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ENGAGING RELUCTANT LOW PROFICIENCY LEVEL STUDENTS IN MULTILEVEL GROUP WORK ACTIVITIES

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Abstract

Increasing demand for English language and adopting modern communicative language teaching method in EFL/ESL classrooms have, in return, raised the need for good communication skills (Tanveer, 2007). As a result, the role of student engagement in speaking activities, especially, has become vital in language classroom. However, language anxiety may be a barrier from achieving the desired goal (Tanveer, 2007). Student demotivation and their reluctance, particularly, during speaking activities, have been an unpleasant challenge for many language teachers most of the time. This chapter explores some speaking related challenges such as students' unwillingness to speak and holding back from participating and contributing during group work activities. The observed factors which keep them from speaking are language level diversity, lack of vocabulary, lack of confidence, fear of being mocked by high level learners because of their errors. This is done by analyzing teacher self and peer observations and surveys of 17 students in one of my classes at Namangan State University, Teaching English Methodology department. Through thematic analyzes and taking some actions, several effective strategies were found to overcome the mentioned challenges. This chapter concludes with the coping approaches like modelling, using name cards, praising for minor improvements and the areas which need to be discussed for further research.

Keywords: *exploratory action research, multilevel students, reluctance, speaking activities,*

Introduction

Student reluctance and demotivation in speaking activities are one of the most observed behaviors in EFL classrooms. Especially, when they work in small groups where they don't have to present in front of their teachers. Not adopting active speech roles and being resistant in participating speaking activities prevent students to develop their communicative and speaking skills (Savaşçı,

M. 2014). This research was conducted on 17 students in multi-level context at Namangan State University, Uzbekistan, for four months. The purpose of this investigation is to analyze the reasons why students are unwilling to participate in group work activities and what are the possible ways to motivate them to speak during interactive activities. One of the factors which caused this issue is the admission of students on the basis of increased

contract fee, as a result, students who are not at university level are being challenged by much higher study requirements which they are not capable of accomplishing. In return it brings learners and teachers enormous frustration and disappointment. In fact, it's not the only problem which is holding students from participation. During this study I've learned some more causes by investigating my students' and colleagues' perspectives, as well as reading related literature.

In any classroom, more knowledgeable students usually take the chance to answer without considering other passive learners' willing to try, which sometimes becomes handy for unknowledgeable students but sometimes makes them anxious. According to the study on Classroom Social Factors and Foreign Language Anxiety by Okon Effiong (2016) in one of Japanese Universities, the main factor that affected students was that the domination of more active and high level international students in peer collaboration activities. The research also shows that students may give up speaking in class if they are mocked for their errors by their peers, however, most of the participants in the study stated that laughter in classroom made the lessons more fun (Effiong 2006), which was also observed with my students. In fact, avoiding embarrassment in front of the class, anxious students prefer to ignore complicated tasks. Especially, they find it hard to learn a new language because they feel unconfident and vulnerable they develop some psychological obstacles to communicating. Personality plays a crucial role in communicating, especially, in foreign languages. Nurah Alfares indicates that anxiety and shyness are other barriers for students to interact in group work which in return may affect negatively to other group members. Also, not involving passive peers could result with ineffective group work (2017). However, my observations showed that in some cases, involving passive peers may not work, unless, they are willing to be involved intrinsically.

In the survey, a few of my learners suggested that giving topics and materials before the class would be beneficial for them to be ready for the lesson. In fact, the study which was conducted in Saudia Arabia on Arabic speaking participants between age 12–22

reports several reasons of student reluctance in speaking activities, such as panic of forgetting the words they want to say due to nervousness in class and fear of being asked a topic or question which they are not prepared for (Fakieh Alrabai 2014).

Another reason I noticed for my students' low attendance is being with peers who have different language levels. Multilevel context also brings learner anxiety in speaking activities. Teachers typically call upon most participating students in class. This undeliberate action leads to low student reluctance and inactivity which more likely affect their self-esteem (Brown 1980, as cited in Jaime Andrés García Fonseca and Wilmar Javier Casallas Gordillo 2016). Kadim Öztürk, Ferdane Denkci Akkaş (2013) state that anxiety and motivation are two affective factors in multilevel classes which require great effort to cope with effectively in such context. Having only few or one advanced learner and grouping him with low level students made both, high and low level learners demotivated as they couldn't find the same language. Brown (2001) points out that teachers dealing with challenging advanced-level students and not overload the lower-level learners, at one time keeping the average group well-paced towards their aim (cited in Kadim Öztürk, Ferdane Denkci Akkaş 2013).

Teachers in adult ESL classroom note students with different motivation for learning: some students are extremely active which sometimes become disruptive while others seem hang back and rarely contribute in group work activities (Steven J. Carter & Lynn E. Henrichsen, 2015). To put it another way, "despite the efforts of ...teachers to create the right conditions [for positive communicative interaction], some learners have a strong tendency to withdraw from opportunities for oral exchange" (Baran-Lucarz, 2014, p. 446 as quoted in Steven J. Carter & Lynn E. Henrichsen, 2015).

Shank and Terril (1995) emphasizes that classes with multilevel context causes serious problems such as lower-level students are usually influenced by the proficient ones, which brings anxiety to less proficient learners in the classroom. On the other hand, if lessons are adjusted for low-level learners, this makes high-levels bored. As a result, they

become disinterested and demotivated, and it discourage them from learning (as cited in Steven J. Carter & Lynn E. Henrichsen, 2015). As a matter of fact, in the survey most of my students claimed that they were interrupted by the fact that they had much advanced peer, so they felt uncomfortable to use their basic communication skills in the target language. On the other hand, the advanced one said he felt annoyed that all his group members waited for him to do all the work.

Reading several studies related my research focus, I decided to consider the problem through different perspectives: from teacher's perspective; from students' perspective and from other's (colleagues' perspective).

Exploratory research questions:

1. Why do I think the students don't want to speak in group work activities?
2. What do my students think working in small groups means? And what do my students feel during group work activities?
3. When I assign group work speaking activities, how do my students behave? (what do they do?)

Action research questions:

1. What my students and colleagues think would help to overcome the challenge?
2. What my students would want to change in themselves to be a better speaker in group-work activities?
3. How my students want me to have the lesson?

Research methodology

This research's aim is to identify the sources of reluctance and demotivation that some of the students in Namangan state University, Uzbekistan, typically experience when learning English, and to propose findings about problems and possible solutions to student reluctance during group-work activities in multilevel context.

Participants

The participants were 1 male and 16 female EFL university students who were recruited in three data collection iterations. Participating students were Uzbek nationals and spoke Uzbek as their first language. Selection of participants was according to my choice of the group of students I was teaching, took place in Namangan region, Uzbekistan.

Data Collection

Over the four month in 2021, during the fall term, the research data was collected via three data collection methods. After they were explained about the study's nature and procedures, participants were asked to confirm their approval to take part in the study. The participating learners are provided with the detailed instructions on how to complete the questionnaire. Considering their level and to ensure response accuracy and honesty, the questions were translated into subjects' mother tongue of Uzbek. The questions can be found in the Appendix. The students required 35–50 minutes to respond to the entire questionnaire.

Teacher's observation and reflection were the tools chosen for data collecting.

A total number of students in the group is 17, age: 18–20. 15 students out of 17 participated in the questionnaire, 1 boy and 14 girls. Gathered data was coded and thematically analyzed. I have students with pre-intermediate, intermediate and elementary (in minority) levels, plus one advanced level. When I asked what the reason was with their passive participation in group work activities, before the questionnaire, they claimed that it was because the lack of grammatical and lexical knowledge on the target language.

To identify the root problem and find answers to those problems, I conducted a questionnaire asking students following open ended questions:

Main points of observation:

1. Who are more active in group work activities: high-level or low-level students?
2. What makes high level students be reluctant in group work activities?
3. How much low-level students are trying to contribute to teamwork

Students' questionnaire

Exploratory phase:

1. What does group-working mean to you?
2. What students are supposed to do while working in small groups?
3. How do you feel when you need to work in small groups?
4. What are the possible factors that may be stopping you from speaking or contributing in group-work activities?

5. Do you think working in groups is more effective than working individually? If yes/no, why?

Action phase:

6. How do you want me to conduct the lessons?

7. What do you think you need to change in yourself in order to be a good communicator or participant in group work activities?

Behavior. Teacher observation and reflection.

In order to analyze what my students feel and behave during group work activities I observed and take notes during the classes. To compare/contrast my methods and practices, discover more opinions and ideas on students' participation in interactive activities, I conducted an informal reflective conversation with some of the colleagues who teach the same group and have the similar issue in their classroom.

Results

Improving productive skills is usually the main goal for language learners, as we learn languages in order to communicate and express our ideas in a target language. Unfortunately, the same skills are the most challenging ones, especially, when it comes to speak. With the help of the small scale exploratory action research with the 17 students of Namangan State University, in Uzbekistan. Some root problems such as lack of confidence, fear from being mocked at for their mistakes by other students, feeling hesitant in front of advanced group members during group work activities were identified. Based on the collected data, I tried several strategies and techniques: praising for minor improvements, giving a high-level student a teacher assistant role, using name cards, simplifying instructions and asking random students to repeat the instruction both in English and Uzbek languages, as a solution.

Exploratory level data findings

My own perceptions.

Why do I think the students don't want to speak in group work activities?

Observation and Reflective note.

During the observation of my classes with multilevel students, I found:

– Both (high and low level) students are not interested in participating in group work activities and have no will to do the given tasks most of the time;

– Even when I walked around the room to monitor if there was any need for help, they just acted like they were doing something in my presence but didn't speak almost a word in English anyway;

– I thought it was only because that the majority of the students had low-level or zero level of English;

– However, I felt more than half of the class understood the instructions I was giving in English which means not most of the students' challenges with their level. There were some trying students who were engaging in group working but they were using too much mother tongue, or writing down their sentences in Uzbek and translate it into English;

– While some other students wrote their words on a paper and read it when they needed to present. Those observations helped me realize that their main challenge is not only because of the lack of vocabulary or grammatical knowledge but mostly because they have lack of confidence to express their ideas in English.

Others' perceptions

What do my students think working in small groups means? And what do my students feel during group work activities?

Open-ended questionnaire from students

After conducting a questionnaire, I realized that the level is not the main barrier for them to be active in group work activities. Here are some other reasons of their reluctance during small group activities: lack of confidence; feeling shy; scared to speak in the presence of high-level students as they may make fun of her; scared of not giving valuable contribution which may cause to decrease the score of all the group members; don't always understand teacher's instructions; don't want to do the all work by themselves while other group members show any interest to contribute for the group work; don't like when other group members do not respect their ideas and opinions.

Behaviour. *When I assign group work speaking activities, how do my students behave? (what do they do?)*

Observation

When I assign group work speaking activities, I found most of the students being busy with their phones or they didn't show any interest in contributing to the group work. There were few students who were trying to accomplish the tasks however, they used L1 most of the time. Some students wrote down their sentences and translate it and then read it when it came to share.

Action research findings

After analyzing the collected data on my research problem, I immediately started to plan to take an action to overcome those challenges. My action research questions are: "What helps my students to feel confident enough to speak? What helps them to overcome the fear of making mistakes and being mocked by proficient students?"

During data analysis I noticed that 7 of the (low-level) students mentioned "Sometimes I don't understand teacher's instructions", which made clear that the instructions should be simplified. Relying on the recommendations of my experienced colleague Halima Muhammadieva, I applied the method of randomly asking couple of students to repeat the given instruction in both native and target languages to check their comprehension. After applying this strategy, I observed that students started having less confusion when they had the instructions.

In the questionnaire one of the students said "I can't take action right after teacher gives instruction as a lack of knowledge" and she suggested that she would rather have the topics and materials beforehand, so she could prepare for the upcoming lesson. That made me think the other students might have the similar issue as most of them have low proficiency. According to Jackson (2011) in order not to demotivate students in speaking or attending in a classroom with particular cultural and social background, knowledge and competency should be given in advance (as cited in Dawood Mahdi, 2015). On this specific problem, I decided to give or show examples first, by myself first, so it would be

clear for them what to do. Modelling is helpful for students who couldn't understand instructions clearly as well.

A student in the questionnaire stated "I don't want Umidjon (name was changed) to laugh at my me if I make mistakes", 5 of the others students' responds were also similar but they didn't mention the name. A study indicates that when having multiple groups in classroom, Two Teachers: Monitor/Teach would be effective. It says that creating several groups helps teacher to monitor and facilitate student work at the same time on appointed skill or topic. Simultaneously, chosen learners can receive instruction according to their unique needs (Adrea Honigsfeld and Maria Dove, 2008). I decided to give the only advanced student in the class, different responsibility: made him my assistant and ask him to help his groupmates when they are engaging in group-work activities. The result was noticeable, students felt free to take help from him when he was assigned as an assistant teacher. Only 4 students seemed to feel still shy, so I personally was there for them to scaffold.

Most of the students emphasized that the main factor which is keeping them from speaking or participating in group-works is lack of self-confidence. Dawood Mahdi in his article "Motivating Reluctant EFL students" mentioned that the encouragement, such as, praising words, actions and behaviors of teachers can help students built up their intrinsic motivation (anonymous, n, d). Based on this, I started to make friendly environment and praise students verbally and emotionally for every little improvement they made. This strategy motivated other students to speak without me calling them by name.

To bring them out of their comfort zone I also share my own language learning experience and told them that my level at their age, was far behind than theirs. It was also seemed to be a good inspiration for them in their learning journey, as one of the students said "you can't imagine how much you inspired us today", at the end of the lesson.

Getting students feel more responsible and be ready to present, knowing that their names can be called any time, I tried to write each of the students' names on a piece of paper cards and when it comes to ask, I chose

names randomly, according to my observations it was one of the most effective strategies I used to fight against their reluctance. They became much conscious in both group-work and individual works. This helped to improve their responsibility. This technique I learned when observing the classes of a former American fellow in Namangan State University.

Applying those strategies, I observed how my students reacting, feeling, behaving, and noticed that most students have become much active in interactive activities, surprisingly, 4 of the reluctant students made great progress. Though couple of students were still hesitant to speak. However, in general, majority of the students were observed having positive changes.

After taking an action, I conducted face-to-face informal interview with the students. Almost all students agreed that creating friendly environment and praising them, helped them a lot to improve their self-confidence and fear from speaking.

Half of the students agreed that it was a good idea to make the advanced student an assistant teacher. All students approved that making name cards increases self-responsibility and get them prepared to present when their names were called.

My Reflection

Every teacher more likely to comes across various challenges in classroom which lead to teacher and student demotivation. Obviously, student and teacher demotivation results ineffective lessons. Like most other teachers I also have undergone those ups and downs during my teaching experience. However, conducting Exploratory Action Research was a huge help to make me capable of exploring my classes, analyzing and identifying the root problems and find the effective solutions. In my classes, I used to do some investigations when I had problems with my own teaching or with my students but it wouldn't end up with success most of the time, as my research was not disciplined and had no methodology. I realized this, only after learning the means of Exploratory Action Research and doing it in action helped me how to conduct a classroom research properly, step by step.

Learning about data collecting tools and how to code the gathered information assist-

ed me to find out the major reasons of the problems in my class. And in the next stage I used my knowledge on how to take action which I was taught in the NETRUZ project. Seeing positive changes in my classroom made me excited and motivated to do further classroom based researches.

Those above are not the only thing I got from doing Exploratory Action Research, it also assisted me to write a professional research paper! Furthermore, I'm planning to use my takeaways from my small scale research for overcoming similar challenges in other groups of students. Besides, I'm going to continue my research in bigger scale! In conclusion, conducting classroom based Exploratory Action Research was a priceless experience for me which has made me more professional in my field!

Conclusion

This small-scale investigation explored a group of multi-level students in Namangan State University on motivating them to speak in interactive activities. It investigated the barriers which are stopping them from participating in group work activities. The learners who took part in this study were generally reluctant in small group activities, and the main sources of their unwillingness were their low-proficiency, lack of self-confidence, fear of being mocked and negative evaluation. After analyzing root problems, several actions, like giving a high-level student a teacher assistant role, praising students for minor improvements, using name cards to make learners more conscious and raise the responsibility, simplifying instructions and asking random students to repeat the instruction both in English and Uzbek languages, were taken as solutions.

The study's contribution includes investigating the sources of student reluctance in group work activities and offering possible suggestions to overcome mentioned challenges among the students of Uzbekistan, Namangan State University, English Philology Faculty over a four-months period of time, which could help to draw a valid conclusion about the unwillingness to speak or participate in interactive activities in EFL classrooms of NamSU. This classroom research might be beneficial for EFL Univer-

sity teachers in Uzbekistan to figure out the main sources and factors of their students' hesitance or disinclination to speak in group work activities and a range of implications.

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