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Students' Self-reflections of Own Participation in English Language Oral Class

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ABSTRACT

The English language learners' needs changes from time to time. In Malaysia, the focus of English teaching and learning has shifted from accuracy to fluency; the effective usage of the language. Learners are expected to use the English language in daily communication and to learn the workplace English language communication skill. Due to this demand, language lecturers at higher institutions are expected to assist English language learners to use the language fluently rather than to concentrate heavily on form. Nevertheless, instigating speaking activities in Malaysian classrooms has never been easy and successful. This research was conducted with an aim to identify the underlying factors that motivate or demotivate students' participation in an English oral classroom. The data were qualitatively collected via students' self-reflection reports on their own participation in the English language oral class. It was found that teacher's personality traits, students' communication skills, learning environment, students' motivation, self-confidence and topical knowledge, and fascinating discussion topics play significant roles in students' participation in the English oral class. Thus, these findings could guide language teachers to consider relevant and creative oral activities to encourage students' active classroom participation.

Keywords: Oral classroom participation, teachers' personality traits, learning environment, motivation and self-confidence, classroom discussion topic

INTRODUCTION

Language learning in the 21st century is changing from exam-oriented to communication competency. Students-centered language classroom which involves and stresses on substantial participation from the students is slowly replacing the traditional classroom. In Malaysia, the national education system is also in the process of transforming the teacher-centered classroom, which often produced passive learners, to student-centered classroom. Chong (2015) stated that lecturers in Malaysian public universities are also requested to utilize the student-centered learning (SCL) approach as the key teaching approach. Therefore, classroom participation should be constantly encouraged in the language classroom.

The definition of classroom participation varies according to different learning or teaching styles employed. Hence, classroom behaviors such as asking or answering queries would frequently be associated with the definitions of participation in the classroom (Mustapha, Rahman & Yunus, 2010). In line with this, Fassinger (1995) defined participation as any expressions or queries posed or proposed by students in class. Similarly, Bippus and Young (2000) defined participation as the act

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of getting involved actively in class discussion. Thus, it can be concluded from the educators' perspective that oral involvement is the key element in classroom participation. Therefore, motivating or stimulating students to speak and to voice their opinions, ideas, and confusions, which will indirectly force them to participate orally, should be the criteria for successful teaching and learning a language. From students' perspective, in-class participation also plays an important role in their learning. However, students may understand participation differently compared to the educators where the students might see participation as a variety of non-oral participation behaviors such as taking notes, listening to the lecture whereas educators define participation as oral participation (Dallimore, Hertenstein & Platt, 2004). Regardless of the different understandings of classroom participation, Tatar (2005) stated that active classroom participation plays an important role not only in the success of education but also in students' future personal development. Likewise, Astin (1999) said that students with active involvement show higher satisfaction and persistence rates. Similar studies conducted by Gomez, Arai and Lowe (1995) and Tsou (2005) also revealed that in order to learn effectively, participation in classroom activities is important. The students' participation in class will not only affect the effectiveness of their learning, but it will also affect their academic achievement (Ferguson-Hessler & de Jong, 1991). They argued that there is a tendency that students with active participation will achieve better academic results compared to those who are passive. Therefore, it is necessary for educators to know the factors that motivate students to participate in classroom activities so as to enhance both the teaching and learning process.

Although in-class participation is constantly encouraged in Malaysia, there are gaps about in-class participation among tertiary level students just like in other countries. Fassinger (1995) found that studies related that classroom participation were often related to children rather than adults or young adults. Similarly, only a few studies about classroom participation had been done in Malaysia. For example, Mustapha, Rahman & Yunus, (2010) investigated how students' perceptions of classroom participation affect their actual participation whereas Karim and Shah (2012) studied participation anxiety among undergraduates in classroom. They found that classroom participation anxiety can be significantly affected by the English language oral competency and teachers' immediacy verbal responses. As such, the literature related to participation among tertiary level students are insufficient especially those from the students' perspective (Mustapha, Rahman & Yunus, 2010). Therefore, this research is designed to understand tertiary level students' perspective of their own participation in English language oral class.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although studies have shown that classroom participation can indeed help students to achieve greater academic results (Lim, 1992; Wudong, 1994; Zhou, 1991), some students are still reticent in classroom. The behaviors of these students can be understood as having insufficient interest of the activity; thus, leading to communication reluctance. Other than that, hostility signals, disagreement, lack of social skills, anxiety and shyness, and insufficient verbal skills are all the factors that affect students' in-

class participation (Tatar, 2005). Studies also revealed that factors such as personal characteristics, background, pre-class preparation, anxiety level can affect students' willingness to participate in activities (Czekanski & Wolf, 2013; Karim & Shah, 2012). Besides that, features related to the subject-matter such as topic and type of activity, teacher's personality traits, classroom group size, and classroom arrangements as well as role of in-class participation as academic assessment can all motivate or demotivate student' level of participation (Rogers, 2011; Wiratama Pranasti, 2013).

Hence, from the above definitions, participation can be considered as oral involvement in the classroom which heavily rely on students' speaking skills. Therefore, understanding the reasons why students' reluctance to speak in the classroom is essential so that active in-class participation can be enhanced among Malaysian students.

Positive Lecturer Traits

Teachers' traits can significantly influence students' participation especially when motivation is needed for students to participate (Mustapha, Rahman & Yunus, 2010). It was also found that students will participate more if the teacher is encouraging, understanding, approachable, exhibits behaviors like confirming and supportive (Dallimore, Hertenstein, & Platt, 2004; Fassinger,1995, 2000; Mustapha, Rahman & Yunus, 2010). In addition, students tend to participate or to answer probing questions when they are called by name or they received positive nonverbal signals from teachers such as smiling or nodding which show acceptance of their answers (Auster & MacRone, 1994; Crombie, Pyke, Silverthorn, Jones, & Piccinin, 2003; Mustapha, Rahman & Yunus, 2010). The same researchers also said that teachers who can create an environment where students can feel welcomed to participate and free to make mistakes will further encourage their in-class participation.

On the contrary to the positive teacher traits mentioned above, there are some negative teacher traits that could often demotivate students from actively participating in the classroom. Mustapha, Rahaman & Yunus (2010) found that teachers' poor teaching skills, attitudes such as being impatient or unapproachable, or teachers' hostile acts are some of the negative teacher traits that prevent students from actively participating in class. In addition, Tobin & Capie (1982) found out that the length of time that a teacher waits for students to answer the question could affect students' participation. The longer the teacher waits for students to prepare their answers, the higher the possibility for students to participate (Mustapha, Rahman & Yunus, 2010). Otherwise, the students would rather keep silent if the teacher can only wait no more than a few seconds (Fritschner, 2000).

Factors that Affect In-class Participation

Students' passive oral classroom participation could also be due to their inhibition, lack of topical knowledge, low or uneven participation, and the use of their mother-tongue (Ur, 1996).

Lack of Topical Knowledge

Bachman & Palmer (1996) defined topical knowledge as knowledge structures stored in the long-term memory; to be specific, topical knowledge is one's knowledge that is related to the given topic. They also believed that insufficient topical knowledge will not only affect ones' speaking performance but it will also negatively affect students' willingness to speak. In addition, Ur (1996) said that students' insufficient knowledge on a given topic of discussion could limit and prevent them from speaking.

Unrelated Topic

Rivers (1968) found that unsuitability topic or unfamiliarity topic would frequently make the students not having anything to say during an oral discussion activity. Hence, with regards to this, Rivers (1968) suggested that teachers choose topics that are related to students' prior or recent learning experience or even their real life routine. Additionally, teachers can give topics before the actual discussion take place so that the students can have sufficient time to further understand the topic or to search for related topical information. It can be said that students would be willing to share ideas and thoughts if the discussion topics are related to their prior or recent knowledge as they would have comparatively sufficient and authentic topical knowledge.

Lack of Communication Skills

Besides the lack of topical knowledge, it was found that students' insufficient English language communication skills could also hinder them from participating actively in class. Students, who lack the relevance language knowledge like grammar, vocabularies, sentences structure, pronunciation, are often afraid to make mistakes; therefore, they fear to talk or express their ideas and thoughts (Ur, 1996; Juhana, 2012; Nuan, 1999; Yi Htwe, 2007).

Pronunciation mistake is one of the crucial problem among language learners due to its direct effect on communication (Abebe & Deneke, 2015). The researchers revealed that three-quarter of their respondents had concerns about their pronunciation and more than half of the respondents said they will feel embarrass if they pronounce the word wrongly when they speak in class. In relation to this, Thaher (2005) reported that the inability to speak with accurate pronunciation often scares students as they felt that it could create negative evaluations and criticism from their peers. Apart from that, some students also have problems related to vocabulary. Cortazzi & Jin (1996) stated that the reason students would rather listen than speak in oral class is due to their insufficient vocabulary knowledge. Abebe & Deneke (2015) found that lack of vocabulary can cause passive participation among students in an oral English language classroom. They also stated that due to student's inability to express their ideas with exact words, students often felt nervous when communicating in English. Likewise, Juhana (2012) stated that having insufficient vocabulary and being afraid of making mistakes often lead to communication incompetence among students, and their inability to participate actively in an English language discussion.

Classroom Environment

Nation & Newton (2009) believed that speaking performance can be influenced by the learning environment. In relation to this, Tuan & Mai (2015) argued that students often restrained themselves from speaking in a foreign language in public because of the attention they received from others. They are concerned about their face, and they are afraid of criticism caused by any mistake they made. Due to this, it is necessary for teachers and audiences to create an environment that tolerates minor mistakes made by speakers and focus mainly on comprehensive rather than accuracy to ensure speaking in a foreign language will be less pressured and more enjoyable for the speaker.

In line with Tuan & Mai's theory, Aftat (2008) added that the fear of mistakes is highly related to correction and negative assessment. Hieu (2011) stated that when learning a foreign language, students would often have the fear of being jeered by peers or criticized by the authorities, and thus, they stop from participating in the oral activity. Similarly, Kurtus (2001) postulated that being afraid to make mistakes can be caused by the fear of looking foolish in public, the anxieties of how people judge them, and the worries of being laughed by peers. In other words, the fear of being negatively evaluated for mistakes when speaking in a foreign language overweighs the willingness to participate in any oral communication activity (Hieu, 2011; He & Chen, 2010).

Motivation

Nunan (1999) stressed that it is important to know the importance of motivation because it can influence students' willingness to speak in English. Evidence revealed that it is crucial to motivate students to learn because better academic results can be achieved if the student had substantial motivation to succeed compared to those who has not (Juhana, 2012). Based on the self-determination theory by Deci & Ryan (1985), motivation can be categorized into two types: intrinsic motivation which is an internal force that makes something naturally entertaining and enjoyable to do, and extrinsic motivation which refers to behaving for a desired outcome.

Besides motivation, Karshen (1982) asserted that self-confidence and anxiety can prevent students from speaking too. Scovel (1978) stated that anxiety is a complicated affective factor that relates to the feelings of uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt, apprehension, or worry. In relation to foreign language anxiety, Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope (1986) referred it to a unique complicated self-perception, beliefs, feelings and behaviors that occur while learning a foreign language. Foreign language anxiety includes three elements: communication apprehension, test anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation (Park & Lee, 2005). The negative evaluation from teachers and peers in classroom can cause the feeling of awkwardness, embarrassment and shame.

In a research conducted by Li & Jia (2006), students stated that they are not confident with their English language; therefore, they preferred to keep silent or wait to see whether anyone else has a better answer. In the same research, it was also mentioned that the poor English language proficiency and strong foreign accent can cause students to be lack of confident, fear making mistakes and being laughed by peers (Li & Jia, 2006). As a result, in order to safe their faces, students will resolve not taking the risks and not sharing their thoughts with others. Nevertheless, Heyde (1979) stated that self-esteem can actually influence the score of student' oral performance positively. The

more confident the students are, the better they will perform in the oral communication activity. MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei & Noels (1998) supported this by claiming that self-confidence affects students' willingness to communicate in a foreign language activity significantly. Therefore, it is important for both lecturers and students to boost up students' confidence level for better participation in language classroom.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For this research, a total of 24 UTM engineering undergraduates participated. They were the third year undergraduates undertaking the English for Professional Purposes course; they who were required to use the online forum consistently as a communication tool to share their ideas and thoughts academically. All of the participants were Malaysians and in order to keep their identities confidential, each respondent was given a pseudonym in this report. They were labeled as "R1", "R2", and "R3", which "R" stands for "Respondent".

The students' reflections via the online forum were utilized as the data. Thus reflection assignment was done at the end of the semester where the students were asked to reflect on given topics in the elearning@utm website. The questions were about the effectiveness of using of the online forum as a tool to share their ideas and thoughts. The students were asked to reflect on the given topics based on their experience of using the online forum for the entire semester. The reflection questions were posted in the online forum rather than using the paper-based form to encourage students to respond freely and conveniently.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the data collected through students' self-reflection, it was found that majority of the respondents stated that they were actively involved in classroom activities. 17 out of 24 respondents stated that they participated actively during English language activities. 16 respondents stated that although their English language proficiency is not high, they were willing to speak with the help and encouragement from their lecturer and friends. Besides that, they also mentioned about the enjoyable class environment and the interesting practical activities are among the reasons why they were attracted to participate in class. On the contrary to the active respondents, the rest of respondents gave negative responses. Two of the respondents wrote that they tried to participate more but failed to do so due to their lack of speaking competency. Only one respondent said that he/she was not sure whether his/her participation was considered as active or not. In contrast, two respondents stated that they were not able to participate actively at the beginning due to their language and self-confidence problems. The following table illustrates the students' level of participation during the in-class speaking activities.

Students' participation of classroom speaking activities

Reflection Q 1: Do you participate actively in the classroom speaking activities?						
	Yes	No				
	All the time	Some of the time	Depends on the given topic	Not at the beginning	Not sure	Not at all
Number of respondents	16	2	1	2	1	2
Percentage	66.7%	8.3%	4.2%	8.3%	4.2%	8.3%

Teacher's Traits

Based on students' own reflection, it was found that there were many factors that the 16 students claimed that they were active participants for the given in-class activities. The most frequently mentioned factor is teacher's traits which was mentioned by 9 out of 16 students. The following excerpts are the students' claims.

［R5］ : "Credit to Dr X for all the advice and courage that she gave to me and my classmates"
［R7］ : "… grateful to have one supporting and loving lecturer"
［R10］ : "Credit to Dr X for all the advice and courage that she gave to me and my classmates"
［R10］ : "... after 12 week I had with Dr X had changed my point of view to this subject"
［R15］ : "…I am really grateful to get such wonderful and helpful lecturer"

All the above excerpts indicated that the characteristics of the instructor can affect the way how students participate in classroom activities. Similarly, the study conducted by Mustapha *et al.* (2010) on the factors that affect Malaysian undergraduates' participation found that the instructors' traits can actually stimulate students to participate in classroom oral activities. Abdullah *et al.* (2012) explained the importance of lecturers' traits by saying that the lecturer's traits and skills are the factors that can affect the students' participation in the classroom. The lecturer' behaviors behaviors such as smiling to students, nodding to show approval or agreement (Mustapha *et al.*, 2010), facial expressions such as inspiring and affirming (Dallimore, Hertenstein & Platt, 2004; Fassinger, 1995; 2000) can help the lecturer to create asupporting, understanding, friendly and approachable image which will motivate students to participate actively in classroom (Abdullah *et al.*, 2012).

Furthermore, students' participation will be limited if teachers do not give his/her attention to the students, laugh at them, underestimate them or criticize them excessively. Kearney, Plax, Hays & Ivey (1991) found that instructors who behave offensively such as being sarcastic or abusive, who

sexually harassing or who have negative personalities can affect the teaching and learning environment negatively. Besides that, Berdine (1986) stated that instructors who were described as boring, bigoted, moody, close-minded, too opinionated, arrogant, and not approachable will often receive less participation from students in classroom.

Motivation

Both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is the second most mentioned factors that encouraged respondents to participate (6 out of 16 respondents). Students expressed that the given activities motivate them to participate actively and they believed that their active participation is good practice for their future of career. The following are some of the students' responses.

［R4］ : "It is also a way for us to learn, as we speak more we will learn more"
［R5］ : "It⋯improving my English communication skills"
［R8］ : "This is some kind of training for my future skills in English communication"
［R5］ : "⋯the speaking activities was ⋯ helpful for me⋯"

　　　From the reflections, it was noticed that the respondents who participated actively or tried to participate during the speaking activities are those who felt motivated to speak in the classroom. In line with the findings, Wade (1994) stated that majority of students were able to enjoy sharing ideas with peers, and eventually learnt more when contributing their ideas and thoughts during class discussions. It can be said that all these intrinsic and extrinsic motivational factors had triggered the respondents to participate willingly and frequently.

Fascinating Discussion Topics

It was found in this research that students were interested in the given topics for discussion or the themes of the activities. They mentioned in their reflection that they were excited and willing to participate in the activities because it was fun. The excerpts below are their responses.

［R8］ : "It was fun activities actually"
［R9］ : "⋯ is actually quite interesting, fun ⋯ for me"
［R10］ : "⋯ the speaking activities was held very exciting ⋯"
［R12］ : "⋯ these speaking activities are so interesting"

　　　From the above excerpts, 5 out of 16 respondents stated that the topics of the given activities were interesting and the reasons why they participated. In line with this finding, Mustapha, Rahman & Yunus (2010) also found through their research that their participants ranked interesting topics and fun activities as the third most influential factor that will affect their level of participation in class.

Besides that, they found that students would participate more if they were familiar with the topics and if the topic have different controversy to discuss.

Communication Skills

Lack of communication skills such as knowledge of vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar were commonly recognized as the factors that prevent students from communicating orally (Ur, 1996; Juhana, 2012; Nuan, 1999; Yi Htwe, 2007). In this research, communication skills were also mentioned by students who reflected themselves either active or passive participants. A few students stated that they were able to participate all the time even though their pronunciation or grammar is not good. The excerpts below are the students' responses relating to their communication problems.

［R16］ : "I was a bit awkward and funny due to my wired pronunciations and grammatical error…"
［R3］ : "… my English is just in moderate level"
［R4］ : "… my pronunciation is not really clear"

Based on the literature, lack of communication skills supposed to limit student's participation (Ur, 1996; Juhana, 2012; Nuan, 1999; Yi Htwe, 2007). However, in this particular research, it was found that students had hesitated or were not confident to participate because they think their English is not very good. Yet, they were willing and consequently able to participate actively due the help from the lecturer, their motivation and the positive classroom environment.

Classroom Environment and Self-Confidence

Both the classroom environment and self-confidence were mentioned by 2 active participants. As discussed earlier, an easy-going environment that does not focus on mistakes made by students will encourage students to participate. When students are not afraid of losing face and negative criticism, they will speak actively. The following are some students' responses.

［R5］ : "…with the encourage from Dr X and friends…"
［R3］ : "… my confidence level is increasing…"
［R6］ : "… gain more confidence to speak more next time"

From the reflections written by the respondents, although it was found that many students did not have enough confidence to participate during the given activities orally, they were able to build their confidence through practices and the help from both the lecturer and their peers (as seen in the above excerpts).

Passive Participants

The study also revealed that there were students who responded "not sure", "depends on the different topic" or "I seldom participate" when reflecting on their own participation during the given activities. They indicated in the reflection the following: "I concentrate on what others was trying to say", "I am not the one who always participates in any English especially for the oral class", "I just give the chance to other to talk" or "I am not a good fan of any English class". All these replies show that the respondents were lack or do not have the motivation and confidence to participate in oral activities. It seems that they prefer nonverbal behaviors such as taking notes or just keeping quiet; acts which are considered as passive behaviors for in-class participation (Mohd Yusof, *et al* 2011; Hussein, 2010; Bas, 2010).

    Students' behaviors like: just sit quietly, taking notes, listen to the lecture, doing something else are considered as passive type of behaviors while those students who asking questions, giving opinions, or answering questions are considered as active type of classroom behavior (Mohd Yusof, *et al* 2011; Hussein, 2010; Bas, 2010). According to Liu (2001), there are four different types of student behaviors in the classroom: full integration, participation in the circumstances, marginal interaction and lastly silence observation. Full integration refers to the students who are able to engage actively in the classroom discussion and know not only the ideas they want to express but also what they are not allow to say (Abdullah *et al.*, 2012). This type of students usually participates in class spontaneously and naturally (Zainal, 2007). On the other hand, participation in the circumstances refers to students who participate under the influence of factors such as socio-cultural, cognitive, affective, linguistic or even the environment which will result in students' participation and interaction among themselves with minimum involvement from the instructors if it is necessary (Abdullah *et al.*, 2012). As for marginal interaction, it refers to the students who behave more like listeners and they seldom speak in class. On the contrary to the previous two types of students who are considered as active participants, listening to others and taking notes are preferred by this type of students. Last but not least, silent observation refers to students who tend to avoid participating in the classroom activities orally. This kind of students like to learn through taking notes using different strategies like tape recording or hand writing (Abdullah *et al.*, 2012). Hence, although not all types of students are active participants in classroom, they still learn using the way they preferred. As long as the instructors can understand the theories behind the behaviors, different strategies can be utilized to encourage students' participation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, from the data collected and literature reviewed, it was found that teacher's personality traits play crucial roles in encouraging students' oral participation in the classroom. Other than that, by providing students with skills and methods to minimize their fear of participating orally in class, and designing the activities with information related to students' daily life, teachers can encourage

students' active participation. Therefore, teachers who put efforts to create a more supportive, understanding and accepting learning environment would make students feel confident and comfortable in voicing their ideas and thoughts in class

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