

‘I FEEL LIKE I GO BLANK’: IDENTIFYING THE FACTORS AFFECTING CLASSROOM PARTICIPATION IN AN ORAL COMMUNICATION COURSE

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Abstract: This paper reports on a case study of seven undergraduate students’ classroom participation in an English-medium university in an EFL context, with a focus on their perceptions about the factors affecting their involvement in interactional opportunities in a specific speaking course. Results suggest that student participation in a foreign language learning setting is a complicated and dynamic process strongly influenced by multiple factors. Students’ participation in the language practices of the classroom and their agentive choices for L2 speaking appear to be contingent on the various individual (psychological and social) factors and contextual and classroom-oriented factors. Therefore, this current piece supports the importance of a holistic understanding of multiple factors to arrive at an in-depth picture of students’ involvement, engagement, and participation.

Keywords: classroom participation, EFL, speaking classes, interaction, influential factors

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15639/teflinjournal.v31i1/19-43>

Classroom participation has been receiving much attention as an important component in student learning and academic success (Theriault, 2019). In

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language education, in particular, this marks the start of communicative language teaching (CLT) methodologies that underscored the concepts of interaction and communication (Tsou, 2005). In that regard, Ellis and Fotos (1999) suggest that interactional opportunities in L2 classrooms might affect learners' language acquisition because their active engagement in learning creates spaces for negative evidence and modified output. As language learners as conversational partners take particular roles to promote more opportunities for interactional restructuring (i.e., making some adjustments or modifications in the interactional structures) to ensure mutual understanding, they enhance their language store (Long, 1981; Rivers, 1987). Therefore, Ellis (1991) regards such classroom opportunities for *negotiation of meaning* as a catalyst in the process of second language acquisition.

In the literature, the concept of classroom participation has been defined in various ways (Weaver & Qi, 2005). Rocca (2010), for example, defined it as 'an active engagement process' consisting of preparation, contribution to discussions, group skills, communication skills, and attendance, whereas Fassinger (2000) described the notion as "any comments or questions that students offered or raised in class" (p. 39). In a similar vein, Burchfield and Sappington (1999) considered classroom participation as "the number of unsolicited responses volunteered" (p. 290). On the contrary, Dancer and Kamvounias (2005) adopted a different definition, that is, an overall engagement process whereby learners prepare, contribute to discussions, develop group skills and communication skills and attend. This study adopted Dancer and Kamvounias's (2005) definition since their definition was considered to reflect the dynamic and complex nature of classroom participation in a holistic way.

It seems obvious that classroom participation is a complex, multi-faceted process whereby it encapsulates a wide range of practices of a community such as doing, talking, thinking, feeling, and belonging (Floding & Swier, 2012). In this sense, the literature strongly supports this complicated nature of participation since most of the research studies which attempted to examine why students do and do not participate reveal that a great variety of factors make an impact on participation. The studies in the literature mostly highlighted several socio-cultural, affective, cognitive and other factors affecting student participation that should be considered in creating an active learning environment.

As for socio-cultural factors, the literature found that gender, age, culture, teacher traits, and classroom climate significantly impacted students' tendency to participate actively in language classrooms (Loftin et al., 2010; Mustapha et al., 2010; Weaver & Qi, 2005). Anxiety, self-esteem, shyness, fear of making mistakes, and willingness to participate were also regarded among the affective factors (Effiong, 2016; Patil, 2008; Savaşçı, 2014; Trent, 2009). Concerning the cognitive factors, not being able to formulate thoughts and organize ideas was reported to impact student participation in oral activities (Loftin et al., 2010; Rocca, 2010). Other factors that might impact classroom participation involve class size (Loftin et al., 2010; Weaver & Qi, 2005), lack of language proficiency and experience in speaking English (Loftin et al., 2010), language competence (Kayı-Aydar, 2019), and classroom topics (Mustapha et al., 2010; Sixsmith et al., 2006).

There is a growing recognition of benefits of classroom participation in the literature since L2 learners' engagement in interactional opportunities in classes contributes to their awareness of focus on form (Abdullah et al., 2012; Nunan, 1991; Wang & Castro, 2010). Besides, much of the literature has underpinned that student active participation is of vital importance since it helps the learner develop in terms of various aspects. Research, in general, demonstrates that L2 learners who actively participate in in-class learning opportunities are characterized by their increased academic success (Liu, 2005; Tatar, 2005; Weaver & Qi, 2005), developed critical thinking skills (Jones, 2008), a more satisfying learning process (Majid et al., 2010), and improved language proficiency (Tsou, 2005). Although there are numerous benefits of participation in learning, classroom participation still seems to be a critical problem particularly in EFL contexts where most students are not likely to participate and the minority of the classes tend to do so repeatedly and dominate the discussion (Susak, 2016).

Even though teacher-fronted approaches are no longer accepted and the use of communicative language teaching has been prevalently adopted, EFL learners are still reluctant to take an active role in classroom interactional tasks (Abdullah et al., 2012; Savaşçı, 2014). In a similar vein, based on his classroom observations, Caicedo (2015) concludes that the use of English is not viewed as an important asset and this perception results in low student participation in English classes. Along similar lines, Abebe and Deneke (2015) describe the EFL setting as a 'frustrating place'. In response to students' reticence and reluctance to interact and speak in EFL classrooms, many

language instructors encounter challenging times to motivate them for more engagement and active participation (Abebe & Deneke, 2015; Tsou, 2005).

It is reported that there is much literature on student participation since it is the most observable behavior (Tsou, 2005). However, given that “the nature of silence in the classroom is complex with different students possessing distinct beliefs, social norms, and cultural backgrounds” (Abebe & Deneke, 2015, p. 76), the findings of these studies on the classroom participation are not applicable to every institution (Susak, 2016). Thus, it is suggested that learning environments, institutions and even educators’ and students’ characteristics show changing patterns and this results in an urgent need to investigate the notion of student participation in a more comprehensive way (Susak, 2016).

Similarly, Tatar (2005) states that the number of research studies exploring classroom participation from students’ point of view is not sufficient to explain the conception of ‘active classroom participation’. Therefore, a more developed understanding of the contributing and impeding factors of classroom participation is necessary to increase the potential to help teachers develop more effective strategies and tackle the factors discouraging students from participating and promote a more supportive and non-threatening learning atmosphere. Besides, it seems essential to gain a more thorough insight into these factors at play in EFL contexts to be able to reflect on teaching techniques or tasks employed during such speaking classes. Therefore, considering the important influence of classroom participation on learners’ language learning and development, we aim to explore the perceptions of university students about classroom participation as well as inhibitive and encouraging factors in an oral communication course. In parallel with these purposes of the study, this research was intended to find answers to the following research questions:

- (1) What are the university students’ perceptions of classroom participation in an oral communication course?
- (2) What factors influence university students’ classroom participation in an oral communication course?

Theoretical Framework

This study is premised on the situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) since it takes learning as a social, cultural, and temporal activity (Morita, 2004). This sociocultural view of L2 learning considers learning as a social

process in which one participates in a *community of practice (CoP)*. In this study, the community of practice was the Oral Communication Course within which the university students engaged in various forms of communication-oriented L2 opportunities through which they learn together and build relationships. Besides, Lave and Wenger (1991) conceptualize learning as *legitimate peripheral participation* whereby newcomers gradually become old-timers as they move from peripheral to full participation in a particular community of practice. Legitimate peripheral participation enables learners to speak about activities, artifacts, and identities since it allows interlocutors to take active roles to ensure full participation in the socio-cultural practice. In line with this concept, Rogoff (1994) argues that participation in the socio-cultural activities of their communities makes learning and development possible.

METHOD

This paper reports on a qualitative case study of seven students in a tertiary setting to provide an in-depth description of the complexities of the language learning process (Mackey & Gass, 2005). Since this study aims to elucidate the factors affecting classroom participation in an oral communication course, case study as a research method helps the researchers examine the phenomenon within its real-life context (Guest et al., 2012). The richness of the data gathered could help to reveal the complexities and dynamics regarding the phenomenon of student participation. Case studies intend to capture a commonplace situation to provide a *representative* of this circumstance (Yin, 2003). Thus, this case study could provide useful insights into similar language learning settings through the *transferability* of the qualitative results (Stake, 2000).

Context and Participants

Seven freshman students who enrolled in a language teacher education program at one of the major research universities in central Turkey participated (see Table 1 for detailed background information of the participants). The goal of this program, as stated in its official website, is to educate prospective EFL teachers by providing a solid foundation in the English language, English literature, methodology, educational sciences, and linguistics to make them

teachers of English in primary, secondary and tertiary level educational institutions. This language teacher education program offers its students a communication-oriented course which is called ‘Oral Communication Course’ in the first year. This study was conducted in two different sections of the course (Section I and Section II). This course aims to offer a variety of different communication-oriented speaking opportunities, such as, discussions, debates, role-plays, individual and group presentations and other interactive tasks providing an opportunity for students to improve their oral competence by developing effective language use both in formal and informal contexts. It also includes discussion topics, interesting facts, stimulating quotes, and literary texts for the promotion of interest and motivation in communication to help students improve listening and speaking skills in academic and everyday contexts, and speak more fluently and efficiently.

Table 1. Background Information of the Participants

Participants	Gender	Age
Stimulated Recall Interview Session (Section I)		
S1	Female	20
S2	Female	19
S3	Female	22
S4	Male	19
Stimulated Recall Interview Session (Section II)		
S5	Male	21
S6	Male	20
S7	Female	20

To collect data that could shed light on the complexity of university students’ participation in a communication-oriented course, a multi-methods design (field notes, written questionnaires, and video-stimulated recall interviews) was employed (Yin, 2003). In this study, the data obtained from the field notes and the written questionnaires were used to provide results that complement and triangulate the findings from the video-stimulated recall interviews (VSR-Is). The procedure of collecting the data is as follows. Firstly,

one of the researchers, who was also the teaching assistant of the given course, observed her class and took *field notes* over four weeks to feel the classroom atmosphere and to have general opinions about students and the flow of lessons (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). A written questionnaire was prepared by the two researchers by exploring the literature about the possible factors affecting classroom participation both negatively and positively. It was used to elicit student teachers' perceptions about classroom participation in addition to inhibiting and encouraging aspects of the given course. The written questionnaire utilized in the initial phase of this study is comprised of three sections. The first part of the questionnaire collected general demographic information about the participants (i.e., age, gender, year of language learning, and their proficiency exam score). In the second part of the questionnaire, involving multiple statements, the respondents were asked to rate how much (on a scale from 1 to 10) they felt the various factors made an impact on their classroom participation in the given course. The last section of the questionnaire involves one open-ended question focusing on their opinions about other factor(s) they think influence their participation in the given course either negatively or positively. This section was inserted to complement the closed-ended questions in the second part of the questionnaire. After the pilot of the questionnaire administered with six students in the same department, necessary amendments were made based on the respondents' feedback and comments on the questions.

After the administration of the written questionnaire, eight university students of those who volunteered to participate in a video-stimulated recall interview were selected. The main criteria for selecting the participants were that they had written lengthy and detailed answers to the open-ended questions in the questionnaire and that they showed different modes of engagement during in-class speaking activities to explore the variations that cut across participative patterns. In that sense, four students from Section I and four students from Section II were the participants of video-stimulated recall sessions. In line with the aims of this study, in each section, two of them were selected from those who were very active and attentive during the classes and the rest of them were chosen from those who did not seem to be very active and attending to the lesson. However, one of the participants from Section II decided to withdraw from the study due to her personal reasons.

After the analysis of the questionnaire results, *video-stimulated recall interviews (VSR-Is)* were conducted (Koc et al., 2009). As one of the

videography strategies, a video-stimulated recall interview was used in this study to allow participants to watch their performances and discuss these with others. They were conducted in participants' mother tongue which is Turkish. Once the video-recorded simulated interview was initiated, the video-recorded lesson was stopped by the researchers and the students were asked: 'Any comments? Did you have any particular objectives in mind in this passage of the lesson? What were you noticing about the students?' As the interview progressed, the following questions included: 'Or what were your thoughts or feelings at this point?'. These enabled participants to focus on their practices and gain a new perspective on them (Tripp & Rich, 2012). As Sherin (2004) states, video recordings provide participants and researchers with the opportunity to develop a different kind of perspective of teaching and learning, and knowledge of how to interpret and reflect on classroom practices. These sessions lasted approximately 89 minutes and were audio-recorded by the researchers.

Data Analysis

Data obtained from the field notes, the written questionnaire, and the two VSR-Is were analyzed using a multi-step iterative process including both researchers and a full professor in the same department. Data from the field notes and questionnaire formed the basis for an initial descriptive analysis of affecting factors that student teachers perceived as inhibiting or encouraging their classroom participation in speaking classes. Field notes were re-read to examine the statements about the participants' perceptions of classroom participation and affecting factors. The questionnaire results were categorized as 'attentive' and 'inattentive' according to their different modes of participation. Both data sources were used to gain extra insight to see the bigger picture of the context as well as to reduce the risk of bias in the selection of focal student teachers for the VSR-Is. Since they were used to triangulate and complement the data obtained from the VSR-Is, the results obtained from the field notes and questionnaires were not presented.

For the analysis of VSR-I data, the data analysis procedure suggested by Miles & Huberman (1994) was followed. Firstly, the VSR-Is were transcribed verbatim and all transcripts were put in a file after being printed out. Then, while reading and re-reading the transcripts, the researchers wrote down short phrases and key concepts in memos (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), since "writing

notes or memos in the margins of transcripts helps in the initial process of exploring a database” (Creswell, 2013, p.183). After identifying the most salient statements by marking and labeling, the researchers reached descriptive codes, which were the early labels of data including little inferences and interpretations. For instance, they used ‘LSE’ as a code for ‘lack of speaking experience’ and ‘LFK’ as a code for ‘lack of prior knowledge’. Finally, they grouped the codes to create categories. For instance, they grouped ‘LSE’ and ‘LFK’ to create the category of ‘Language Sources’. Each category was supported using participants’ quotations extracted from transcripts. Additionally, the researchers re-read all the transcripts and checked them to ensure that each important statement had been noticed and grouped.

In this study, the researchers read the data thoroughly and coded the raw data twice in order to ensure intra-reliability. For transferability, the researchers gave sufficient details about the data collection procedure and the context of the study to provide a thick description. In this way, other researchers who aim at studying the similar phenomenon can evaluate to what extent the results drawn from this study can be transferred to other contexts, situations, and people. As for the ethical issues, the researchers took a written consent from the participants. In order to ensure the anonymity of the study, instead of stating their real names, numbers were given to every participant.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The main data source of this study was obtained from two VSR-Is as “a means of eliciting data about thought processes” (Gass & Mackey, 2000, p. 1). During the VSR-Is, the purpose was to create a stimulating atmosphere to make students reflect on their cognitive and emotive processes during the activities. After students’ retrospective comments on their participation in the class were examined, the emerging themes on influential factors in classroom participation were identified and the codes and themes were presented in Figure 1.

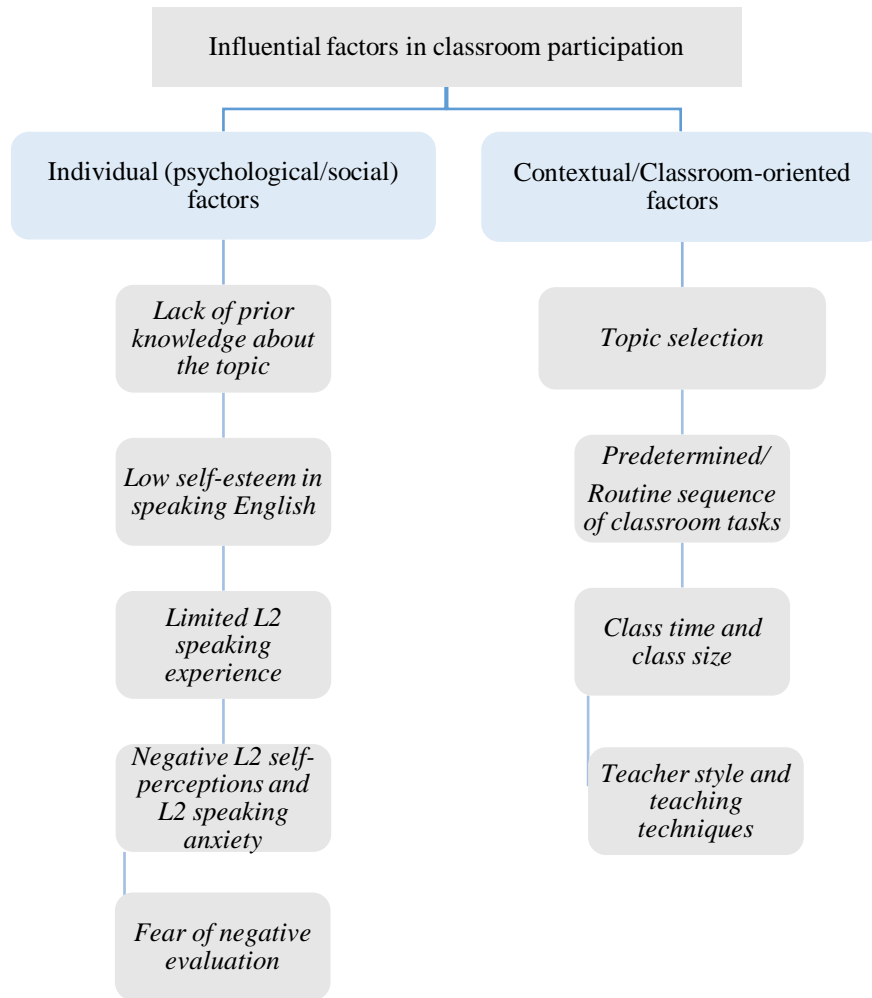


Figure 1. Influential Factors in Classroom Participation

Individual (Psychological/Social) Factors

Lack of Prior Knowledge about the Topic

The first theme identified in this study indicated that students were affected by their lack of prior knowledge about the topic. The students stated that having a lack of background knowledge about the topic was a great hindrance to taking an active role in speaking classes. The participants in this study also confirmed that if they did not have enough knowledge about the topic in concern, they preferred to remain silent. For instance, S2 expressed her opinions as: “If I didn’t have any information about the topic, I could not talk about my opinions ... could not give any answers to the instructor’s questions” (S2, VSR-I). In line with S2, other participants also agreed that even if they found the topic interesting, the lack of prior knowledge prevented them from participating in the speaking activities.

Low Self-Esteem in Speaking English

Even though not common, students pointed out that low self-esteem in speaking English was a source of their unwillingness to speak during in-class discussions. For instance, S6 commented, “...in the classes, I am expected to think in English, that’s why I have some troubles during the class time. I want to speak but this happens only when I really work up the courage to speak English”. In a similar vein, S5 stressed the importance of experience and practice for one’s self-awareness about the language level:

We are, I think, mostly unwilling to speak in this course because we do not take any speaking courses until we come to the university. In other words, we don’t use English both inside and outside the four-walled classrooms. So, this leads to a lack of self-confidence in speaking. You can’t know about your English until you experience or practice it. (S5, VSR-I)

Limited L2 Learning Experience

S4 made an important point about having sufficient L2 learning opportunities to speak in English along with having self-esteem as an enhancing factor of classroom participation. The students commonly referred to the lack of previous speaking experience and limited opportunities to use English as a major source of their reluctance to participate in speaking classes.

About a lack of opportunity for practicing English, S3 expressed her feelings as follows:

I generally couldn't speak English. I guess I have a phobia to speak in front of people ... for instance, umm ...when I begin to speak English in classes, I feel like my heart beats faster and I feel quite anxious. But, I don't have such problems in other language skills. Umm ... I think it is because I didn't have any previous experience of speaking English before. It was my first time to speak English when I started this department. I have never taken exams such as IELTS or TOEFL. (S3, VSR-I)

S1 and S6 made similar comments and S1 associated the lack of experience in speaking English to the difficulties to organize and express thoughts. He pointed out that as they had limited opportunities to access English speaking communities during their past school years, they felt difficulties in articulating their thoughts and feelings in speaking classes. S6 noted: 'I need to start thinking in English in my mind to fluently use it. I couldn't tell about clearly what I think or feel. Sometimes, I feel like I go blank. I want to participate only when I am sure that I'm particularly eloquent'.

During the VSR-Is, S7 explained her agreement as: 'I agree with him. At those times when I am speaking English, I mix up my words and don't make sense. So I'm ending up sounding weird and dumb'. S2 talked about her troubles in putting her points by giving a sample snapshot from the course: 'For example, the topic was 'Stereotypes' in that lesson, and I was very confident in speaking about it, but I couldn't talk about it since it was difficult for me to organize my thoughts'. In another attempt when we asked what exactly discouraged her in the courses S2 also stated:

I wasn't sure about which words I should choose to make my point. I had something in my mind, but I couldn't set any connections between sentences. Even if I could do it in my head, I had difficulties in verbally expressing myself. I'm getting more nervous and therefore I choose not to speak. (S2, VSR-I)

Negative L2 Self-Perceptions and L2 Speaking Anxiety

Another factor affecting the students' participation is the fear of speaking in public, which in turn led to the formation of negative self-perceptions about their L2 competence. They all referred to their fear and anxiety when they were asked to talk about a topic in front of the whole class. The students raised this issue by directly making connections between fear of speaking in public and

self-criticizing their mistakes involving grammar or pronunciation. For instance, S3 explained she had fears of being criticized and losing face when she made a mistake: ‘When I attempt to speak about the given topic, I become quite obsessed with the possible mistakes hanging over my head’.

Fear of Negative Evaluation

Another theme that emerged from the VSR-Is data in this study was fear of negative evaluation which was emphasized by the students as a big source of anxiety and stress in speaking classes. Participants noted that they feared losing face, particularly during role-play sessions. In relation to this concern, S6 commented:

We have a text in role-plays and we have to act out according to this text. Sometimes, it doesn’t appeal to me. Sometimes, my classmates who perform the role-play before us make a good job. Then, I start to make comparisons between our performance and theirs and feel very anxious and nervous about my performance. (S6, VSRI)

In relation to comparing speaking performance with other students, S5 explained that he was reluctant to participate because, ‘When I see the ones who speak better than me, I feel pressured and I had nothing to contribute and therefore I prefer to remain silent’. On fear of losing face, S6 stated:

The moment I notice that I have made a mistake, this hinders me from keeping speaking ... umm ... because I’m constantly thinking of my mistake while talking about the topic at the same time. This causes stress and I lose my interest in participating in class discussions. (S6, VSR-I)

S7 mentioned a ‘competitive atmosphere’ as an inhibitive factor in classroom participation in speaking classes. She stated that they all began to feel shy when they realized that they could not speak fluently in comparison to their peers. In parallel, S4 pointed out: ‘When it is a pair-work activity, you know that what you have said will not be heard and you relieve your fear of being disgraced in front of the whole class’.

Lastly, although not very common, the students also stated their opinions about perceived high expectations from their social and academic circles as prospective language teachers. Studying in a language teaching department at

an English medium university made them feel pressured since they were supposed to speak English in a very proficient way.

Contextual and Classroom-oriented Factors

Topic Selection

The students considered topics as a significant factor that impacts the extent of their active participation. They stated that topics selected for the class discussions should be interesting and fun. They thought that enjoyable contents significantly play a role in making them willing or unwilling to participate in the classroom activities.

The students mentioned familiar and controversial topics should be considered in classes. In that regard, S1 noted: 'I think debatable topics should be selected. As an example, we might talk about today's political, cultural or social concerns. I'm not interested in such topics as career, education and so on'. S2 agreed and pointed out: 'I also don't enjoy talking about these popular topics. When asked about why he seemed to be disengaged in class discussion in an identified episode of the course in the VSR-Is, S5 referred to the role of topic familiarity as follows:

We were talking about an irrelevant issue at that moment because the topic in that class wasn't interesting enough to attract my attention. We didn't know much about the topic which is 'fashion'. How can I speak about a topic if I do not have anything to say? That's why I do not want to speak. (S5, VSR-I)

S6 believed that if topics were selected from meaningful and controversial issues such as euthanasia or abortion, more students would show interest in oral activities. Students also provided some alternative solutions to making topic selection more controversial, debatable and interesting. For instance, S5 stated: 'We should be given next week's discussion topic in advance to be able to prepare for the class. This might also contribute to our personal growth'.

Predetermined/Routine Sequence of L2 Classroom Tasks

Another factor that was regarded as an impeding factor in classroom participation was following a routine sequence of classroom tasks. The students commonly highlighted that there was a pre-determined order in classroom activities following the sequence: first warm-up activity, second listening

comprehension activity, third class discussion and individual presentations, and lastly role-plays. Almost all of the students in the VSR-Is stated that role-play activities should be excluded from the course syllabus. They agreed that everyone did not have act-out skills and they found it irrelevant to the course aims. Regarding individual presentation, S7 cited:

The most unnecessary activities in this course are presentations and role-plays. In the individual presentation, we only give information about a topic or even read our PowerPoint slides ... we speak about the food and cultures of different countries. This doesn't mean interaction ... there is no exchange of opinions and we just give brief information. I think this is not in line with the aim of this course. (S7, VSR-I)

Class Size

During the VSR-Is, the participants stated that class size was one of the main factors that affected their classroom participation. The field notes of the first author revealed that students who were generally reluctant to speak preferred to sit in the back of the classroom. It was also found that these reticent students preferred to sit in a certain area of the classroom. When the participants were asked about their typical choice of sitting, S6 stated: 'In fact, I am a chatty person but when there are thirty people in the classroom, I don't prefer to speak. However, if there are fewer students in the class, then I am sure I will talk much more than this'. In a similar vein, S5 emphasized class size as an essential factor in classroom participation. He pointed out that the class size had a big impact on their opportunities to practice their speaking skills: 'Suppose that the topic is a very debatable issue, is it possible for each student to express their opinions and discuss within only three hours?'

Class Time

Another factor pertaining to formal structure that emerged in VSR-Is was class time. As aforementioned, this study was conducted with two different sections of the course. In relation to class time, participants in Section I mentioned class time as an important factor for their motivation and willingness to speak. Since this course started very early in the morning and they were expected to actively engage in the activities, they were reluctant to take part in the activities. On the other hand, participants in Section II reported that the given course was scheduled right after another tough departmental

course. They all pointed out that since they had an only ten-minute break, they did not have a chance to relax and therefore, they had difficulties concentrating on class discussions.

Teacher Style and Teaching Techniques

Teacher style and teaching techniques were indicated as a factor that affects their willingness and motivation to speak in classes. They mainly stated that the course instructor as an authority of knowledge tended to speak more than students and dominated the classes most of the time. For instance, S1 stated: ‘... the instructor continuously interrupts our individual presentations and talk about something else. We are already anxious and when she intervenes, it becomes very difficult to concentrate again’. In parallel, S2 noted:

Our instructor constantly interrupts our speeches and after some time, we feel lost in topics. In such situations, it becomes difficult for us to come back to the presentation topic ... umm ... the instructor steals time from the presenter student and expects us to finish our presentation in a very short time. Of course, it is nice to be directed but there are too many interruptions and it is discouraging. (S2, VSR-I)

Another point concerning the teacher style was the instructor's dominance in selecting topics to present or discuss. In this sense, S7 stated that the instructor was very dominant while choosing presentation topics and they were not allowed to have freedom in this course. Student 5 also agreed:

We need more freedom while selecting our presentation topics. We don't have any control over our assignments. For example, I wanted to present on a topic that I am very interested in in the class. It was about South Park. But she did not allow me to do it and I believe if I could present it, everyone would want to participate in the discussion and enjoy it. (S5, VSR-I)

The students commonly stated that they felt anxious and hampered when they felt that the instructor did not allow them to have freedom. They also agreed that there should be more flexibility in such speaking classes. In that regard, S5 stated: ‘... when our desires, our needs are unmet in this course, we all tend to become less interested in participating in it’. In contrast, S2 mentioned the intervention of the instructor as a contributing factor to their

participation. She stated: ‘... the instructor gives many examples from her personal and professional life and this helps me feel more motivated’. S3 agreed: ‘This enables us to create a sincere atmosphere in classes’.

Discussions

Before we offer the implications of our study, we would like to discuss some limitations. There are two limitations that have to do with our focal participants all being in one teacher education program. First, even though we initially targeted university students in one language teacher education department, we currently think that it would have been useful to have data from different contexts. Besides, university students in this study might have distinctive characteristics that are different from individuals in other language teacher education programs. A reader, therefore, should evaluate this case study in terms of transferability rather than generalizability and interpret it in this light and with caution. Despite these limitations, we believe that this study clearly supported the standpoint in the relevant literature that regarded classroom participation as complex and multifaceted (Kovalainen & Kumpulainen, 2009).

The purposes of this study were to investigate the perceptions of university students about classroom participation and to identify the factors affecting their engagement from their perspective. The in-depth analyses confirmed that many interrelated factors are influencing in-class student participation (Al-Ghafri, 2018). Following the data analysis of the video-stimulated interviews, we found that participants’ classroom participation was characterized by the two main themes: individual (psychological and social) factors (lack of prior knowledge about the topic, low self-esteem in speaking English, limited L2 learning experience, negative L2 self-perceptions and L2 speaking anxiety, and fear of negative evaluation) and factors related to the classroom context and course structure (topic selection, predetermined/routine sequence of L2 classroom tasks, class size, class time and teacher style and teaching techniques).

In relation to the individual (psychological and social) factors, participants stated that the lack of prior knowledge about the topic, poor English speaking skills caused by limited opportunities for using English in the past years, low self-esteem, speaking anxiety, and negative self-perceptions and their fear of negative evaluation hindered their active participation in speaking classes. The

results of this study were consistent with Liu and Littlewood's (1997) findings in that lack of practice in English was a major factor explaining the poor performance of the students, particularly in the input-poor environments where English is not the dominant medium of communication inside and outside the classroom. They stated that since practice opportunities were very critical to confidence and proficiency, those who had a higher level of proficiency tended to participate more. In a similar vein, Thornbury (2005) reported that affective factors such as shyness, lack of self-confidence, fear of making mistakes and anxiety were among the important factors impacting student participation.

Regarding the fear of speaking in public and negative evaluation by others, this present study reveals consistent findings with those in the study by Abebe and Deneke (2015), who showed that more than half of the students in speaking classes were afraid of speaking in front of the whole class. They also reported that many students felt anxious because of the fear of losing face. The students in this study noted that their very proficient classmates were also a source of their anxiety in classes since they possessed negative self-perceptions about their L2 skills. In parallel with the statement of the participants in this study, Effiong (2016) stated that the competitive atmosphere in classrooms induces Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA). In line with the results of this study, Weaver and Qi (2005) demonstrated that communicating ideas clearly and presenting them openly in front of people resulted in an emotional experience of fear and formation of negative self-perceptions.

As for the contextual and classroom-oriented factors, the topic selection was reported among the influential element of student participation in speaking activities. In parallel, Abebe and Deneke (2015) found similar results indicating that topic familiarity was an important trigger for students to participate in interactional opportunities in the classroom since it allows them to talk about the topics they have already known and aroused willingness to share their feelings, opinions, and beliefs.

The predetermined/routine sequence of tasks in the given course was perceived as an obstacle for participants because it made a negative impact on their attentiveness before coming to the class, which was not reported in any of the studies reviewed for this study. This finding revealed how the dynamic relationship between the predictability and unpredictability in foreign language education (Kurtz, 2011) was underemphasized in the given course context where the participants studied. In that regard, the dynamism between the planned and predictable and the unplanned and unpredictable should find a

more visible place in foreign language classroom instruction (van Lier, 2007). Participants stated that they would be more willing and motivated to speak if the topics were chosen among controversial and debatable issues. This result is aligned with Byford et al's (2009)'s finding that controversial topics were more encouraging for students to discuss and they felt more comfortable. In parallel, Abebe and Deneke (2015) also found that topic familiarity, topic interest, and topic preparation played a central role in making the students more active and willing to participate. Mustapha et al. (2010) reached similar findings and suggested that engaging class content was perceived to have a facilitating impact on student engagement in oral activities.

The formal structure of the given course such as class size and time was also found to be a significant factor that should be considered in designing such communication-oriented courses. Participants in this study viewed a large class as an intimidating factor and stated that a large class resulted in a lack of practice opportunities in interactional activities. In line with this result, Hyde and Ruth (2002) found that class size had a great impact on students' willingness to participate in classes. Consistently, Loftin et al. (2010) found that students were less apt to participate in larger classes and preferred to sit their favorite places which were 'their comfort zone'. Regarding class schedule, the students emphasized that morning classes or not scheduling enough time between classes made a negative impact on their motivation and participation. In this respect, Rocca (2010) supported this finding and argued that classes should be broken up to encourage better classroom participation.

Pertaining to the instructor's style and teaching techniques, students in this study reported the dominant, authoritarian and inflexible approach of the instructor might make them reluctant and demotivated to benefit from the interactional opportunities in the course. Similarly, previous studies (Liu, 2005; Tanveer, 2007) indicated that students' reluctance to participate in class might also be attributable to the perceived negative traits of the instructor. The participants in this study mentioned that they were not allowed to have the freedom to choose their presentation topics. In this respect, Rocca (2010) recommends that instructors should not only encourage students to be respectful and critical but also allow them to see the value in their ideas. Similarly, Loftin et al. (2010) suggest that when teachers are unwilling to cooperate with their students, it creates a discouraging atmosphere in the classroom, which impedes their attempts to take action for using the target language.

CONCLUSIONS

The results reported in this article indicated that student participation in a foreign language setting appeared to be a complicated and dynamic process strongly influenced by multiple factors. Students' participation in the language practices of the classroom and their agentive choices for L2 speaking were contingent on the various individual (psychological and social) factors and contextual/classroom-oriented factors. Therefore, this current piece supports the importance of a holistic understanding of multiple factors to arrive at an in-depth picture of their involvement, engagement, and participation.

The results of this study may provide potential pedagogical implications to promote students' social L2 learning activities in speaking classes. Given speaking anxiety and fear of making mistakes as major inhibitive factors in such courses, students should be given an understanding that making mistakes is inherently part of the learning process and errors might stimulate learning. Since most EFL learners tended to be reluctant to benefit from the interactional opportunities for using English in speaking courses (Savaşçı, 2014) because of their perceived low level of L2 competence, teachers should ensure an encouraging classroom atmosphere particularly for the students with low L2 proficiency levels and promote an equitable learning space for all students. Large classes can be reduced to small groups in class to enhance interactional and input opportunities during class time. Students should be allowed to take active and agentive roles in their learning process. For example, they should be given freedom in selecting the discussion or oral presentation topics, which possibly encourage them to feel comfortable and motivated to speak English. Besides, teachers should enable students to use their existing repertoire of knowledge and skills in speaking courses (Urmeneta & Walsh, 2017). A lot of the efforts to get students to participate in speaking classes depend on teachers because they play a significant role in using interaction as a means of mediating and assisting L2 learners.

The results of this study were based on a case study and cannot easily be generalized to other settings. However, they could inform our understanding of the complicated, multifaceted nature of classroom participation and offer useful insights into the complexity of classroom dynamics in an EFL context, particularly student reluctance to participate (Savaşçı, 2014). Future research could extend this research with more participants and institutions. Conducting this study in different programs may provide researchers with a more

comprehensive picture of student participation in communication-oriented courses.

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