Chapter 9

Omani English Language Learners’ Perceptions of Interactive and Online Listening and Speaking Activities

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ABSTRACT

Online learning calls for a revolution in course development for English language teaching. This chapter examines the effects of interpersonal interaction, computer-mediated tasks, and podcasting on engagement in listening and speaking activities by exploring instruction that promotes fluent and accurate speech, in addition to the potential benefits of employing student podcasts as authentic listening materials. Fifty-one L1 Arabic English language learners (ELLs) from an intermediate English cohort of the Foundation Program for English Language (FPEL) at Sultan Qaboos University (SQU) in Oman responded to a 24-question online survey that addressed their perceptions of classroom-based and online listening and speaking activities. To further ascertain students’ motivations, the researcher interviewed a focus group of seven learners from the cohort and examined willingness to engage in speaking activities inside the classroom and as part of extracurricular activities. Findings suggest an influence of foreign language anxiety (FLA) on participation.

INTRODUCTION: ELT APPROACHES

With regard to the research context, there is evidence that ELLs in Oman experience FLA. For example, according to Khan and Al-Mahrooqi (2015), “Omani EFL learners at the tertiary level have General Anxiety in English classes,… suffer from evaluation anxiety and teacher anxiety more than from peer anxiety,… [and] their self-perceived English language proficiency is positively correlated with all anxiety types” (p. 57). Additionally, Fareh (2010) generalizes that, in the Arab world, learners often appear demotivated, and there are issues with teacher preparation, assessments, and instruction focused
on teacher-centered approaches. In contrast, contemporary ELT approaches, such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), the Natural Approach (NA) (Krashen & Terrell, 1983), and Community Language Learning (CLL) (Curran, 1972), have been reported as lowering the affective filter, reducing learner anxiety, and heightening learner engagement. CLT, for example, is based on utilizing the target language and authentic materials in process-based learning that acknowledges learners' experiences and connects lessons with the outside world (Nunan, 1991).

Certainly, as Savignon (1997, cited in Pfingsthorn, 2013) asserts, communicative competence “should be the goal of language teaching” (p. 55). To promote communicative aims, the NA consists of “affective-humanistic activities that comprise dialogue, and content includes: slide shows, panels, presentations, films, television reports, news, guest lectures, readings and conversations on culture” (Bancroft, 1999, p. 17). These activities have the potential to heighten learner engagement. Affective-humanistic lesson content in Oman includes storytelling, since it is an integral part of the nation’s culture. Oman’s primary school curriculum, English for Me, is story-based (Al Harrasi, 2012). Furthermore, texts for the SQU FPEL include storytelling, along with role plays and collaborative learning activities, that are meant to enhance participation through group membership.

Another method, Suggestopedia (Lozonav, 1978), or Desuggestopedia as it was later called, is based on the notion that psychological suggestion facilitates participation in learning. It, therefore, focuses on psychological comfort (Bancroft, 1999) and desuggestive learning. Essentially, Desuggestopedia emphasizes that ELLs learn through language encounters as opposed to explicit lessons, and it includes experiential learning environments and expectations of success.

Considering the potential impact of psychology on participation, the researcher created an extracurricular podcasting club with an open door participation policy (with no requirements to attend or remain for the entirety of a session) and endeavored to facilitate desuggestive learning. Podcasting is defined as “the publishing of audio or video [files] via the Internet, designed to be downloaded and listened to on a portable player or a personal computer” (McMinn, 2008, p. 212), and “student podcasting” refers to podcasting which is “produced by students” as opposed to “ESL podcasts, native-English podcasts and podcasts focusing on test preparation” (p. 212). Club participants listened to externally-accessed ESL and native-English podcasts, as well as teacher and student podcasts, before discussing topics. They also shared informal chats, low-stakes competitions, friendly debates, jokes, stories, role plays and dreams, some of which they recorded as podcasts for webpages and social media.

An important aspect of the club was the role of the teacher as a mentor and a facilitator of dialogue. As in the NA, corrective feedback was limited. Elements of CLL (in which ELLs co-construct and reconstruct conversations with peers and the assistance of a teacher through a form of counseling style learning) were employed. Learners self-selected to speak, and whoever was holding the audio recorder was the speaker in “the studio”.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The rationale for recording the learners’ speaking activities (beyond following CLL methodology), is that the majority of tertiary-level students bring smartphones with audio recorders and internet features into the classroom at the research site. They also send text and audio messages frequently throughout the day (Santos, 2013). While some educators object to the use of mobile devices in the classroom or during language club activities, others find ways to integrate technology-based communication tasks in English
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