

Affect and Students' Reluctance in EFL Oral Classrooms.

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Abstract

Oral interaction in the oral EFL classrooms remains a prominent concern of many scholars. In addition, students in the LMD system are taught under the Communicative Approach seeking to enhance their oral proficiency. Yet, an important number of learners are reluctant to speak English. Considering that learners do not actually take an active involvement in their oral classes, an investigation was conducted among 36 young adults studying English at the University of Mostaganem. First, it is an attempt to shed light on the reasons behind the students' reluctance in the classroom, and then, focus would be to find out the affective factors related to their lack of participation. Four aspects of affect have been considered; namely, motivation, anxiety, risk-taking, and concern for grades. Results revealed that each variable had a direct effect on the students' hesitation to take part in the oral activities, and that those factors were interrelated as well.

Key words: EFL context, Oral Interaction, Reluctance, Affect, Motivation, Risk-Taking, Anxiety, Concern for grades.

Introduction

In the sphere of globalization, the urge to speak and communicate in the English language has become the main target of many ESL/EFL learners. Indeed, one of the current approaches to second or foreign language teaching is the Communicative Approach. Yet, a great number of students still face the problem to speak the target language proficiently, mainly because of their lack of participation in the classroom. Students' reluctance in an EFL context remains a complex phenomenon which has long been investigated by theorists as well as practitioners. In fact, the fields of didactics and educational psychology have dealt with EFL teaching taking into consideration physical, cognitive as well as affective factors. The current study focuses on students' reluctance to participate in an EFL context at the university level. It attempts to look for the main affective factors that can boost or inhibit students' participation within an oral classroom. In this respect, four aspects of affect are surveyed namely

anxiety, motivation, risk-taking, and students' concern for grades. The question raised is:

To what extent are affective factors related to students' reluctance to participate in an EFL oral classroom?

One believes that the affective factors have an impact on the students' reluctance within the EFL oral classes as the learning process is not limited simply to their personal abilities or disabilities. Students' anxiety, concern for grades along with a low self-confidence feeling may hinder their risk-taking behaviour and keep reluctant most of the time.

The study has been conducted through the use of a questionnaire given to university students. The results obtained show that the affective factors have a great influence on students' reluctance which consequently affects their oral proficiency. Therefore, to enhance participation in an oral classroom, students cannot be blamed: teachers should give much more interest to their students' affect during the learning and teaching process and above all to create a relaxed atmosphere in which all students with their mixed abilities can be involved.

1. Literature review:

1.1 Classroom interaction:

The importance of classroom interaction has witnessed a variety of studies in ESL/EFL learning. According to recent research, it has been claimed by an important number of researchers that interaction plays an important role in language learning. To start with Allwright (1984) claimed that classroom interaction contributes to language development simply by providing the target language practice opportunities, and that interaction is considered as the process whereby classroom language learning is managed and that in the language classroom the process of negotiation that is involved in interaction is itself to be identified with the process of language learning. In this view, the claim was that both linguistic knowledge and linguistic ability are developed. Furthermore, Allwright (1984) added *"Since we learn by communicating it is of great importance that students are active in the classroom."* (Allwright 1984: 157). By

the same token, Ellis (1999) claimed that an interaction refers to communication between individuals, particularly when they are negotiating meaning in order to facilitate communication.

The common view in the different studies agrees on the role classroom interaction plays in language learning and the benefit that learners' development result especially in terms of proficiency, Tsui (1995) confirmed that *"in a language classroom, students' oral participation is crucial in order for students' language proficiency to improve."* (Tsui 1995: 81). Gass & Selinker (2001) claimed that in the interaction Approach "communicative pressures and mechanisms (noticing and attention) that mediate between them lead to changes in the interaction language system." (Gass & Selinker 2001, 265) therefore, the major focus from this perspective is to find the effective way to facilitate the learners' internal assimilation of new systemic knowledge. According to Eggins (1994), interaction takes place when people are actively engaged in the communication event in naturally social context. In the same sense, Taylor (1987) stated that:

Real communication is shared activity which requires the active involvement of its participants who must exercise what we call communicating initiative.

(Taylor 1987: 49)

1.2 Students' reluctance:

In fact, the need to communicate is considered to be an integral part of the human being's life. Hence, in the classroom, the need to speak is also considered as an important part of the EFL learning process. Yet, teachers as well as students at the level of our universities still face that problem of learners' reluctance mainly in oral sessions. The adoption of Communicative Approach has not really met its objectives. Students remain passive and do not participate in speaking activities where they should be more talkative and active in order to develop their oral proficiency and speaking skills. There might be a variety of factors preventing students from participating in the classroom. The matter of reluctance has been subject to a number of studies in the EFL contexts. Gaudart (1992) stated that

learners' reluctance in the oral classroom is attributed to their lack of motivation. Furthermore, Littlewood (1997) claimed that more EFL students are involved in the speaking activities, more their speaking ability is improved. Further, Littlewood (2004) summarized six factors that hinder students' participation within the classroom; namely, tiredness, fear of being wrong, insufficient interest in the class, insufficient knowledge in the subject, shyness and insufficient time to formulate ideas. In this respect some affective factors seem to be directly related to students' reluctance. This is the main focus of the current investigation.

1.3 Affect and foreign language learning:

Human beings are emotional creatures in their daily activities. Finegan (1999) advanced that "it is obvious that we feel something while we use language in interaction with others." Indeed, interaction in the EFL classroom involves different types of human communications-teachers and students interact verbally or nonverbally. The EFL classroom is considered as a setting where the learning/ teaching takes place. English is introduced through content: it can be used as the language of the classroom; however, there are some difficulties that most students face in using that language. A number of investigations attribute affect to those difficulties. Indeed, affective aspects in previous studies on foreign language learning and teaching have been largely discussed and mainly explored from psychological perspectives such as Mc Donough 1986, Horwitz 1986, MacIntyre & Gardner 1991.

2. The study:

The research scheme was delimited by the principles of the action research. The selected approach for the present research project was qualitative. Qualitative research is basically exploratory. My interest in this study was to explore *Students' reluctance to use the target language in the EFL oral classroom*. In this respect the research project involved a students' questionnaire administered to second year students.

2.1 The context:

This investigation took place in an English oral classroom at the University of Mostaganem 'Abdehamid Ibn Badis', Faculty

of Foreign Languages, Department of English. The size of the classroom was quite suitable for the number of students (36). Classes were two days a week, and the participants were observed during a three - month period: from October the 17th to December 14th during this phase a variety of activities such as drills, role plays and motivating readings were developed for the participants in order to provide a variety of assignments.

This study focused on the oral skill and investigated the factors affecting the participants' reluctance in their oral sessions. The main objective of the speaking activities was to increase the amount of English in the classroom, providing different contexts and opportunities for the practice of the principal language skills, mainly oral production.

2.2 The participants:

Thirty-six university students of second year (LMD) were surveyed. All participants were native speakers of Algerian language dialectal Arabic and ranged between 19 and 21 years in age. Among the thirty-six participants, there were 12 male students (33%) and 24 female students (67%). They all learn English as a university subject for mostly academic purposes not for everyday communicative purposes as the target language is a foreign language in Algeria which is required in some professions.

2.3 Method

A questionnaire assessing beliefs and behaviours associated with students' reluctance in the oral classroom was distributed to the students. The investigator gave the questionnaire and helped the students understand the questions in case they found difficulties to answer some questions, a kind of controlled questionnaire so that the results would be more reliable.

In addition, the students were allowed to add any information they felt necessary to their answers. They were explained that their answers would be anonymous and used only for the purpose of the current study. The questionnaire was collected by the end of the tutorial (after approximately one hour and a half or one and a half hours).

Data for the investigation were also collected in a three month period that began with observing some lessons via an observation sheet. The observations took place on January 18th, January 25th, February 8th, February 15th, February 22nd, March 1st and March 8th. This schedule was to analyze some of the lessons. Indeed the outcomes were massive. Thus, a list of categories was elaborated regarding the main aspects of the study to comprehend why the students were reluctant to use the target language in the classroom in relationship to the selected affective factors in this study namely anxiety, motivation, risk-taking, and students' concern for grades.

3. Results:

Among the 36 participants, all recognized the importance of speaking and participating in the oral course. Yet, most of them claimed that when it comes to participate in the classroom, they do not find it so 'easy'. 81% of the population were motivated and showed their positive willingness to speak in the classroom. 75% felt anxious because of a number of causes summarized in the fear of making mistakes, fear of being laughed at, fear of their teacher's reaction, and nearly all students claimed their interest in having the average or 'avoiding bad marks'. In order to illustrate these findings, the main reasons behind the participants' reluctance have been summarized in the following table as follow:

Causes of reluctance	Frequency
Lack of vocabulary	74%
Afraid of making mistakes	69%
Do not know the answer	51%
Afraid of being laughed at	49%
Shyness	47%
Afraid of having bad marks	82%
Afraid of teacher's reaction	35%

Table 1: Reasons of students' reluctance

Based on the previous causes, the selected affective factors for the present investigation have been related to reluctance behaviour as follows:

Affective variable	Relation to reluctance
Anxiety	75%
Motivation	46%
Risk-taking	15%
Concern for grades	65%

Table 2: Relationship between affective variables and Students' reluctance

- **Anxiety:** Most students expressed their feeling of anxiety before speaking mainly in front of their classmates, that stress was also explained by the fear of getting bad marks. Therefore, the present study revealed that anxiety was the most prominent variable linked to students' reluctance in the classroom. Indeed, most students expressed that feeling through the 'fear' of making mistakes, being mocked at, or the teacher's negative feedback.
- **Motivation:** Analysis showed that real motivated students are willing to participate, but if their anxiety and shyness are of a high degree they cannot take part and get involved in real interaction, only those who are to some extent self-confident can overcome their difficulties especially with the 'assistance and help of their teacher.'
- **Risk-taking:** Analysis provided that students who were less anxious and more self-confident took the risk to participate voluntarily, by asking questions, commenting and adding personal reflections; consequently, risk-taker students could not stay passive in the oral classroom whatever the activity is.
- **Concern for grades:** The current investigation showed that the concern for grades is another prominent variable that is directly linked to students' reluctance especially when they know that they are graded. They want to do better but their anxiety 'test anxiety' is too high, and then 'need more time to think'.

Conclusion

The present study supports the hypothesis that some affective variables are directly correlated to students' reluctance in the EFL oral classroom. Therefore, It is important to understand that affect should be seriously taken into

consideration during the learning/teaching process especially to develop the learners' oral proficiency. A relaxed atmosphere might provide a sense of self-confidence at our students, motivate them and consequently their anxiety is reduced. In addition, consideration on assessment is also to be taken into account.

As a conclusion, teachers should recognize that they are the first responsible on the stage of educational contexts. They should give much more interest to their students' affect. It is their role to consider the cognitive as well as the affective side of the learners. Students' success or failure can never be limited only to their cognitive ability or disability; but, it is also related to their personal characteristics mainly affective factors.

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