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AN ACTION RESEARCH ON ENCOURAGING STUDENTS TO SPEAK IN SECOND LANGUAGE EDUCATION: A LEARNER-CENTERED APPROACH

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Abstract

Although the ability to speak to people in their language or in a language that both speakers can understand is definitely the aim of many second language learners, some of the students keep silent all the time in class. This article reports on an action research focusing on increasing the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' confidence in speaking in an Iranian context. Ten male university students from different majors participated in this study. The method used was the learner-centered approach to increase students' performance in terms of pair work and group work. The present study used teacher observation as the sole elicitation instrument in order to gain a rich understanding of the participants' confidence development. The findings suggest that although teacher-centered instruction, typically utilizing little interaction, is the most common in EFL classrooms, an instructional methodology stressing peer collaboration as a tool for increasing the ability of the students to speak is likely to result in higher confidence.

Keywords: Action Research; Student Confidence; Speaking Skill; Learner-Centered Approach; Teacher Observation; Peer Collaboration

Introduction

Speaking skills are an important part of the curriculum in language teaching and the ability to speak in a foreign language is at the very heart of what it means to be able to use a foreign language (Biggs & Moore, 1993; Liu, 2001; Tsou, 2005; Tsui, 1992; Van den Branden, Bygate, and Norris, 2009). Being able to speak to friends, colleagues, visitors and even strangers, in their language or in a language which both speakers can understand, is surely the goal of very many learners (Luoma, 2004). In addition, the linkage between students' classroom oral participation and their academic achievement is undeniable. Studies have

shown that when students participate actively in class, their academic achievement seems to be higher than that of those who are passive in class (Krupa-Kwiatkowski, 1998). The importance of the ability or perception of ability to speak should not therefore be underestimated by either teacher or pupil (Turner, 2010).

In my teaching experience, however, some of the students keep silent all the time in class. They do not want to speak English. Even when they know the answer to a simple question, they hesitate to open their mouths. Although they clearly know that they should speak English well in order to make themselves qualified for the current competitive society, they are indifferent about talking in English. Similarly, by way of interviews, observations, journals, and surveys, research has revealed that Second Language (L2) learners often seem passive and reticent in language classrooms. Encouraging students to talk in a language classroom is thus a problem that many language teachers face (Tsui, 1996; White & Lightbown, 1984). With the advent of globalization, however, there is a pressing need for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers to help reticent students develop the skills, and confidence needed to take an active role in oral classroom lessons (Liu & Jackson, 2009). In this way, students should be encouraged to work cooperatively so that they could have opportunities to progress in achieving their academic objectives (Dailey, 2009; Tong, 2010). Only in this situation, they can share ideas and structures with each other.

Researchers have discovered various reasons for this reluctance to speak in L2 classroom situations such as the following: fear of losing face; low proficiency in the L2; previous negative experiences with speaking in class; cultural beliefs about appropriate behavior in classroom contexts; habits; personality; and lack of confidence. Since few, if any, studies have previously provided valuable information about confidence in an Iranian L2 context, the aim in this paper is to look at this affective variable through doing an action research and find out whether encouraging students to collaborate with their peers in extra speaking activities incorporated into the classroom leads to a more active role on the part of learners and increases their self-confidence.

Why choose action research for the present study? The first thought that comes to mind when one hears the term "research" is that the researcher should spend months or even years going through many difficult steps in a process to create a scholarly piece of work. However, many teachers are so concerned with their routine activities that they are left with almost no time for research whatsoever (Salmani Nodoushan, 2009). In this way, many teachers consider research an extra burden in their regular schedule unless the word research is used in a new sense. Here is where action research plays an important role. It is more practical and user-friendly than research defined in traditional senses and does not necessitate some essential features of the conventional research such as a sizable sample of participants or time limitations (Wallace, 1998). Given that I sought to inform my own teaching practice with the research –particularly with my specific classroom context– it was clear that an action research project would be the most suitable for my purposes.

Literature Review

Confidence, motivation, and language ability are often treated as distinct but related learning dimensions in the field of second language (Clement & Kruidenier, 1985). The literature widely holds that these concepts are directly related and impact each other and that if one of the factors increases or decreases, the others will follow in a direct relationship. Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide, and Shimizu (2004) claim "considering that students need to communicate in order to improve communicative skills and gain confidence, the researchers hope to postulate a circular and interactive model to show the dynamics of interest, motivation, learning, confidence, and communication" (p. 144). Thus, few, if any, attempts have been made to explore confidence in isolation and this concept has largely been regarded as a corollary of other studies dealing with other affective variables such as anxiety or motivation. However, these studies are important since they have identified an association between self-confidence in language ability and other language-related phenomena.

An important strand of research in second language acquisition has investigated the relationship between reticence and confidence. Riasati (2014), in his recent review of literature on reticence, argues that reticence has a detrimental effect on the L2 learning process. He believes that this is why many different researchers have made use of various ways of identifying students' reasons of reticence. In order to understand why some language learners choose to remain silent in language classrooms, these researchers have employed interviews, observations, and journals. Dwyer and Heller-Murphy (1996), for example, conducted interviews with sixJapanese students to identify sources of reticence among these learners. It was found that the students were reticent due to several reasons, including lack of self-confidence. Similar findings were achieved by Li and Liu (2011) who investigated the issue of reticence in China. They assert that many Chinese learners prefer to remain silent in language learning contexts. A range of factors is identified as leading to reticence among which is lack of self-confidence. However, they believe that "through more personal engagement with class activities, it is expected that both students' confidence and their ability to speak English will be improved" (Li & Liu, 2011, p. 961).

Many previous studies have shown that there is a direct relationship between students' confidence and their speaking behavior in L2. For example, Lai (1994) attempted to identify Hong Kong secondary students' level of confidence in using English and the factors leading to different confidence levels in oral participation in classrooms. The findings show that most of the subjects "felt a lack of confidence in using English as a means of communication in the classroom" (Lai, 1994, p. 122). In another study, MacIntyre, Clement, Dornyei, and Noels (1998) suggest that self-confidence significantly contributes to the learner's willingness to communicate in a foreign language. According to them, affective factors such as motivation, personality, intergroup climate, and self-confidence underlie willingness to communicate, and the factor of self-confidence including overall self-confidence in L2 and situational self-confidence in communication play an important role in determining the

learner's willingness to communicate. Yashima et al. (2004) cite a study of high school students who traveled abroad to study English. Some students were not ready to communicate due to some factors, including lack of L2 confidence, and found themselves in an endless cycle: needing to communicate with native speakers to gain L2 confidence, but due to a lack of confidence, unable to initiate interactions. Cao (2011), in a recent study, investigated the willingness to communicate of a group of international students studying EAP (English for Academic Purposes) during one academic year at a New Zealand university. She suggests that three dimensions overlap and interrelate in order to inhibit or facilitate learners' willingness to communicate: First, individual characteristics, including self-confidence; second, classroom environmental conditions, such as topic; and third, linguistic factors. Thus an *ecological* perspective is drawn, whereby an individual is seen as interacting in a complex fashion with his/her environment.

Due to its negative effects, some researchers in their studies attempted to propose solutions for students' lack of confidence in L2 classrooms. A study conducted by Burden (2004) reveals that almost 70% of 289 university freshmen surveyed felt unconfident speaking English. Burden (2004) thus suggested teachers use *cooperative* as opposed to *competitive* goal structures as a means of creating interdependencies between learners to increase their self-confidence. Ewald (2007) reports that only about half of the students in her study claimed to experience a relative level of confidence in their upper-level classes. She then suggested that teachers work actively to build upper-level students' confidence through encouraging them. In her words, "convince them that the challenge of learning to use a foreign language is not outside their grasp. Assure them that mistakes are normal and expected and that even through flawed participation they learn" (Ewald, 2007, p. 134).

Problem Statement

The problem I identified in my classroom was that most of my students were not active enough during the class and did not speak most of the time. Following informal talks to my students, I discovered that most of them had problems with speaking English. In order to investigate this problem, I found it necessary to determine what speaking activities I currently use and the amount of interactions and language my students generate. For that, I made use of audio recordings of my class (three sessions) as tools for aiding my research. The first issue to be investigated was the type of speaking activities I used in my class and the students' response to those activities. In addition, I wanted to know about teacher and student talking time and the amount of my students' speaking. Listening to the recordings, I found out that my teaching was not as effective as I hoped it to be. The evidence for that was that my students were silent during speaking activities most of the time, and it seemed that they did not have enough confidence for speaking. Investigating students' attitudes toward learning English, I asked the question: which skill do you want to improve the most? I found that most of them wanted to improve speaking, but they were not brave enough to express their ideas. In other words, they wanted to speak, but they lacked *confidence* to speak. Regarding the activities, just a small portion of my teaching was devoted to this skill

because I was only teaching based on the book I had to cover in that semester in which all the skills were worked on simultaneously and no especial attention was paid to oral productive skills.

While language teachers often teach based on informal analyses of their learners' needs (Tarone & Yule, 1989), however, I thought that this informal analysis was not enough to confirm that students lacked confidence in order to speak. So I decided to investigate students' attitudes toward speaking skill through collecting data from a need analysis questionnaire (see Appendix A) I had designed for this purpose. The needs analysis revealed that most of the students were really interested in speaking, but they had low confidence in speaking English. Further, the data showed that the students attributed their inability to speak English confidently to the lack of speaking experience and/or opportunities to engage in L2 conversation inside the classroom. Thus, the key research question that forms the basis of the present action research is as the following:

Does the EFL students' confidence in speaking in the classroom enhance as a result of providing students with additional speaking activities?

Methodology

Participants. Participants involved in this study were 10 university students at B.A. level from different fields of study. They were all males and had participated in a general English classroom in a private English language institute in Iran. The students had an intermediate level of English, as determined by their TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) test taken by the institute. They had two 90-minute language sessions per week over a 12-week semester.

Context. The participants in this study had a reasonable knowledge of English grammar but were reticent to speak or produce the target language. According to Jahangard (2007), one of the main reasons that contributes to the Iranian students' inability to speak English is that students' aural and oral skills are not emphasized in Iranian prescribed EFL textbooks, especially at high school. These skills are not tested in the university entrance examination, as well as in the final exams during the three years of senior high school and one year of pre-university education. Teachers put much less emphasis, if any, on oral drills, listening and speaking abilities than on reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary. The main focus is to make students pass tests and exams, and because productive abilities of students are not tested, most teachers then skip the oral drills in the prescribed books. Thus, the students are the products of a deficient educational system that has not allowed for active participation of the students in the classroom.

Material. Many previous studies have shown that L2 students' lack of confidence is attributed to their lack of speaking practice (Benson, 1991; Biggs, 1994; Schneider, 2001).

For example, Kubo (2009) claims that the lack of the opportunity to practice speaking is one of the main factors that result in lack of confidence in students. Since I wanted to increase the students' confidence in speaking, they had to have more opportunities to practice speaking together with their friends. In addition, many researchers so far have proposed that students' confidence is enhanced through providing them with non-threatening activities. Using the learner-centered approach, the non-threatening activities in this study were one of the main factors to encourage students to participate in the class. This approach is a subtype of the humanistic approach, which is defined by Richards (2002, p. 13) as:

a) the development of human values
b) growth in self-awareness and in the understanding of other
c) sensitivity to human feelings and emotions
d) active student involvement in learning and in the way learning takes place.

Since I wanted to promote students' desire to express their ideas and to reduce their anxiety toward speaking, it seems that all of these principles are relevant to this project. In other words, to promote students' confidence in speaking English, non-threatening activities can be seen as a tool to promote students to be aware of their performance and feelings (Legutke & Thomas, 1991). Thus, I made use of one of the authorized books on speaking on the market in which activities were based on real-world events. *Speaking Extra* (Gammidge, 2004) is a resource book containing materials for supplementary classroom work that could be photocopied. The book helps the learners "to speak with confidence to carry out the most basic social transactions" (Gammidge, 2004, p. 7).

Procedure. I started incorporating extra speaking activities into the classroom from week 3 to the end of the semester (covering 20 sessions during 10 weeks). Twenty minutes of each session was devoted to supplementary speaking activities. The ordinary technique used in the book to engage students in speaking was "interview". In this technique, one learner was usually asked questions by one or several interviewers. As Meng (2009) asserts, "this strategy [technique] is useful for keeping a conversation going and is a worthwhile speaking activity" (p. 220).

*Data Type***.** The present study used teacher observation as the sole elicitation instrument in order to gain a rich understanding of the participants' confidence development and of the impact of the extracurricular speaking activities on that development. In other words, the data source was my own notes based on weekly record of the most/least active, silent, confident students doing the extracurricular speaking activities during 10 weeks (from week 3 to week 12). The data also included thoughts that I recorded while preparing students for speaking activities, during class, and immediately after class, as well as my reactions to conversations with the students during class.

Results

I often went around the class whilst students were engaged in work and had a look at their interview sheets and spoke to individual students about their perceived progress, and any difficulties that they had encountered. I recorded everything that happened in my classroom, of course from my point of view, and my own feelings and thoughts about students' oral participation in my personal notes. In order to get a better idea of the students' progress, I have chosen three excerpts from my notes from three different weeks (week 5, week 8, and week 11, respectively) in a timeline. The following observation excerpt is from one of my early notes and represents an ordinary scene of my classroom situation three weeks after starting the study:

The case is often like this: two or three pairs of students are very active in doing the extra speaking activities and actively participate in their interview tasks. They are more talkative. The others speak softly as they are whispering to each other. They can perform well if I ask them to engage more actively in the activities, ask and answer more questions or state personal ideas. If not asked, they remain almost silent. The situation is even worse when they are asked to work in groups. I feel I need to make an effort…I feel that I need to work harder to get them feel relax, and get them to speak.

As the term progressed and the students gained more exposure to spoken English and became more used to interactive classroom activities, many changed from being quiet to being (more) active, a tendency not only reported by the students themselves, but also reported in one of my middle notes:

While doing the activities, students gradually decrease dependence on me and some of them have even developed as autonomous speakers. In the classroom setting, the students are brave enough to ask both their friends and me… I think that students tend to be surer of themselves after passing the first few weeks and their participation is a lot better. Many students are now more involved in the pair/group work activities and speak out…I noted that some of them called on their classmates for help when they were unsure of what to say. This group effort could be linked to recognizing group values which promote group solidarity and helpfulness…they obviously show willingness to talk and are not afraid of embarrassment anymore.

From the eighth week on, however, almost all the students in each pair/group tended to be active in extra speaking activities and no one was quiet, especially during pair work. In one of my late entries, I have particularly commented that no student was reticent during pair work:

It seems that the students are satisfied with their pair work activities. All of them actively participate in their interview activities and exchange ideas… I think the students appeared to be the most nervous for the first few weeks of the term. But as time went on, they became less and less nervous. I don't think the students are nervous during pair work because nobody else can hear them… In these last weeks of the term, I think most of them are somehow confident and relaxed… It seems that the students' attitudes to speaking have

changed. They enjoy participating in the speaking activities and are also enthusiastic and very willing to participate in these activities… Working with their friends is fun… The feeling of enjoyment and enthusiasm has motivated them and provided a positive attitude toward speaking English.

Discussion

I believe that curriculum would be better developed if teachers acted as action researchers. Elyildirim and Ashton (2006) support that action research can improve the current teaching situation in terms of boosting teachers' professional development, teacher training and presenting to an institution evidence of the need for change. This was my own experience after I undertook this action research project. At first, I tried to get information about the problems of the course in terms of students' feelings toward language learning, especially speaking. I did it through a need analysis questionnaire I had designed and speaking with my students informally. After that, I understood that students would like to speak, but they lacked confidence in speaking English. Thus, it made me think of how to provide interacting and participatory activities, materials and the opportunity to practice speaking.

The learner-centered paradigm in language teaching curriculum emphasizes on an interactive, participatory and collaborative approach to speaking. In my project, the interactive approach was used to increase students' performance in terms of pair work and group work. They had more opportunities to practice speaking due to some additional activities, because the main aspects of activities focused on an interactive approach. I used the participatory approach with students because it was very important to me to comprehend students' responses in the activities. I acted as teacher, helper, encourager and facilitator to help students to reach their goals and develop their confidence. In my opinion, the best ways to know what learners need are close interaction and participation with them as much as possible. As a result, teachers who do action research in the class with learners are a significant factor in developing language curriculum, which is one of the main factors to promote students' confidence in language learning, especially speaking.

I tried to practice as a teacher and a researcher simultaneously. If I know about classroom and educational information, I will have the potential to reflect on and analyze my own teaching in real situations, which are very important for teachers who have more opportunities to create curriculum by themselves. In addition, as a teacher and researcher, I gained significant benefits from students' feedback to improve my teaching. I could understand students' responses and their behavior in terms of passive and active learners after I had a chance to talk informally and get feedback from them. Although it was very difficult for me to consider students' responses to my teaching, it was worth doing as I discovered in my action research study.

Conclusion

This research project combined two areas in L2 teaching profession – students' confidence in speaking English in EFL classrooms and teachers' practical, classroom-based action research – both of which have been recognized "as not only being of importance, but also as areas in which there is still much progress to be made" (Curtis, 2001, p. 69). In this action research project, extra speaking activities were incorporated into the classroom to increase the students' performance in terms of pair/group work. Although teacher-centered instruction, typically utilizing little interaction in English, is the most common in EFL classrooms, this study showed that an instructional methodology stressing peer collaboration as a tool for increasing the ability of the students to speak is likely to result in confidence. The findings of this study thus suggest that L2 instructors should seek ways to include students' collaboration in the subject language as part of their curriculum design to help them gain confidence in speaking L2.

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Appendix A: A Sample of Needs Analysis Questionnaire (Adapted from Nunan, 1998)

Age: **Field of Study:**

1) Do you like to learn English by: Reading   Writing   Listening   Speaking

2) Do you like to: Study grammar   Learn new words   Practice conversation

3) Do you like to learn English by: Cassettes   Games   Conversation   Studying English   books   Watching T.V.

4) Do you like to learn by talking to friends in English? Yes   No

5) Do you like to learn English words by: Seeing them?   Using them?

6) Do you like to learn English with the whole class? Yes   No

7) Do you like to learn English by talking in pairs? Yes   No

8) Do you speak English out of the class? Yes   No

9) Do you feel happy when you speak English? Yes   No

10) Do you look for chances to speak English? Yes   No

11) Do you have enough confidence to speak to a group of people in English? Yes   No

12) Do you feel relaxed when you speak in English? Yes   No

13) How do you learn best? Alone   Pairs   Small group   Class   Outside class

14) What do you feel are the most important things for you to learn in the:

    Short term:

    Long term: