

AN INVESTIGATION INTO THE FACTORS AFFECTING SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS' CLASSROOM PARTICIPATION

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ABSTRACT: This study was conducted to identify the second language learners' perceptions of their classroom participation. Factors influencing the learners' classroom participation were also examined. Besides, it also explored the lecturers' perceptions of the second language learners' participation in the classrooms. A group of 35 learners who enrolled in two classes and two lecturers who taught the classes were selected as the respondents of this study. The data for this study were obtained via questionnaires, observations, and interviews. The findings of this study show that a majority of the learners perceived that they were passive in classroom participation. This study also indicated the key factors restricting a majority of the learners' participation, which are affective, cognitive, cultural, learning strategies, and pedagogical factors. To be specific, 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. As for the lecturers, they perceived that the students were passive and the factors which may have caused the reticence are the learners' personality and their perceptions of their roles as universities students. Next, they reported that students' participation does not reflect their actual academic ability. The techniques used in stimulating learners' feedback were also identified. Pedagogical implications of this study and recommendations for future research were also made.

ABSTRAK: Kajian ini dijalankan untuk mengenalpasti pandangan pelajar-pelajar Bahasa Kedua atas penglibatan mereka di dalam kelas. Faktor-faktor yang mempengaruhi penglibatan mereka juga dikaji. Selain itu, kajian ini juga bertujuan mengenalpasti pandangan pensyarah-pensyarah atas penglibatan pelajar-pelajar dalam kelas. Sekumpulan pelajar yang terdiri daripada 35 orang yang mengikuti dua kelas dan dua orang pensyarah yang mengajar kelas-kelas tersebut telah dipilih sebagai responden bagi kajian ini. Data kajian ini diperolehi melalui borang soal selidik, pemerhatian, dan temu bual. Dapatan kajian ini menunjukkan pelajar-pelajar menganggap bahawa penglibatan mereka dalam kelas adalah pasif. Kajian ini juga mengesan faktor-faktor yang menyekat penglibatan kebanyakan pelajar, iaitu afektif, kognitif, budaya, strategi pembelajaran, dan pedagogi. Secara lebih khusus, kebimbangan bahawa jawapan mereka akan dikritik oleh pensyarah, kerisauan, anggapan bahawa pensyarah merupakan orang yang berautoriti, pengelakan daripada mengkritik cadangan rakan-rakan, kekurangan pemahaman terhadap isi kandungan yang diajar, kebimbangan bahawa pensyarah akan meminta penjelasan yang selanjutnya, strategi pembelajaran, dan kaedah pengajaran serta personaliti pensyarah merupakan faktor-faktor yang mengurangkan penglibatan mereka. Pada pandangan pensyarah-pensyarah pula, mereka menganggap bahawa kebanyakan pelajar adalah pasif dan faktor yang berkemungkinan menyekat penglibatan mereka ialah peribadi pelajar dan pandangan pelajar atas fungsi mereka sebagai pelajar universiti. Tambahan, pensyarah-pensyarah juga menyatakan bahawa penglibatan pelajar dalam kelas tidak membayangkan pencapaian mereka dalam akademik. Teknik-teknik yang digunakan untuk meningkatkan penglibatan pelajar juga dikenalpasti. Implikasi pedagogi kajian ini dan cadangan kajian lanjutan turut dikemukakan.

Keyword: pedagogical, cognitive, cultural

INTRODUCTION

Statement of Problems

Participation in classroom may affect one's language development as the initiative to produce English output is vital in achieving proficient speaking skills, either inside or outside the classroom. Most importantly, English language speaking proficiency contributes significantly towards learners' academic success as well as future career. Hence, the factors which have an impact on learners' participation must be identified so that appropriate methods can be taken to reduce students' reluctance in giving feedback in the classroom.

A survey conducted by Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) discovers that good command of English serves as the second most crucial criteria after critical thinking ability to get employed. UPM vice-chancellor Prof. Datuk Dr. Nik Mustapha R. Abdullah said, "With a functional ability of the language, many doors will open once students graduate." (The Star Online, 12 May 2008). Thus, we have to accept the fact that poor command of English serves as one of the factors that may cause unemployment among graduates. This is because they need to handle tasks which require them to use the language, such as communicating with the superiors and colleagues at their workplaces, attending meetings, meeting customers, etc. Hence, the lack of speaking proficiency will affect their efficiency in carrying out their duties.

The fact that even though Malaysian English language learners have been learning the target language since primary schools and yet they still lack speaking proficiency has been a worrying issue. Thus, to help learners improve their speaking proficiency, their participation in classrooms conducted in English is being emphasized in order to increase their opportunities to use the language. This is due to the fact that even though learners are exposed to a wide range of English input in the forms of reading materials, television programmes, radio broadcasting, and internet, not all learners speak the language in their daily life. Therefore, learners must be encouraged to apply their language skills and knowledge learnt in real life situation. One way to achieve this is by encouraging learners to answer lecturers' questions or give comments and to ask questions. Unequivocally, their involvement will improve their speaking proficiency which can benefit them both inside and outside the classrooms.

Research Objectives

This research aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To identify the second language learners' perceptions of their classroom participation.
2. To investigate the factors affecting second language learners' classroom participation.
3. To examine the lecturers' perceptions of the second language learners' classroom participation.

Significance of Study

The findings of this study can draw learners' attention on their attitudes towards classroom participation, thus, making them aware of the factors that encourage or inhibit their participation in asking lecturers questions and providing feedback to the questions posed by their lecturers. As a result, they can try to overcome those obstacles so that they will be able to participate in the classroom question-and-answer session as well as classroom discussions successfully.

As for lecturers, having learnt the factors influencing learners' participation in classrooms will enable them to reflect on their teaching strategies as well as to draw their attention on the impact of their

personality on learners' willingness to participate in the classroom. Consequently, appropriate steps can be taken to promote learners' classroom participation.

Scope of Study

This study seeks to find out learners' perceptions of their classroom participation, including asking lecturers questions and answering lecturers' questions or giving comments during open discussion in classes conducted in English. Besides, this study also examines the factors that influence learners' classroom participation. Lecturers' perceptions of the learners' classroom participation are investigated as well. This study only focuses on learners' oral participation during open discussion, which is observable and vocal. However, the interaction takes place throughout learners' presentation of their assignments or projects is not taken into account. This is because during presentation, undeniably the floor will be given to the presenters whereby they will do the talking as well as answer the lecturers or peers' questions directed towards them. Therefore, the natural participation of the lecturers and learners as in usual classrooms will be altered. In sum, this study only emphasizes on learners' vocal and natural occurring participation in classrooms.

The respondents involved in this study were a group of thirty five learners enrolled in two classes which were conducted in English. Observations were carried in both classes. In addition, questionnaires were distributed to this group of learners. Besides, four learners who were found active and four learners who were passive in the classrooms as well as two lecturers who taught the two classes were selected for interviews.

Research Instruments

The methods of data collection selected and implemented in this study are questionnaire, observation, and interview.

Questionnaire

Moore (2006) highlights that questionnaires are relatively easy to administer and are useful to gather a wealth of data. Therefore, to collect the quantitative data, a set of questionnaire consisting of thirty-four questions which is divided into two parts were developed by the researcher. The questionnaire is presented in Appendix A. These two parts look into learners' perceptions of their classroom participation and the factors that influence their classroom participation. Thirty-three Likert-scale type questions with the scales of 1, 2, 3, and 4 with each number representing „strongly disagree“, „disagree“, „agree“ and „strongly agree“ respectively were utilized in the questionnaire. In addition, one open-ended question was included to get more information from the respondents, which might not be covered by the Likert-scale type questions.

Observation

To investigate the learners' actual classroom participation in the two classes which were conducted in English, a total of three observations were carried out by the researcher in each of the classes selected. In this study, participant observation was applied, that is, the researcher took part in the activities of the respondents in the classes. By adapting the interaction categories listed in Moskowitz's (1971, cited in Allwright and Bailey, 1991) Foreign Language Interaction Analysis (FLient) system, learners' involvement in asking the lecturers questions and answering the lecturers' questions or providing comments were noted in the form of field notes. Besides, the lecturer's role in engaging learners' participation in the classroom was observed as well. Based on the field

notes taken, the researcher came up with generalizations which were noted in the observation forms. Please refer to Appendix B to view the observation form.

According to Dörnyei (2007: 178), classroom observation “provides direct information rather than self-reported accounts”. This is significant in learners’ classroom participation as well as lecturers’ ways of eliciting learners’ feedback which will influence the learning atmosphere. Thus, besides analyzing the self-reported data collected via questionnaires, the observations done also enabled the researcher to gain an insight into the learners’ actual participation in the classrooms and the interaction between the lecturers and the learners. Consequently, the observations will enrich the findings of this research.

Interview

Besides observations, the qualitative data of this study were collected via interview as well. According to Best and Khan (1986), the use of interview yields the advantage in which by building rapport with the interviewees, the interviewer will be able to get some confidential information which they might be reluctant to express through writing. Plus, as interview is carried out face-to-face, interviewees’ difficulties in understanding the questions can be clarified by the interviewer.

The interview questions of this study were created by the researcher. Interviews were conducted with the two TESL lecturers who taught the two classes selected to explore their views on the learners’ classroom participation. Please refer to Appendix C to view the interview questions for lecturers. The interview data collected from the lecturers were used to answer the third research question of this study, that is, the lecturers’ perceptions of the learners’ classroom participation. The data collected were important as they provided more in-depth information on the learners’ classroom participation and the quality of their responses in the classroom from the lecturers’ perspectives. Besides, via interview, the lecturers’ views on their roles in influencing learners’ willingness to speak up in the classroom could be collected as well.

In addition, interviews were conducted with four students who usually participated actively and four students who usually remained quiet in both classes observed. The interview questions for active learners are presented in Appendix D whereas for the passive learners, they are presented in Appendix E. The interview served as a medium for them to share their personal points of view regarding their classroom participation which they might not be able to point out via the questionnaire as well as their internal factors which were unobservable in the classroom.

In sum, the structured interviews conducted ensured comparability of responses across participants as the topic areas to be covered are pre-defined (Dörnyei, 2007). In addition, the interviews which were carried out after the questionnaire survey and classroom observations also enriched the final findings as the interviewees were required to provide more in-depth explanation on the discovered patterns (Dörnyei, 2007). In other words, the interviews done played an important role in validating the observation and questionnaire findings of this study.

Respondents of the Study

The respondents of the observations and questionnaires of this study was a group of thirty-five Universiti Teknologi Malaysia learners enrolled in two classes which were conducted in English. These learners were selected as they were in the same class with the researcher, hence, facilitating the progress of this study whereby the researcher would be able to develop a deeper understanding of their classroom participation as well as to explore the learning climate and the lecturer’s roles in stimulating the learners’ participation. In other words, the researcher was a participant-observer who engaged in the activities conducted in the classes.

As for the interview, the respondents were four students who usually showed active participation, four usually quiet students in both classes, and two TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) lecturers who taught the two classes.

Research Procedure

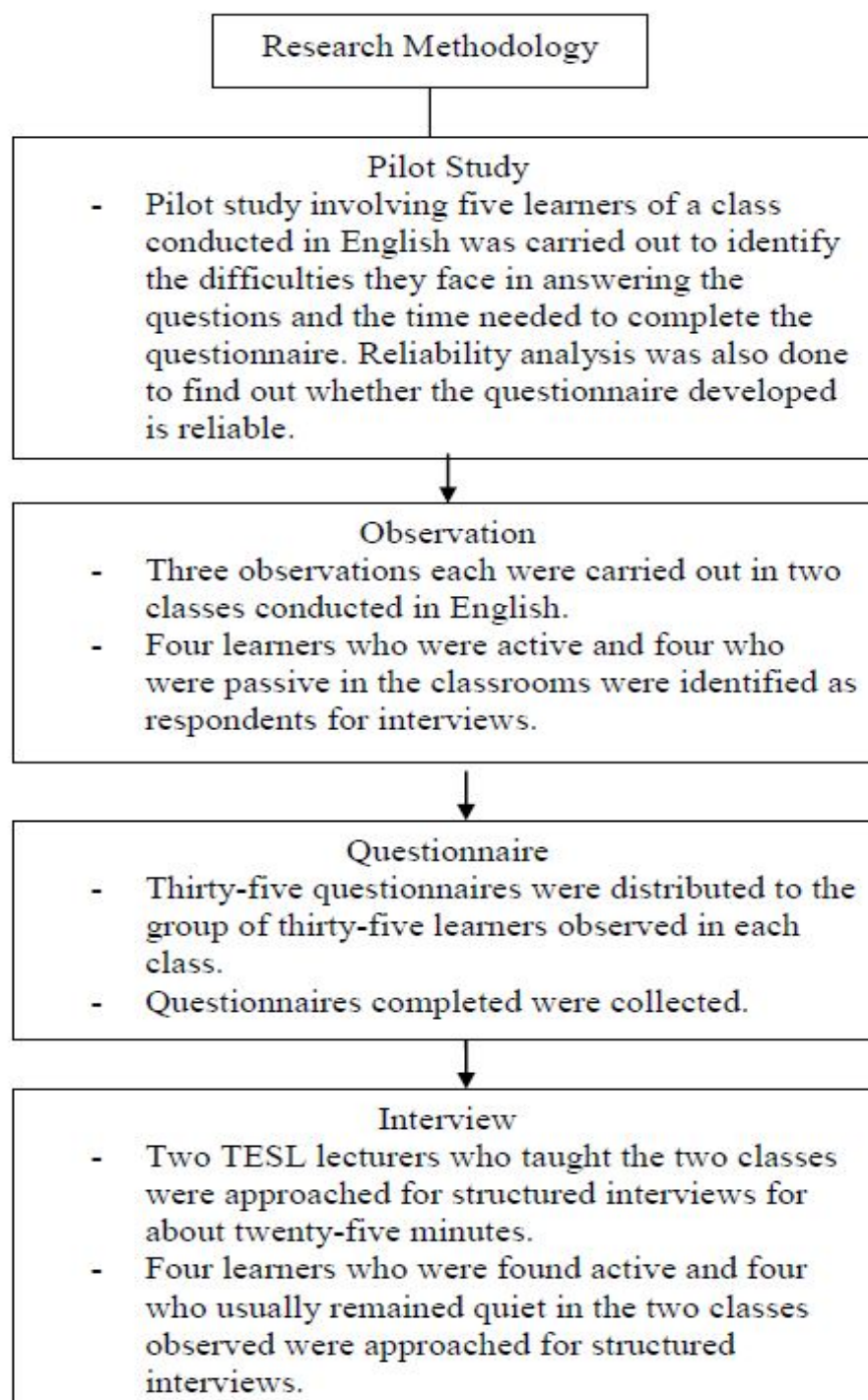


Figure 1 The procedures for data collection

DISCUSSION

From the three observations conducted in each class, it was found that it was always the same consistent few who frequently volunteered to answer the lecturer's questions in both classes. This observation finding is in line with the students' perceptions whereby a majority of them did not answer the lecturers' questions in class frequently. A majority of them answered the lecturers' questions in unison. Overall, this is consistent with what has been suggested by Karp and Yoels (1976, cited in Weaver and Jiang Qi, 2005) that typically only a few learners in a class will engage in classroom discussion while the majority will remain passive.

Nevertheless, interestingly, as opposed to what was claimed by a minority of the learners that they did ask their lecturers questions in class frequently, it was discovered that no question was asked by them throughout the observations even though Lecturer A and Lecturer B opened the floor for them to pose their questions. According to Myers (1999, cited in Burchfield and Sappington, 1999), when dealing with "subjective and socially desirable measure", most individuals have better perceptions of themselves than what they actually are. Therefore, this indicates that some students regarded involvement in asking questions a desirable behavior in the classroom. Consequently, they would rate their involvement in asking questions at a higher degree than their actual participation in both classes.

Summary of Research Question One

In sum, this group of learners' classroom participation is not active, as what was perceived by the learners themselves. Hence, as a majority of the learners were passive, the factors which may have influenced their classroom participation will be identified and discussed in the findings and discussions of research question two and research question three of this study.

Summary of Research Question Two

In sum, the findings have revealed the significant factors influencing this group of learners' classroom participation. The factors identified are learners' fear of the lecturers' criticism towards their ideas, anxiety stimulated while answering the lecturers' questions, perception of the lecturers as the authority, reluctance to give negative feedback on peers' view points, learning strategies, and lecturers' teaching practices and personality.

Summary of Research Question Three

In sum, the lecturers thought that this group of learners' classroom participation is not satisfactory as a majority of them were passive when class discussions were conducted. They also stated that learners' personality, their perceptions of whether they should contribute and explore ideas in their learning process or merely accept everything imparted by the lecturer without voicing out their thoughts, and students' lack of understanding of the teaching contents are the factors which may have influenced this group of learners' classroom participation. Next, the lecturers' responses on the steps they took when the students did not give feedback to their questions imply that they took into consideration students' involvement in the teaching and learning process. They also thought that learners' participation in the classroom does not reflect their actual academic performance as those who are competent may not contribute their ideas. Lastly, the lecturers emphasized that classroom participation is important in promoting communication skills, enhancing language proficiency, helping lecturers to identify whether their teaching were comprehensible to the students, and facilitating learners' understanding.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study reveal that this group of second language learners' classroom participation, which are their involvement in answering the lecturers' questions and asking the lecturers questions, is not active. It was also found that only a consistent few would participate actively in answering the lecturers' questions while a majority of the learners would remain quiet when classroom discussions were carried out. In addition, the learners also preferred to answer the lecturers' questions in unison instead of taking the opportunities to voice out their thoughts to the class loudly and voluntarily.

The factors significantly affecting the learners' classroom participation identified are their fear of the lecturers' criticism towards their responses, anxiety encountered while answering the lecturers' questions, perception of their lecturers as the authority, avoidance to voice out negative feedback on their friends' ideas, lack of understanding of the teaching contents, fear of lecturers' possibility of asking for elaboration after sharing their view points, learning strategies, and the lecturers' teaching practices and personality.

The lecturers who taught this group of learners also stated the factors which may have caused the learners' reticence in the classrooms. Firstly, learners' personality, that is, whether they are introverted or extroverted can influence their willingness to speak up in class. Extroverted learners will involve themselves actively as they are used to speak up in public. Secondly, if learners perceive that their role as university students is to explore knowledge and share ideas, they will take the chances to share their thoughts during class discussions. Lastly, learners' unfamiliarity with the teaching contents may have hindered their participation as they do not have much idea to be shared with the class. Next, the lecturers also suggested some techniques taken to encourage students' participation, which are by asking open-ended questions, encouraging students to give feedback on their peers' ideas, provoking students' arguments towards view points, and reminding students of the importance of participating in the class discussions. The lecturers emphasized that learners' participation does not reflect their academic knowledge as students may not necessarily speak up even though they have adequate knowledge on the contents being discussed. Lastly, the lecturers highlighted that learners' classroom participation plays a crucial role in promoting their communicative competence, facilitating their English development, increasing the effectiveness of the lecturers' teaching, and fostering learners' understanding of the contents learned.

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