Investigating the Factors that Affect the Oral Classroom Participation of Arab Postgraduate Students

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Abstract

This study examines the factors that affect oral participation of six Arab postgraduate students (two Iraqis, two Jordanians, and two Libyans), namely, three male participants and three female participants. For this purpose, a semi-structured interview was employed. The results showed that female as well male interviewees share some factors that make oral participation in classroom disheartening. These factors include high levels of anxiety, lack of confidence, shyness, and lack of preparation. It was also that there is no difference between male and female interviewees in relation to the factors that make them feel disheartened from oral classroom participation.

Keywords: oral participation; interviews; Arab; postgraduate students

This study, however, has its limitation in regards to number of interviewees and the type of interviewees.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background to the Study

Oral participation has been considered an important factor that enhances learners' acquisition of knowledge an academic achievement (Lim, 1992). It has been found in the literature of second language acquisition that students who orally participate in class expressed satisfaction and persistence rates that are higher than those students who did not participate orally in the classroom (Tsui, 1996). Similarly, Jackson (2002) notes that participation creates the setting that encourages students to construct and shape identities as members of the classroom. Further, oral participation in class makes learners achieve better academic performance (Liu, 2005). It can help them fill the gap between what they want to say and their ability to say it (Hamouda, 2013). It can also help them practice what they have learned in the class such as new vocabulary, and grammar rules (Liu, 2005). Hamouda (2013) mentioned that Arab students tend to be silent in classrooms and not to respond to a teachers' questions, or engage in mutual talk with each other in Arabic language.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Speaking has been always identified as important and essential in an EFL classroom. It plays a role in raising students' proficiency and understanding of the target language (TL). However, many students feel reluctant to participate in an EFL classroom. Out of common practice and our personal observation, there are many factors involved in oral production. Some argue that these factors may include nervousness, anxiety, lack of vocabulary or lack of self-confidence

(Carrillo, 2013). In relation to this Castro, Londoño, and Torres (2010) found that some students sit in the back because of their lack to get involved in oral interaction in the French as a foreign language classroom, though they may not necessarily be of lower proficiency level in comparison to the front position seated students. Winke (2005) found that motivation plays an effective role in the level of oral participation in a foreign language classroom.

One of the important studies that explored the factors that influenced the oral classroom was carried out by Lee (2009). Lee interviewed and observed six Korean students attending graduate school in the US, to understand the factors that impacted their oral interaction in class discussions. The interviewed students are three masters' students and three doctoral students, two males and four females, enrolled in two education courses. Lee (2009) found that multilayered factors that affected the students' oral participation in the EFL classroom. These factors included the students' English proficiency, differences in sociocultural values and educational practices between two cultures, individual differences, and classroom.

Though some studies examined the oral classroom participation of Asian international students as a group (Kim, 2008; Liu, 2001) or Chinese and/ or Japanese students in particular (Morita, 2000, 2004), little is known about studies that investigated the oral classroom participation of Arab students. Therefore this study aims to fill in the gap in the literature by replicating Lee's (2009) study on Arab students.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

This study aims to explore the factors and problems that affect the oral classroom participation of Arab students. It will also investigate the impact of gender on the oral classroom participation of Arab students. This study specifically aims to:

1. Identify the factors that affect the reticence of oral classroom participation of Arab postgraduate students,
2. Examine the extent gender can contribute to reticence of oral classroom participation among Arab postgraduate students.

1.4 Research Questions

2. What are the factors that make oral classroom participation challenging for Arab postgraduate students?
3. To what extent females and males are different in their perception of oral classroom participation challenges?

1.5 Theoretical Framework

This study is underpinned by the communication apprehension theory proposed by McCroskey (1977). This theory postulates that communication apprehension or anxiety is one of the factors that affect students' oral communication in classroom.

Communication apprehension (CA) is the term used to refer to a learner's fear of real or anticipated communication with other people (McCroskey, 1977). Although this problem seems to be more present at the elementary school level, it also was found to exist at more advanced levels. Personality traits can be among the factors that contribute to the level of communication apprehension. These personality traits might include quietness, shyness, and reticence frequently precipitate CA. Friedman(1980) mentioned that , shyness or reticence are factors that inhibit a learner's ability and desire to participate in discussion. A learner is likely find himself stumbled and unable to participate in a classroom activity. These personality traits, however, differ from one person to another in terms of its degree and seriousness.

McCroskey (1980) and Bond (1984) have identified seven factors that can a learner quiet. These factors are: 1. low intellectual skills 2. Speech skill deficiencies 3. Voluntary social introversion 4. Social alienation 5. Communication anxiety 6. Low social self-esteem 7. Ethnic/cultural divergence in communication norms. Although these factors were considered factors that affect the oral participation of children, its applicability to adults has been proven in the literature.

2 Literature review

Oral participation is a problem that seems to face international students in the different parts of the world, which have been attributed to different factors and causes in the literature of second language acquisition (Tatar, 2005). Some of the identified reasons are culture, differences in educational system between students' home country and the country they are pursuing their education, proficiency in language skills, and the home countries values that may differ from the target culture (Abe, Talbot, & Geelhoed, 1998; Burke & Wyat-Smith, 1996; Deressa & Beavers). Tatar (2005) adds that one major problem with international students is that many of them come from teacher-centered cultures, whereby a teacher speaks most of the time and a student listens attentively without any participation. In relation to the oral classroom participation problem. Tartar (2005) examined four Turkish students' perceptions of participation in graduate courses at a U.S. university. He collected the data through in-depth- interviews, focus-group interviews, observations and documents. The findings of the study revealed that there are different factors that influenced students' participation in classrooms. Some of these factors include the cultural background of the participants, the topic of discussion, and the peer dominance in discussion, also he found that females more participation than male. Liu and Kuo (1996) found that oral English proficiency and knowledge of subject matter had the greatest influence on the students' oral participation in class. They found also that sociability and risk-taking ability influenced the participants' oral participation. Winke (2005) claims that motivation plays an important role in students' participation in EFL classrooms.

In a similar vein, Pinheiro (2001) reported that many Asian students from different countries showed their lack of interest in the discussions held in classrooms; they found them as disconnected talking rather than structured discussion. Dwyer & Heller-Murphy (1996) also found that Japanese students who study in the US did not value oral participation, instead they considered it unimportant. The literature tends to show that international students do not like oral participation in classrooms. Kao and Gansneder (1995) found that international students, who study English as a second language (ESL), participated much less than native students. They found also that the students' participation was mainly influenced by their background culture and by their individual personality traits. Similarly, Tapper (1996) found that only one student out of the 8 students he investigated took part and initiated oral discussions in the class.

Hamouda (2013) examined the causes of the lack of oral participation among 159 first-year non English major students in al Qassim University, Saudi Arabia. He employed a 66-item questionnaire on reticence. He found that the participants were reluctant to oral participation in the classroom due to many factors, such as low English proficiency, fear of speaking in front of others, negative evaluation, shyness, lack of confidence and preparation, and fear of making mistakes.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research design

Qualitative approach is adopted for this study. A qualitative research design was deemed appropriate for this study because it allows investigating things deeply (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Other advantages of qualitative inquiry include its ability to provide flexible ways in data collection and analysis; it also provides a holistic view of the phenomenon under study (Griffin, 2005; Snape & Spencer, 2003). Qualitative paradigm also views reality as multifaceted (Higgs & Cherry, 2009).

3.2 Participants

Six master's students (two Iraqis, two Jordanians, and two Libyans) were selected purposively based on certain criteria. These criteria include being doing a master. They should also be students who experience such problem. Thus, they were asked first if they experienced any problems in the oral classroom participation. Three of the participants were male students, while the other three students were female students. Their age ranges from 30 to 40 years old.

In a qualitative inquiry, sampling is usually purposive or non-probability sampling. Thus, sampling is not intended to be statistically representative, but selection is based on the shared characteristics of population (Ritchie & Rirchie,

2003). Although statistical representation is not sought in qualitative research, symbolic representation is required. Symbolic representation refers to the selection of units based on their features of relevance to the investigation (Ritchie & Rirchie, 2003). Another important requirement as highlighted by Ritchie & Rirchie (2003) is the diversity of sampling. Diversity is required because it optimizes the chances of identifying the full range of factors or features that are associated with a phenomenon, and because it gives access to investigating interdependency between variables, and that is, to disengage the most relevant from those of lesser importance.

However, overall, selection was based on the informants' ability to contribute to the under-study phenomenon. As Creswell (1997) states that when choosing samples for a qualitative inquiry, the informants must have experience about the phenomenon under study. Miles and Huberman (as cited in Curtis, Gesler, Smith, & Washburn, 2000) argue that sampling in qualitative research should meet certain criteria. For example, sampling should be relevant to the research questions and to the conceptual framework; it should also provide rich information cases which provide deep information and thick description about the researched phenomenon. In addition, the sample should boost the analytic generalizability of the findings (and not the quantitative statistical generalizability); it further should provide believable and convincing description and explanations; and it should also be ethical and feasible. Merriam (2002) states that sampling should be selected from which the most to be learned.

3.3 Setting

The participants were selected from Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) students, specifically they were selected from Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication..

3.4 Data collection method

A semi structured interview was the instrument used for this study. Semi structured interviews were used for their in-depth nature which can allow exploration of the factors that might affect the oral classroom participation of Arab students. Semi-structured interviews involve a number of open-ended questions based on certain areas that the researcher wants to cover. The advantage of such open-ended questions is that they provide opportunities for both interviewer and interviewee to discuss some topics in more detail. One more important advantage of a semi-structured interview is that the interviewer can probe the interviewee to elaborate on an original response or to follow a line of inquiry introduced by the interviewee (Hancock, Ockleford, & Windridge, 2009).

Creswell (2007) mentions steps which should be followed by a researcher to conduct an interview. These steps include selection of interviewees based on

purposive sampling techniques; using a reliable recording set, and using an interview protocol. An interview protocol is a form with approximately five open-ended questions and ample space between the questions to write responses to the interviewee's comments. The questions should start from the main question, narrowing down to sub-questions (p. 133). Creswell (2007) adds that a pilot study is recommended to refine the interview questions. Creswell adds that conducting the interview by recommending that the setting of the interview be far from distractions. He also mentions that a consent form should be obtained from the interviewees. During the interview process, Creswell recommends staying to the questions, and trying to finish in time, besides, being courteous and respectful towards the interviewees. He also recommends asking few questions. Lewis (2003) mentions that in-depth interviews are the best method to elicit data which requires in-depth understanding of a phenomenon, especially the complex and detailed issues. Legard et al. (2003) mention some characteristics of the in-depth interviews, which for me sound the same as semi-structured interviews. In-depth interviews combine structure with flexibility, as the researcher has a set of prepared questions and guidelines without being rigid in following them. Such flexibility of structure allows topics to be deeply covered and explored. Another characteristic of the in-depth interviews is that interview is interactive in nature, whereby a researcher and an interviewee interact. One more characteristic of such kind of interviews is that a researcher employs different techniques and probes to in-depth answers; he will use follow-up questions to obtain deeper and fuller understanding of meaning. Legard et al (2003) mention one more characteristic of such in-depth interviews is that they are generative, as new knowledge was created at a certain point.

As for the interviewer, who is the researcher in this context, Legard et al. (2003) mention some requirements that should be considered. For example, an interviewer should have the patience to listen to his interviewees, and digest what they say to ask further questions. An interviewer should also have a good memory so as to make mental notes for further clarification of some points.   He, further, should establish a good rapport with his interviewees. Thus, as Legard et al. state the role of a researcher in the interview is as a facilitator. Facilitator in the sense that he is active in managing the interview to ensure that the topics of the interview are well-covered. However, this does not imply any kind of interference or influence on the part of the researcher on his interviewees. He must give his interviewees a chance to articulate their views freely.

As regards the questions that can be asked in an interview, Legard et al. (2003) differentiates between two types of question, that is, content mapping and content mining questions. Content mapping questions are for the purpose of starting off the research territory, and to identify the participant's relevant questions. Content

mining questions Content mining questions, however, explores the detail and depth within each dimension, to access the meaning it holds for the interviewee, and to generate an in-depth understanding from the interviewee's stance. Thus, interview questions should be made up of these two types of questions. In the two types of questions, probes are also encouraged because they contribute to exploring and understanding a phenomenon in more depth.

Content mapping questions comprise ground questions, dimension question, and perspective widening questions. Ground questions are the first open up questions. For example, How do you evaluate your English ability? However, dimension questions are questions which aim to narrow down the topic for the interviewee (Legard et al., 2003). For example, do you like to participate orally in classes? How often? Why not? Perspective widening questions aim to widen the interviewee's perspective by giving him prompts, which make him think of other perspectives, which the researcher wants to explore; for example, what are the reasons that frustrate you from participating in classes?

Content mining questions, on the other hand, are of different types. They include amplificatory, exploratory, explanatory and clarificatory questions. Legard et al (2003) underscore the importance of asking broad and narrow questions, and to avoid leading questions, which might influence an interviewee. Thus, even yes-no questions can be part of an interview because they can help to control the interview process. Legard et al. mention that a researcher or interviewer should avoid making assumptions about the interviewee. Rather, interviewees should be given opportunity to clarify things. Also, an interviewer should refrain from commenting on the answer of an interviewee or summarizing his answers. Interviewees also should be given time to answer without being interrupted. Extraneous remarks, such as Okay or right should be avoided, as well.

Based on the discussion above, the researcher passed the questions of the interview written to the participants. The participants were given enough time to review the questions that focus on whether they have comprehended the questions. After, answering the written questions, the researcher interviewed the participants to reassure that they comprehended the questions, and to get more information from them.

3.5. Procedures of data collection
Data was collected through interviews, as the participants were interviewed one by one in a quiet room. They were asked first to voluntarily participate in the

interview. The interviews were recorded after obtaining the consent from the participants. Then, the interviews were transcribed for analysis purpose.

3.6 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was carried out simultaneously with the data collection process. In other words, the first interview was analyzed before proceeding further to the next interview, for the purpose of reviewing the interview and ensuring that the instrument used properly. This also allows the researchers to change the questions of the interview if needed. In this regard, thematic analysis refers to analysis that is based on themes elicited from the interviews.

In relation to analysis in qualitative inquiry, it usually follows inductive data analysis, as a researcher builds his patterns and themes from bottom-up; he organizes data in increasingly more abstract units of information, and he may go back and forth to establish a comprehensive set of themes (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2002). Such inquiry is also interpretive, in the sense that a researcher interprets the data at hand based on his knowledge, experience and prior understandings (Creswell, 2007). One characteristic of qualitative inquiry is that data analysis is a simultaneous process with data collection (Merriam, 2002).

4. Findings and discussion

Recapitulating the research questions, they aimed to identify the factors that make oral classroom participation challenging for Arab postgraduate students, and the extent females and males are different in their perception of oral classroom participation challenges. To address these research questions, thematic analysis was conducted. The results of the thematic analysis of the collected data revealed that female as well male interviewees share some factors that make oral participation in classroom challenging. These factors include high levels of anxiety, lack of confidence, shyness, and lack of preparation. There was also found no difference between males and females perception of anxiety. The interviewees from males as well as females expressed their reluctance of oral participation in classroom for the same reasons. The details are unpacked in the sections to follow.

4.1 Female interviewees

Female interviewees expressed their dislike of oral participation in classroom from many reasons that included lack of confidence, shyness, lack of preparation, the cultural gap between their home countries and the target countries, the fear of competition and the high level of anxiety. These themes are explained in details in the section to follow.

1. Lack of confidence

Lack of confidence is one of the identified causes of oral classroom participation problems. Arab students lack confidence in themselves, maybe due to the teacher-

centered approach of teaching in the Arab classrooms. One of the interviewees mentioned "I do not have the courage to stand in front of huge number of students and the doctor and start present any topic. Sometimes my sound starts shivering and the words get away from me". One of the interviewees expressed her lack of confidence as she mentioned "I feel as if everybody will listen to me while speaking and they find some mistakes in using words in the wrong context or I mispronounce them. The feeling of being observed, and lack of confidence make some students highly anxious. Another interviewee mentioned that she lack confidence in herself or in her words "courage" she said: "I do not have that courage of speaking in a language that is not mine in front of others"

2. Shyness

Shyness is another factor that frustrate Arab female students from oral participation in classroom. Maybe, it is a feminine nature to be shy. One of the interviewees describes her shyness when speaking in a classroom as "shyness makes me confused when speaking and usually I lost concentration about what I am saying." As seen in th quotation, the interviewee describes how she loses concentration because of shyness. This makes her confused and frustrated to participate orally in a classroom. Another interviewee said "I do not like to put myself at an embarrassing situation". Her answer reflects how shyness causes her difficulty and she avoids participation to avoid being in critical or embarrassing situations. This was a common feeling among the female participants, as one of the participants described her shyness in a dramatic way, she mentioned "I am somehow a shy girl so my voice goes down as soon as I have been asked to participate even I am sure about the answer."

3. Lack of preparation

Lack of preparation is another problem that hampers students from participation. When a student is not well-prepared for a class, he feels that people are watching the words coming out of his mouth, and thus he feels shy to speak up. One of the interviewees expressed how lack of preparation makes her feel unready for participation in classroom. She said" The other problem is lack of good preparation before the class. One of the interviewees has mentioned that she had a problem with preparation, which made her lack confidence in herself. She expressed this in her words as follows: "my voice was very low due to lack of the encourage of standing in front of a quite large number of second language speakers and also shyness can be one of the reasons". She described this situation as the least successful because she was nervous and not well-prepared. She expressed her worry because of what she described as large audience. Another interviewee expressed the same feelings of worry using different word: "sometimes I feel that the lecturer is speaking about something that I do not know before".

4. Oral anxiety

Oral anxiety is one of the established problems in oral communication. Students feel anxious to speak in classrooms because they fear being caught speaking

incorrect words. One of the interviewee mentioned, "I do not find the appropriate words to express. Even if I have some I find it very difficult to produce it.". the interviewee expressed her anxiety and inability to produce even the knowledge she has. This oral anxiety is also expressed in another interviewee's words, as she mentioned "I have to take care of every single word before I use in the sentence and do my best to pronounce the word correctly my because when I was home I share the same knowledge and background with students but here I feel as if I am the weakest that is why I have to think twice before making any step for participating". Another interviewee, in a similar vein, expressed her oral anxiety, as she described her feeling during oral participation in classroom as: "So nervous, fear and shy all the time and usually do not want to be asked not because I do not know the answer but because I do not want to speak so that I avoid making silly mistakes when speaking"

Another interviewee expressed her feeling of anxiety of speaking in front of audience using very emotional words. She said "anxiety or phobia of speaking in front of those who are better than me so that they can easily realize my mistakes and may laugh at me, so that to get rid of such situation I prefer keeping silent and listening all the time. Another factor to be mention is get nervous whenever I commence speaking loudly."

Some students mentioned that they would feel anxious because they thought that a lecture would expect high level of performance. Thus, students prefer to employ 'avoidance' as a strategy to avoid being in trouble of being under the expected standard. One of the interviewees expressed this by stating "the lecturer may expect some perfect answers from me like the others that is why I don't participate in the class discussion.

5. Competitiveness

Some interviewees expressed their worry about competitiveness. They feel anxious because of their worry about being criticized by other students. One of them said "I believe that I am some kind of people that is shy most of the time and this shyness puts me in embarrassing situation most of the time especially when it is related to the moment that I have to speak with someone that I feel is better than me or a first or second language speaker".

6. Gap in Educational Systems of the Home country and the Target Country

Differences between the educational system in the home country and the target country is one of the reported factors that invigorate the students' feeling of anxiety, and inability to express themselves orally in classrooms. One of the interviewees mentioned:

We do not have to come up with academic words to prove our ability to the lecture, but here the situation is different, firstly the students in the class

have very different backgrounds and they are coming from different place of the universal. Secondly most of them are first users of the language and others are second users which means they have a very large number of vocabulary, this makes me think many times before speaking or discussing in serious topic with them to avoid misunderstanding of some issues

As I have mentioned earlier, students come from different cultural and education backgrounds, which make it difficult sometimes catch up with new methods of learning. Arab classes are usually teacher-centred, and the role of the student is to be attentive listener rather than being a participating student.

4.2 Male participants

Male participants expressed their lack of confidence in themselves, shyness, and anxiety as main factors that hinder their oral participation in classroom. These factors are discussed in the section to follow.

1. **Lack of self-confidence**

Similar to female interviewees, male interviewees mentioned that one significant reason that hinders them from active participation orally in classroom is the lack of confidence. They expressed their worry that the answer might be incorrect. One of the interviewees expressed that he "hesitate [s] to express my opinion thinking that my answer is not right or related to the topic".

2. **Shyness**

Shyness is another reason that prevents male interviewees from oral classroom participation. They feel shy to speak in front of audience. This feeling of shyness was expressed in one of the interviewees' words "I'm a calm kind of person, I feel shy sometimes". Another interviewee expressed his discomfort of talking in front of audience "I don't prefer to talk or participate in front of others.

3. **Anxiety**

Correspondingly to female interviewees, male interviewees expressed their high level of anxiety to speak in front of others. This was clearly noticed in one of the interviewees' words, as he mentioned "I feel nervous, upset and somehow unable to do work in a perfect way".

As seen in the analysis above, it seems that culture is an important embedded factor that make Arab students feel reluctant to participate orally in classrooms. Arab students come from cultures that enhance shyness, especially among females. The educational system in the Arab world is also different from it in Malaysia, as it is teacher-centred. Students' oral participation is not encouraged so far in the Arab countries. These results are similar to Lee's (2009) , as both of this study and Lee's found that differences in culture or sociocultural norms, anxiety, and content knowledge as important factors that make learners from other cultures feel reluctant to participate orally in classroom.

5. Conclusion

This research aimed to explore the factors that lead Arab postgraduate students to be reluctant to participate orally in classrooms, and if there is any difference between such factors in male and female participants. The results showed that female as well male interviewees share some factors that make oral participation in classroom disheartening. These factors include high levels of anxiety, lack of confidence, shyness, and lack of preparation. It was also that there is no difference between males and female interviewees in relation to the factor that make them feel disheartened from oral classroom participation.

This study, however, has its limitation in regards to number of interviewees and the type of interviewees. Therefore, future studies are encouraged to be conducted on larger number participants. It is also suggested that future studies be conducted on the role of age and experience on the ability to participate orally in classroom.

دراسة العوامل التي تؤثر على المشاركة الشفوية الصفية لدى طلاب الدراسات العليا العرب

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يهدف البحث الحالي التعرف على العوامل التي تؤثر على التحفظ في المشاركة الشفوية داخل الصف لطلاب الدراسات العليا وكذلك التعرف على مدى اسهام الجنس في التحفظ على المشاركة الشفوية داخل الصف. حيث تم اعتماد المنهج الوصفي في الداراسة و شملت عينة البحث ستة طلاب (اثنان من العراق واثنان من الاردن واثنان من ليبيا) وكانو ثلاثة من الذكور وثلاثة من الاناث تتراوح اعمارهم بين (٣٠-٤٠) سنة تم اختيارهم من جامعة بوترا الماليزا وتحديدا من كلية اللغات والاتصالات بناءاً على معايير معينة وتشمل هذه المعايير ان يكون المشارك طالب ماجستير وان يكون من الذين يعانون من هذه المشكلة. ولجمع البيانات استخدمت المقابلات شبة المنظمة وأُجري التحليل الموضوعي مباشرةً للبيانات مع انتهاء كل مقابلة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المشاركة الشفوية, الدراسات العليا

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Appendix

Interview questions

- **How do you evaluate your English ability?**
- **How do you describe yourself?**
- **Do you like to participate orally in classes? How often? Why not?**
- **Do you experience any problems in the oral classroom participation? What are they?**
- **What are the reasons that frustrate you from participating in classes?**
- **Does your participation in the classes you take here in Malaysia differ from it in your home country? If yes, why?**
- **Describe the most/the least successful participation you have ever had.**
- **How do you prepare to participate in class discussions?**
- **How do you feel when you talk in class?**
- **What factors do you consider important to participate in class discussions?**
- **What discussion formats (e.g., whole class, small group, or online discussions) do you think help you talk in class? Why?**