The Role of EFL Teachers in Decreasing Learners' Reticence

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Abstract

Willingness to communicate (WTC), as a prerequisite for improving communication skills, has garnered special attention in second and foreign language classes. It is believed that high tendency to become involved in communication activities may expose learners to much more input and as a result more intake. Several factors, some of which are situational and some others trait, have been identified in promoting learners' WTC or reticence. This study set out to unravel the role of English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers, as the main facilitators of communication, in these classes in encouraging learners' WTC. Data for this study were collected using a focus group interview. For this purpose, 48 EFL learners, with the age range of 17-45, who were taking general advanced and high-intermediate English courses in one of the popular English Schools, were selected to participate in the study. The results of the analysis revealed that both teachers' socio-affective strategies and teaching style have a determining role in learners' WTC. What was more interesting was that these learners found teachers' socio-affective strategies even more influential than teaching style. The findings of the study have important implications for teacher trainers and EFL teachers to improve their pedagogic strategies to foster WTC in learners who prefer reticence to talk.

Keywords: *Willingness to Communicate, Reticence, Socio-affective Strategies, Teaching Style.*

1. Introduction

Willingness to communicate (WTC) defined as the individual's "readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2" (p. 547) [1] functions as a path to language learning inasmuch as higher levels of WTC contribute to more frequent L2 use [2], and this increased interaction is thought to promote successful L2 development [3] [4]. Empirical studies have not only found that L2 WTC is related to some inherently stable individual factors such as personality, age, and gender [5, 6, 7] but they have also discovered that it is related to some situational and contextual factors, such as topic, interlocutors, group size, cultural background, teacher, classroom social environment and so on [8, 9, 10, 2, 3, 11, 12, 13, 14]

With respect to contextual factors, although some of the above mentioned studies [10, 12,14] have investigated teacher effect as a contextual factor, they have studied it among other factors (12) except for Zarrinabadi [14] and Fallah [10]; however, due to the determining role of teachers in boosting classroom WTC, it still requires due attention. Therefore, the present study addresses the following question:

What teacher factors do EFL learners perceive to be the main stimulators of learners' WTC in the classroom?

2. The Study

2.1. Participants

The study used a qualitative methodology to investigate teacher factors enhancing learners' WTC. For this purpose, the data were collected in Iran language Institute (a popular English school in Iran). Learners: 48 Iranian female students, out of 146 learners, were selected to participate in the focus group interview. The students spoke Turkish and Persian; were mostly high school or university students; came from high or middle-class social background with the age range of 17-45; and were taking a general English course at a higher intermediate level. The participants were selected through purposeful sampling [15].

2.2. Procedure

Focus group interview: The learners were divided to four groups with 12 students in each. The interview questions were given to participant learners a week before the interview time [16]. Following Krueger's [17] guidelines, we tried to create warm and friendly environment and observe the participants for seating arrangements. Having welcomed the participants and overviewed the topic, we

started the interview. The interview was conducted in English with most of the talking done by participants; however, they were allowed to ask for help when they did not know how to express an idea in English. We did the interview in English; otherwise, it would require a translation and member check [18], which might have endangered the validity of the findings.

3. The Results and Discussion

The data were analyzed qualitatively following Cresswell's [16] six steps of inductive analysis in order to reveal teacher factors that seemed to contribute to participants' WTC. Finally, the patterns within the data were developed and categorized. The result is as follows:

3.1. Teachers' Socio-affective Strategies

Fairness

Berry [19] advised needs-based fairness in educational setting, which means that "all students receive the supports or instruction they need to achieve academically, not that all students receive the same supports or instruction"(p. 1150). Similar to these studies, most of the learners in this study believed that when teachers involve just more sociable and more competent students, others withdraw. One of the learners said, "Some students are shy; the teacher should give them roles in discussions, too." (ID: 11, age, 45). Another learner commented, "When the teacher is friendly with other students, it discourages me to talk." (ID: 14, age, 16).

Enthusiasm

Teachers' enthusiasm, active presentation, and dynamism cause students to like him or her [20]. When teachers are liked by students, they are more willing to participate [8]. One of the participants said, "I don't want to talk because the teacher is like a robot; she just does her job and no more." (ID: 12; age, 17). Affirming her, another student commented, "When the teacher is not active and energetic, I lose my motivation to talk." (ID: 9; age, 20).

Respect

As shown in the previous study [12], classroom atmosphere (i.e., moods, emotions or climate) influences the learners' WTC. Respect which has been defined as the "behavior that reduces the vulnerability of others, especially those with less power in a relationship" [21, p.162] is the determining part of the classroom atmosphere. The majority of the learners noted that when teachers value their opinions in the class and evaluate them positively, they become encouraged to talk. As one of the learners remarked, "The teacher feels superior. She tries to find our mistakes, so we don't talk much." (ID: 15; age, 19).

Immediacy

Immediacy was defined as communication behaviors that "enhance closeness to and nonverbal interaction with another" [22, p.203]. It has been found by several researchers to affect students' interaction and WTC in the classroom [10, 23, 14]. The role of teachers' immediacy was also emphasized in this study. The interviewed learners mostly mentioned teachers' friendly behavior, sense of humor, tone of voice, and personalized examples as encouraging factors in their WTC. One of the learners said, "When the teacher is so strict, no one talks." (ID: 2; age, 16). Another student stated, "I can't talk in a boring atmosphere. Some teachers don't make fun at all." (ID: 3; age, 16).

3.2. Teaching Style

Teachers' talk time

Teachers are expected to create a balance between teaching time (for example, teaching grammar) and language use [24]. Some of the learners believed that although teachers' talk functions as useful input for them, when it becomes too long, it denies the learners the chance of involvement. One of the learners said, "I want to talk and use the words and grammar I have learned while talking, but the teacher says we have some important tasks to complete." (ID: 7; age, 20).

Error correction

Error correction strategies used by the teacher have been found to affect learners WTC [3,14, 25]. The learners in this study also confirmed the role of error correction. Most of the interviewed learners believed that when teachers write down their mistakes while talking and judge and mock them because of their mistakes, they choose reticence. One of the students noted that "Teachers shouldn't expect an impeccable performance from the learners or it will discourage them from talking." (ID: 40; age 19).

Choice of the topic

The choice of the topic may greatly affect learners' involvement [3, 9, 14, 25, 26]. The learners in this study asserted that they would like to talk about current events, and real and interesting things. They also said they preferred to talk about special topics related to society and young people and topics related to their age. Nevertheless, most of the time, as they noted, they had to talk about the topics in their text books, which were not interesting enough.

4. Conclusion

This study aimed to delve into teacher factors that facilitate classroom WTC. The results of the study revealed that teachers' both socio-affective strategies such as teachers' fairness, enthusiasm, respect and immediacy, and teaching style such as teachers' talk time, error correction, and choice of the topic have an impact on learners' WTC.

The results showed that, considering fairness, when learners of different characteristics receive equal attention from the teacher, they become more willing to join discussions. The findings also indicated that teachers' interest in their job and their liveliness in the class may foster WTC. Furthermore, it was found that teachers' respect to learners may encourage WTC. When teachers value learners' opinions on the issues raised in the class and evaluate them positively, they become encouraged to participate. In addition, the study confirmed the findings from the previous studies [10, 23, 14] that teachers' both verbal and non-verbal immediacy may trigger learners' WTC. Regarding teachers' talk time, it was found that the more teachers manage class time, the better they can make time for learners' participation in the class. Besides, when it comes to error correction strategies, it was found that when error correction is without judging and blaming students', it may not lead to learners' reticence. Finally, the choice of the topic was found to affect learners' WTC. However, it is not an easy task for a teacher especially in some conservative cultures. On the one hand, young learners wish to talk about recent issues and hot topics in the world; on the other hand, the education system exerts some limitations on the topics discussed in the classroom due to cultural, social and religious rules.

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