

Students' Attitudes towards Teachers' using Activities in EFL class

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Abstract

This study investigated the students' attitudes towards activities used in an EFL classroom in one Thai university. The research participants include the students of first year (bachelor students of medical and engineering faculties) who had studied public speaking subject as their minor in second semester. The data was collected through class observations and semi structured interviews. In classroom observations, EFL learners' perceptions and satisfactions on their teacher using class activities were recorded in the field-notes and questions related to EFL learners' attitudes in target language learning based on certain factors that include better teaching strategies, classroom activities and social environment that can help reduce or change negative attitudes were asked through interview. This study found promising results on the students' attitudes towards teacher using activities. More than half of the participants regarded teacher's using activities that determined their success in language learning. However, less than half of the participants showed dissatisfying factor that related to the EFL teacher using humor on their cultures as the part of his teaching. This research paves a way for future research by indicating issues and questions for researchers to address.

Key Words

Students' attitudes, EFL learners, Classroom activities, Target language, Use of humors

Introduction

This paper is based on the findings from a research examining the students' attitudes towards EFL teacher using activities at one Thai University. Different strategies in terms of class activities used by teachers were widely discussed in then time in order to know the target learners' attitudes. For example, Byram (2000) explained that in the late seventeenth century, the main aim of teachers was teaching grammar rather than communication. Thus, translation was the means of teaching. Students were provided with lists of words to translate sentences in order to understand the grammar. However, Hawkins (1981) mentioned that the appeal for new

teaching strategies increased after the late nineteenth and in the early twentieth indicating that the words should be associated directly with objects and thinking in target language. For example, Candlin and Mercer (2001) examined that attitudes of language learners towards the EFL activities, its speakers and the learning situation all play its role in describing their success or failure. This study begins with a brief overview that follows a brief literature review section explaining about the learners' attitudes towards class activities. Then, the method used for data collection, and data analysis is employed. In the method section, information is given about the engineering and medical faculties of one Thai university learners participating in this study. In short, the results of this study are presented that follow discussion and recommendations section for further research. However, the study ends with conclusion based on analysed data.

Literature Review

This study indicates the target learners' perceptions related to language learning that follow their teachers using different activities in the classroom. Many studies were conducted regarding learners' attitudes towards teaching target language. For example, Franklin, (1990); Macaro, (1997); Dickson, (1996); Swain and Lapkin, (2000); Scott and de la Fuente, (2008) believe using L1 in the classroom in order to make teaching and learning in a natural context by applying positive learning strategy through activities.

Hawkey, R. (2006) presented language education reform project, carried out in Italy where he found differences between learners' and teachers' perceptions on activities in foreign language classes. The study further explored the target language teachers and learners both agreed on teaching methods that varied from communicative approach to language teaching having differences in them over grammar and pair work activities in the class.

Nunan (1989) argues about a 'hidden agenda' that is taken for granted by learners to enhance their target language for their professional needs. He further explained that learners like corrective feedback for their either individual or pair work activities, preferred by teachers highly in the classes, yet there are greater differences between learners and teachers on class activities that include pair work, error correction and learner self discovery of errors. Supporting Nunan, Peacock's (1998) study evidenced that the attitude of students is detrimental to language learning. Comparing 64 percent of learners with 7 percent of teachers, his study believed that learning a language in EFL class means learning a grammar and its rules with wide range of class activities, initiated by L2 teachers for FL learners in order to enhance their motivation and practice actively.

This study aims to develop an understanding by explaining the relationship between FL learners' attitudes towards activities and teachers initiate those activities in their classrooms. The main research question is not whether EFL students support activities but whether EFL students actively participate in these activities. Thus, the following research question helps frame the study.

1. What are the learners' attitudes towards teachers using activities in EFL classes?

Method

Two methods have been applied for data collection: semi structured interviews and class observations. The students' attitudes towards teachers using activities in EFL and FL classes have been investigated through all these two methods.

Participants

Eight (of 12) first year university students at *Greenland University* (*Greenland University* is a pseudonym of one Thai university) agreed to participate in the study. Of these, 1 was Thai, 3 Pakistani, 2 Nepalese, 1 student from Japan, and 1 student from Philippine.

Data Collection

Classroom Observations

The researchers followed Edwards and Talbot (1999) on classroom observations and observed the participants during their learning in public speaking class by the English speaking teacher, teaching EFL. A total of three observations made and information was collected, recorded in field-notes and was interpreted later according to the suggestion of O'Leary (2004).

Semi-structured Interview

The researchers followed Spradley's (1979) design for interview and conducted interviews of eight participants. The researchers applied a series of open ended questions. All interviews were audio recorded and were transcribed later.

Data Analysis

Transcribed semi structure interviews data and classroom observations field-notes were analyzed and coded using Shank's (2002) open coding method. Collected information was divided into categories based on participants' responses in the interview questions and researchers' field-notes of triangulated observations were identified, read, comprehended, and used to find out both learners' negative and positive attitudes towards classroom activities and teachers method used in the class. The data reveals how participants show their attachment to the class activities and how their perceptions towards teachers' methods groom or affect their learning.

The results part is divided into five sub-sections. These sub-sections are: (1) teacher's different teaching techniques at *Greenland University*, (2) Students' positive attitude towards class activities, (3) Students' negative attitude towards activities, (4) Students' positive perception of teacher using humor in classroom, and (5) Students' negative perception of teacher using humor in classroom.

Results

Teacher's different teaching techniques at Greenland University

Albert (a British teacher) applied multiple techniques to teach EFL students at *Greenland University*. His teaching techniques varied in terms of activities and assignment of the students studying public speaking subject in EFL class in order to cope with the daily conversational situations and meet with the work-world organizations. In EFL class, Albert assigned various spoken tasks to the FL students that matched with the real life situations. He asked students to do either as an individual or in pair work. Some time students were asked to work in group but to act individually in the class by using multimedia, internet; audio or video presentations or sometimes they are called for extempore speeches. However, Albert assisted them with

handouts and sometimes through lectures. He corrected students, sometimes in the beginning or in the mid or in the end of each student's performance.

In short, Albert used humors on cultures of the students; belong to different countries or nationalities as the part of his teaching in order to draw learners' attention towards his teachings. Before applying a sense of humor at any student, Albert, at first used humor at his culture as the students may not feel something wrong.

Students' positive attitudes towards class activities

All 8 participants were asked to express their perceptions of teacher's teaching techniques for classroom activities. The data revealed that these participants differed widely in their attitudes towards teacher's using wide range of activities in the class. Almost 6 of participants were positive about teacher's activities, considered these as beneficial for them to develop their confidence for playing their roles to participate actively in the classroom. All these students regarded classroom activities as the tools that enable them to cope with the communicative problems for their future at their work-world organizations. These all 6 participants (Khan, Noor, Taha, Num, David and Akito) possessed same views regarding use of activities. For example three Pakistani students said:

I like activities because these grow my interest and build confidence to act according to the situations of daily life. I actively participate in these activities. (Khan)

I like classroom activities very much and participate either in pairs or group works because through these I can develop my confidence, and become bold to speak before other people without hesitation. (Noor)

Classroom activities engage us and increase our knowledge in different ways. I think these activities make us active to study by participating in presentations or in other tasks. (Taha)

Three participants include David a Philippines, Num a Thai and Akito Japanese reported the same as three Pakistani students. They said:

Albert motivates us to speak in target language in order to overcome nervousness and hesitation. (Num)

In every class we are provided with wide range of presentations activities on different topics. (Akito)

I like activities including his error correction, grammar correction and guidance to use correct words according to the situation. Thus, I participate actively and support classroom activities. (David)

In short, Khan, Noor, Taha, Num, Akito and David were satisfied with the activities used in EFL classroom. They similarly found activities beneficial for them to enhance their learning effectively.

Students' negative attitude towards activities

However, less than half of the participants (two Nepalese students Anchal and Arti) disagreed with their colleagues' opinions. They thought that teacher's activities are no more beneficial for them in FL learning class. They further explained that they participated in activities because their FL teacher has made presentation activities compulsory for the whole class as a part of his teaching.

I like activities but the use of FL creates problems for us to speak. It seems hard for us and we hesitate and feel nervousness when we are called for presentations. I think students can play well in their mother tongue instead of English in the class presentation. Teacher should give choice of using mother tongue or English to the students in class activities. (Anchal)

The second Nepalese student, Arti also disagreed with the use of classroom activities. She commented;

I do not like teachers' activities in terms of classroom presentation and other tasks which are given as individual work. I feel bore and hesitated to do individually. I like pair work and group tasks. So EFL teacher should not make these activities compulsory for students.

Students' positive perception of teacher using humor in classroom

Majority (6 Of 8) of the participants demonstrated their positive perceptions toward teacher's use of humor as the part of his teaching strategy over different cultures of different countries. (Khan) a Pakistani student said, "I Think students learn different cultures through these jokes". A Philippine student (David) and two Pakistani students (Taha and Noor) also considered humor as the positive approach for learning in a language class. David said, "Jokes energize the tired students and refresh them to pay attention to the classroom activities". (Num) a Thai student added, "Jokes on different nationalities enhance their learning to deal with international friends". (Akito) a Japanese student said;

I am not so serious about the use of jokes but some may think it's funny. Some may think it offend them. Joke is the real life situation and it gives us an aspect of life how people look us and what they feel about us. We can improve ourselves and understand what they feel and like how we act toward them.

In short, the excerpts taken from the interviews of participants exemplified why these students liked their teacher using humor in class activities.

Students' negative perceptions of teacher using humor in classroom

However, less than half of participants (two Nepalese students) considered negative effects of humors on different cultures of the students in class activities. A Nepali Student (Arti) explained, "Jokes of the teacher on them cause discouragement and poor performance in class". Another Nepali student (Anchal) added;

I dislike jokes on students in the class. Before joking on any student's culture, teacher must be equipped with cultural awareness and real information regarding that particular student's culture before performing in class.

In brief, both participants expressed their dissatisfaction with the teacher using humor in class activities.

Discussion and Recommendations

The results of this study revealed that the use of activities was an unavoidable phenomenon in EFL class. The majority of students' perception of activities appeared to be systematic, though there were less than half of students did not make the best use of it. The EFL teacher was aware

of the advantages of the excessive use of class activities include pair work or group work using English language depended on their specific needs.

Moreover, the classroom observations revealed some situations for which the teachers used presentations activities in excess. Explaining grammatical terms, introducing new vocabulary and correcting their style of presenting the topic were the main areas for employing these activities. Despite the teacher's flexibility in using humours in some situations, Albert a British teacher at *Greenland University* was lenient and allowed his students to ask questions if they needed. Speaking of the students' interest in participating the class activities, the majority of the students were in favour of the systematic use of presentation activities include pair work or group work, and they expressed their desire to practice the new language. The researchers suggested the following recommendations after studying the analyzed data and transcribed interviews.

1. Should EFL Teachers allow students to use both L1 and L2 in class activities for better understanding and better performance?
2. Should Teachers use cultural humors in the EFL or FL class as the part of their teaching?

In short, it is recommended that further studies be undertaken on larger scales to develop more understanding of students' attitudes towards teachers applying activities in EFL classrooms. Moreover, this study could encourage further research to investigate the relationship between using activities and students' motivation for participating on one hand and between EFL teachers' using wide range of activities and promoting learners' interest on the other hand. This present study could help educators and EFL curriculum developers to publish guidelines for teachers and students on applying classroom activities.

Conclusion

To conclude, the researchers found that in spite of the majority of students positive belief on teacher's using different techniques for classroom activities, EFL teacher cannot ignore the students disagreeing over the use of target language instead of mother tongue. These findings were in line with the argument that referring to mother tongue is a natural phenomenon (Atkinson, 1987; Scott and de la Fuente, 2008). In short, teachers play main role in imparting students' education using a variety of attractive teaching strategies and shaping students' attitudes positively towards EFL learning.

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