

Understanding ESL Learner Participation from the Perspectives of Critical Learning Theories

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Abstract: English as a Second Language (ESL) learner participation in oral activities has been a concern of many. The lack of such participation is seen to be detrimental to the learning process; a notion that has been well supported by numerous studies. In the present study, the aim is to investigate the issue of ESL learner participation from the perspectives of Critical learning theories; where what has been taken for granted (i.e. learner participation) is being critically addressed. To do so, the present study investigated the forms of participation of six ESL learners during their English lessons. These learners were then interviewed to gain the reasons behind their different manner of participation.

Keywords: learner participation, Critical learning theories, ESL, in-class

INTRODUCTION

ESL Asian learners are often regarded as passive in terms of their participation in oral activities. Ghanaguru et.al (2006) label learners who do not ask questions about the

content, purpose, and ideas that are presented to them as “disengaged learners”. Some studies point to the learners’ cultural disposition as the reason for what is believed to be a detrimental behaviour in language learning (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Flowerdew & Miller, 1995). Liu (2001) has contested this large culture assumption (Holliday, 1999) and suggested that there are a number of possible reasons why learners, with reference to Asian learners, chose to be quiet in class like “the relevance of the topic under discussion, the instructor’s presentation of the material, the students’ familiarity with the subject, the students’ motivation to participate, the students’ anxiety and tolerance of risk-taking, and their speaking abilities and communicative competence” (Liu, 2001, p. 49). There is a need for further investigation of learners’ passivity in class so that in-depth insights into this behaviour could be gained rather than labelling them; which can bring negative consequences (Spack, in Clark & Gieve, 2006).

In Malaysia, there are various reasons why learners are quiet in class. Maizatulliza (2008) points out that there is a tendency for English teaching in Malaysia to put priority on accuracy rather than on the ability to use the language in a manner that is socially acceptable. In terms of participation in oral activities, it could be suggested that the teacher’s focus on the accuracy of forms would somehow restrict learner participation. Tsui (1996) in her study on reticence among Asian ESL learners finds that the participants in her study are afraid of making mistakes and being negatively judged by the teacher. Thus, she advances that a teacher who constantly corrects the learners’ errors and sets high expectations might hinder her learners’ participation in oral activities. Safinas (2006) in her study on Malaysian ESL classroom discourse claims that the focal students reported that they chose to be quiet due to reasons such as waiting for others to respond, feeling afraid that their answers were wrong and thus they might be laughed at by their classmates, and giving the chance for other less capable peers to answer. Safinas (2006) suggests that learners are very aware of and sensitive to the norms and expectations that prevail in a particular classroom, and that most of the time their participation is geared towards accommodating

these classroom norms and expectations.

This study is interested in interrogating some basic assumptions about ESL learner participation. The dominant view held regarding ESL learner participation (that stems from the cognitive view of learning, as well as some lineages of the sociocultural theory of learning) is that it has to be in the form of oral engagement, it results in gains in linguistic competence such as knowledge of the formal system of lexis, morphology, syntax, and phonology (Politzer & McGroarty, 1985). In the present study, the issue of learner participation will be investigated from the perspective of Critical learning theories (Block, 2007; Norton, 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2004; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004; Peirce, 1995; Pennycook, 2001).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Critical language learning theories (Block, 2007; Norton, 2000; Norton & Toohey, 2004; Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004; Peirce, 1995; Pennycook, 2001) are helpful in explaining learner participation in classroom activities. Pennycook (2001) declares that “a crucial component of critical work is always turning a sceptical eye towards assumptions, ideas that have become ‘naturalised’, notions that are no longer questioned” (p. 7). To illustrate, ESL learner participation in classroom activities have been taken for granted where learners are often labelled as passive when they are reluctant to participate orally. However, by adopting the Critical language learning theories, learner participation will be critically addressed.

In Critical learning theories, learners are seen as having agency. Ahern (2001) in her discussion of agency, defines it as “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act”...where “all action is socioculturally mediated, both in its production and its interpretation” (p. 121). Lantolf and Thorne (2006) caution that agency is not to be mistaken with free will, independent thinking, or an inborn trait. It is also not something that is developed autonomously, free from the influence of other

social beings. Agency is formed as one participates in any practice that is rich with historical, cultural, and social elements. What one does and how others construe the act are embedded in the sociocultural context. In critical language learning theories, learner participation is addressed in a complex way. So, when learners participate, it is a way of them exercising their agency in a particular social practice. The various forms of participation - oral and non-oral - are all significant in their process of learning a second language.

In the context of the present study, the ESL learners are seen as having agency. By embracing the importance of agency, it also means that the traditional view of learners as passive recipients of knowledge is also rejected. Learner agency is a significant factor that has to be acknowledged in an attempt to gain an understanding of learner inclination towards participation of different types. Lantolf and Pavlenko state that “learners actively engage in constructing the terms and conditions of their own learning” (2001, p. 145). In their view, when learners decide to participate in a learning activity, their actions have significance. According to them “It is agency that links motivation...to action and defines a myriad of paths taken by the learners” (ibid.). This is an important insight in an attempt to understand learner participation. Their participation cannot be seen as a routine that is linked to various internal factors like language aptitude, motivation, personality, and anxiety (Ellis, 2008). Learner participation and agency are intertwined. This important relationship shapes the way learners participate as they encounter learning opportunities.

THE STUDY

6 ESL learners (2 males: AZR and SKR and 4 females: THN, SKR, NS, and HM) from a sub-urban school participated in this study. They were in Form Four (aged around 16 years old). They were selected using convenience sampling, where it did not have a clear strategy and participants were chosen based on ease of access (Patton, 2002). All these learners

were high achievers in the PMR as they scored As in almost all subjects. However, their result for the English subject varied from A to C.

This study adopts a case study approach. Yin (1994) states this approach can be used when a study seeks to answer “how” and “why” questions and the contextual conditions are considered important. This study of ESL learner participation seeks to explore the types of participation and the factors that influence the participation, seeking answers to the “how” and “why” questions. More importantly, learner participation could not be considered without the context; in this study, the in-class setting. 6 classroom observations were conducted. After each observation, an interview was done to gain an understanding of the issue of learner participation from the perspectives of the learners themselves.

FINDINGS

The findings of the study suggest that the 6 learners’ forms of participation can be divided into 2 types. The first type involves them participating in the manner that is being dictated by the teacher. The second type is the various manner of participation that learners chose in their own accord. For this particular ESL classroom, the most common forms of participation are using dictionary, reading, listening, responding orally, and working on tasks. Hence, the findings below are divided into two types: dictated by the teacher and learners’ own choice.

Using Dictionary

Dictated by the teacher

During a group work activity, HM said the teacher read out ten words from a passage. They were told to underline these words and look for their meanings in the dictionary. On many occasions, the teacher told learners to look for the meanings of words while she was explaining the content of the lessons.

Observation Notes/1a: *“The teacher explained the first stanza of the poem. She asked for the meaning of ‘soaky’. There was no answer. She told the learners to use the dictionary.”*

Learners’ own choice

Sometimes learners used the dictionary on their own initiative. To illustrate, HM described what she and her partner did while answering a worksheet: *“First I read the passage, then we underlined the difficult words...there were 4...she looked for the meaning of two words and I another two words”* (HM INT 2/IN).

Reading

Dictated by the teacher

The learners reported engaging in reading aloud. Several times, they read aloud when they were nominated by the teacher. Throughout the six lessons, the teacher asked them to read out meaning of words from the dictionary, short excerpts, and stanzas from poems.

Learners’ own choice

All six learners spoke about engaging in silent reading. Most of the time, they read silently without being instructed by the teacher. To illustrate, AZR said he read the synopsis of a poem written on a poster soon after the teacher pasted it on the whiteboard. Some of these learners said they read silently, following their friends who were asked by the teacher to read aloud to the whole class.

NS’s engagement is quite different. Instead of following her friends, she said she used this opportunity to read other parts of the passages as she was trying to answer the comprehension questions. NS explained, *“Because the teacher gave only 10 minutes to read the whole passages...I didn’t have enough time...I’m a bit slow to understand...that’s why I read the passages again while the others were reading”* (NS INT 2/IN). In this instance, the learner engaged in silent

reading to further understand the material.

Listening

The six learners in this study often engaged in listening; which is commonly construed as ‘passive’ behaviour. Nevertheless, the learners themselves had good reasons for engaging in this manner; which they did at their own accord. To exemplify, on the day the class had a lesson on report writing, AZR said he listened to the teacher’s explanation while thinking about the previous lessons that he had experienced on the same topic. Another learner, TRK, explained that while listening to the teacher’s explanation of speech writing, she imagined herself giving a speech and what she would say. She went on, “*I was in my mind thinking...by the time she was explaining how to begin and how to introduce yourself, I was thinking if I am the one who giving the speech, how I want to do the beginning, how to introduce*” (TRK INT 1/IN). THN (INT 2/IN) reported she listened attentively while the teacher explained a poem because she had difficulties understanding it when she read it on her own at home.

Responding Orally

In this study, learners talked about providing oral responses either individually or in chorus. Findings show that most of their oral participation is their responses to the teacher’s instruction. In many occasions, however, they chose to keep quiet.

Dictated by the teacher

Individual oral responses were given when the learners were nominated by the teacher to answer. AZR said when the teacher asked the class for the reasons for bullying, he “*just whispered*” (INT 1/IN). AZR gave two reasons why he did not answer loudly. First, he was afraid that his answer might be wrong. Second, he admitted feeling shy as he was a new

student in the class.

These learners also reported providing oral responses in chorus. This happened when the teacher posed questions to the whole class. AZR stated that he preferred to answer individually than in chorus. He explained, “...if I answer in group...there'll be many other answers...the teacher couldn't hear my answer” (INT 2/IN).

Learners' own choice

Without being called by the teacher, findings show that the learners chose to keep quiet in class. This is due to several reasons.

AZR said he could not understand the questions and that he “had to listen carefully to understand the teacher” (INT 1/IN). Similarly, THN said she was quiet and did not attempt to answer the teacher's questions on bullying because the topic was new to her. She compared this to when they had a lesson on the topic ‘Teachers’ where she said she was more active because she had knowledge on it. She recounted, “Last week, the lesson was about ‘Teachers’...something that I know well, but yesterday was about bully...when we discussed about bully, it was the first time for me, so it was quite difficult for me” (THN INT 1/IN). TRK had the same experience when the teacher taught them a poem. She stated, “I do not know what the thing is all about... how can I participate when I do not know what it is all about” (INT 2/IN).

Four learners: HM, THN, TRK, and NS claimed that the teacher's pedagogic strategies were the reasons for them not to participate orally as expected by her. TRK said when the teacher discussed answers for the tasks that they worked on, she wanted to volunteer and give the answer. Yet, she said the teacher called upon another learner to respond, TRK explained: “...when I want to volunteer my group and myself...but at that time teacher was speaking...she called people to answer...so I did not volunteer” (INT 1/IN).

Another learner, THN, gave a different reason for being quiet. She said the teacher did not give ample time for her

to think of the answer to the question posed. She clarified, *"I tried to find the answer, but teacher talked too fast. I still looking for the answer, teacher already gave the answer"* (INT 3/IN). NS said she did not participate because the teacher was looking for a specific answer. She continued: *"Because the teacher wanted to get the answer 'snatch' from us...she said the answer started with 's'...even if I gave my answer, there was no point for it because it was not the answer that the teacher was looking for"* (NS INT 2/IN). HM reported her limited English proficiency as the reason for her non-participation. HM (INT 2/IN) recounted that when the teacher asked for the meaning of 'Society at Risk', she did not answer the question even though she understood the phrase because she could not explain it in English.

Several learners said they did not take part in choral responses. NS said she did not give her answer. She explained that, *"Because the others already answered...so I just let them answer"* (INT 2/IN). NS also claimed that her answer was similar to the answer given by her friends; thus she felt she did not have to participate. Somewhat similar to NS's answer, TRK (INT 2/IN) said she did not provide an answer in chorus because she said her classmates had already given the answer, thus she questioned, *"Why should I?"*

There are also other reasons that learners gave for their non-participation. NS, for example, said she was quiet only during English lessons. Nevertheless, she described herself as "attentive" (NS INT 1/IN) and that she said she was active during Mathematics lessons because it was her favourite subject. SKR said he was quiet in class because it was his character. He explained that he was also quiet at home and that being the only son in the family, he said, *"I just do my own things. I only talk to them (his four sisters and parents) when it is necessary"* (INT 2/IN).

Working on Tasks

In the six lessons observed, the learners engaged in working on tasks, in which they were instructed to work in small

groups, in pairs, and also individually. Out of six lessons that I observed, group activities were held in five lessons. From observations and personal communication with the teacher, it could be concluded that her main objective for having learners to work in pairs and in small groups was to create the opportunities for them to interact in the target language. However, interviews with the learners show that they hardly used English during these activities. This shows that while working on tasks, these learners most often participated in the manner of their own choice; not as expected by the teacher.

To illustrate, when being asked about the language that he and his friends used during a group work, AZR answered, *"A bit of English...lot of Bahasa Melayu"* (AZR INT 1/IN). TRK confessed that she and her friends were *"acting like good students"* (TRK INT/3) because she said they used Tamil during the group work and would only use English when the teacher came near them. On several occasions, some learners said they worked individually even though the teacher told them to work in pairs. NS explained that she chose to work alone because the questions were relatively simple and thus she could answer them on her own.

Two learners, AZR and NS, reported that they did not participate in the class activities because they were newcomers to the classroom community. AZR was concerned about observing and learning how things were done in the class. He explained his lack of participation: *"I didn't know whether they are the quiet type...like serious or playful... because this is a good class...so I need to know all that first before I could join the class"* (INT 2/IN). NS described her group members as *"not my friends"* because she said she had only been with them for 3 weeks and that she did not know them well.

The presence of a dominant peer also caused learners not to participate during group work. AZR claimed he experienced this when he worked with several boys. He said the others in the group were good in English and that *"they answered most of the questions"* (INT 2/IN) and that one boy in particular dominated the discussion. AZR described, *"He*

read the question...then he straight away gave the answer... most of the time, we just accepted his answers” (INT 2/IN).

DISCUSSION

From the Critical learning theories, learners are not seen as passive individuals. Instead, they are viewed as active agents, who are capable of making decisions, for example either to participate or not in an activity. In the context of the present study, findings indicate that the six learners are active agents, where they constantly made decisions on what to engage with and how, acted on the norms and expectations that were imposed on them in a particular socialcultural context.

In the present study, on the surface of it, the learners seemed to display less agency in the classroom as they often appeared to be quiet and obedient in class. However, by listening to what they had to say about their manner of participation, one could conclude that they were actually exercising their agency in class. Classroom for them is the place where formal learning takes place, and it is ruled by the teacher. Within the allocated time, these learners strived to make the best of it. Similarly, a study by Razianna (2003) on successful ESL learners in several Malaysian boarding schools highlights how these students see classroom learning as the context where the main agenda is to prepare them for the examination. In any classroom, neither the students nor the teacher acts independently of a school's routines and expectations. In the classroom investigated, the learners' main purpose to learn English is to do well in the examination and the teacher's focus on preparing them for the examination seems to suit their needs well. For them, learning the language is not so much about engaging in oral activities, as has been espoused in cognitive SLA. It is about doing well in the examination that focuses on two skills: reading and writing. Thus, it could be concluded that their different forms of participation are displays of their agency in the pursuits of attaining their academic goals.

Learners also do not act independently of the immediate social context. They are conscious of their surrounding and the consequences of their actions as members of the classroom community. For newcomers: AZR and NS, their decisions were made based on their concern to be accepted in the classroom community. At times, they chose not to participate in order to observe the classroom culture.

Findings show that participation is about engaging in the manner that learners think is the best and most benefitting in a particular time and setting. This means that participation requires active decision making by the learners themselves. The form of engagement that learners choose might be viewed as “passive” by others (e.g. the teacher), such as when learners decide to keep quiet in class. However, this is actually the result of the interplay between the learners’ acting as active decision makers and the norms and expectations in a particular community that they are in.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings from this study have shown that learners are active decision makers in the classroom. It is important that teachers are aware of this. Although active participation in oral activities is sought after in any L2 context; it is crucial to acknowledge that other forms of participation will also benefit the learners as these are made based on what matter to them as individuals as well as members of the classroom community. It is also equally important that teachers avoid labelling their learners as “passive students”. As learners might not be active participants in oral activities for various reasons such as shown in the findings, they are actually actively making decisions about what matters to them in their pursuit to learn the language.

Findings also indicate that the teacher seemed to focus on preparing the learners for the coming national examination. While an examination is inevitable in a formal system, teachers need to break away from thinking that their sole responsibility is to prepare learners for the examination (Gieve & Miller, 2006). They need to perceive teaching as helping learners to learn: to help them expand and enhance

their existing knowledge, understanding and skills. Related to the teacher's focus on the examination, is the tendency to place primacy on teaching point (Allwright, 2005), or teaching objective as the unit for lesson planning and evaluation. The findings reveal that the teacher sometimes had to rush the lesson so that she could cover the teaching points that she had earlier set. Instead of using teaching point, Allwright (ibid) suggests the use of learning opportunity as a unit of analysis. In advancing this idea, he (ibid.) argues that he is not suggesting that planning should be abandoned, but he is wary of the kind of planning that involves specific learning outcomes at the expense of the rich learning opportunities that might emerge from a lesson. This might sound too idealistic for many ESL teachers in Malaysia as the reality of the situation is that these teachers are largely bound by a nationally prescribed curriculum. Therefore, instead of abandoning planning according to teaching points, the teacher can try to be more sensitive towards learners' contributions in a lesson. Goodwin (2007, as cited in Waring, 2009) talks about "occasioned" knowledge exploration where children seem to learn best when their curiosity is being answered in situ. To illustrate, a learner might have given a wrong answer to the teacher's question. Instead of just telling her that it is wrong, what the teacher can do is to use the response as a learning opportunity, by encouraging contributions from others, and expanding on these contributions. Hawkins (2007) describes a successful ESL class as the one that the teacher will first "bend[ed] towards the students" to grasp their understanding before getting the students to "converge[d] towards her own expert understanding" (as cited in Waring, 2009, p. 816).

Teachers should realise that they, themselves, constitute learning resources. For these learners, the classroom is the main avenue where they had the opportunity to have contact with a proficient speaker of English, i.e. the teacher. In this context, the teacher is not only transmitting knowledge, she is also a model of language use. Therefore, the teacher needs to create an environment where the learners would feel comfortable enough to participate in oral activities as they lacked this type of opportunity in their everyday lives. Increasing wait time could be one of the ways as findings from

this study showed that one of the factors why learners resorted to silence was they did not have enough time to think of an answer to the teacher's question and then construct it in the target language. Teachers need to be more sensitive towards the factors that might impinge on learner participation in classroom activities, especially those that involve speaking skills. Although some teachers are well aware of the above mentioned factor and this finding is not something new in the Malaysian context, there is a need for them to address this matter and even try to work together with learners to deal and hopefully overcome this problem.

CONCLUSION

The findings from this study show that learner participation is a complex issue. However, it has often been taken for granted and the fact that too much emphasis has been given on oral participation has made other forms of participation (especially silence) being frowned upon. Findings from this study also show that these learners, given the chance to articulate their engagement with the learning resources, are able to describe and provide 'stories' behind their various types of engagement, and understanding the issue from the view of Critical learning theories has given insights from the other side of the coin.

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