



RESEARCH PAPER

Investigating the Factors that hinder Students' Participation in English Language Classrooms at University Level in Pakistan

Sana Qudoos¹ Dr. Abdus Samad*²

1. MS Scholar, Department of English, Kohat University of Science and Technology, Kohat, KP, Pakistan
2. Associate Professor, Department of English, Kohsar University Murree, Punjab, Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

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***Corresponding
Author**

dr.samad@kust.e
du.pk

Conventionally, students were assumed to sit in rows in front of an instructor who would teach and drive information to them with the help of a blackboard, and the students would listen passively. This is not true any longer. Rather than sitting in rows, students are expected to be doing different things, like practical tasks, some writing, etc. Despite the importance often assigned to classroom participation, it has been repeatedly observed that many students stay passive in class. This study aims to explore the elements that hinder the participation of students in English language classes, as English holds a prominent place in the education system of Pakistan. Overall, 150 BS English students were selected through a technique of simple random sampling. A sequential explanatory mixed-method research design was followed in this study. Analysis associated with the questionnaire was conducted through SPSS, and interviews were reviewed through the content analysis method. The results of the study revealed that factors affecting participation in the classroom were lack of confidence, inadequate preparation, lack of English vocabulary, fear of negative evaluation, teacher traits and behavior, classroom size, and lecture timings.

Introduction

Taking part in classroom discussions and giving responses to teachers' questions seem to be an illustration of learning for many teachers. Teachers feel delighted if they observe good student-teacher interaction in the classroom (Gafri, 2018). Classroom participation is an essential ingredient for active learning (Ironside, 2005). Active participation is not the only yardstick for measuring the extent to which students have understood the concepts; it creates a platform for feedback that helps the lecturer to assess whether students have gained some form of understanding. But, classroom observation never fails to reveal the phenomenon that in certain courses, even though communication opportunities are provided, interaction will not truly take place (Zhao, 2016).

In addition to the above, despite the value usually assigned to classroom participation, many pupils continue to be passive in class for some personal reasons

known to them. Consequently, this affects the teaching and learning process. For example, the lecturer is tempted to engage only a few who participate.

Furthermore, ineffective participation mostly leads to boredom in the classroom, and those who are not participating may not pay attention. Such pupils are often disadvantaged because they have to do more memorization as they are not able to learn through discussion; they are less motivated; don't enhance their ability to communicate orally nor build their self-confidence.

This study aims to explore the elements that hinder the participation of students in English language classrooms at the university level in Pakistan, as English holds a prominent place in the education system of Pakistan. In Pakistan, it enjoys the status of being a second language as well as an official language (Roshan and Raisani, 2017). English is a compulsory subject from grade one to a higher level (Roshan and Raisani, 2017).

The share of classroom involvement towards an effective teaching-learning procedure is not a questionable point. Numerous studies have been carried out on this issue in various contexts, but to the best of my knowledge, not much work has been done on this topic in Pakistan. Khan et al. (2014) in their study "The interplay between gender and student classroom participation: A case study of University of Swat" explored the issue of classroom participation, focusing on gender disparity and female students in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KPK) context. Similarly, Nosheen et al. (2019) shed light on university students' problems with speaking English during participation in the classroom, but the sample of that study was only limited to the Islamia University Bahawalpur. Aziz and Kazi (2019) conducted a study to pinpoint the role of teachers in enhancing students' classroom participation in universities.

It can duly be calculated that research conducted at the university level is quite less, especially in Pakistan. As Aziz and Kazi (2019) also stated that a review of related literature indicates that studies on classroom participation have been more focused on the elementary and secondary levels, and the higher education level has been ignored.

Furthermore, being a student and a teacher, I observed that even intelligent students remain reluctant when it comes to active participation in the classroom, which motivates me to take this problem into account. So, this research aims to explore the factors that influence student involvement in the English classrooms at Kohat University of Science and Technology (KUST). It tries to unravel a few of the factors that could have an impact on the types of participation students employ in their class, as well as understand the underlying reasons behind their participation within the classroom.

Literature Review

What is meant by "Classroom Participation"?

Classroom involvement has grown to become an element that is increasingly essential for engaging students in higher education. As educators strive to find the

appropriate mix of strategies to raise participation amounts in the classroom, it is necessary to check out existing research to gain knowledge of what defines involvement, in addition to the factors that affect participation both directly and indirectly.

Definitions of participation are given in various ways, like “the number of unsolicited responses volunteered” (Burchfield & Sappington, 1999, p. 290), the “extent of participation in class discussion” (Weaver & Qi, 2005, p. 581), and “any comments or questions that students offered or raised in class” (Fassinger, 2000, p. 39). The above-mentioned meanings primarily rely on quantitative dimensions of participation and do not take into account the standard of the answers offered by a student. It is most likely as a result of the difficulty in assessing what a quality response consists of for all disciplines and because the result may be subjective.

Participation can also be considered as part of an overall student engagement process as stated by Dancer and Kamvounias (2005) who divided this procedure into 05 categories: contribution to the discussion, preparation, communication skills, attendance, and group skills. This definition is much more holistic because it includes the quality of conversation along with respect inside the group, which Weaver and Qi (2005) indicated as a direct factor that affected the amount of participation in the classroom.

Language Learning and Classroom Participation

For the acquisition of a second or foreign language, classroom participation is inevitable and therefore must be done. Learning theories explicitly formulate the assumptions as learning by doing (Dewey, 1997 [1938]) and authorize marginal participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991). This assumption that students should be actively included and engaged in the teaching and learning activities is also found in the pedagogical application, for instance, in communicative language teaching and task-based language teaching (see, e.g., Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

Furthermore, the mutual relationship between learning and participation, which appears to be inseparable in many aspects, has been thoroughly observed by many studies, such as (Firth and Wagner, 1997, 1998, 2007; Long, 1997; Mondada and Pekarek-Doehler, 2004). The issue of classroom participation has also been studied from psychological and sociological perspectives in order to know why and why not students can participate in their classes. These studies have found that social factors like age, gender, culture (Fassinger, 1995), classroom size, as well as the curriculum (Howard et al., 1996) can affect participation.

Studies on Classroom Participation

The students who eagerly take part in the learning process learn more as compared to the others, “Involvement matters”. According to Tinto (1997), this involvement can be both indoor and outdoor. The significance of the student’s active participation is now well-recorded and well-known (Fritschner, 2000; Howard &

Henney, 1998; Howard, James, & Taylor, 2002 ;). Critical thinking is encouraged by active contribution (Garside, 1996) and facilitates the retention of information that may be lost otherwise (Bransford, 1979).

Many instructors do recommend the active involvement of students in a college classroom, though the acquisition of some positive results seems like a hard nut to crack. Teachers talk around eighty percent of the total time (Fischer & Grant, 1983; Smith, 1983). Only 10 in 40 students participate in the conversation, and again, only 5 of them prevail in the discussion (Karp & Yoels, 1976).

If the participation of students in the classroom is so inevitable, then why is it so low? What are the actual impediments in the way? Scholars have distinguished a few important factors contributing to the cause, for example, the size of the classroom (Constantinople, Corneilius, & Gray, 1988; Crawford & MacLeod, 1990; Fassinger, 1995; Howard et al., 1996; Howard et al., 2002), faculty authority (Auster & MacRone, 1994; Fassinger, 1995) size of the class (Crawford & MacLeod, 1990; Fassinger, 1995; Howard et al., 1996; Howard et al., 200 2), the jurisdiction of faculty (Auster & MacRone, 1994; Fassinger, 1995).

There may be several issues with the lack of participation. For instance, Nunn (1996) found a direct relationship between the size of the classroom and the participation of students. Karp and Yoels in Rocca (2010) “found that while the number of students who participate in any given classroom is often the same, courses that have more than 40 students have fewer overall interactions per class period” (p. 5).

In a similar way, seating layout has also been found as an active factor in the cause. Brown and Pruis (1958), Bowers (1986), Fassinger (1978), and Ferguson (1986) believed that students’ seating layout has also been found as a contributing factor in the low participation of students. According to them, the students in the front are more prone to active participation as compared to the backbenchers, and they think themselves to be more responsible for answering general questions in the classroom.

Similarly, Mustapha et al. (2010) conducted a study to record the predominant factors that determine the participation of undergraduate students in Malaysian classrooms. Different observations and interviews were conducted. The results vehemently authorized the traits of both the classmates and the teacher in promoting classroom participation.

Abebe and Deneke (2015) examined the reasons why students of the first year are less inclined to participate in EFL classroom discussions, concerning the public universities of Ethiopia. Three hundred students were taken from different departments for the research. The data collected from these three hundred students were duly interpreted in terms of percentage. The results found that factors like learners’ related, methods of teaching, and physical environment affected the students’ participation in the classroom discussion.

Deble and Kalbisa (2017) conducted a study at Samara University to identify the role of the learning method in the involvement of students in the class. The study

revealed that lack of an active learning method, arrangement of seats, confidence problems, cultural background, silence, language obstructions, and instructor approach were the main factors in the way of active classroom participation.

Ghafri (2018) conducted a study to find out the considerations of the students' participation in the English classroom at the Ibri College of Applied Sciences, Oman. The results concluded to accentuate the role of students and teachers in rightly shaping classroom participation. Besides, some of the findings also elaborated the reasons like shyness, religion, culture, and gender.

In Pakistan, Khan et al. (2019) conducted a study to observe the interrelationship of gender and its effects on participation in the classroom. The results suggest that there is a prejudice, disparity, and somewhat scornful attitude towards female students. Interestingly, they are also considered less intelligent than male students.

Similarly, Nosheen et al. (2019) conducted a study to determine the problems of university students in speaking English during classroom participation. All the students of Islamia University Bahawalpur were the population of the study. The data was collected through a questionnaire from the selected sample. The results highlighted several reasons: namely, a shortage of vocabulary, pronunciation hindrances, grammar issues, lack of confidence, and most importantly the environment, which halts a smooth platform for participation. Aziz and Kazi (2019) conducted a study to pinpoint the role of teachers in enhancing students' classroom participation. It was found that a skillful teacher keeps the students engaged and makes them responsive.

It can duly be calculated that studies conducted in a variety of scenarios may produce different results. So, different contexts may bring forth different eventualities.

Material and Methods

The current study utilized a sequential explanatory mixed-methods approach, so the researcher planned to use a questionnaire and interviews as research instruments for collecting information regarding factors hindering students' classroom participation. It is hoped that researchers can be provided with authentic data concerning classroom participation through a coalition of qualitative and quantitative approaches. Thus, the ongoing mixed-method study alludes to adding more empirical data to the literature and suggests strategies for teachers to maintain a reliable environment for classroom participation.

Sample

The setting of the current study was district Kohat, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, in which all the students who were studying at BS English were the target population of the study. Overall, 150 students were included in the questionnaire's sample, which was selected from BS English at Kohat University of Science and

Technology (KUST) through a simple random sampling technique. Both male and female students, aged between 19 and 24, who belong to the university, finished the questionnaire. They were enrolled in the 1st, 3rd, 5th, and 7th semesters (literature and linguistics) of their undergraduate studies (BS) and were studying English as a major subject.

With students, semi-structured interviews were conducted who belonged to the same semesters of BS English. The sample of interviewees comprised 10 students.

Data Collection and Analysis Procedures

The current study used a sequential explanatory mixed-method research design for data collection. As a data collection instrument, the present study utilized a structured questionnaire followed by semi-structured interviews. Analysis associated with the questionnaire was conducted through SPSS to find out frequencies and percentages, and interviews were reviewed through the content analysis method.

Results and Discussion

The data identified various factors that hinder students' involvement in English language classrooms. Table 1 indicates participants' responses to the questionnaire.

Table 1
Factors that hinder students' classroom participation

No.	Statements	SA%	A%	N%	D%	SD%
1.	I do not participate in class because I do not have the confidence to do so	11.8	36.8	20.6	24.3	6.6
2.	Inadequate preparation before the lecture hinders my ability to participate in class	11.8	36	21.3	25	5.9
3.	I do not participate in the classroom due to a lack of English vocabulary	20.6	36.8	17.6	17.6	6.6
4.	I am afraid of negative evaluation from Classmates so I do not participate	16.2	38.2	8.1	24.3	13.2
5.	I am afraid of negative evaluation from teacher so I do not participate	19.1	29.4	27.9	14.7	8.1
6.	I participate when the lecturer usually builds on my contribution but does not condemn or criticize me	22.1	36.8	25.7	11.0	2.9
7.	I do participate when the lecturer motivate me to contribute	30.9	47.1	10.3	6.6	2.9
8.	I do not participate when the lecturer is unfriendly	17.6	34.6	17.6	16.2	12.5
9.	I do not participate when the lecturer likes embarrassing students in front of classmates	30.9	34.6	19.1	8.8	5.1
10.	I am reluctant to participate in the large class	14.0	21.3	35.3	21.3	5.9
11.	I do participate when there is less number of students in the class	16.2	19.9	21.3	28.7	12.5
12.	I do not participate when the lecture is in the	14.7	24.3	23.5	22.1	14.0

	late afternoons because I am exhausted by then					
13.	I feel very active and fresh in the class during morning lectures	39.0	29.4	18.4	5.9	5.9

Lack of Confidence

It is revealed that students avoid participation due to a lack of confidence. As the students' majority (49%) either agreed or strongly agreed, 24.3% disagreed, 6.6% strongly disagreed, while 20.6% were neutral with the item (1) in Table 1.

Interviews also supported this finding. When asked about different factors hindering classroom participation, one of the respondents commented: "Most of the time, I know the answer, but I do not have the confidence to speak up in class". Interviews also revealed that stage fright also affects the confidence level of students. As one of the respondents commented: "I can participate while sitting in my seat, but when I am asked to present something in front of the class, it makes me uncomfortable".

Inadequate Preparation before the Lecture

The data also revealed that inadequate preparation hindered students' participation. A majority of respondents (47.8%) strongly agreed or agreed that inadequate preparation before the lecture hindered their ability to participate in class. 21.3% were neutral, and 25% disagreed, whereas 5.9% strongly disagreed. This showed that the majority of respondents agreed that inadequate preparation before the lecture hindered their ability to participate in class.

Interviews revealed that when students are well prepared for what they are supposed to be studying, they can make a more valuable contribution. As one of the students commented: "I can raise my voice without any fear if I know much about what we are supposed to be studying". Another student further consolidated: "If I am unprepared, then the fear of making mistakes limits my participation in the class".

Lack of English Vocabulary

The data revealed that a lack of English vocabulary also hindered students' participation. 57.4% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they do not participate in class due to a lack of English vocabulary, 17% were neutral; 17.6% disagreed, and 6.6% strongly disagreed. This showed that respondents strongly agreed that they do not participate in class due to a lack of English vocabulary (Item 3 in Table 1).

Qualitative data also supported this finding. As one of the respondents stated: "It is very difficult to phrase my thoughts into sentences". Similarly, another student commented: "I am worried about looking at the standard of my English." She further elaborated that "I can't speak or write much in English due to a lack of vocabulary."

Fear of Negative Evaluation

The data also revealed that fear of negative evaluation was also limiting students' participation. As 54.4% of respondents agreed and strongly agreed that they were afraid of negative evaluation from colleagues, so they did not participate, 8.1% were neutral; 24.3% disagreed, and 13.2% strongly disagreed (Item 4 in Table 1). Also, 48.5% of respondents strongly agreed and agreed that they were afraid of negative evaluation from teachers. 27.9% were neutral, and 22.8% disagreed or strongly disagreed (Item 5 in Table 1).

Interviews also revealed that fear of appearing unintelligent can limit students' participation. As one of the students stated: "If I make mistakes, others will think I am not a bright student". Another student commented: "Instead of appearing incapable, I chose to remain passive in the class".

Further, students reported that teachers and peers might laugh at their particular blunders and might develop a negative view of them. In addition, students believe that teachers' opinions about them may affect their grades. As one of the respondents said: "I remain silent in class to avoid teacher's criticism and any other embarrassing situation. I don't want others to make fun of me or form any negative opinions about me. If my teacher considers me a dull student that possibly affects my grades".

Teacher Traits and Behavior

Items 6, 7, 8, and 9 in Table 1 indicate the impact of teacher traits and behavior on classroom participation. Both the qualitative and quantitative data revealed that supportive teachers welcome more active participation and usually do not mind when pupils make blunders. The following remark made by the student makes it clearer, "I can participate more when my teacher remains friendly in the class and corrects my mistakes without stating any negative remarks." Interviews further revealed that the strict and harsh behavior of teachers can limit students' participation. As one of the students rightly said: "If the teacher is strict and precise, I feel hesitant to answer or participate".

Classroom Size

Analysis of the interviews and questionnaire revealed that the size of the classroom somehow affects participation level in the classrooms. In a larger-dimension classroom, there is not sufficient time to have a chance to participate. As one of the students stated: "Too many students want to talk and there will not be adequate time for everyone to say something". As a result of a large number of students attempting to participate as well as the length of time they ate while participating, there was an inadequate amount of time to participate.

Interviews also revealed that in a class with fewer students, even more pupils will probably participate. In bigger classroom sizes, students could not participate and felt nervous. Another student stated: "I participate more when I am in a small

class...people are just friendlier when it is just a small group. I also interact more with my lecturer and other friends in class."

Lecture Time

The present study revealed that class timings can also limit the class participation of students. As for the students' majority, 39% agreed that they do not participate when the lecture is in the late afternoon because they will be exhausted (item in table 1). Also, 68.4% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with Item 13 in Table 1, that they feel very active in the morning lectures.

Interviews also revealed that lecture time, nonetheless, is very important and can affect participation. Pupils who attend classes in the evenings generally feel tired and this may decrease their interest to be earnestly involved in the class. As one of the respondents said: "I usually feel sleepy and tired, in the afternoon lectures." Similarly, another one commented: "I feel quite fresh and active in the morning lectures...feeling involved in the class".

Discussion

The present study identified three main categories: namely, student-related factors, teacher-related factors, and classroom environment-related factors.

Student related Factors

The first factor revealed by this study is a lack of confidence. This is in line with the study of Hemouda (2012) who stated that lacking confidence makes students believe that their language skills are weaker than those of others in the class. Students who were not confident were less likely to participate, and vice versa. Khaleghi (2016) found that lack of confidence affected classroom participation. Also, Green (2008) reported that the most frequent factor influencing participation was the student's self-confidence. This may be due to the fact that less confident students are more likely to be bothered by other students' perceptions or views, and hence, likely to avoid participation.

Inadequate preparation is another cause of students' reticence to participate in English language classes. This finding is consistent with that of the study carried out by Mustapha et al. (2010) who found lack of preparation, fear of appearing unintelligent to their classmates or instructors, and feeling intimidated make students less inclined to participate. They found in their study that lack of preparation before the class prevented students from active participation. Consistent with the current study, Abebe and Deneke (2015) also found that a lack of preparation before the lecture hindered classroom participation. Closely related to the above, Maite Ruiz (2014) reported that students were more likely to participate when they knew the answer, which can be achieved through adequate preparation. The result of the current study may be because adequate preparation is likely to boost students' confidence and also give a broader scope of the concept of the topic being discussed, which is likely cause them to participate.

Also, another big factor identified was the lack of vocabulary that hinders students' participation in English language classrooms. This result corresponds with Cortazzi and Jin (1996), who stated that students' poor vocabulary is among the reasons why pupils are hushed audience in place of active participants within the English language classrooms. As students can only process a limited amount of information at a time (Lightbown and Spada, 2006), many words don't come out when students have to speak in a hurry.

Fear of negative evaluation was also found in the present study as one of the factors that hindered students' classroom participation. Students remain reticent when they make blunders simply because they believe that the instructor evaluates them negatively. This finding is consistent with the studies of Green (2008) and Abeasi (2018) who found negative evaluation' fear as one of the factors influencing students' participation.

Teacher related Factors

Negative traits of lecturers affect the classroom participation of students. Many previous scholars mentioned that negative lecturer traits discourage students' participation (Liu, 2005 Tanveer, 2007). Just like the earlier research, this study also discovered that many students mentioned that negative lecturer traits like unfriendliness and impatience deter students from participating.

Similarly, fear of being ashamed and criticized in front of classmates have also been among the factors that contribute to students' unwillingness to participate in the classroom. Most of the students prefer to be quiet rather than be orally involved in the classroom to avoid the teacher's criticism and any other embarrassing situation. Similarly, Susak (2016) found that criticism towards the students' responses by the lecturer restricted students' participation. Inconsistent with the above, Abebe and Deneke (2015) also found that students keep quiet when they want to avoid criticism from their lecturer.

Another negative teacher trait that discouraged participation was the teacher's harshness and strictness. It is expressed by most of the students that they get more anxious when their teacher is very strict. Similarly, Abebe and Deneke (2015) found in their study that students were discouraged from participating when the lecturer was perceived as being harsh. Mustapha et al. (2010) also reported that when the lecturer was rude and unfriendly, students were not motivated to participate.

The present study found that most of the pupils assented that instructors certainly play a major role in the classroom. Positive traits of trainers, in addition to the method or type of teaching used, are important motivating elements to stimulate verbal engagement among students in the classroom. An instructor's traits that are favored by students are: being friendly, knowing each student well, trying not to criticize the students, and always showing a good and friendly state of mind. With these traits, pupils don't feel ashamed and afraid to participate.

Classroom environment-related Factors

The elements that are associated with this factor, such as the size of a classroom, seating positions in class, condition of the classroom, and lecture time, were asked to the students. The responses of students provide a different view regarding the influence of class size on participation in the classroom. Some are concerned about the size and choose a small size as a conducive environment for learning. With the small size of the classroom, students feel less ashamed to ask questions, and instructors can focus more on the students. However, some students are not so concerned with the size because, big or small, they can ask questions to get more information.

Inconsistent with the above, Susak (2016) also found classroom size as an impacting factor, where 6 out of 10 students noted that in the larger course sections, there was not sufficient time to have the opportunity to participate. On the contrary, Crombie, Pyke, Silverthorn, Jones, and Piccinin (2003) failed to find a significant impact of class size.

Lecture time is important and can influence participation. Students who attend classes in the evenings usually feel tired, and this may reduce their interest to be actively involved in the classroom (Abdullah, Abu Bakar & Mahbob, 2012). Rocca (2010) also found that classes that were held in the evening decreased classroom participation.

Conclusion

Classroom participation has accumulated a lot of positive attention, and it is not entirely undeserved because the participation of students in class helps to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills that would be useful in their professional development and other aspects of self-development. The results of this study provide some insights into the student, teacher, and classroom-related factors influencing participation. Undoubtedly, classroom participation is not entirely one-dimensional. All the key stakeholders have to play their role to make sure that participation is effective and that the maximum benefits can be derived from it. Furthermore, it is hoped that the present research can establish awareness among educators and pupils concerning the importance of participation in the classroom, particularly in improving their communicative skills.

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