Improving Students' Oral Participation in Communicative English Language Skills II Classroom: Second Year Section 'L' Students in Focus

Belayneh Amsalu

Department of English Language and Literature, Mekdela Amba University, Ethiopia

ABSTRACT: The main purpose of this study was to improve freshman students' limited participation in the Communicative English Language Skills II classroom activities taking section 'L' fresh man students of Mekdela Amba University by the year 2022 in focus. To put this in to effect, action research design was used. To collect data section freshman 'L' students, which are 46 in number by the year 2022 were used by using available sampling strategy from Mekdela Amba University. After the data were collected using classroom observation and focus group discussions, the analysis were conducted using narrative description (using thematic qualitative method of analysis). After intervention practices the researcher observed significant changes towards the frequency and number of participants during the actual classroom. And finally based on the findings of the study, some possible suggestions were recommended to responsible bodies.

1. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

There have been a number of studies attempting to define classroom participation. For example, Vandrik, (2000) claims that most teachers' ideas of participation are limited, requiring students to speak in class, answer questions, make comments and join in discussions. Similarly, Lee (2005) as cited in (Lightboun & Spada, 2006) has identified participation as students speaking in classrooms such as answering teacher's or other students' questions and asking questions to get the better explanation and clarification. Lee also added that making comments and joining in discussions by showing their opinions, thoughts and ideas are also considered as students' participation in classrooms.

Fritschner, (2000) on the other hand defines classroom participation in terms of 'talkers' who prefer 'speaking out in class' and 'non-talkers' who participate through 'attendance, active listening, sitting in their seats, doing the assignments and being prepared for class. As to this man, participation includes the activities of both silent students who regularly be in class and who participate using non-verbal cues, and those active students who want to express what they feel orally in the classroom.

However, oral classroom participation is defined in the present study as students' verbal expressions regarding to different activities in the classroom which is almost what Vandrik (2000) and Lee (2005) have already identified.

Different scholars have depicted a lot with regard to the significance of oral participation using the target language in the classroom. Because in the context of English as Foreign Language (EFL) teaching and learning, students' verbal or oral participation or engagement is basically important in the classroom. This claim complies with the conceptualization of the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach of teaching English, which sees language being taught as a system for expressing meaning (Nunan, 1999).

It is believed that when students engage in the classrooms with their teachers or among peers, they are forced to be involved in the negotiation of meaning, that is to express and clarify their intentions, thoughts and opinions (Lightboun & Spada, 2006). In turn, the students' communicative competence or what they need to know to communicate can be developed in the classrooms (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

Therefore, students' oral contribution is of great importance for class participation. Operating from the belief that verbal participation is also associated with learning, students are always encouraged by their teachers to contribute to the classroom discourse, and their participation is often evaluated according to the amount and quality of their talk (Warayet, 2011). This practice has also become an evaluative benchmark for English Foreign Language teachers to reflect if they have conducted a good lesson or elicited sufficient responses from their students.

Although participation may be graded in different forms, and vary substantially from one instructor to another according to the types of instructional activities, the ultimate goal is somewhat to increase student involvement (Bean & Peterson, 1998). Generally speaking, with teachers' encouragement and effort, students are always expected to be able to fully contribute in the classroom

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discourse. Nonetheless, the English Foreign Language classroom may be a frustrating place when most students remain silent in class, and only a small proportion of them actually participate (Fritschner, 2000).

Despite the students being aware of the importance of spoken English, and knowing the fact that participation is encouraged, many teachers still experience a great deal of quietness in the English Foreign Language classroom. The students are said to remain non-participatory, quiet or behave passively. In the field of second language acquisition, most scholars termed this situation as 'reticence', a situation when learners are unwilling to talk what they feel or what they know. For English Foreign Language instructors, this is a kind of uncomfortable feeling as it reflects negatively on their instructional practice. Many of them, in spite of having many years of teaching, they still fail to decode the reticent behavior, and work out suitable strategies to encourage their students to contribute more to classroom oral discourse. This experience also prompts the researcher to find out more about reticence since it has already been denoted a problematic attribute that would hinder the development of learners' oral proficiency in the English language.

No one can deny that active classroom participation plays an important role in the success of language learning (Tatar, 2005) as cited in Liu (2005). As involvement and participation are essential for language acquisition the more utterances the learners offer, the better their spoken language and vice versa. When they respond to the teacher's or students' questions, raise queries and give comments, they are actively involved in making deep meaningful connections in the mind that are important in learning the language. Besides, students who are actively involved reported higher satisfaction and higher persistence rates (Tsui, 1996).

Moreover, research has shown that participation in classroom activities is important in order for effective learning to take place (Tsui, 1996). The linkage between classroom participation and students' academic achievement is also undeniable. A study by Liu (2005) finds that students who participate actively tend to have better academic achievement compared to students who do not participate. As to the researcher, students' oral participation can help students fill the gap between what they want to say and whether they are able to say it. Furthermore, it is a common belief that participation in verbal interaction offers language learners the opportunity to follow up on new words and structures to which they have been exposed during language lessons and to practice them in context.

As it has been said directly or indirectly above, learners' oral participation in EFL classroom is necessary for the progress of instruction in the classroom thereby for better language acquisition. Because students' participation in the classroom indicates their physical and mental presence, which are very crucial for smooth teaching learning process to take place. In continuation of this, Clay (1991) has stated regarding the downside of deleting oral participation in the English classroom as follows:

If learners have been slow to acquire speech or have been offered few opportunities to hold conversations (for many reasons), there can be limitations in the grammar they control, which might mean that they have difficulties with comprehending oral and written language. Such learners may not have control of some of the most common sentence structures used in English story book, and therefore are unable to anticipate what may happen next in the sentences of their reading texts.

Within this recommendation is the assumption that students who participate actively in the EFL classroom will in fact learn the subject matter more effectively than students taught in the conventional method, and in addition, will show greater development in areas like oral communication, critical thinking and problem solving.

Despite the growing expectation for verbal classroom participation in foreign language learning situations, uncommunicativeness research has captured the attention of language theorists and educators in recent decades (Biggs & Moore, 1993; Liu, 2005; Bygate & Morris, 2009). By using interviews, observations and questionnaires, research has demonstrated that engaging in classroom discussions is one of the most problematic areas for students, as identified by both teachers and students themselves (Kim, 2006) as cited in Bygate & Morris (2009).

As far as the researcher's experience is concerned, foreign language learners in our context often seem passive and reticent in language classrooms. Most of the students often do not respond to questions and they do not offer answers or initiate questions. The researcher also recognizes the fact that students will not produce answers unless they are called on. It is not surprising to find out that students often know the answers, but just do not want to volunteer to say them. They are reluctant to participate in the classroom discussions while few actively participate in discussions.

From my observation and experience of teaching English as a foreign language, the researcher has also noticed that most of the students have lacks of intrinsic motivation in speaking out what they feel orally. This is especially observable since when the students took the course entitled *'Communicative English Language Skills I'* onward. The researcher observed that many students participate poorly in this course. They have been observed to be either quiet or to speak English with a trembling voice, make numerous unnecessary stops, having shaking hands and legs during English lessons and oral English practices. What accounts for this phenomenon? What can be done to help students take a more active role?

It is in line with this reality that this action research is intended by the researcher to be conducted. Therefore, the rationale behind this particular research is to identify students' major challenges that hinder them from participating in Communicative English Language Skills II classroom and to give practical solutions to the problems by finding ways which help to increase students' oral

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engagement there by to improve oral participation in the class. To put this in to effect, the following objectives have been formulated.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this study are two-fold: the general and the specific objectives.

2.1. General Objectives

This study intends to improve freshman students' limited participation in the Communicative English Language Skills II classroom activities.

2.2. Specific Objectives

The specific objectives of this study are;

- To investigate major psychological factors affecting students' participation.
- To identify major physical factors that affect oral participation of students in the classroom.
- To provide practical solutions to the problems that hinder students' oral participation in Communicative English Language Skills II classroom
- To see the improvement that comes after the intervention processes.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Design

As the aim of this study was to improve freshman students' oral classroom participation in Communicative English Language Skills II classroom, descriptive case study research design involving qualitative data was employed. This design was selected because it enables to obtain data about practice and challenges of oral classroom participation. And the researcher used qualitative data as it is very important to address the objectives deeply.

3.2. Research Participants

Freshman Section 'L' students of Mekdela Amba University by the year 2022 were participants of the study. The researcher used all 46 students of the aforementioned group as participants by using available sampling strategy.

3.3. Instruments of Data Collection

So as to collect the necessary data for this action research, two types of data collection tools namely, classroom observation and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) were employed as the researcher believed on their effectiveness to collect the intended data for the issue under investigation.

3.4. Procedures of Data Collection and Methods of Data Analysis

The researcher informed the Common Courses College about the issue and made clear the idea for the students to engage freely to the project. From the start of data collection to the intervention actions made by the researcher in the classroom to improve the participation of students, information was accountably communicated. And then the data obtained through the aforementioned tools were analyzed using narrative description (using thematic qualitative method of analysis).

4. PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION

To have a clear view of the problems related to oral participation in Communicative English Language Skills II classroom, the researcher took a look at the actual classes in the classroom when contents were delivered. And this was held from Wednesday, February 16/02/2022 up to Friday, March 04/03/2022. Moreover, the researcher made focus group discussions for three solid hours with 12 purposefully selected students in their classroom on Thursday, March 10/03/2022 about the challenges which limit them from expressing what they feel freely on activities in the Communicative English Language skills II classroom, and to check the extent of their awareness about the advantages of oral participation in English classroom. The discussions were held from 8: 30am up to 11:40am with the exception of using their ten minutes tea break. Thus, from the observation and focus group discussions, the researcher found out the following problems:

4.1. Analysis of Data Obtained through Classroom Observation

➢ **Inappropriate Class Size:** The researcher has observed that the class was very narrow to house this large number of students (46 in number). The unfavorable effect of this problem was manifested by suffocation.

➢ **Uncomfortable Seating Arrangement:** because of the small class size and the relatively large number of students in the classroom, the researcher, himself, face the problem of freedom of moving in the classroom from one corner to the other and controlling if the students are following the lesson.

➢ **Presence of Disruptive Behaviors:** during the observation period, students were most of the time busy in using their cell phones to chat with people through social media. Side talk, what we call it whispering was the other disruptive behavior which the

researcher has observed. Learners were observed and heard when they talked their own personal business during interactional works. Another disruptive behavior that was observed was sleeping in the classroom. This problem was common in afternoon classes due to the large number of students in proportion to the large class size. These activities in one or another way limited the learners from concentrating on the lesson and also disturb those who were attending the lesson attentively thereby the learners' oral participation.

4.2. Analysis of Data Obtained through Focus Group Discussions

The focus group discussions with the 12 purposefully selected freshman section 'L' students were conducted on Thursday morning March 10/04/2022. It was actually held by using their normal class which was always started from 8: 30 am. Therefore, the researcher used almost a total of 3 hours (with the exception of the tea break) for the purpose of the discussion. In the group discussions, the researcher has identified the following major challenges that hindered the successful practice of oral participation in the actual Communicative English Language Skills II classroom. Some of them are similar with the factors identified above by using classroom observations and informal discussions with the students.

❖ **Lack of Awareness about the Advantages of Oral Classroom Participation:** During the focus group discussion, students were asked to mention the benefits of oral participation in the Communicative English Language Skills classroom. Surprisingly, most of the students view the use of oral participation narrowly as a means to get better marks only. Besides, they do not know as if it is the source of the development of their social skills like communication, presentation, problem solving and so on.

❖ **Problem of Organization or Group Structuring:** This was the second factor raised by many of the student participants repeatedly. They expressed as if the groups were formed spontaneously by their coordinator.

❖ **Shyness:** majority of the participants expressed as though they failed to say what they want to say because of fear. They said that when they thought of how to say a point that they want to say orally, fear comes and limit them from participation. This was really observed during classroom observation times as well. The students were observed when they got disturbed and frustrated at times when the instructor gave the chance to answer questions randomly.

❖ **Narrowness of the Classroom:** they said that the class was not enough to accommodate them as they are large in size (46 in number).

❖ **Lack of Using Positive Reinforcement Mechanisms:** here again, the student participants raised the instructor's rarely used positive reinforcement mechanisms like verbal appreciations for the students who gave feedback on activities as one factor

Based on these findings, the researcher proposed the different possible actions to be taken in order to improve learners' oral classroom participation in Communicative English Language Skills II classroom under the next section.

5. INTERVENTION

The researcher in consultation with the concerned bodies tried to solve the aforementioned problems via the following four cycles from Monday, March 14/03/22 up to Friday, April 22/04/22.

▶ **First Cycle: From Monday, March 14/03/22 up to Friday, March 25/03/22**

During this period, the researcher discussed the problem of the size of the class frankly with the college of common courses dean and got a class which was wide enough to house all the students. Then the researcher took the section 'L' students (46 in number) to the new class. After this, the researcher reformulated the groups based on the students previous contribution and adjusted the seating arrangement in to a horse shoe shape to ensure that the students can see, and speak to one another with enough space for the teacher to move around and control the class easily. This is to mean that the researcher arranged the room in a way that encourages active engagement.

• Having done this, the researcher observed when the students felt relaxed and most of them attended the class attentively and showed participatory behaviors. Even almost all the students asked the researcher in order to have continuity for other courses to be taken next beyond using it for only research purpose. Besides, this re-arrangement or re-organization of group members also provided an additional opportunity for students to create and strengthen their social life with new members of the group in which they did not practice such behavior before even if they are learning in the same classroom. The teacher was also able to move freely in the class and control what the students were doing.

▶ **Second Cycle: Monday, March 28/03/22 up to Friday, April 01/04/22**

In this period, awareness raising discussions were held with the students. The first discussion was on the uses of oral participation as lack of awareness about oral participation was one of the major factors affecting the participation of students. The second discussion with in this cycle was on the disruptive behaviors, for raising awareness has much better effect on behavior than punishment. The researcher discussed with the students on the problems of using cell phones, making side talks, sleeping and their related consequences while class is on progress and while they are doing their group activities. The researcher designed very crucial ground rules using flip charts which have the power to minimize disruptive behaviors in class based on the students' feedback, and posted the rules on the walls of different sides of the room.

- After the researcher reacted to the problems, it was found that the result of the intervention was very effective in raising awareness about the uses of oral participation, improving the behavior of the students to a great extent and thereby to the improvement of the students' oral participation in the Communicative English Language Skills II classrooms.

▶ **Third Cycle: From Monday, April 04/04/22 up to Friday, April 08/04/22**

To deter the problem related to shyness, the practitioner advised the students to avoid any kind of frustration and feel free during English classrooms. As the researcher understood from the focus group discussion and informal discussions with the students, their shyness is manly deep-rooted from fear of making mistakes. For this, the researcher told them as if mistakes are the characteristics of all human beings not only for them. Even the researcher told them as though mistakes are the source of success via the proverb which reads "If you do not make mistakes, you are trying nothing".

The teacher researcher also tried to learn and use his students' names in the classroom for the literature has pointed out that students will be more engaged if they believe that the teacher perceives them as individuals, rather than as anonymous members of the class. This practice has also its own effect to make the students put their fear aside and get engaged in the different activities. Moreover, the teacher has accustomed to use verbal and non-verbal cues to encourage oral participation. The researcher planned as to how this could be done. First, The researcher managed not to rely on the volunteers to answer every question through responding to frequent volunteers in a way that indicates he appreciate their responses, but want to hear from others as well, because ideally the goal of improving participation is to create an environment in which all participants have the opportunity to learn and in which the class explores issues and ideas in depth, from a variety of viewpoints. Second, the researcher moved a part of the room where shy and quiet cadets are sitting, and smiled at and made eye contact with these students to encourage them to speak up. By the same token, the researcher looked around the room when frequent volunteers spoke rather than only at them to encourage others to respond.

Parallel to the above mechanisms, the researcher again gave a tip for the students to use a technique of writing what they want to say first on their exercise book and say what they have already written orally then after.

- At the end of taking the actions discussed above, the researcher observed when many hands were raised for participation during Communicative English Language Skills II classrooms. Even the researcher noticed when the students themselves started to encourage one another during oral presentation time. This was, indeed, the fruit of the researcher's intervention that he has seen during evaluation period.

▶ **Forth Cycle: From Monday, April 11/04/22 up to Friday, April 22/04/22**

Since lack of using positive reinforcement mechanisms was found to be one of the factors affecting the students' oral participation, the researcher sat down and thought on the issue and the possible actions to be taken for two solid hours. Then he has reached at one central point to apply different mechanisms that enhance the students' oral participation. This is to mean that the used verbal and non-verbal ways of giving appreciation to the learners when he/she tried his/her best in giving feedback and asking questions in the Communicative English Language Skills II classroom.

- After the implementation of the intervention, he observed a significant change on the number of students who raised their hands to their teacher for participation during the actual classes.

6. REFLECTION

Scholars like Gamson, as cited in Muhamed, (2014), stated that "learning is enhanced when it is more like a participatory effort than a solo race. Good learning, like good work, is interactive and social, not competitive and isolated. Sharing one's ideas and responding to others' reactions sharpens thinking, and it also deepens and increases understanding and social skills of those who perform it respectively". In similar manner, the researcher had full confidence on improving students' oral participation in Communicative English Language Skills II classrooms through the application of different strategies which are depicted in different existing literature. For example, by using positive reinforcement mechanisms; by learning and using the students' names when they raise their hand to participate in the classroom and by arranging the room in a way that encourages active engagement.

While conducting this action research, the researcher experienced problem of shortage of time as almost the researcher was busy in teaching a major course entitled 'Advanced Writing Skills I /Enla 301/ for third year English major students. But he tried his best in challenging all the challenges and arrived at this fruitful work.

Here, the researcher would like to recommend teachers of all departments and colleges across the university to apply these techniques of improving students' oral participation in a more organized and well-planned way and experience the significant changes.

At the end, the researcher has planned to see the effects of some of the techniques that Harmer (2007) suggests in his book to solve the problem of oral classroom participation ahead.

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