Foreign Language students in the English department at Cihan University-Erbil to find solutions for improving their speaking skills. A questionnaire was prepared based on the most common reasons affecting class engagement and it was divided into four sections: Personal factors, the role of the teacher, environmental factors, and linguistic factors. The participants were students at the English department at Cihan University-Erbil. After conducting the questionnaire, the researcher had an interview with the students and their teachers. The results showed that there are many reasons and factors that hinder learners from speaking and turn them into passive listeners. The personal factors and the effect of the teachers were the most prominent factors that had an impact on the learner's performance.

Keywords—Class interaction, Communicative competence, English foreign language classes, Learner's autonomy, Oral participation.

I. INTRODUCTION

A classroom is a place or context in which teachers and students meet and share knowledge and information about a specific subject. Many activities are taking part in the classroom, students attending following what is going on, oral discussions, group work, and pair work, besides doing exercises. Hence, the term “class participation” may refer to a variety of activities and it is defined as all the ways in which the students engage in the class (Warayet, 2011). Since class participation may entail different activities; in this paper, the focus is on oral participation. Fritschner (2000: p 62) states that class participation is divided into “talkers” who prefer to speak in the lecture and “Non-talkers” learners who participate by attending the lecture, listening actively, finishing assignments, and preparing themselves for the following lectures. Speaking in the class or oral participation refers to students' active engagement during the lecture and Henainia (2011) states that “oral participation is a form of active learning in which students publicly discuss the course

materials.” Regarding English Foreign Language (EFL) classes, oral participation is considered as a vital part of language learning.

Many studies showed that learners active involvement in the class using the target language is significant and necessary throughout their learning process.

Although oral participation is highly focused on during teaching and learning, many students prefer not to speak during the lecture. There are many reasons that hinder learners from active engagement in the class, some of which are personal such as feeling shy, lack of confidence, or environmental reasons such as classroom climate, the teacher, the teaching method, and incompetent language skills such as being unable to communicate in the target language. This paper aims at examining the main factors in motivating or demotivating the students to speak in English department at Cihan university-Erbil.

There is a diversity of students in English department with different backgrounds and different nationalities (Kurds,

Arabs and Turkmen). Moreover, despite the fact that the department is following the university's policy of promoting teaching practices based on new methods and different facilities to encourage students' participation, some students tend during the lectures. To investigate the reasons that hinders learners from active participation, a questionnaire was prepared and distributed to the students in addition to a discussion session with the professors teaching in English department to outline the best possible solutions to enhance the teaching and learning process.

A. Statement of the Problem

1. Many students in English department do not participate in the lecture
2. Students hesitate in speaking in the Foreign Language
3. Lack of engagement affects their learning and developing speaking skills.

B. The Aim of the Study

This research aims at examining and outlining the reasons behind the lack of participation and oral interaction of students inside the class and finding the possible solutions to overcome these issues and help learners to improve their speaking and their communicative skills during the lecture.

C. The Scope of the Study

Class participation may include different activities; oral and written thus, this paper is limited to oral participation of EFL in class only. The study is also limited to the English department, so all the participants are EFL learners in the English department at Cihan University-Erbil.

D. Significance of the Study

This paper is beneficial for professors who teach English as a second/foreign language since it helps in understanding learners, the effect of their personality, the social background, their mother tongue, and many other factors on their learning process. Understanding these reasons and finding solutions for them helps improving the teaching and learning process in EFL classes.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In acquiring any language, students' participation is vital for learning, and the importance of class interaction in EFL setting is undebatable. Moreover, class participation includes many activities such as verbal interaction, non-verbal, group work, pair work, and oral discussion. Participating orally in the class is called oral interaction. Maziha et al. (2010). Ellis (1985) indicates that interaction is "the discourse" which is constructed by both teachers and students. Warayet (2011) states that oral interaction in the class includes the students speaking in the lecture, asking and answering questions, giving opinions, making comments, and participating in discussions. Interaction defined as communication between individuals when they are trying to not break the conversation

by negotiating meaning. Liu (2001) mentioned four types of "student participation" in class "full interaction, participating in circumstances, marginal interaction, and silent observation. Full interaction means that learners are actively engaging in the lecture's discussion, they are aware of what is being discussed and they know what to say. Their interaction is natural and spontaneous. However, in each class, there are some students who engage in particular situations only, not necessarily in every discussion. It happens when the learner is affected by "cognitive, socio-cultural, or linguistic factors." Within this type of interaction, students are more careful about what to say and when to say it; therefore, it is less spontaneous and less natural. The third type which is called marginal participation is used for students who prefer listening to speaking and they would rather taking notes during the lecture. The fourth type of students participation is "silent observation." It may be done by students who avoid speaking and those who prefer taking notes to speaking or take part in small discussions after the lectures and they tend to stay silent whether they agree or disagree with what is being discussed (Castro and Diaz, 2019).

Warayet (2011) described students who are silent as passive learners who show reluctance in interacting inside the class and this can affect the class environment negatively. Moreover, instructors may interpret this silence as criticism for the way they teach. There are many reasons and factors that prevent students from participating and lead them to stay silent although participation is rewarded. These reasons that have impact on the students are many and they are viewed differently by many researchers. The most common factors are (Personal, The Impact of Teachers, Environmental Factors, Linguistic Factors, and Other Factors).

One of the most effective reasons is the learner's personality, the way he or she thinks can have a great influence on their learning behavior (Meyer and Hunt, 2004). Students' perception affect their interaction, feeling shy, or feeling uncomfortable sharing their ideas is another factor. Low self-esteem and being afraid of making mistakes are another reason. Learners are afraid of making mistakes, so to avoid getting embarrassed, they choose not to speak (Skehan, 1989 cited in Zarrinabadi, 2014). Another reason is Willingness to Communicate (WTC). WTC is considered as motives or reasons that push learners to seek out opportunities to speak in the target language/foreign language. (Abdulwahid, 2023) states "Some students join the English department due to having a low average not due to their passion, so they are not motivated to participate." Seri (2016) in his paper entitled "Enhancing Students WTC; Teachers' Beliefs about Their Roles and Strategies" concluded that the concept of "WTC" should be introduced to both teachers and students since it has a great impact on their performance. McCroskey and McVetta (1987) cited in Liu and Jackson (2008) noted that WTC is a good way to predict class interaction because learners with high levels of WTC have participated more in the class.

Moreover, Wade (1994) mentioned that one of the main factors of class participation is the instructor, more specifically students will interact less if the teacher is not

giving them attention or if the instructor is making fun of them, criticize, or neglect them. The lecturer contributes to the learner's levels of participation, Karp and Yoel (1976) stated that "the actions of the teacher are indeed most crucial in promoting classroom interaction" (Roca, 2010). Berdine (1986) noted that lecturers who are boring, moody, unsocial, unfriendly, and close-minded are likely to have passive and silent students. Silence in the classroom is one of the most disappointing and frustrating phenomena. Teaching English as a foreign language is not easy, the instructor has to consider many points in teaching as speaking slowly, with a clear high tone and correct pronunciation. In addition, teachers should care about the vocabulary (basic-advanced) and less idiomatic (Henainia and Hamlaoui, 2011). Moreover, the method of teaching is also significant, Abbasian (2022) states that "In a learner-centered class, the emphasis is on each student's unique requirements. This method necessitates the participation of both the teacher and the student. They should each have their own part to play. In such a class, the teacher can be the data collector, controller, and activator, as well as a meditative practitioner and researcher in such a class."

The teacher acts as the leader of communication in class, he/she provides input by explaining or setting the context for speaking/listening or reading. Therefore, their role is vital since everything they do may motivate or demotivate the students. Beside the teacher's teaching skills, another important point is teacher's questions. Knowing what, how, and when to ask is one of the dimensions of effective teaching. White and Lightbown (1984) showed that teachers do not provide enough time for the learner to think about the question before redirecting it to another student, mostly teachers are looking for quick and instant answers. The short time allocated for answering may reduce the levels of students' engagement. Similarly, teacher's feedback whether positive or negative is nevertheless significant in the class. Mohammed and Mustafa (2022) defined corrective feedback as the responses of peers and teachers to the flawed second language production of the learner. Researchers have different points of view regarding the timing and the kind of feedback on learners' performance. Cathcart and Olsen (1976) cited in Henainia (2011) indicate that despite the fact that students say that they want to be corrected if they are mistaken, However, sometimes correction interrupts communication. Over correction or negative feedback may hinder engagement and leads students to hesitate before participating. Another point is the students diversity, Qarani and Muhammad (2019) state that "to achieve a high-quality interaction, instructors are required to be prepared well for student's diversity in terms of beliefs, cultural, national, experience and capacities, social class, financial differences, language, gender, and disability."

Roca (2010) states that class environment affects student's behavior and their participation. Classroom environment includes the teacher, the students, the size of the class, the seating arrangement, and the method of teaching. Karp and Yoel (1976) stated that classes with large number of students usually have less participation and interaction. Another point is seating arrangement each kind of arrangement of seats serves a specific purpose. It is believed that classes arranged

with U-shape are more active than traditional seating (McCroskey and McVetta, 1978). However, many scholars found no relationship between the preferred arrangement of seating and lack of participation (Bowers, 1986). As for the impact of timing, the time of the course has been found to affect the interaction, students are more likely to participate more as the course is proceeding. Moreover, students are expected to be more active in day classes than in evening or night classes (Howard and Henney, 1996).

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

For the sake of understanding the main reasons behind lack of participation, eighty students were chosen from English department at Cihan University-Erbil. The participants are from second, third and fourth stages. Moreover, the participants are from both genders, different ages, have different social backgrounds, and speak different native languages (Arabic and Kurdish).

B. Procedure

After reviewing many studies about class participations such as Henainia and Hamlaoui (2011) in their dissertation entitled *The Importance of Classroom Oral Participation in Developing the Speaking Skill*, Crosthwaite et al. (2015) in their paper entitled *Assessing in-class participation for EFL: considerations of effectiveness and fairness for different learning styles*, and Rocca, (2010) in his paper entitled *Student Participation in the College Classroom: An Extended Multidisciplinary Literature Review*. A questionnaire was prepared including the most possible factors influencing students' engagement in class in English department at Cihan University-Erbil. The researcher outlined these factors after having scientific discussions with English language professors at English department. After distributing the questionnaire, the results were analyzed and the possible solutions were discussed again with the faculty members.

IV. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

For the purpose of analyzing the main reasons behind lack of participation, the questionnaire items were chosen after reviewing many papers related to the subject in addition to observing classes in English department. The questionnaire has been organized into four sections (personal factors, teacher's role, environmental factors, and linguistic factors). Moreover, the students were asked to write any other reason that affects them and that is not mentioned. The total number of statements was 27 statements covering the four criteria.

A. Personal Factors

The personal factors (Table I) are related to students' personality, their willingness to participate, and their perception of class participation. The first two statements within the personal factors were (I feel shy to speak in the class) and (I do not feel confident). Both of these statements

TABLE I
PERSONAL FACTORS

Items	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
I feel shy to speak	32	10	8	45	5
I do not feel confident	28	14	6	44	8
I have other important issues	50	10	5	30	5
I am not interested in speaking English	10	9	31	35	15
I do not think that my contribution is valuable	8	7	6	45	34
I prefer to listening to speaking	25	18	9	28	20
I am not motivated	34	20	6	21	19
I am afraid of making mistakes	40	29	3	15	13
I like the teacher to correct my mistakes	45	35	5	10	5

TABLE II
THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER

The items	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
The teacher does not give me a chance to speak	12	10	10	38	30
The teacher asks very difficult questions	13	11	4	30	42
The teacher is moody	7	3	15	45	30
I do not like the teacher	5	6	20	40	29
The teacher does not accept mistakes and gets angry	16	15	19	35	15
The teacher's feedback affects my performance	34	30	11	15	10

TABLE III
ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

The items	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
The class is boring	30	20	10	22	18
The class is not interactive	10	10	6	44	30
When I make a mistake my colleagues laugh at me	28	25	10	20	17
The class is crowded	12	11	5	35	37
The class is not friendly	15	20	11	34	20
The class seating affects my interaction	4	3	23	30	40
The timing of the class affects me	10	11	15	36	28

TABLE IV
LINGUISTIC FACTORS

The items	Strongly agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly disagree (%)
The subjects are very difficult	9	10	5	33	43
I cannot speak English	5	10	12	43	30
The subjects are not interesting	15	13	8	37	27
When I make a mistake my colleagues laugh at me	28	25	10	20	17
I do not understand English	5	10	15	35	35
The mark for participation is not very high	12	18	10	40	20

reflect the learner's communication problems and speaking apprehension. The results for both questions were close somehow, 45% of the participants disagreed on feeling shy and less confident while 32% strongly agreed and 10% agreed on the statement and only 8% of the answers were neutral. However, 42% is still a high percentage regardless of the fact that the students are from third and fourth stages. The students were asked to write any other reason that affects them. One of the answers was "I do not have anything to say, but actually I feel shy to speak and I know its bad for myself."

The third statement was (I have other important issues). Many students of the department are either married, they have children and family responsibilities or are working in part-

time jobs. Both profession and familial responsibilities proved to be important variables regarding learner's performance. About 50% agreed that having other important things to do affects their participation. In contrast, 30% disagreed and 5% were neutral. One of the students wrote "I do not participate due to other commitments like working part-timely. I might not have a complete control over the subjects therefore my participation gets affected drastically" and another female student wrote "I have another degree as a lawyer, I'm so busy, that is why I am skipping lectures and I do not participate a lot." Another male student agreed on having personal issues and responsibilities affects his performance, he commented "one of the reasons is having the brain occupied by personal problems and family and work difficulty."

Regarding the fourth and fifth statements, most students disagreed, this shows that they are aware of the importance of their contribution inside the classroom. However, the last four statements were about their communication apprehension and psychological issues like feeling afraid of making mistakes and preferring listening to speaking. The results indicate that many students are hesitant in engaging in lectures because of being afraid of mistakes and not being motivated enough. One of the students commented that “most of the students of my batch did not choose English department, but more ended up due to low average and lack of other options which leaves them ill-motivated” another student wrote that “it does not matter to me if I do not speak a lot, I do not want to be talkative.” These answers show the great impact of students’ personal life and attitude on their educational engagements.

B. Teacher’s Role

Regarding the role of the instructor inside the class, students’ answers varied. As shown in (Table II), most of them showed disagreement with the idea that the teacher is moody or he/she does not provide equal chances for learners to engage in the lecture. However, some students noted that the lecturer’s behavior has an impact on them. A student wrote, “when the teacher tries to avoid me and does not make eye contact I will not participate and making a lot of interrupts while I’m speaking.” This shows that the teacher must be so careful and avoid interrupting and embarrassing the students, another student wrote “I’m afraid of direct correction and embarrassing me and the teacher making sarcasm of me, sometimes I’m afraid of the lecturer’s reactions.” The instructor’s attitude, feedback, and body language are significant in the class.

C. Environmental Factors

Table III shows the environmental factors are about the atmosphere in the class, the number of the students, students’ behavior, seating arrangement, and the timing of the lectures. According to many studies, these factors are significant in defining the performance of students. About 30% of the students disagreed with the idea that the class is crowded or it is not interactive. Yet, 30% of students agreed that the class was boring and as an answer to the question why do not you participate, one of the students wrote “the class is so boring.” As for the feedback from colleagues and their reactions 28% agreed that it affects them and a student commented “the colleagues will laugh about any simple or small mistake.” Although there is little evidence that the timing of the class whether early or late is important, a student answered “when the classes start at 8:30 a.m. I and my friend become very sleepy and when there are not enough rests, we get very hungry that we cannot focus.”

D. Linguistic Factors

The last part of the questionnaire was about linguistic factors such as the subjects, the textbooks being difficult or very easy, not understanding English, and the mark designated for speaking in the lecture. As (Table IV) shows,

43% disagreed with the idea that the subjects were difficult and also 30% disagreed with the idea of not being able to speak or not understanding English. As shown in the table, the linguistic factors do not have much impact on students in the English department.

V. CONCLUSION

After conducting a questionnaire and having discussion sessions with the faculty members and the students of the English department at Cihan University – Erbil, it was concluded that the personal factors as being shy, afraid of mistakes, busy with family or children, and having other important responsibilities were the most effective factors regarding students’ engagement during the lecture. The role of the teacher was also seen as a significant factor. The teachers’ behavior, their teaching style, and their mood all were important variables in defining the learners’ participation. Besides the former two reasons, there were more vital reasons such as class environment and linguistic factors. Yet their effect was not as strong as personal factors and the role of the teacher.

A. Suggestions and Recommendations

Knowing the problems, the researcher had sessions with students and their teachers asking them about the best possible methods to improve the quality of teaching and learning and about how to overcome these issues. The research reached the following possible suggestions.

1. Students’ age, marital status, and personal attitude must be taken into consideration. As a follow-up for this point, the department of English has decided to sign a teacher for each stage. The teacher will have regular meetings with the students asking them about their progress, their problems, and their requests.
2. The instructors should pay attention to everything they do in and out of the class regarding the way of addressing students, eye contact, asking questions, tolerating mistakes, and controlling their moods.
3. Regarding the class environment, the number of students inside each class and their seating must be considered. Moreover, the students must be taught the importance of respecting their colleagues and avoiding sarcasm, and laughing whenever one of them makes a mistake.
4. The subjects being taught should be well-chosen according to the specialty and they should be taught using the most up to dated methods of teaching.

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