

Enhancing Iraqi EFL Secondary School Students' Communicative Skills through Classroom Interaction

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ABSTRACT

Scientifically, learning becomes effective if the learners are actively involved in the learning process. The current study was conducted to investigate the factors that affect EFL secondary students' interaction in language classroom activities. Moreover, it investigated the effect of psychological motivation on EFL learners' participation in language classroom activities. Also, this study stressed the importance of giving EFL secondary school students more opportunities to interact in the classroom language activities.

The Descriptive Analytical Method was adopted in this study. The data required for the study were collected by using a questionnaire that was distributed to (50) EFL secondary school teachers in Al Samawah city. The data were statistically analyzed by the (SPSS) Program. The results of the this study showed that most EFL secondary school students need to improve and develop their participation in the classroom language activities, providing EFL learners with more opportunities in the classrooms help them to communicate, using communicative language teaching develops EFL secondary school students' language skills, participation develops EFL learners' fluency in language use, using authentic sources reinforces EFL secondary school students' classroom language communication, EFL learners communicate successfully through group works, psychological motivation improves and develops EFL learners' interaction, classroom management influences EFL learners' participation, and learner-learner interaction encourages student-centre discussions.

Based on study findings, the researcher recommends the following: EFL teachers should create effective opportunities for language classroom interaction, EFL teachers should use communicative language activities in the classroom, EFL learners should practice discussions in the classroom, EFL teachers should use dialogues improve students' interaction, EFL teachers should manage their classes in a way that encourage EFL learners to participate in oral interaction, EFL teachers should use motivated topics to increase students' participation, EFL teachers should facilitate and guide students to communicate, EFL teachers should use various teaching techniques to enhance learners' language skills, and EFL teachers should be trained to use modern techniques in teaching English at the secondary school level.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Some EFL learners do not participate in the language classroom activities effectively; they attend in the class but do not pay attention to the running of the language lesson. They do not listen to the teacher carefully and feel bored. The current study attempts to investigate the factors that affect EFL secondary school students' participation in English language classroom activities.

AIMS OF THE STUDY

The aims of the current study are briefly of three aspects: First, it investigates the factors that affect EFL secondary school students' interaction in the EFL classroom activities. Second, it investigates the effect of motivation on language learners' participation. Third, it emphasizes the importance of giving EFL secondary students real

opportunities to interact. Fourth, it provides quantitative data on the important of interaction in English language learning.

QUESTIONS OF THE STUDY

The present study tries the get scientific answers to the following questions:

1. What are the factors that affect EFL secondary students' interaction in classroom language activities?
2. To what extent does motivation develop EFL secondary school students' interaction?
3. To what extent do opportunities help EFL secondary students' productions of English language?

HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY

The current study tests the following hypotheses:

1. Neglecting EFL secondary students' responses and feedback limits their participation in English language activities.
2. Psychological motivation improves EFL secondary students' participation in English language activities.
3. Providing EFL secondary students with language opportunities develops their participation in English language activities.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is important as it clarifies the factors that affect EFL secondary school students' classroom English language activities participation because it investigates some techniques that improve EFL secondary school students' interaction. Furthermore, it encourages EFL learners to share their ideas confidently.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Active classroom interaction plays a vital and effective role in the success of second or foreign language learning (Markee, 2004: 37). As involvement and participation are fundamental factors in language acquisition, the more utterances learners produce, the better their spoken and written aspects of language are developed and improved. FL learners' oral contribution is of great importance for class participation. Since foreign language teaching should help students achieve and develop certain communicative skills in the foreign language, all situations in which real communication occurs naturally should be taken into consideration.

Learning becomes more effective if the learners are actively involved in the process. Meng (2011: 22) points out that, "Language learner activity in a more literal sense of the word can involve doing and making things; for example, producing a radio programme forces the students to read, write, and walk in the foreign language as well as letting them 'play' with tape recorders, sound effects, and music".

As verbal interaction is highly associated with language learning, language learners are always encouraged by their teachers. This has also become an evaluative benchmark for EFL teachers to reflect if they have presented a good lesson or elicited effective responses from their students. Nasriandi and Sari (2020: 209-2014) explain that, "Although language learners' participation may be graded in different forms, and vary from one instructor to another according to the types of interactional activities and measures quality, the ultimate goal is to developing and improving student involvement". In other words, with teachers' encouragement, language students are always expected to be able to contribute in the classroom discourse. However, the EFL/ESL classroom may be a frustrating place when most students remain silent in the classroom, and only a small group of students actually participate (Freeman, 2008: 121). Equally important, EFL students should be aware of the importance of spoken English. In

addition, they should know the fact that participation is encouraged, many EFL teachers still experience a great deal of quietness in the EFL classrooms. Many EFL students are informed to remain non-participatory, quiet or behave passively. In The field of foreign language acquisitions, this is a situation typically termed as 'reticence'.

Furthermore, applied linguistics emerge two important views on English Language Teaching (ELT). The first view focuses on the psycholinguistic perspective that tries to explain foreign language learning as a cognitive process occurring in the human brain (Doughty and Long, 2003: 121), whereas the second view considers foreign language learning as sociolinguistic process, that is to say, foreign language learning is seen as a socially constructed phenomenon (Firth and Wagner, 1997: 213). Accordingly, this is an interaction-based instruction that makes samples of the learners of the foreign language through classroom interaction.

More importantly, applied linguists consider that foreign language classrooms as a community group and a social place not just a learning environment. There is an emergent need to provide learners with good and fair opportunities to use and produce English inside foreign language classrooms and to give them different forms and meanings used in everyday life in English. Presently, communicative language teaching approach has become an essential approach for learning English language in Iraq, and the foreign language classroom interaction as a foreign language strategy has become necessary in teaching English as a foreign language in Iraqi schools.

According to the Iraqi Ministry of Education, EFL students' performance in the final examination of the 3rd intermediate school level for the year (2010-2011) which has revealed the start of the adoption of the Communicative Approach in English language textbooks in Iraqi 3rd intermediate school level, EFL students' performance was the weakest level compared with previous academic years. According to this approach, EFL students were taught by teachers who are not often interacting with them in English where most English classroom activities were concerned with pedagogical content and not with real life situations in English. Hymes (1972: 54) argues that "there are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless".

EFL classes in private institutes in Iraq adopt Communicative Language Learning Approaches where EFL students are given more opportunities to communicate in English language inside classrooms. Sze (1995: 231) states that communicative language learning approach strengthens speaking practice in the classroom. In other words, communicative language learning approach makes EFL students be exposed to various real life situations and taught social expressions and idioms as used by English native speakers (Fahad, 2012: 132).

Language

There are many definitions of language, but there is one certain definition of language that may be mostly related to effective language teaching. According to this definition, language is an 'arbitrary' system of vocal symbols used to communicate thoughts and express feeling among the members of a particular social community (Abdul Hameed, 1999: 65).

This definition focuses on the following points:

1. Language is a system. This refers to that language is systematic at phonetic, phonemic, morphological, semantic and syntactic levels.
2. The system of language is 'arbitrary'. This indicates that there is no logical reason for why a particular language behaves as it does. For instance, there is no reason why the subject in an English sentence occurs before the verb, whereas the verb comes before the subject in Arabic language.
3. Language is basically vocal, which indicates that language is basically an oral activity, and the writing aspect of language is a secondary aspect. On the whole, language is speech, and writing is a representation of speech.
4. Language is symbols of referents, which means that words, for instance, are not identical with what they refer to, they only symbols for them.
5. The purpose of language is not only expressing thoughts, but also human feelings (Alkhuli, 2012: 11-12).

More importantly, we should know that there are two scientific sides to language: (1) a 'functional side to language', i.e. the jobs language does in human society; and (2) 'the way language is structured'.

Language: The Functional Side

According to Abdul Hameed (1999: 65), language is a part of human culture. It is part of human behaviour. Language is an acquired habit of systematic vocal activity representing meanings coming from human experiences, that is to say, it is an acquired vocal system for communication meaning. In general, language is defined to be an oral controlled system used for communication in a particular society. This informs us that:

1. Language operates in a regular and systematic way.
2. Language is basically oral and that the oral symbols represent meaning as they are related to real life situations and experiences.
3. Language is a controlled system.
4. language has a social function.
5. Language is the most fundamental means of human communication. It is the main object of the study of linguistics. It is the most frequently used and the most highly developed form of human communication.

More importantly, anthropologists regard language as a form of cultural behaviour. The American anthropological linguist Edward Sapir (1884-1939), for example, defines language as "a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions, and desires by means of a system of voluntarily produced symbols" (Crystal, 1987: 223). This definition implies the following points:

1. Language is a purely human activity, although some animals have systems of communication which have particular analogies to the human communication system.
2. All human beings use language to interact with other members of the same speech community.
3. Language is not only used as an instrument of communication, but also as a means of individual expression.
4. Language is not instinctive. It is learnt as a system of arbitrary symbols which are produced vocally by the organs of speech.

Language as an Act of Communication

Lyons (1981: 102) considers language as an act of communication which is basically the transmission of information 'message' from a source to a receiver (both are human and the message is transmitted either vocally through the air or graphically by written marks on a surface usually a paper).

Furthermore, there are other forms of communication (not necessarily human) such as the instinctive voices which animals of a given species use to communicate with each other. This is communication, but not language because language is fundamentally a human phenomenon.

He (ibid: 103) argues that there are other methods of communication concerned with human beings which linguists do not consider as language. They are simply other possibilities of human communication. For instance, some secret societies have a system of communication by touch or with their mouths or other parts of their faces or any other senses. The use of senses of smell, taste and touch are restricted as far as human communication is concerned.

Language as an Oral Activity

Bollinger (1968: 154) emphasizes that the visual system is well-established in human beings. Equally important, all the facial expressions and bodily gestures, hand signals and so on communicate a great deal of information.

He (ibid: 155) claims that despite its importance, the visual system of communication in humans does not have any means the same structure, as the vocal structure, there is nothing really like grammar, for example. Hence, linguists do not call it language. They restrict the term 'language' to a vocal system of human communication.

Language is basically oral. The message is transmitted vocally through the air from the speaker to the listener or listeners. The spoken language is alive, while the written form of language is a fossil. The spoken language always changes by introducing new terms to it while the written form of language is something artificial (Abdul Hameed, 1999: 68).

Language as a Controlled Act of Communication

Scientifically, language should be controlled by the human brain to give sense. Our speech must be controlled. We must think before we speak and our language should be based on rules that govern our speech informing us what is right and wrong. Additionally, we cannot breathe, snore or sneeze at our will, but we can control our language. We can speak or not at our will or we can use particular words any time we like. (Bollinger, 1968: 155).

There is a difference between information and communication. For instance, audible vocal noises such as a sneeze or a snore do not communicate a message in the same sense as when we speak words or sentences. A sneeze, for example, may inform us that there is a person who has a cold. On the contrary, words are not tied down to our bodily state. Therefore, uncontrolled vocal noises lacking any clear internal structure or conventional meaning are not part of language (ibid.).

In general, language is a system of systems. It has both a phonological system and a grammatical system, each with its proper units and rules of acceptable combinations and order. Language is systematic because it can be described in terms of a limited number of units that can combine only in a limited number of ways (Abdul Hameed, 1999: 69).

Communicative Language Teaching

Defined as an approach to foreign or second language teaching that emphasizes that the aim of language teaching is 'communicative competence'. It tries to make meaningful communication and language use a centre of all language classroom activities (Richards and Schmidt, 2002: 90-91). Furthermore, the communicative approach was first established and developed particularly by British applied linguists in the 1980s as a reaction against 'grammar-based approaches' like 'Situational Language

Teaching' and 'Audio-lingual Method' (ibid.).

Communicative Language Teaching is sometimes described as a comprehensive approach to foreign or second language teaching rather than as a teaching method with clearly defined classroom activities. Harmer (1999: 32-33) maintains that communicative language teaching approach's aim is helping learners create meaning than helping them develop perfectly grammatical structures or acquire native-like pronunciation. That is to say, successful learning a foreign or second language is assessed in terms of how well learners have developed their communicative competence which can be defined as their abilities to use and apply knowledge of a language with appropriate proficiency to communicate effectively.

Nunan (1991: 120-3) defines Communicative Language Teaching as a list of general principles or features. He (ibid.) presents five principles of Communicative Language Teaching:

1. An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language.
2. The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation.
3. The positive of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on language but also on the learning management process.

4. An enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important elements in the classroom learning process.
5. An attempt to link classroom language learning with language activities outside the classroom.

Generally speaking, communication is connected with human interaction, through communication we can share our thoughts and feelings from one to another. Luthra and Dahiya, 2015: 32-33) claim that communication is defined as a way to interact with others and it is used to share information and beliefs, exchange ideas and feelings, make plans and solve problems.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current study will use the descriptive analytical method. The researcher will use a questionnaire as a tool to collect the data required for the study from EFL secondary school teachers. Accordingly, the collected data will be analyzed statistically with the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) Program.

The Scope of the Study

The current study is restricted to the study of developing EFL secondary school students' interaction in EFL classroom setting. Furthermore, it is limited to (50) Iraqi EFL secondary school students in Al Samawah city. This study will be carried out in the 2020-2021 academic year.

Population of the Study

The population of the present study is all intermediate school EFL teachers in Al Muthanna Province.

Sample of the Study

The sample of the current study was (80) intermediate school EFL teachers in different three cities in Al Muthanna Province.

Method of the Study

The researcher used the descriptive-analytical method and a questionnaire as a tool for collecting the required data of the study. The questionnaire consisted of (20) statements. The questionnaire was designed to investigate the problems of intermediate school EFL students' oral communication in Al Muthanna Province.

Data Analysis and Discussion

The data collected was analyzed and displayed in tables according to the order of the statements of the questionnaire. In addition, the hypotheses of the study were tested in relation to the results of the study.

The Analysis of the Questionnaire

Statement (1): The EFL intermediate school students are not given enough time to speak during the English language lessons.

	Frequency	Percent	Validity Percent
Agree	58	72.4%	72.4%
Not Sure	17	21.2%	21.2%
Disagree	5	6.1%	6.1%
Total	80	99.7%	99.7%

Table: (1)

Table:(1) reveals the EFL intermediate school teachers' responses to statement (1). The statistical results are: (72.5%) agree, (21.2%) are not sure, (6.2%) disagree. These results clearly indicate that the students are not given enough time to practice speaking during the English language lessons. Therefore, this statement is accepted.

Statement (2): Group works help EFL intermediate school students to practice oral communication.

	Frequency	Percent	Validity Percent
Agree	68	84.2%	84.2%
Not Sure	10	12.5%	12.5%
Disagree	2	3.3%	3.3%
Total	80	100.0%	100.0%

Table: (2)

According to statistical analysis of statement (2), most EFL intermediate school teachers agree (84.2%) that group works help EFL intermediate school students to practice oral communication, (12.5%) are not sure and (3.3%) disagree. Therefore, this statement is highly accepted.

Statement (3): EFL intermediate school students do not have previous experiences in speaking skills.

	Frequency	Percent	Validity Percent
Agree	69	86.2%	86.2%
Not Sure	7	8.8%	8.8%
Disagree	4	5.0%	5.0
Total	80	100.0%	100.0%

Table: (3)

Table (3) shows that (86.2%) EFL intermediate school teachers agree, (8.8%) are not sure and (5.0%) disagree that EFL intermediate school students do not have previous experiences in speaking skills.

Statement (4): Most oral communication exercises are done inside the classrooms by teachers rather than students

	Frequency	Percent	Validity Percent
Agree	62	77.5%	77.5%
Not Sure	11	13.7%	13.7%
Disagree	7	8.8%	8.8%
Total	80	100.0%	100.0%

Table: (4)

Table (4) reveals that (77.5) EFL intermediate school teachers agree, (13.7%) are not sure and (8.8%) disagree that most oral communication exercises are done inside the classrooms by teachers rather than students.

Statement (5): EFL teacher need effective training in teaching speaking skills.

	Frequency	Percent	Validity Percent
Agree	59	73.8%	73.8%
Not Sure	19	23.8%	23.8
Disagree	2	2.4%	2.4%
Total	80	100.0%	100.0%

Table: (5)

According to table (5), (73.8%) EFL intermediate school teachers agree, (23.8%) are not sure and (2.4%) disagree that EFL teachers need effective training in teaching speaking skills.

Statement (6): Academic training courses give EFL teachers good and effective opportunities to express their ideas orally and develop their oral communication experiences.

	Frequency	Percent	Validity Percent
Agree	61	76.2%	76.2%
Not Sure	17	21.2%	21.2%
Disagree	2	2.5%	2.5%
Total	80	99.9%	99.9%

Table: (6)

According to table (6), (76.2%) EFL intermediate school teachers agree, (21.2%) are not sure and (2.5%) disagree that academic training courses give EFL teachers good opportunities to express their ideas orally and develop their oral communication experiences.

Statement (7): Training EFL intermediate school teachers in oral communication with native speakers of English helps in enhancing EFL students' verbal communication skills.

	Frequency	Percent	Validity Percent
Agree	57	71.2%	71.2%
Not Sure	20	25.0%	25.0%
Disagree	3	3.8%	3.8%
Total	80	100.0%	100.0%

Table: (7)

The results given in table (7) reveal that (71.2%) EFL intermediate teachers agree, (25.0%) are not sure and (3.8%) disagree that training EFL intermediate school teachers in oral communication with native speakers of English helps in enhancing EFL students' verbal communication skills.

Statement (8): Some EFL intermediate school teachers do not focus teaching students' oral communication exercises.

	Frequency	Percent	Validity Percent
Agree	53	66.2%	66.2%
Not Sure	21	26.2%	26.2%
Disagree	6	7.5%	7.5%
Total	80	99.9%	99.9%

Table: (8)

The statistical results presented in table (4.8) show that (66.2%) EFL intermediate school teachers agree, (26.2%) are not sure and (7.5%) disagree that some EFL intermediate school teachers do not focus teaching students' oral communication exercises.

Statement (9): Watching Tv. and video films and listening to the radio in English are good ways of improving EFL students' oral communication skills.

	Frequency	Percent	Validity Percent
Agree	63	78.8%	78.8%
Not Sure	15	18.7%	18.7%
Disagree	2	2.5%	2.5%
Total	80	100.0%	100.0%

Table: (9)

The statistical results given in table (9) show that (78.8%) EFL intermediate school teachers agree, (18.7%) are not sure and (2.5%) disagree that watching Tv. and listening to the radio in English are good ways of improving EFL students' oral communication skills.

Statement (10): Technological aids can effectively improve EFL students' oral communication skills and motivate them as well.

	Frequency	Percent	Validity Percent
Agree	64	80.0%	80.0%
Not Sure	11	13.8%	13.8%
Disagree	5	6.2%	6.2%
Total	80	100.0%	100.0%

Table: (10)

The statistical results shown in table (10) reveal that (80.0%) EFL intermediate school teachers agree, (13.8%) are not sure and (6.2%) disagree that technological aids can effectively improve EFL students' oral communication skills and motivate them as well.

Statement (11): EFL students can learn good pronunciation and listening and speaking skills through the computer.

	Frequency	Percent	Validity Percent
Agree	61	77.7%	77.7%
Not Sure	13	16.8%	16.8%
Disagree	6	5.5%	5.5%
Total	80	100.0%	100.0%

Table: (11)

The statistical results shown in table (11) reveal that (77.7%) EFL intermediate school teachers agree, (16.8%) are not sure and (5.5%) disagree that EFL students can learn good pronunciation and listening and speaking skills through the computer.

Statement (12): Technology enhances the quality of EFL students' oral communication because they always spend much time on the computer.

	Frequency	Percent	Validity Percent
Agree	68	85.0%	85.0%
Not Sure	8	10.0%	10.0%
Disagree	4	5.0%	5.0%
Total	80	100.0%	100.0%

Table: (12)

The statistical results given in table (12) show that (85.0%) EFL intermediate school teachers agree, (10.0%) are not sure and (5.0%) disagree that technology enhances the quality of EFL students' oral communication because they always spend much time on the computer.

Testing the Study Hypotheses

The current study tested three hypotheses. After collecting and analyzing the required data, the study arrived at the following testing explanations:

1. Hypothesis (1): Iraqi EFL intermediate school students are weak in producing good oral communication.

The statistical results showed in table (1): (72.4%), table (2): (84.2%), table (3): (86.2%) and table (4): (77.5) emphasize hypothesis (1).

2. Hypothesis (2): EFL teacher-training in oral communication can help in developing intermediate school students' oral communication skills in English.

The statistical results given in table (5): (73.8), table (6): (76.2%), table (7): (71.2%) and table (8): (66.2) emphasize hypothesis (2).

3. Hypothesis (3): Modern technology develop and enhance the quality of intermediate school students' oral communication skills in English.

The statistical results showed in table (9): (78.8%), table (10): (80.0%), table (11): (77.7%) and table (12): (85.0%) emphasize hypothesis (3).

CONCLUSIONS

The present study deals investigates the problems that EFL intermediate school students encounter in oral compunction. The study concluded the following:

1. EFL intermediate school students are weak in oral communication because they do not have effective previous experiences in oral communication skills.

2. EFL intermediate school students' listening and speaking skills can be improved and developed through working in small groups discussions.

3. EFL teachers need in-service training to develop their teaching techniques, and they should focus on teaching oral communication. EFL teachers should be well trained in how to teach oral communication effectively as well as giving them chances to activate the modern techniques of teaching oral communication.

4. Modern technology enhances EFL intermediate school students' oral communication. Oral communication at intermediate schools should be taught through effective means of technology rather than the traditional techniques.

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