Assessing the Classroom Participation of Female Students in EFL Speaking Sessions in the Course of Communicative Skills I at Debark University, Ethiopia

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Abstract: This study investigates the participation of female students in EFL speaking sections in the course of Communicative Skills I at Debark University, Ethiopia. Classroom observation, questionnaire and semi-structured were data gathering instruments. Using descriptive survey methods, the study identifies socio-cultural norms, confidence issues, classroom dynamics, and pedagogical practices as key factors contributing to this phenomenon. Recommendations focus on promoting gender-equitable classroom practices, creating supportive learning environments, utilizing diverse teaching methods, and improving teacher training on gender-inclusive strategies. Further research is encouraged to explore the effectiveness of interventions and the intersection of gender with other identities in language learning.
Keywords: Female Students, Classroom participation, EFL speaking, Communicative Skills I.

Research Paper

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INTRODUCTION

Effective communication skills are crucial in today's globalized world, and English has become the lingua franca, making English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction essential. Speaking skills are particularly important for academic and professional success; however, researches indicate that female students often participate less actively in EFL speaking sections compared to their male counterparts (Tsui, 2014; Li & Stables, 2019). This under-participation has significant implications, hindering female students' skill development, perpetuating gender disparities in language learning outcomes, and creating an un-inclusive learning environment (Warschauer, 2004).

The vibrant tapestry of classroom interaction often masks a subtle dissonance: the muted voices of female students in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) speaking sections. This under-participation, documented across diverse educational landscapes, has become a growing concern in recent years, prompting numerous studies to unravel its complex and multifaceted roots

(Wray & Thompson, 2008; Thorne, 1993; MacIntyre, 2004). Recognizing the need for a nuanced understanding of this phenomenon, this study delves into the intricate interplay of socio-cultural, pedagogical, and psychological factors that contribute to the disparity in female participation in EFL speaking classrooms.

Socio-Cultural Norms

Research suggests that cultural expectations of female passivity and deference can lead to self-silencing tendencies among female students (Miller & Tannen, 1994). These expectations are deeply embedded within societal norms and reinforced through language itself, where certain styles and linguistic choices are traditionally associated with male assertiveness (Cameron, 2005). This creates a complex barrier for female students who may hesitate to challenge these ingrained patterns and assert their voices within the classroom environment.

Confidence and Anxiety

Gender-based stereotypes and negative self-perceptions can further erode female students'

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confidence and fuel higher levels of anxiety in EFL speaking sections (MacIntyre, 2004). These anxieties can stem from the fear of judgment, making mistakes, or not meeting perceived expectations of fluency and accuracy. Such internal struggles can significantly hinder their willingness to actively participate and contribute to classroom discussions.

Classroom Dynamics

The dominance of male voices in many EFL classrooms can inadvertently create an unwelcoming environment for female students (Thorne & Henley, 1997). Male students may frequently interrupt female contributions, monopolize speaking time, or dominate classroom interactions, leaving less space for female participation. This exclusionary dynamic can further discourage female students from taking risks and actively engaging in speaking activities.

Pedagogical Practices

Unconscious biases and gendered expectations can creep into teaching practices and assessment methods, inadvertently favoring male students' strengths in language use (Sadker & Sadker, 2002). For example, teacher attention may be unconsciously skewed towards male contributions, or assessment criteria may emphasize linguistic characteristics traditionally associated with masculinity. This lack of gender sensitivity can exacerbate the existing disparity and discourage female students from participating fully.

Beyond these core factors, it is crucial to acknowledge the influence of contextual variables such as class size, cultural norms, and teacher-student relationships (Kumaravadivelu, 2001). Additionally, recognizing the inter-sectionalist of gender with other social identities (e.g., socioeconomic status, ethnicity) is critical, as female students from marginalized communities may face additional challenges and barriers to participation (Cremin, 2006).

To this end, the problem of low classroom participation among female students in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) speaking sections is a multifaceted issue that requires careful examination. This problem manifests in various educational settings where English is taught as a second language, and it hinders the overall language acquisition and communication skills development of female students (Norton, 2000). Several factors contribute to this phenomenon, and understanding them is crucial for devising effective interventions and promoting gender-inclusive language education.

While the under-participation of female students in EFL speaking sections is recognized, a comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon, particularly in the context of specific classroom activities and interactions, is lacking. Therefore, a detailed investigation is needed to assess the participation of female students in speaking sections of the course of communicative skills-1 at Debark University.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study was to assess the participation of female students in the speaking Sessions of \ communicative Skills I course.

Significance of the Study

This study's findings will contribute to a deeper understanding of female under-participation in EFL speaking sections, providing valuable insights for educators, curriculum developers, and language researchers. The proposed recommendations for promoting female participation can significantly improve EFL instruction by fostering a more inclusive and equitable learning environment where all students, regardless of gender, have the opportunity to develop their speaking skills and reach their full potential.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Using the appropriate design enables researchers to align the research title with its tools. Therefore, the researcher employed descriptive survey. The reason for using this design is that helps the researcher for assessing the phenomena, practices, implementations and process of events.

The Study Setting and Sampling Techniques

Ministry of education in Ethiopia has launched new Road Maps, the four generation universities have been established; Debark University, Ras Dejen University is one of the institutions which located in North Gondar. There are four colleges; however, the researcher delimited the study only on Social Sciences College and FBE colleges because of time and budget problems. There are five departments in Social Science college: English, Geography, psychology, History and Amharic Language, and in FBE college, there are six departments: Marketing, Accounting and Finance, Tourism, Management, Economics and Banking and Finance. To take the respondents, to the researcher used purpose sampling.

Sample Size

As stated above, the study was delimited to colleges of social sciences and FBE at Debark University, Ethiopia. The number of female students from college of social sciences: English=7, Geography=15, Psychology=15, History=20, Amharic=25, and the number of females from college of FBE: Management=21, Accounting and Finance=12, Economics=5, Banking and Finance=10, Tourism=12 and Marketing=25. Totally, there were 157 female students from the two colleges; therefore, all female students were taken comprehensively.

Data Gathering Tools

To gather the available data from the samples taken, the researcher used classroom observation, questionnaires and semi-structured interview.

DISCUSSION AND PRESENTATION OF DATA FROM THE THREE TOOLS

As the researcher carried out five classroom observations from each class, some EFL teachers were providing activities that elicited students; female students were observed that they didn't raise their hands in the classroom; few of females were glanced they didn't pay great attention to the issues given. As the data obtained from the two tools, questionnaire and interview, female students replayed that they were not fond to classroom speaking activities because mother-tongue of students are the main challenges not to have good interest to the subject.

The other reason was due to lack of encouragement of teachers. Learners need scaffolding on the behalf of teachers; teachers were encouraging females, rather they were observed that some EFL teachers undermined students when they faced difficulties during responding oral questions. The researcher got data from the questionnaire items that one of the main reason that females failed to participate from the classroom speaking activities is due to lack of clear instructions for those activities. To this end, the researcher checked that some EFL teachers didn't give clear instructions.

There were also some teachers who adhered teacher-centered teaching-learning process; they were glanced all the processes dominated by teachers so that students didn't get have chances to participate and to practice in the classroom. The researcher observed and the semi-structured interview revealed that instructors were not providing constructive feedbacks for female students; the comments they forwarded were somehow irritating learners. Teachers were glanced that they went with medium and low achievers.

EFL teachers didn't provide participatory activities, like group discussions, problem solving activities, Jigsaw activates. In the same vein, the data from questionnaire and semi-structured interview have shown a similar response. There were a few female students participating in the classroom, but they were exposed to anxiety; they begun to speak and stopped to speak in the meanwhile because of speaking anxiety. The data from questionnaire and semi structured interview showed that culture, low self-esteem, lack of confidence, fear of making mistakes, Gender bias, and dominant classroom environment were the main barrier to participate in the class.

Pedagogical Implications

➢ Under-participation of female students in EFL speaking sections is a complex issue: The study highlights that numerous factors contribute to this phenomenon, including socio-cultural norms, confidence issues, classroom dynamics, and pedagogical practices.

➢ Contextual factors matter: Recognizing the influence of variables like class size, cultural norms, and teacher-student relationships is crucial for understanding the specific challenges faced by female students in different settings.

➢ Intersectional identities: Inter-sectionality of gender with other social identities adds another layer of complexity, requiring inclusive teaching approaches that address the diverse needs of students.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Pedagogical Strategies:

- Promote gender-equitable classroom practices: This includes using inclusive language, providing equal opportunities for participation, and eliminating biased assessments.

- Create a supportive and encouraging learning environment: Foster a safe space where students feel comfortable taking risks and making mistakes. Celebrate successes and provide constructive feedback.

- Utilize diverse teaching methods: Employ a variety of activities that cater to different learning styles and encourage group work and collaborative learning.

- Implement clear and specific instructions: Ensure students understand the expectations and objectives of speaking activities.

- Provide opportunities for self-reflection and feedback: Encourage students to reflect on their participation and provide constructive feedback for improvement.

- Utilize technology as a tool for participation: Online platforms and virtual activities can offer additional avenues for shy or hesitant students to engage.

Teacher Training and Development

- Raise awareness of gender bias in language teaching: Conduct workshops and training programs for teachers to help them identify and address unconscious biases in their teaching practices.

- Equip teachers with gender-inclusive teaching strategies: Provide training on utilizing strategies mentioned above and adapting them to specific contexts and challenges.

- Promote ongoing reflection and improvement: Encourage teachers to continuously reflect on their practices and seek feedback from students and colleagues to improve their ability to create inclusive learning environments.

Further Research

- Investigate the effectiveness of specific interventions: Conduct empirical research to evaluate the effectiveness of different strategies in promoting female participation in EFL speaking sections.
- Explore the intersection of gender with other identities: Conduct research to understand how gender interacts with other social identities (e.g., socio-economic status, ethnicity) and its impact on language learning experiences.
- Engage students in participatory action research: Involve students in research efforts to explore their experiences and perspectives on their own participation in EFL speaking sections.
- By implementing these recommendations and promoting further research, we can work towards creating a more inclusive and equitable learning environment for all students, regardless of their gender or other social identities.

Authors' Contributions

The authors of this article have played crucial roles about the issue of the title, design of the study and the data gathering tools. The collected data were substantiated and triangulated via the three tools. To this end, the part of the study has been analyzed accordingly. The issue of language has been reviewed as much as possible. Thus, the authors of this article has approved all the version of the manuscript and agreed personally accountable for the authors' own contributions and to ensure that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work.

Availability of Data and Materials: The dataset supporting the conclusions of this article is included within the article.

Competing Interests: The authors declare that they didn't have competing interests.

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