Students' Participation in Oral Discussions

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ABSTRACT

The present study deals with some obstacles affecting EFL learners' participation in oral discussions at departments of English. It is hypothesized that do not participate in oral discussions due to psychological problems such as (anxiety, fear, shyness, etc), and linguistic problems; for example, lack of vocabulary, mispronunciation , grammatical mistakes, motivation. To verify the aim and its hypotheses, the researcher investigate the case of fourth year students at departments of English, and teachers in certain private colleges. The study is divided into two parts; theoretical part, in which a general overview about speaking skills is made and then the various obstacles that hinder the learners' participation is discussed . On the other hand, the study suggests some techniques and activities that teachers of foreign language may apply as solutions to the stated difficulties. Therefore, the practical part deals with the methodology adopted to conduct the research in which the researcher analyzes the questionnaires that are administered to both students and teachers of English in certain private colleges. The data obtained from the two questionnaires indicate that there are some factors affecting the students' participation in oral discussions. Furthermore, the data suggest some techniques and activities that EFL students need to work with to get over of these obstacles.

1 . Introduction

In Iraq, English is taught as a compulsory subject for about eight years in general education. The only way to learn English in Iraq is in classrooms where the majority of language teachers are native speakers of Arabic. Learners spent most of their time doing grammar and vocabulary drills instead of oral practice. Developing oral communicative skills, which require learners to practice in real-life situations, is totally ignored. Moreover, learners have little

opportunities to apply what they have learned in class in the outside world. As a result, they graduate from high school unable to express themselves or engage in conversation. (Rababah, 2005). In most Iraqi universities, especially in private colleges, English language departments accept high school graduates without taking into consideration their proficiency levels in English, which, in turn , doubles the effort exerted by language instructors to help them master the speaking skill.

Oral discussion is one of the topics introduced to English majors in order to enhance their speaking abilities. Learners describe it as one of the most stressful courses they have ever had

1.1 The problem

No one can deny that many Iraqi students can write and read English well but they cannot speak fluently and correctly. Most of the students find speaking difficult, even uninteresting. After several years of teaching English, we have found that the university students are quite passive in speaking English. They do not actively participate in speaking activities. Certainly, students' participation can be affected by a variety of factors on the teachers' side, students' side and some others including classroom environment, types and contents of activities, etc. Unfortunately, this is not only the situation in the university where I teach but it is almost the same in many other universities in Iraq.

 One of the most widespread problems among learners of foreign languages is their considerably lower speaking performance when compared to their passive knowledge. Those learners are not able to express their thoughts and opinions satisfactorily, rather they generally speak slowly and less fluently. They often make mistakes by making frequent pauses and thinking of suitable or correct words . They usually feel very shy , respond briefly and often use only one word answers, e.g. "Yes" or "No" .Sometimes, they have nothing to say at all . In such learners, the weak performance in speaking skill is a big problem, as it makes their ability to use the language for its most important purpose – the exchange of information are limited. This leads to frustration and anxiety.

This has motivated me to conduct a research to identify the factors that hinder students' participation as well as to find out the techniques

and activities to increase students' participation in speaking activities at different private colleges.

1.2 Research questions

This study, is an attempt to answer the following questions:

1- What are the main linguistics, psychological, social and environmental difficulties of EFL learners' oral participation in class discussion at certain Iraqi private colleges .

2- Which factor among these mentioned above most hinders students' oral participation?

3- What are the possible remedies for the problem under study?

The possible answers to these questions formulate the following hypotheses.

1.3 Hypotheses

It is hypothesized that:

1. Students are unfamiliar with new topics and do not have a wide range of vocabulary

2. Students are afraid of mispronunciations and grammar mistakes.

3. Students may face psychological problems-lack of self-confidence, anxiety of being ridiculed, corrected or laughed at.

4. Teachers do not give students adequate opportunities to talk and express themselves.

1.4 Aims of the Study

The aims of the study are :

- To identify the difficulties that prevent EFL learners from participating in oral discussions.

- To suggest alternative techniques that may encourage those students to be active participants in oral session.

- To enhance the students' oral communication through attracting the teachers' attention to adopt variety of classroom speaking activities.

2. Review of Literature.

 Researchers and educationalists have been preoccupied lately trying to emphasize the role of oral discussions in students' academic careers, especially at undergraduate and postgraduate levels (Munby, 2011). The majority of those studies were devoted to ways of conducting proper oral discussions (e.g., Abu El Enein, 2011). Some studies, are concerned with listing the difficulties that students usually face in oral discussions, such as feeling nervous (Chuang, 2009; Abu El Enein). One of the main difficulties reported facing students in oral

discussions was anxiety or fear of speaking. In addition, some studies investigated the reasons behind students' anxiety, such as lack of vocabulary (Subasi, 2010) while others proposed ways to overcome these difficulties, such as choosing a familiar topic and practicing a lot (e.g. Zappa-Hollman, 2007).

2.1 Definition of Speaking

Speaking is a skill which language teachers believe is very important. By speaking, individuals can express their needs , opinions, feelings , understand and ask questions.

According to Brown (1994) , speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing , receiving and processing information.

Hedge (2000:261) views that speaking is *"Skill by which they are judged while first impressions are being formed"*

Speaking skill requires one to be skilled in other language skills. Therefore, with speaking, students can improve their writing skill and develop their vocabulary and grammar.

Based on the definitions above, it can be inferred that speaking is a skill which enables people to produce utterances when communicating to achieve a particular end.

2.2 The Importance of Speaking

It is difficult to decide which skill is the most important among the four language skills. However , speaking seems the most important to achieve the goal of language teaching (communicative competence).

Ur (1996: 120) states, " of all the four skills (listening, speaking , reading and writing) , speaking seems intuitively the most important." We communicate with others, to express our ideas , and to know others' ideas as well. Without speech, we can't communicate with one another. Thus, the importance of the speaking skill is enormous for the learners of any language.

2.3 Characteristics of a Successful Speaking Activity

According to Ur (1996:120), there are four characteristics for a successful activity. First, students talk a lot. Secondly, participation is even . Thirdly, motivation is high. Finally, language is of an acceptable level.

2.4. Factors hindering students' participation in speaking activities.

There are various factors which hinder students' participation in speaking activities on the part of the students themselves such as

learning styles, anxiety, language level, personality and students' attitude and motivation. Others are ascribed to teachers such as teachers' characteristics, teachers' roles while others are due to learning and teaching conditions like classroom atmosphere.

3. Procedures:

3. 1 Methodology

In order to test our hypotheses, and obtain the information required from the subjects, and to fit the aims of the present research , the researcher will use two main tools: descriptive and analytic method. The Descriptive Method is to determine the different obstacles that prevent the students' participation and to present the effective techniques and activities that solve this problem and to enhance their participation. Therefore, the Analytical Method is used to investigate the problem and to answer the questions above. So far, we have administered two questionnaires to both teachers of English and students at different levels.

3. 2 The Instrument

To achieve the previous stated objectives, the researcher has used questionnaires as data collection instrument with both students and teachers of English in two private colleges.

3.3 Population and sample

The samples of this study consist of English -department students in two Iraqi private colleges :Bilad Al Rafidain University College and Al Yarmook University College .

Fifty students have been randomly selected from these two colleges : 25 students from each colleges . As for the sample teachers, 10 teachers have been selected randomly from the two colleges . The reason behind selecting the sample of teachers and students from these colleges is the facilities offered to the researcher by these two colleges since the researcher is a staff member at Bilad al- Rafidain University college and a lecturer at Al Yarmouk college . The table below shows the population of students and teachers and the selected sample.

	Bilad al- Rafidain		AL -Yarmouk	
	No. of whole students	No. of selected students	No. of whole students	No. of selected students
Teachers	10	5	11	5
Students	60	25	40	25

Table 1: the population of students and teachers and the selected sample.

4. Findings

The findings from the result of the questionnaire strengthen our hypotheses about the students' hindrances. First, the analysis showed that some of the participants had inhibitions, which could hinder their pathway to success in mastering English speaking skills. It is also found that they are very worried about making mistakes in pronunciation. One possible factor is that they are afraid that people might laugh at them if they pronounce English words incorrectly. This is probably because their teachers place too much emphasis on speaking grammatically- correct English and correct them in front of others, which embarrass them during studying or speaking English . It is found that most of the students face similar problems which vary from the linguistic obstacles to psychological ones. They see that the lack of vocabulary is the most remarkable problem, while grammar mistakes and pronunciation come next. Moreover, the results also prove that linguistic barriers are not the only problems, but the psychological problems can also hinder their participation and reduce their development concerning the speaking- skill. In addition, the teachers play a considerable role in enhancing students' participation through the opportunities they give to them and through the type of atmosphere they are supposed to create. Despite all of that, the reliance of students on using the mother tongue inside the classroom can cause participation' hindrances. Based on the theoretical and the hypotheses stated in the introduction, the results prove that pair and group work are the appropriate remedy for their problems. Both techniques help the students to enhance their amount of speaking and build up their confidence. Furthermore, role play, discussion and debates, problem- solving activity and information gap activities are also considered as the suitable solution to resolve the difficulties of the EFL students participation.

The data and the obtained results show that the students really face many serious problems which prevent them from speaking during oral discussions. Likewise, one may assert that all teachers confirm the non participation of their students. They prove that the linguistic and the psychological barriers hold back the students and reduce their

participation. From what have been discussed, it can be found that all teachers emphasize " shyness" as the main psychological problem. Additionally, both time allocated and students' large number are regarded as participation problems for both teachers and students. They prevent the teachers from achieving their pre-planned goals and do not allow them to give enough opportunity to their students. Despite all of that, teachers often make effort to solve the above-mentioned problems as much as possible. They maintain successful techniques and strategies that enhance the students 'participation. This, in fact, leads us to assume that all the teachers adopt group and pair work to reduce the students' problems. In addition, they choose interesting topics that motivate the students .

As for the attitudes toward English teachers, it is found that the majority of the participants are satisfied with their English teachers' teaching techniques and characteristics. Taken together, most of the participants reported high motivation in learning English and good attitudes towards the English language. It is possible that their teachers really encourages them, knowing how to increase motivation. Also, they might have a good relationship with their students, and the help offered to them create positive attitudes and motivation in student, which is crucial for effective and successful teaching of English speaking. Bearing this in mind, English teachers should improve their standards in order to provide a good model of speaking and learning English for their students. Moreover, the teachers should take the responsibility to devise strategies to help the students speak English effectively to meet the international demands.

5 . Recommendations

In order to encourage students to speak effectively in the class, teachers should:

1. Plan the lessons carefully.

2. Encourage students to speak by giving suitable and interesting topics

3. Give simple, clear instructions so that students understand what they are supposed to do. .

4. Support students with vocabulary, structures and information.

5. Give students opportunities to speak individually, in pairs or in groups.

6. Be tolerant with students' mistakes to build up their self-confidence

7. Be patient when listening to students' speaking.

8. Give feedback on students' performance.

CONCLUSIONS:

One of the main conclusions is that there are various factors which hinder students participating in speaking activities on the part of the students themselves such as students" learning styles, anxiety, language level, coming from teachers such as teachers" characteristics, teachers" roles and coming from learning and teaching conditions like classroom atmosphere. The research affirms the powerful impact of these factors on both their teaching and students' feelings and learning speaking in class.

In conclusion, students' participation plays an important role in speaking activities. If we want to have a successful speaking lesson, teachers should pay more attention to the factors that hinder students' participation such as students" personality, students' anxiety or students' language level and try to improve our teaching methods, our characteristics as well as our roles. The researcher hopes that this study will make an especial significant contribution to the betterment of the current teaching and learning to speak English at university level today.

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بعض العقبات التي تؤثر على مشاركة المتعلمين للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في المناقشات الشفوية

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الملخص

تتناول الدراسة الحالية دراسة بعض العقبات التي تؤثر على مشاركة المتعلمين للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في المناقشات الشفوية .تفترض هذه الدراسة أن الطلاب لا يشاركون في المناقشات الشفوية عن طريق الكلام و ذلك بسبب المشاكل النفسية مثل (القلق والخوف والخجل ...) ، والمشكلات اللغوية مثل وجود نقص في المفردات ، وأخطاء لفظية

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و نحوية ، وأيضا بسبب الموضوعات غير المستحبة وعدم وجود الحافز . وللتأكد من هذه الفرضيات تم تطبيق الدراسة على طلاب السنة الرابعة في قسم اللغة الانكليزية والمدرسين في بعض الكليات الاهلية . وتتضمن الدراسة جزأين جزء نظري ، ويشمل لمحة عامة عن مهاراتهم في الخطابة ، ويليها جزء يتناول مختلف العقبات التي تحول دون مشاركة الطلاب و من ناحية أخرى تم اقتراح بعض الأساليب والأنشطة التي يفضل أن تطبق من طرف معلمي اللغة الأجنبية لإيجاد حلول لمختلف الصعوبات المذكورة. أما الجزء العملي فقد احتوى الدراسة التطبيقية التي اعتمدت منهجية لإجراء تحليل الاستبيانات التي وزعت على كل من الطلاب ومدرسي اللغة الانجليزية في كليتي بلاد الرافدين الجامعة وكلية اليرموك الجامعة. والبيانات المستقاة من الاستبيانات تؤكد أن هناك بعض العوامل التي تؤثر على مشاركة الطلاب في مسار المناقشات الشفوية. وعلاوة على ذلك ، فإن البيانات تشير إلى بعض التقنيات والأنشطة التي يعمل بها طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية لتجاوز هذه العقبات

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