The Effects of Discussion-oriented Classes on Students' General Proficiency as well as their Attitude toward Learning English

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Abstract

The study investigated the pivotal role of free-related discussions in EFL classes and its relevance to students' general proficiency level as well as their impressions toward English. The researchers selected two groups of EFL learners to investigate the topic of the study. To this respect, the researchers used homogeneous sampling to select appropriate participants among the groups who took part in EFL classes in Muhammad Male English Centre (MEC) and Nasim Female English Centre (NEC) in Jahrom, Fars, Iran. Two groups of 45 pre-intermediate participants (one male and one female) aged 15-21, were selected for the study. To conduct the study, an open-ended attitudinal questionnaire and a semi-structured interview were utilized to collect data. Although, there were some subtle differences between male and female participants, the results of the open-ended questionnaire and the interview were in line with each other. The study revealed that almost all participants in in both male and female groups enjoyed discussions in classes comparing to their previous term(s) because of fun and friendly atmosphere, stress-free speaking, score free, motivation, speaking improvement, informative aspect of discussions, freeing from boring (sometimes restricted) topics in the books, various and motivating topics, peer learning as well as improved general proficiency level in language productivity.

Keywords: discussion time, particularity, sociocultural context, practicality

INTRODUCTION

Several methods and approaches have been developed or modified and some have been rejected in some parts of their theories and applications (Grammar Translation, 1940s; Audio Lingual Method, 1950s; The Silent way and Total Physical Response, 1970; Suggestopedia, 1975; Communicative Language Teaching, 1985; Principled Ecleticism, 2000) but today's main concerns in language learning are individual differences and psychology of the learners. By now it seems there is no fit-for-all method or approach to stick to but we can consider individual differences and psychology of the learners as, to some extent, the dominant factors.

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Kachru (1980s) proposed world Englishes (inner, outer, expanding circles) in which the expanding circle refers to those speakers who learn and use English for global communication without any historical, cultural, social background. This signifies that each individual, learning English for any instrumental or integrated purposes around the world, has their own idiosyncratic style of English which is generally communicative.

Kumaravadivelu (2012) points out globish (global English) as a post-colonial perspective in which learners have their own cultural identity and freedom. These are fundamental values in human. This issue is somehow in line with that world Englishes which L2 learners need and learn an English to satisfy their local and global needs. He also designed and proposed a modular model named KARDS – Knowing, Analysing, Recognising, Doing and Seeing. In this modular model Kumaravadivelu (2012) emphasizes on professional, procedural and personal knowledge. He raises the topic of students need, motivation and autonomy and believes in students' own identities and values. He argues that teachers should teach, theorize, dialogize and finally monitor their own teaching.

Another issue is the teacherpreneur which deals with the innovative and creative teacher in the class with the risk-taking and entrepreneurial leadership that we commonly associate with those who create their own place in the professional and global world. Teacherpreneurs are imaginative teachers in general. They create a classroom culture of reflection and creativity. They attempt to make the lessons more meaningful and somehow beyond the classroom. Differentiation is in focus and we normally differentiate our students, but we rarely talk about the need to differentiate our context of teaching and teachers, too. The key here is that the teacher creates a different way of navigating the profession. They provide opportunities and use their skills in a different way **(**Ann Byrd, 2015).

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in dialogic form of learning English, Chappell, 2014; Lima, von Duyke, 2016; von Duyke, K. S., 2013; White, E. J., & Peters, M., 2011; Mercer, N., 2000; Lindfors, J. W., 1999; Sullivan, P., 2012. The current study investigates the pivotal role of discussions and students' general language proficiency as well as their total impressions toward learning English. Motivation and psychological orientation of the language seem to be key factors to learn and master another language other than their native language, Krashen (1970s-1980s). Triggering motivation and making students interested and involved in learning another language can be quite challenging. Task-based language learning seems to try to lower the stress and negative feeling most students have toward learning another language in English classes Ellis (2004). Discussions, language exchange and interactions about related topics in classes are the real and meaningful interactions students can improve their mastery of their L2 by sharing their real ,but not artificial like role plays, viewpoints. Since society is not an artificial event, related discussions can somehow pave the way to a real-life condition for acquiring a real and productive language.

METHOD

Participants

In order to have homogeneous groups the researchers arranged with the languages centres' principals and used 160 students' final grades (80 female and 80 male) from the previous semester. They selected 45 male and 45 female participants who had gained more than 70 out of 100 in their final exams. The researchers negotiated with the teachers in order to insert a 15- minute "discussion time" into these classes for one term (3 months). All selected participants were in the same level of both language schools' courses as well as the same years of attending English classes (2 years).

Instrumentation

In order to validate the data the researchers utilized two instruments in this study to collect appropriate data:

Open-ended attitudinal questionnaire: There were 2 attitudinal questions on the questionnaire sheet that the participants could answer openly. In order to provide a relaxed atmosphere, all the participants were free to answer the questions on their own time limit (and no one took more than 25 minutes). The two questions were as follow:

   a. Do you like "discussion time" in your English classes? Why or why not? Explain in detail.
   b. How do you feel about learning English when you come to "discussion time" in your English class?

Semi-Structured interview: A semi-structured interview was designed and conducted to heighten reliability and validity of the study one day after the questionnaire. The researchers offered another day for the interview because they wanted to review the answers in the questionnaire and mop up any gaps emerged through the questionnaire. In this respect, the researchers selected 20 participants from both groups (10 male and 10 female) for this process. They were interviewed two by two to feel less stressed because some of them had mentioned that they felt stressed out when they are alone to answer a question. All the participants had the same amount of time to be interviewed. There were two pre-planned question at the interview session:

a. What are the advantages and disadvantages of "discussion time" in your language classes?
b. Do you learn better through "discussion time"? How? Explain.

Procedures

Along the term the researchers visited the language schools to make sure the teachers follow the instructions they received. When the semester finished, the researchers randomly chose 70 participants (35 male and 35 female) for the open-ended questionnaire. 10 participants from each group (male and female) were left for the interview session which took place one day after the open-ended questionnaire session.

Open-ended attitudinal questionnaire administration: All the participants (35 male and 35 female) attended the open-ended questionnaire exam. They were asked to write their answers in English in order to check their general proficiency comparing to their previous term with the help of their teachers. It took less than 30 minutes for all of them to finish and deliver their questionnaire handouts.

Interview session: For the interview session, the researchers asked both groups' teachers to accompany and observe the interview in order to evaluate their students' English productivity. All of the participants were asked to attend the interview sharply one day after the open-ended questionnaire in order to analyse the data collected from the questionnaires. Participants took part two by two in the interview session in order to reduce their stress to answer the questions of the interview. Each pair had about 10-minutes interview time and they could think for 2 minutes for probable consultation in order to provide the interviewer more comprehensive answers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There was a pile of detailed data to be analyzed. The researchers first coded the data meticulously from the questionnaire and then tabulated them in tables 1 and 2. In this section of the study first female findings are discussed and then male findings will follow.

Female findings: As shown in table 1, the first factor most females (around 95%) mentioned was 'fun and friendly atmosphere' while having "discussion time". They liked the enjoyable and pleasant condition accompanied with discussion. 'stress-free speaking' ranked second and they enjoyed speaking without stress. Increasing general knowledge also played a significant role when "discussion time" is added to class time. Participants were motivated by "discussion time" and it ranked forth. The fifth factor they mentioned was 'speaking improvement'. About 80% of the participants reported that their speaking improved in "discussion time" as well as the claim of their teachers to agree with the students' reports. As a matter of facts tests and the results of tests which are scores can be the source of some negative stress, anxiety (Brown, 2004). So participants felt relieved in case of losing some scores and many of them (75%) stated this factor as a significant one. Interesting topics were another reason for the participants to love "discussion time". They cited that some of the topics in textbooks are not interesting (or socioculturally unknown to them) and sometimes boring but in "discussion time" we have various, motivating and socioculturally known topics (see codes 7 & 8 Table1.).

Table 1. Results of female open-ended attitudinal questionnaire

Codes	Percentage of female participants
1-Fun & Friendly Atmosphere	95%
2-Stress-Free Speaking	90%
3-Informative	88%
4-Motivation	85%
5-Speaking Improvement	80%
6-Score Free	75%
7- Various Motivating Topics	55%
8. Boring Topics in Textbooks	50%

Male Findings: Table 2 shows that many of the codes among males and females are to some extent similar with just a little of lower percentage in general among males but for code 1 (Fun and Friendly Atmosphere) males mentioned 1% more than females. There are two differences revealed in tables 1 & 2. First, In case of codes 3 in both tables, there is a difference among males and females. More females mentioned informative aspect of "discussion time" than males while 'score free' is more significant for males and this may indicate that females are more interested in improving their general information comparing to males who are interested in scores more but not learning. Second, in case of code 6 in both tables we notice the difference. 'Score free' is code 6 for females but it is number 3 for males and this shows that males are interested in grades more than females. Last but not least there is an interesting point shown in table 2. It is code 9 (No Book) which was mentioned by half of the males but female didn't name it at all. It seems that some male participants (50%) didn't like textbooks and liked to be free rather than be limited in the book.

Table 2. Results of male open-ended attitudinal questionnaire

Codes	Percentage for male participants
1-Fun & Friendly Atmosphere	96%
2-Stress-Free Speaking	89%
3-Score Free	84%
4-Motivation	80%
5-Speaking Improvement	75%
6-Informative	65%
7-Boring Topics in textbooks	55%
8- Various Motivating Topics	52%
9-No Book	50%

Interview results: The researchers wrote down they gist of the interviewees' claims. It is wonderful to know that the interview results mostly agreed with the questionnaire findings. Almost all of the participants (male and female) repeated the points (codes) mentioned in questionnaire answer sheets. What is interesting here to mention is that both male and female participants mentioned "speaking confidence". They claimed that they improved their confidence and risk taking power in speaking as well as they are not afraid of speaking because some of them reported that before inserting ""discussion time"" into their classes, they were scared, shy or even unaware of some topics (mentioned in the book because of sociocultural background) to start speaking in classes but after this program they improved generally because they had their own time to speak and even their culturally favorite, related topics were practiced so that they could catch up with the class discussion. Table 3. Shows the frequency of interviewees' report on confidence and risk taking power.

Table 3. Interview percentage

participants	Speaking confidence percentage	Risk-taking percentage
Female participants	100%	90%
Male participants	80%	70%

Teachers and researchers' final evaluation: Although the results of the open-ended attitudinal questionnaire and the semi-structured interview indicated many interesting point about ""discussion time"" in English classes, the researchers arranged to listen to the teachers' observations and claims according to the classes they taught based on the discussions as well as their presence in the interview time. Both teachers stated that "discussion time" revived the energy of the class and their students were delighted and joyous when it was the time of discussion. They also stated that "discussion time" project gave them opportunity to pose socioculturally familiar topics in the classes so that most of their students were more relaxed to talk because they were familiar with the topic and they had at least something to say and talk about in the classes. Another interesting point was that both teachers reported that even silent students who were not eager to take part in usual class activities, they attended class discussions in "discussion times" due to the culturally-geared topics.

At the end of the analysis, the researchers with the help of both teachers compared the participants' final grades with terms before launching the program for this study and interestingly they noticed that most of the grades have been increased between 3-8 points. This was surprising for the teachers and even the principals of both language schools.

CONCLUSION

The present study revealed that both male and female participants preferred to have ""discussion time"" in their classes because of fun and friendly atmosphere, stress-free speaking, score free, motivation, speaking improvement, informative aspect of discussions, boring topics in the books and various, motivating topics. They claimed that through "discussion time" they are motivated to interact more and they learn much better. Last but not definitely least, no one mentioned any negativities or disadvantages about "discussion time" in their classes and this shows that generally students are eager to develop their own version of English through discussion oriented classes in the process of language learning.

The result of the interview also agreed with what revealed in the open-ended attitudinal questionnaire. Confidence and risk-taking power were two more points (Table 3) to be mentioned by the interviewees. So, teachers and those who are related to English teaching in any way can insert some related free "discussion time" into their classes to improve their students' English production and even add some colors to their teaching methodologies.

Finally, particularity and practicality are main features of "discussion time" which especially give teachers (even students) opportunities to accommodate socioculturally practical topics for particular students in particular sociocultural learning contexts, Kumaravadivelu (2012).

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Finally, no one can claim that his/her research can be generalized to all possible events and participants so, the researchers now feel that it is the beginning of conducting other

aspects of this research. Some aspects that can be investigated through other research projects are suggested below:

    a. Dialogic aspect of discussions and its impact on L2 learners
    b. Correlation between free discussions and risk-taking ability
    c. Dialogic learning vs. monologic learning

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