External Factors Influencing Student Interaction in Oral English Language Classes

Nguyễn Hương Ngọc[1], Nguyễn Vân Thịnh[2]

[1]Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration
[2]Ha Long University

Abstract
External factors influencing student interaction in oral English language classes are very important and at Thai Nguyen University of Economics and Business Administration (TUEBA), it is not an exception. Classroom interaction here is observed to be quite low with a large number of students finding it hard to interact with their teachers and classmates; therefore, it is extremely necessary to conduct this research with the aim of investigating external factors affecting Vietnamese student interaction in their oral EFL (English as Foreign Language) classes and seeking appropriate solutions to help students improve their oral EFL classroom interaction. The findings of this study suggest that the primary external factors influencing student interaction include classroom apprehension, instructors and classroom climate. Additionally, the findings also reveal some solutions which are perceived by participating students to help improve classroom interaction at TUEBA. In light of these findings, the paper discusses relevant topics and offers insightful suggestions for teaching and learning practice as well as directions for further research in this area.

I. Introduction

In every foreign language classroom, both teachers and students are trying to create a learning environment in order to improve communicative language teaching and learning. Language classrooms can be seen as sociolinguistic environments (Cazden, 1988) and discourse communities (Hall and Verplaetse, 2000) in which interaction is thought to be one of the key elements contributing to learners' language development. As a result, interaction arouses a lot of concern in language teaching and learning area. Talking about the importance of interaction, Brown (2001, p. 165) states that "in the era of communicative language teaching, interaction is, in fact, the heart of communication; it is what communication is all about". Interaction is really important; especially, it plays a significant role in language teaching and learning. Obviously, through interaction with each other, teachers and students construct a common body of knowledge. They also create mutual understandings of their roles and relationships, the norms and expectations of their involvement as members in their classrooms (Hall & Walsh, 2002, p. 187). It can be said that interaction is always important, especially in language classes where teachers and learners altogether set a goal to master English communication.

To meet the needs of improving students' ability of interaction, language teaching seems to have made great progress. "The boring and mechanical exercise types which were so common ten for fifteen years ago have virtually disappeared, to be replaced by a splendid variety of exciting and engaging practice activities" (Swan, 1985, p. 2). A revolution in English language teaching has occurred since the appearance of a new approach named "communicative language teaching". Now teachers spend more time to create activities, and students are engaged in pair work, group work to improve their interaction. To catch up with the new trends in language teaching, Vietnam is trying to launch reforms in education step by step. Teachers, for example, are investing time and effort to help students improve their English communication ability; many activities are created to develop student interaction not only in classrooms but also in other situations. However, it can be said, English language teaching in Vietnam mainly focuses on grammar and vocabulary. Textbooks contain a lot of grammar exercises and there is not enough time for students to take part in oral activities. Moreover, the testing and assessment system in Vietnam is primarily concentrated on grammar, vocabulary and reading ability, for example, in the national tests, speaking and listening skills were not measured. This partly explains the reason why interaction, one of the very important parts in learning a language, does not seem to improve effectively in Vietnam.

II. Methodology

Quantitative research is a suitable and effective method. In terms of advantages, it helps obtain exact and quantifiable answers from the broad themes found during the focus group. Also, quantitative research is a structured process that allows obtaining statistically reliable data. The questions in quantitative research are close-ended, which give us definite answers for the research questions. Back to this study, the researcher wants to use exact numeric data to show how some internal and external factors influence students' interaction ability and how they perceive some solutions to improve interaction.

Research questions

Question 1: What are the external factors perceived by students to influence student interaction in oral EFL classes?

Question 2: What are possible solutions perceived by students to help them improve their interaction in oral EFL classes?

Sampling method

To carry out the survey, the researcher used Simple Random Sampling as a method to collect data. Simple random sampling is considered as a probability sampling procedure that gives every element in the target population, and each possible sample of a given size, an equal chance of being selected.

In this study, the university has about 1000 freshmen, out of whom 300 students will be chosen randomly as a representative sample. In details, students at TUEBA come from different regions in the north and central coast of Vietnam; for example, mountainous regions like Cao Bang, Bac Kan, Lang Son, Lao Cai; delta regions like Bac Giang, Bac Ninh, and Hai Duong. Although most of them are around 19 and 20 years old, their English proficiency levels vary.

Research Instrument: Questionnaire Survey

To conduct this survey, a questionnaire was created to find out the factors influencing student interaction in EFL oral classes. Questionnaire is an appropriate research instrument in this present study because of its strengths. A questionnaire "permits the collection of reliable and reasonably valid data relatively simply, cheaply and in a short space of time" (Anderson, 1990, p. 207).

In this part, both the general and specific external factors were investigated; they were all about *timing*, *class size*, *seating arrangement* and *instructor & classroom climate*.

III. Findings And Discussion

Out of all the given external factors, *instructor* and *classroom climate* were perceived to be definitely the two primary factors with more than 80% chosen. This result emphasizes the teacher's roles in a language classroom.

Table 1.1: General External Factors

General internal factors	Responses	
	N	Percent of cases (%)
Instructor	234	81.8
Classroom climate	232	81.1
Timing	146	51.0
Class size	60	21.0
Seating arrangement	40	14.0
Others	8	2.8

(*Source: Authors' calculation*)

As can be seen from the table, *timing* is chosen by about half of the students. Therefore, it should be paid attention to create an interactive class. In terms of class size, although it is always very large in TUEBA with about 60 students per class, *class size* makes up only 21% of the 286 students. In terms of *seating arrangements*, because there are many students in each class, the tables and chairs are arranged traditionally in rows with about 8 students in each row. This kind of seating arrangement makes it hard to organize interactive activities; however, *seating arrangement* was perceived to be the least important factor with only 40 students (14%) thought that the current way of arrange chairs and tables in the classes influences their interaction.

Beside the above factors, some students presented other factors. Firstly, it is *the English teaching and learning method*. According to the information specified by one of the students, Vietnam education does not focus on communication, it is shown on the tests which mainly evaluate reading and writing skill; therefore, this situation leads to poor interaction in English oral classes. This student also emphasized that she does not like this reality and she really wants to study in an international school where English communicative competence is appreciated. Secondly, some other students stated *classroom policies* as an external factor. They admitted that they would interact more if it counts toward their final grades. Giving extra marks for students is a good way to

stimulate classroom interaction. By this way, many students will be more attentive and hardworking. Thirdly, *weather* was perceived to be another factor which was mentioned by some respondents because of the fact that it is inconvenient to interact in the bad weather.

In terms of Teacher-Student interaction, nearly a half of the students (46.7%) agreed that *large class size* influences their interaction with the teacher negatively and about one third of the respondents (30.7%) disagreed with this statement. Although the gap between agreeing and disagreeing is not extremely much in quantity, class size is a factor which should be solved to increase classroom interaction.

Table 1.2: Factors Influencing Teacher-Student Interaction
(as perceived by students)

No	Statement	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
1 2	The large class size with about 60 students makes it hard to interact with the teacher.	30.7%	22.7%	46.7%
	Class time is not at my optimal-time-of-day so I am not interested in interacting.	26.8%	36.9%	36.2%
3	The current classroom arrangement is not suitable to interact with the teacher.	42.7%	30.0%	27.3%
4	When the classroom activities are interesting, I am more interested in interacting with the lecturer.	8.0%	24.2%	67.8%
5	When the lecturer motivates me, I like to interact more with her/him.	34%	31.3%	34.6%
6	When the lecturer knows my name, I want to interact more with him/her.	62%	18.7%	19.3%

(*Source: Authors' calculation*)

Timing in TUEBA is sometimes not convenient for students; therefore, it affects approximately one third of the students involved. In terms of the *current classroom arrangement*, only 27% agreed that they find it difficult to interact with the teacher while a half of the participants believed that it does not affect teacher-student interaction.

In comparison with classroom arrangement and class time, large class size is the most dominating factor which influences teacher-student interaction. Besides those three factors, the two remaining ones were checked in three statements to point out whether the students interact more with the teacher or not. As can be seen, the sixth statement in this table shows students' expectation of interesting classroom activities. The majority of the students, accounting for 67.5%, believe that interesting activities increase their interaction with teachers.

In regards to extrinsic motivation, in contrast with the researcher's prediction, only 34.6% agreed that when the lecturer motivates the students, they will interact with her/him more. The same number of the students (34%) involved in the study disagreed with this statement. In addition, the table also shows that knowing the student names or not does not change the student level of interaction much with 186 students (62%) disagreed with the sixth statement. Although knowing name shows the teacher's consideration to the students, only 19.3% of the total students are motivated to interact more. It can be said that, motivating is not a really effective method to increase interaction.

Regarding Student-Student Interaction, Table 1.3 below presents the external factors with a similar impact to both teacher-student interaction and student-student interaction.

Table 1.3: Factors Influencing Student-Student Interaction

No	Statement	Disagree	Neutral	Agree
1	The class size is large with about 60 students makes it hard to interact with my classmates	32.7%	29.3%	38.1%
2	The classroom arrangement (tables, chairs) is not suitable to interact with my classmates	38.6%	30.4%	31.1%
3	Class time is not at my optimal-time-of-day so I am not interested in interacting with my classmates.	23.6%	38.5%	37.8%
4	When the lecturer motivates me, I interact with my classmates in the classroom more.	27.7%	38.5%	33.8%
5	When the lecturer knows my name, I want to interact with my classmates more.	61.9%	21.8%	16.3%

6	When the classroom activities are suitable and interesting, I interact with my classmates more.	12.8%	27.2%	60%

(Source: Authors' calculation)

Learning in large classes with about 60 students, 38.1% of the students found it hard to interact with their classmates. In comparison with teacher-student interaction, there are fewer students having difficulty with teacher-student interaction than with student-student interaction in large classes. Contrastingly, another 32.7% disagreed that large classes can prevent them from interacting with their classmates and 29.3% somewhat agreed.

In regards to classroom arrangement, the levels of agreement are 38.6 % disagreed, 30.4% somewhat agreed and 31.1 % agreed. It can be inferred that classroom arrangement effects student-student less than class size and class time; however, it influences student-student interaction more than teacher-student interaction.

In terms of *instructor* and *classroom climate*, 33.8% thought that they interact with their classmates more when the lecturer motivates them, about 5% higher than the number of the skeptics. With only 16.3 % saw that they interact more when the lecturer knows their name, *lecturer knows name* is obviously a weak factor. Classroom activities are interesting or not can help improve student-student interaction effectively with 60% agreed and only about 12% did not agree.

IV. Recommendations

So as to improve classroom interaction in oral EFL classes, the findings, firstly, show out some solutions which can help the students to self-improve their interaction. According to the findings, most of the students think that improving communicative competence is a good way for them to improve interaction. Besides, they also want to practice to be more confident as a supplementary method to improve interaction in the classrooms. Those solutions are also supported by Jeyasala (2014, p. 167).

In addition, teachers, in the students' point of view, are expected to encourage spontaneity and unrehearsed language and map out initial input to students more. The findings of the present investigation is corroborated by the book under the title "Teaching by Principles" written by Brown (2001). As in this book, among all of the roles teachers should do in classes, the two roles stated above are really logical. The former helps students be more confidence and less fearful while the latter helps support students to produce output when their competence is limited.

There are 7 types of questions developed from different levels in Bloom's Taxonomy of cognitive domains. In this research, most of the respondents indicate that *knowledge questions*, *comprehension questions* and *application questions*, stemming from the three first levels of cognitive domains, motivate them to answer. Those questions are frequently considered lower-order questions, while questions in the analysis, synthesis, and evaluation domains are considered higher-order questions. Therefore, we can see that the students in TUEBA chose the types of questions which are suitable to their language competence. Instead of asking questions at high levels, those questions can encourage them speak. According to Brown (2001, p. 173), questioning is "one of the most important teaching behaviours to master", therefore, this finding is a reference for teachers in choosing the suitable question types for students in TUEBA.

In terms of interaction types, this study indicates that *group work* and *pair work* are useful for students in TUEBA to improve their interactive competence. However, merely assigning a group is not a good idea because there are also some disadvantages of working in groups. For example, an individual may dominate the discussion or some members may rely too heavily on others to do the work and some members do not adequately contribute to the group (Freeman & Greenacre, 2011). This is one of the most common problems that face groups; therefore, the teachers have increasing responsibilities in their teaching work.

The results of this study indicate that *games* are perceived to be the most favorite activity of the students. According to the students, games are interesting and effective, especially, it helps them improve interaction. These findings from the students' point of view also emphasize the previous study of Sweetser & Wyeth (2005) on the advantages of games in supporting and creating opportunities for social interaction.

V. Conclusion

With the survey completed and analyzed, this study provides several important findings. Firstly, it emphasizes the roles of teachers in organizing interesting and suitable activities. The lecturer's role in the classroom is essential in maintaining the interest and motivation of students to participate in oral classes. The role of teachers in organizing activities is undeniable. In regarding to the types of activities, group work, pair work and games can stimulate TUEBA students effectively. Indeed, indicating how the factors affecting student interaction could contribute to English teaching practice in TUEBA as well as in other universities in Thai Nguyen.

References

[1]. Anderson, G. (1990). Fundamentals of educational research. Bristol, PA: The Falmer Press.
[2]. Brown, H.D. (2001). Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy. New York: Pearson.
[3]. Cazden, C.B. (1988). Classroom Discourse. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann.
[4]. Freeman, L., & Greenacre, L. (2011). An examination of socially destructive behaviors in group work. Journal of Marketing Education, 33(1) p. 5-17. Graduate Outlook Survey (2010). University of Canterbury.
[5]. Hall, J.K., & Walsh, M. (2002). Teacher-student interaction and language learning. Annual Review of Applied Linguistics, 22, 186-203.
[6]. Hall, J.K.., & Verplaetse, L.S. (2000) Second and Foreign Language Learning through Classroom Interaction. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum.
[7]. Jeyasala, V.R. (2014). Interactive Activities for Effective Communication in English. Alagappa Govt. Arts College, India
[8]. Swan, M. (1985). A critical look at the communicative approach. ELT journal, 39(1), 2-12. teaching and Learning Styles. Pittsburgh: Alliance Publishers. the Student Success Puzzle: Research, Propositions, and Recommendations. ASHE.
[9]. Sweetser, P., & Wyeth, P. (2005). GameFlow: A model for evaluating player enjoyment in games. ACM Computers in Entertainment, 3(3).