

Identification of Affective Factors Influencing Students' Low Participation in University EFL Oral Classes: An Iranian Case Study

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Abstract

Undoubtedly, Asian students' low participation when performing oral tasks in classrooms has been one of the topics frequently addressed in recent research studies and many factors such as sociocultural, affective and pedagogical ones, have been explored. Consequently, this research adopts quantitative-qualitative method and is carried out in an undergraduate EFL classroom at Bandar Abbas Islamic Azad University. Participant observation by administering a Likert- scale questionnaire and a semi-structured interview is used to collect data. Iranian students' participation as well as and the underlying factors of the students' behavior patterns are investigated. Additionally, this research aims to determine what the key affective factors affecting students' low participation in university oral classes are. Finally, the results showed that five main factors such as lack of confidence, shyness, anxiety, afraid of making mistakes and afraid of being despised are the most prohibiting affective factors among university students in EFL classes.

Key Words: Affective factors, Participation, EFL, Oral classes.

Introduction

Affective factors are emotional factors which influence learning. They can have a negative or positive effect. Negative affective factors are called affective filters and are an important idea in theories about second language acquisition (Chastain, 1988). In the past, the focus in English language learning used to be on traditional methods such as grammar translation, audio-lingual and more of the same. For example, GTM has been used for many years for the purpose of teaching the foreign language literature and the grammar of the target language specially the classical languages such as Latin and Greek (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). However; when we consider recent techniques, it could easily be seen that the focus has shifted from those methods to communicative methods. Currently, the key factor in the area of second or foreign language is being able to use it and to communicate through it. In addition, Schmitt (2010) pointed out that spoken language is used to negotiate and achieve meaning communicative contexts and so cannot be divorced from those contexts.

Based on the relevant literature, Asian students are almost always portrayed as reticent speakers and, even worse, passive knowledge absorbers in classroom discourses. Most studies attribute students' reticence to their inadequate linguistic competence or cultural factors and other factors such as psychological, affective and pedagogical factors have also been explored (Liu, 2001). For example, based on a study carried out on 159 Saudi Arabia EFL students in Qassim University, Hamouda (2013) discovered that a considerable number of students were reluctant to respond to the teacher and remained silent in oral English language classrooms due to many causes such as low English proficiency, fear of speaking in front of others, negative evaluation, shyness, lack of confidence, preparation and fear of making mistakes. Similarly, in a study on 35 Malaysia Technology University learners, Faizah and Choo (2010) concluded that students' fear of the lecturers' criticism towards their responses, anxiety, perception of the lecturers as the authority, reluctance to criticize their peers' opinions, fear of the lecturers, possibility of asking for elaboration, learning strategies, and the lecturers' teaching practices and personality significantly inhibited their participation. Are Iranian students really, as described in the different literatures, reticent and passive learners?

Are there any other factors besides those documented that inhibit their participation in classroom discourses? What can we do to help them? Nowadays, these are the common questions the teachers are facing as the most challenging issue in EFL classes.

There seems to be an increasing body of evidence which paints a largely passive picture of Asian students. In learning a foreign language, most of the time the language learners are facing some kinds of problems such as anxiety. For instance, in a study Crutone (2009) conducted with EFL Japanese learners, he found out that there are the potential causes of Japanese EFL learners' language anxiety, have been identified as communication apprehension, social evaluation, and inter-learner competition. Furthermore, he suggests that teachers should try to make the EFL classrooms more comfortable and prevent to evaluate learners because they may be afraid of being evaluated and be reluctant to participate in speaking courses. Accordingly, Foreign language learning anxiety has been combined with a large number of negative outcomes and these can be classified as physical, psychological or social (Yarahmadi, 2011). Overall, in recent years, the importance of affective issues has become a matter of debate and extensive research among language teachers, linguists and researchers; and some variables were found as having a high impact on success in EFL learning. Therefore, this study, similarly, aims to investigate the key affective factors inhibiting students' speaking participation in classes and to suggest solutions for teachers to surmount such a great challenge. In order to achieve an objective goal, the following research questions should be discussed:

1. What are the key affective factors affecting students' oral participation in EFL classes?
2. Is there any significant difference about affective factors statistically by gender?
3. What are Iranian students' perceptions of classroom oral participation?

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

The participants of the study included 21 undergraduate sophomore EFL students of English teaching major from Islamic Azad University, Bandar Abbas branch (Janah Center). 7 of them were male and 14 of them were female aged between 19 and 23. They have accepted as undergraduate student by entrance exam. The sophomore university students were selected as sample because they were really aware of the problems they have in EFL oral classes.

2.2. Instruments

Firstly, an informal Likert-scale questionnaire including 10-items informal Likert-scale was created by researcher who is also English instructor, based on his student observation and experience. This questionnaire was translated into Persian to achieve results that are more reliable. The research data were collected through five choices ranged from 1 "Strongly agree" to 5 "Strongly disagree". Secondly, to get more reliable and find out the other possibilities affecting the participants' passive oral performance, a semi-structured interview was conducted with 5 of the participants. Lastly, the researcher analyzed the data through using SPSS 23. It is worth mentioning that methodology of this survey has been conducted based on 'Research Methods in Applied Linguistics' by Dörnyei (2007).

2.3. Procedure

The 10-items informal Likert-scale questionnaire was individually administered to participants. They were told to choose one of the options representing their current status and their information will be confidential. Items were introduced to them to have a better understanding of the procedure. Then the semi-structured was conducted by the researcher. Ultimately, the collected data were analyzed by SPSS 23 and the results were presented in a quantitative- qualitative way. The Cronbach alpha reliability of the study results is obtained as (0.421).

3. Results and Discussion

The interview results were not in line with questionnaire and the expected range of low oral participation was not found. The researcher believed that the participants didn't answer the questions truthfully when being interviewed because of some affective or psychological barriers. As a result, the questionnaire results as more reliable ones were analyzed.

Question one:

1. What are the key affective factors affecting students' oral participation in EFL classes?

After analyzing the questionnaire results by SPSS, as table 1 illustrates, lack of self-confidence, shyness, anxiety, afraid of making mistake and afraid of being Despised, were found to be the key affective factors affecting students' oral participation in EFL classes.

Table1.Frequency and percentage of affective factors

	Frequency	Percentage
Lack of self-confidence	13	61.9
Shyness	12	57.1
Anxiety	11	52.4
Afraid of making mistake	11	52.4
Afraid of being despised	7	33.3

Question two:

2- Is there any significant difference about affective factors statistically by gender?

Initially, as table 2 shows, the factors 'anxiety' , ' afraid of making mistake' , 'afraid of being despised' were found to be higher among university male students. Additionally, 'Lack of self-confidence' was found to be higher among university female students. The most crucial factor among university female students is shyness which is definitely related to the cultural belief toward female participation in EFL oral classes.

Table 2.Descriptive statistics of affective factors by gender

	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Lack of self-confidence	Male	7	2.57	1.134	.429
	Female	14	2.79	1.477	.395
Shyness	Male	7	2.71	.951	.360
	Female	14	2.79	1.626	.434
Anxiety	Male	7	2.71	.951	.360
	Female	14	2.43	1.158	.309
Afraid of making mistake	Male	7	3.00	1.000	.378
	Female	14	2.86	1.406	.376
Afraid of being despised	Male	7	3.43	1.512	.571
	Female	14	3.36	1.151	.308

In order to understand whether the differences are statistically significant, an independent T-test was performed (Table 2). Lastly, the compared results showed that differences between male and female students were not statistically significant.

Question three:

3. What are Iranian students' perceptions of classroom oral participation?

As the results in table 3 represent, 'Lack of confidence 'was found to be the highest among university students. It also shows that most students don't feel self-confidence when speaking English in oral classes. Students always feel that other students speak English better than they do. Shyness as another affective factor is common specifically among female students. Similarly, Li and Lui (2011) claimed that cultural differences also affect students' low participation in speaking performance. In this case, the focus is on the Asian students in related studies. Iranian female students may be shyer and more sensitive by nature than other cultures. Consequently, students' speaking reluctance is related to the cultural beliefs toward female participation in FFL oral classes. Various related studies indicate that students experience remarkably more anxiety in their foreign language classes than in other classes. Moreover, Dörnyei (2009) summarized that anxiety is a curious variable although its conceptualization is straightforward; there is a general uncertainty about the broader categorization of the concept. It may refer to a motivational component, to a personality trait or one of the basic emotions. In this case, there is the strongest correlation between the anxiety as a personality trait and student performance. Low proficiency may be defined as one of the reasons of fear of act of speaking for anxious learners. However, as Savaşçı (2013) in a study on the reasons of speaking reluctance among Turkish university students stated, Low proficiency is not regarded as an affective factor in speaking reluctance among EFL students. More importantly, it may be a situational factor which needs to be discussed in future studies.

Generally speaking, teachers find the anxiety as the most provoking and prevalent factor influencing students' speaking reluctance in EFL oral classes. However, making mistakes is considered as natural process in a second or foreign learning and learning from them can be one of the most useful tools in your language learning. Students are reluctant to use the language in an EFL setting and the worst thing they can do is not speak or practice their new language just because they're scared of making a mistake. Sometimes student are not willing to participate in class discourse because of afraid of being despised. Undeniably, this factor psychologically has a negative impact on all students' learning and educational performance specially speaking skill which is used as a means of using language in real communication. In fact, being evaluated by others is an anxiety-provoking factor.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of affective factors

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Lack of self- confidence	21	2.71	1.347
Shyness	21	2.76	1.411
Anxiety	21	2.52	1.078
Afraid of making mistake	21	2.90	1.261
Afraid of being despised	21	3.38	1.244

Ultimately, in order to overcome the affective factors among university EFL students, the researcher suggests some strategies as follows:

- 1- Making the classroom more comfortable and convenient for students to participate actively in oral performance.
- 2- Creating a sincere and close relation between teacher and student.
- 3- Presenting some academic preparation courses for overcoming stressful situations in EFL settings.
- 4- Motivating students to improve their target language proficiency and communication skills from the elementary levels.

4. Conclusion

This study aimed to find out the key affective factors affecting students' low participation in EFL oral classes as a great issue the teacher were facing in EFL settings. As a result, this research was conducted in one of EFL oral classes where students were not willing to participate in oral performance. The researcher believes that the astonishing point of this study was, although the interview was performed in Persian, the participants did not seem to be truthful because of afraid of being evaluated negatively. In contrast, they filled out the questionnaire in a more comfortable atmosphere. Therefore, the questionnaire results were analyzed. Finally, the results revealed that lack of self-confidence, shyness, Anxiety, afraid of making mistake, afraid of being despised were found to be the essential affective factors influencing speaking reluctance among university EFL students and similarly, the results of this study relatively is in line with previous research findings. Moreover, there is no remarkable difference between male and female students in terms of experiencing the same condition in the oral communication courses. In summary, there may be other potential causes behind students' speaking reluctance and their low participation as the most serious obstacle in communicating through English as a second or foreign language in academic settings. Certainly, such studies are not sufficient and consequently, further research should be done to cover all aspects of this issue in order to seek strategies for surmounting the affective or psychological barriers among university EFL students.

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