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RESEARCH PAPER

An Investigation into the Strategies Reinforcing Students' Participation in English Language Classrooms at BS Level in Kohat University of Science & Technology, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

Although teachers encourage their students to actively participate in the classroom, many of them are still reluctant to participate. However, scholarly research regarding strategies that enhance classroom participation is largely missing in this regard. This study aims to explore different strategies that encourage the participation of students in English language classes, as English holds a prominent place in the education system of Pakistan. Overall, 150 BS English students were selected through a technique of simple random sampling. A sequential explanatory mixed-method research design was followed in this study. The analysis of the questionnaire was conducted through SPSS, and interviews were reviewed through the content analysis method. The results of the study revealed several strategies, such as the use of cold calling, allowing the use of some Urdu, awarding marks, giving adequate wait time, and assigning group or pair work, can enhance students' participation in the classroom

Introduction

The teacher and students' verbal and nonverbal interactions provide the basis for everything that takes place in the classroom. Classroom learning naturally involves interaction, which naturally permeates every aspect of the learning experience. The type and amount of interaction can be a determinant of the success of a class.

The term "classroom participation" is poorly defined, and it is difficult to measure. Research on classroom participation unveils its high importance and need. According to Cohen (1991), pupils can be brought actively into the teaching-learning procedure and can facilitate teaching through their particular participation in the classroom. Crone (1997) advocated that if you engage students in an engaging, dynamic environment, they have the chance to become critical thinkers and, in turn, will become less passive.

But, classroom observation never fails to reveal the phenomenon that in certain courses, even though communication opportunities are provided, interaction will not truly take place (Zhao, 2016).

It has been reported that the majority of students in early and higher grades do not voluntarily take part in classroom activities. Many factors have been identified that may have contributed to this undesirable behavior, such as being in a new school environment, nervousness, less content knowledge, fear of humiliation, or language difficulties.

These factors can be classified as internal factors or as external factors on the basis of the literature review. Internal factors may comprise students' motivation, interest, inclination, abilities, previous knowledge, and physical and learning disabilities, while

external factors include age, peers, teachers' behavior, parents' support, social and economic status of parents, classroom environment, curriculum, etc.

This study aims to explore different strategies that enhance the participation of students in English language classrooms at the university level in Pakistan, as English holds a prominent place in the education system of Pakistan. In Pakistan, it enjoys the status of being a second language as well as an official language. English is a compulsory subject from grade one to a higher level (Roshan and Raisani, 2017).

Numerous studies have been carried out on participation in Pakistan, such as Khan et al. (2014) in their study explored the issue of classroom participation, focusing on gender disparity and female students in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) context. Similarly, Nosheen et al. (2019) shed light on university students' problems with speaking English during participation in the classroom. Aziz and Kazi (2019) conducted a study to pinpoint the role of teachers in enhancing students' classroom participation in universities, but to the best of my knowledge, no work has been done regarding the strategies that enhance students' participation at BS level in Pakistan.

Research Question

- What are the different strategies that can reinforce students' participation in BS English classrooms?

Literature Review

What is "classroom participation"?

The term "classroom participation" has been defined in several ways. Dancer & The Kamvounias (2005) defined participation as an active engagement that has been divided into five categories: contribution to the discussion, preparation, communication skills, attendance, and group skills. Participation has also been thought of as the actual number of "unsolicited responses volunteered" (Burchfield & Sappington, 1999). It can be found in many different kinds, including students' questions and opinions (Fassinger, 1995), and it can take a couple of seconds or an extended duration (Cohen, 1991). So, participation refers to the speaking of students in the class, giving a response to questions, asking questions, participating in group activities, paying attention, being attentive during class, participation in group discussion, looking for assistance, and making good use of class time.

The Role of Teachers in the Classroom

Teachers play a role of pivotal importance in creating a suitable environment and producing opportunities for students. Students are catered to a very good learning process by their teachers. They influence students' involvement in different ways: they encourage students to have an enjoyable place for studies. Teachers' education, behavior, and interpersonal relationships are identified in the literature as some of the relating factors that have the capacity to create enough and suitable room for the student's participation (Frisby and Martin, 2010), leadership, helpful and supporting attitude, authority, motivation, and reinforcement (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009), and the awareness of the teacher about the students' social and cultural background (Kumpulainen et al., 2009). The educational policymakers set a curriculum and the teachers vehemently need to understand the very philosophy of the particular curriculum and the intended outcomes for which they work. Many researchers (Orafi and Borg, 2009; Nunan, 2003) argue that there has been a mismatch between the results of the curriculum and the teachers' beliefs.

Possible factors that affect participation level

The participation level in the classroom has been determined by several factors and needs to be taken into account when determining a strategy that will encourage an active learning environment and raise the level of participation.

Student Traits

As individuals, we differ in personalities, and not everybody is the same. Confidence is a key trait and it plays a vital role in the students' participation (Weaver & Qi, 2005). Students always deal with the fear of not being smart enough to address their class and therefore hold back from providing insight on the subject matter due to intimidation (Karp & Yoels, 1976). Similarly, anxiety and nervousness prevent students from actively participating instead of building their confidence through participation.

Furthermore, students who are not native English speakers face numerous challenges, particularly when it comes to speaking in class discussions, due to a lack of confidence in their language abilities, thus lowering their level of participation in the classroom (Kao & Gansneder, 1995; Tatar, 2005).

Preparation for Class

Fear is a key factor that doesn't allow many students to actively participate in classroom discussions. It may be based on their assumption that they do not have sufficient knowledge and are unable to present it in an effective way (Weaver & Qi, 2005). A few studies indicate that, generally, students do not take part in classroom participation if they have not already prepared the topic to present and thus feel uncomfortable being engaged (Howard et al., 2002). Students are concerned about being criticized both by their classmates and the instructor because of their lack of knowledge about the subject matter. So, this proves to be a halt in the way. Those students who have thoroughly prepared their topic come forward with confidence and do present it without much hesitation (Reinsch & Wambsgnass, 1994).

Classroom Size

Classroom participation is affected by logistics because it does matter. For sure, classroom size has a direct as well as indirect impact on participation (Waver & Qi, 2005). As compared to the larger classrooms, students quite actively participate in the smaller classrooms as they feel more comfortable in an intimate classroom setting and therefore have less anxiety (Myers et al., 2009). Large classrooms promote anonymity among students and raise the level of fear in the students because they have to present in front of a larger classroom and are more prone to criticism by their peers. (Weaver & Qi, 2005).

Auster and MacRone (1994) argued that classrooms with forty students or more are less reliable for good participation. Weaver and Qi (2005) later supported the idea by adding that the classroom comprising more than forty students did not have a sufficient amount of time allocated to participation. Most of the labour is spent on conducting the lecture, and students are prevented from taking part in the classroom discussion.

Grading

Grading is also a splendid method to rightly increase classroom participation. If participation has a positive impact on a students' grade, they would automatically tend to participate in classroom discussions (Fassinger, 2000). Boniecki and Moore (2003) suggested an offer of extra credit as being more effective to reward participation rather than giving it a separate grade. So their findings emphasized the allocation of credit to the students for participation. Dancer and Kamvounias (2005) found that mid-semester grading would be far more effective in the determination of how frequently and often the students should be indulged in participation. This would provide the students with a concrete

performance indicator, and their skills would increase manifold. It would be an opportunity for them to take action and improve for the rest of the semester.

Positive Teacher Traits

Engaging students in their classroom is amongst the most important functions of the teacher. The character of the teacher is that of a leader who leads the students straightway. The construction of a relationship between students and teachers is critical in order to make them participate (Karp & Yoels, 1976; Wade, 1994; Weaver & Qi, 2005). Participation can be hindered by the teachers' attitude, and studies have shown that an effective way to deal with the issue of the students' participation includes learning their names, provision of a friendly climate, promoting openness, and allowing the students to refer to them by their first name (Fassinger, 1995; Nunn, 1996). In classes where the participation level is higher, students perceive their teachers to be easily accessible, inclusive, promoters of discussion, and supportive (Fassinger, 2000).

In a classroom, the tone of the professor is also of vital significance. If the students are ignored, the professor is not positive towards them, and the students are criticized, it is going to result in less participation of students within the classroom (Wade, 1994). Eventually, the student's fear would increase manifold and the participation level would decrease (Rocca, 2009). Myers and Rocca (2000) stated that when the students are verbally challenged, they believe that they are being looked down on, so they become defensive in their cause. As a result, their participation is hindered to a great extent.

Hyde and Ruth (2002) argued that the professor can easily increase the level of participation in the classroom by providing positive feedback to the students and ensuring that dialogue within the classroom allows students to be critical of one another in a respectful manner.

Classroom Climate

Next comes the classroom climate. It is one of the most essential factors affecting the students' classroom participation. It may positively or negatively affect the student's participation. Classroom climate is the perceived quality of the setting. Complicated transactions of many prompt environmental factors lead to its emergence. (e.g., material, physical, organizational, operational, and social variables), as a major determiner of learning and classroom behavior. The participation of students, in particular, and improving schools, in general, is primarily based on understanding how to maintain and establish a positive classroom climate. Lightbown and Spada (1999) stated that students are observed to feel more anxious and less bound, but quite more secure and comfortable in taking part in learning activities in an environment where everything around them is friendly, encouraging, supportive, and cooperative.

Material and Methods

The current study utilized a sequential explanatory mixed-methods approach, so the researcher planned to use a questionnaire and interviews as research instruments for collecting information regarding factors hindering students' classroom participation. It is hoped that researchers can be provided with authentic data concerning classroom participation through a coalition of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Thus, the ongoing mixed-method study alludes to adding more empirical data to the literature and suggests strategies for teachers to maintain a reliable environment for classroom participation.

Research Sample

The setting of the current study was district Kohat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, in which all the students who were studying at BS English were the target population of the

study. Overall, 150 students were included in the questionnaire's sample, which was selected from BS English at Kohat University of Science and Technology (KUST) through a simple random sampling technique. Both male and female students, aged between 19 and 24, who belong to the university, finished the questionnaire. They were enrolled in the 1st, 3rd, 5th, and 7th semesters (literature and linguistics) of their undergraduate studies (BS) and were studying English as a major subject.

With students, semi-structured interviews were conducted who belonged to the same semesters of BS English. The sample of interviewees comprised 10 students.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The current study used a sequential explanatory mixed-method research design for data collection. As a data collection instrument, the present study utilized a structured questionnaire followed by semi-structured interviews. Analysis associated with the questionnaire was conducted through SPSS to find out frequencies and percentages, and interviews were reviewed through the content analysis method.

Results and Discussion

Table 1
Strategies that can enhance students' classroom participation

S. No.	Statements	SA %	A %	N %	D %	SD %
1.	I do participate in the class when asked to participate voluntarily	3.7	16.9	20.6	55.1	3.7
2.	I participate when the lecturer mentions my name to contribute	29.4	33.1	21.3	12.5	2.9
3.	I participate when the teacher awards mark for classroom participation	29.4	37.5	16.2	9.6	5.9
4.	I do participate when allowed to use some Urdu in English language classrooms	24.3	30.1	16.2	15.4	14.0
5.	Code-switching enhances my classroom participation	24.5	35.5	20.0	13.6	6.4
6.	I do participate when the teacher gives adequate wait time for us to digest information and give comments	22.1	40.4	23.5	8.8	4.4
7.	I like to participate in pair/group tasks or discussions	32.4	38.2	19.1	3.7	4.4

Analysis of quantitative and qualitative data revealed the following strategies that may enhance students' participation.

Use of Cold Calling

The participants of this study reported that they do participate when the teacher mentions their name or is called upon to contribute. Interviews also revealed that cold calling can increase students' participation. As one of the students said, "Definitely, I have to share my thoughts when being called upon by the teacher."

Interviews also revealed that students show more involvement when a teacher imposes more questions using a cold- call strategy. As one of the respondents commented, "I remain more active in the class when there is a possibility of being called upon by the teacher. I often raise my hand and also participate in the discussion."

Awarding Marks

Analysis of the data revealed that awarding marks can enhance students' participation. The present study's respondents reported that they would not like to lose points or grades, especially if it affected their overall grade. As one of the students commented, "I do participate in discussions, quizzes, and presentations if it affects my grade".

Interviews also revealed that grading also motivates students to participate in the class. As one of the respondents stated: "I feel more motivated to participate when teachers award marks to my presentation. To get full points, I try my best."

Adequate Wait-Time

A few students who took part in this study reported in their interviews that if they had sufficient wait time to respond to the teacher's question or speak in class, they would feel more comfortable. This finding is confirmed by item 6 in Table 1. This may allow students to think and put words and ideas together. As one of the students stated: "I need some time to put my ideas into words so that I may answer correctly." Her opinions further indicate that students may answer more confidently, "I found suitable words for my answer and then I participated more confidently."

In addition, adequate wait time can reduce the fear of making mistakes and of negative evaluation. As one of the respondents stated, "If the teacher asks me to speak but gives me enough time, I can think in Urdu and translate it into English, and then I make fewer mistakes."

The Use of Urdu

Interview data analysis also revealed that allowing the use of Urdu in English language classrooms might enhance students' participation. This finding is backed up by items 4 and 5 in Table 1. The reason being, pupils may not be proficient in the English language; hence, they might get stuck when talking and, in turn, might feel embarrassed. But, they could feel much more confident and calm if they were permitted to make use of some terms of Urdu to spell out their points. As Kamran said, "I feel very relaxed when teachers don't mind the use of Urdu in English language classrooms. As you know, I am not a native English speaker, nor do I have native-like proficiency."

The interviews also revealed that the method of combining Urdu and English can increase students' inclination to participate. As Kamran said, "I don't like to participate in class when I am not allowed to use Urdu with English."

Assigning Group or Pair Work

Working in pairs or groups is the last strategy suggested by the data that can enhance students' participation. In this research, a few pupils also reported in their interviews that when they perform in teams and pairs in class, they feel less hesitant. One of the many benefits of group work in class might be that students may feel that they are not alone, hence they may feel more confident.

For example, Faryal declared, "I would feel protected when other students are with me during an oral presentation because I won't be the only student in front of the whole class." Likewise, teamwork may encourage students who are shy or lack self-confidence. One explanation could be the fact that students feel much more comfortable talking with their peers rather than their teachers, since their peers' English proficiency degree is similar to theirs, so they can feel more comfortable working with somebody who knows almost as much as they know. As Faryal described, "I feel more confident while sharing my thoughts with my friends as compared to my teacher. Because there is a friendly environment and I also don't care about making mistakes."

A few strategies were identified by the present study. The first strategy revealed by this study is cold calling. Cold calling is the act of calling on students to participate at random and not based on who volunteers to participate. Nunn (1996) and Abeasi (2018) also found that the use of students' names can enhance the level of discussion. Similarly, Dallimore (2012) found that more students answer questions voluntarily in classes with high cold calling. On the contrary, Arafat (2012) reported that students get more anxious when called upon to respond individually. Similar to Arafat's study, Abebe and Deneke (2015) reported that when students were called to answer questions, it created anxiety for them.

Another strategy reported in the study is sufficient wait time to give comments. Several students who participated in this study reported in their interviews that they would feel more confident and comfortable if they were given adequate wait time to answer the teacher's question or speak in class. This may allow students to think and put words and ideas together. Nunn (1996) and Abeasi (2018) also found that when the lecturer had good questioning techniques, it improved participation. Allowing for an adequate wait and halt time is all part of questioning techniques, which have been found to improve the quality of answers as well as participation. During the wait time, students can organize their thoughts and ideas in order to put them across.

The study also revealed that the use of Urdu in English- language classrooms can enhance students' participation. This is inconsistent with Younas et al. (2016), who found that code-switching facilitates the comprehension and participation of bilingual learners. Similarly, Simasiku (2016) indicated that code-switching benefited learners' participation in English medium classrooms.

The present study also revealed that awarding marks can enhance students' participation. This is inconsistent with Susak (2016), who found that the majority of students were likely to participate if it affected their grades. No student would like to lose points or grades, especially if it affects their overall grade. This may explain why they are likely to participate if it affects their final grade. Similarly, Sommer and Sommer (2007) also found that class participation increased when associated with course credits.

"Lastly, assigning group or pair work can also enhance students' participation. The present study indicates that learners are more willing to speak in pairs and groups rather than individually. One reason could be that they feel more comfortable speaking with their peers rather than their teacher, since their peers' English proficiency level is similar to theirs, so they can feel more comfortable speaking to somebody who knows almost as much as they know. Moreover, during such activities, they have the chance to exchange ideas and hence learn from each other. Similarly, Riazi and Riasati (2007) found that in pair and group activities, learners practice their language in pairs and groups rather than on their own. Likewise, Cetinkaya (2005) showed that the individuals in his study preferred to speak in groups rather than speak individually in front of a large group of people. Cao and Philp (2006), too, contend that running a pair-or group work in class gives individuals a greater opportunity to speak than in the case of speaking individually."

Conclusion

Identifying the strategies that can motivate the students to participate in the classroom is helpful for the instructors in managing their classrooms. The study has revealed useful insights as to what motivates students to participate in the classroom. With this understanding, the instructors can plan strategies and employ proper techniques to create a responsive classroom. It is believed that classrooms are richest when all voices are heard. In a situation where students are less active or passive in the classroom, it is pertinent for the instructors to encourage active involvement. Thus, it is paramount for the instructor to create a conducive learning environment that will stimulate the students to be actively involved in the classroom.

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