Handling with EFL learners' negative attitudes towards speaking English

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ABSTRACT

This study mainly investigates young adults' negative attitudes towards speaking in a foreign language with its underlying reasons by developing an action plan to minimize them in a Turkish EFL context. Lower intermediate students (n=35) of Vocational High School at a state university in Turkey participated in the study. The data required to initiate an action research cycle were collected through in-class observations, and then, randomly selected participants (n=8) were interviewed in order to get in-depth data. The qualitative data were analyzed via content analysis. The analysis of the data showed that adults' language learning behaviors were not only influenced by their previous learning experiences but also their lack of knowledge in their L1 and L2. The data collected through action research also revealed that students' negative attitudes towards speaking might also result from the attitudes of their teachers towards them. In terms of the detected problems in the observation process, the present study might be regarded as context-specific since the solutions for speaking anxiety were generated with respect to its own contexts, aspects, variables and effects on learners.

Introduction

Learners' attitudes and their motivation for learning the target language are important factors for second language acquisition (Dörnyei, 2001; Oxford & Ehrman, 1995). Apart from these two traits, foreign language learning is affected by a number of other factors such age, aptitude, intelligence, cognitive style, and personality. Furthermore, Dörnyei (2008) suggests that foreign language learning embodies "situation-specific motives related to the immediate learning environment and experience" (p.106). Among all of these factors, attitude occupies a considerable amount of place in SLA literature and it has been a controversial issue. For example, Du (2009) summarizes how attitude affects SLA as follows:

- The acquirers with positive attitude tend to learn L2 easily and with rapid progress; while those with negative attitude make slowly progress.
- Attitude decides the commitment. Those who give up halfway are probably passive with lower commitment whose achievements are lower than those positive and persistent learners.
- Attitude influences the class participation. The students with positive learning attitude perform actively and can have high grade. (p.163)

Compared to young learners, adults' language learning may be subject to some limitations in that "English competence is related to the individual's prior experience with English and his ensuing self-confidence and greater motivation to learn the language"

(Clément et al., 1977, p. 131). Unlike young learners, these prior experiences, if negative, may constitute an impediment in front of learning a foreign language for adults.

Adults' Language Learning Behaviors

Adult learners' foreign language learning process needs careful handling since motivational or attitudinal characteristics are likely to impact on their achievement in the last analysis (Gardner, 1991). In this respect, "to provide the most effective instruction possible, teachers of a second language (L2) should learn to identify and comprehend significant individual differences in their students" (Oxford & Ehrman, 1993, p. 188). For instance, speaking, more than other skills, has always been perceived as a highly challenging skill both for the learners who will acquire it and for the teachers who will be involved in its teaching process. During this challenging process, teachers "would attest that adults and adolescents require different motivational strategies" (Kormos & Csizér, 2008, p. 328). The difficulty in reaching a competence in speaking skill is not a local problem and it has also been discussed in other contexts (Price, 1991; Young, 1990). In Turkish higher education, however, there are a number of similar studies in which the association between foreign language learning anxiety and academic achievement of (young)adults has been dealt with (Balemir, 2009; Dalkılıç, 2001; Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2014). The findings of these context-specific studies reveal that improving students' oral proficiency includes various dynamics in it; therefore, it requires systematic investigation.

Compared to receptive skills, speaking just similar to writing involves some sub-skills such as pronunciation, intonation, stress, and so on. Cunningham (1999) states that "speaking requires that learners not only know how to produce specific points of language such as grammar, pronunciation, or vocabulary (linguistic competence), but also that they understand when, why, and in what ways to produce language (sociolinguistic competence)" (p.1). When the challenge of speaking skill is accompanied with adult learning procedure, it deteriorates for the teachers owing to the fact that working with adults requires acknowledging the characteristics of those learners which, in turn, makes the problem more complicated. In terms of adult learners' characteristics, Harmer (2000) sets forth that:

> They can be critical of teaching methods. Their previous learning experiences may have predisposed them to one particular methodological style which makes them uncomfortable with unfamiliar teaching patterns. Conversely, they may be hostile to certain teaching and learning activities which replicate the teaching they received earlier in their educational careers. (p. 85)

On the other hand, their experiences may add value to the teaching-learning process if teachers provide a convenient learning environment for them. In accordance with this view, Roger (2007) adds that:

> As adults we have had experience of the world and probably also some experience of the subject we have decided to learn. For this reason, we will usually have a great deal to contribute, even if we are also much more likely to be sceptical and to challenge the 'rules. (p. 35)

Nevertheless, in terms of adults' attitudes towards oral skills, there has still been a paradigm which is awaiting to be clarified. To illustrate, speaking has theoretically been the most desired skill to be improved by adult learners; however, when they have to go from theory into practice, they have a tendency of avoiding the chances of speech.

This study touches upon a genuine issue that is the result of the observation of an experienced English language teacher who has been working young adults. After the endeavors of making students speak English resulted in a failure, the teacher needed to develop an action plan targeting the improvement of students' oral skills in English. Actually, this problem was not limited to speaking skill and it was so serious that negative attitudes of

the students towards English language not only affect the overall atmosphere of the class but they also hinder their language learning process. Therefore, the objectives of this research are:

- to find out the underlying reasons for the problem of adults' negative attitudes towards speaking activities,
- to create an awareness of the importance of oral skills for the students,
- to find the ways of changing their negative attitudes towards speaking activities.

Methodology

This study rests on an action research cycle as it is intended to be "for the purpose of solving a problem or obtaining information in order to inform local practice" (Fraenkel et al., 2012). Action research aids conductors to see the problem they are dealing with more closely by following the cycles of plan, action, observation, and reflection respectively. Among the two types of action research, this research can be classified under Practical Action Research (Fraenkel et al., 2012) whose main purpose is to develop practice as well as to supply information for larger issues.

Participants

This research was conducted with 35 students in Tarsus Vocational High School in the first semester of 2012-2013 Academic Year. All of the students were in the Department of Accounting. 19 of the students were female and 16 of them were male. They were between the ages of 18 and 30. Their English level was lower-intermediate.

Instruments and Data Collection Process

Data was collected through observation and interviews. The researcher initiated the study with class observation which was followed by interviews with selected students. In the pre-interview stage, the researcher worked collaboratively with another English language teacher with whom she was sharing the same class. Both teachers agreed on asking 6 interview questions (*see* Appendix) in which they thought they would obtain sufficient amount of data in order to initiate the research cycle. Except for the first warming question asking their opinion towards English lesson in general, the structure of all of the questions was mostly written in the form of *Wh-* questions. The rationale behind this strategy is to enable already shy students to supply necessary information. By the help of such an approach, students' negative attitudes towards oral skills and their underlying reasons were aimed to be examined comprehensively. For the analysis of data, content analysis technique was used and the common themes were extracted after having analyzed the interviews since this research involved qualitative data.

The Procedure

In order to answer the research questions, the researcher asked her colleague to videotape an hour of her English lesson regarding the contribution of visual data for the research. For the use of videotapes, Silverman and Marvasti (2008) suggest that "when people interact face to face, they do not use merely verbal cues. Researchers who work with videos have access to many of these cues" (p. 80). Having watched the video repeatedly, the researcher detected 8 students who seemed to perform a negative attitude during this lesson. The reason why they were selected as interviewees was that they were uninterested towards the lesson during observation process. Despite all the teacher's efforts during speaking tasks, they refused to talk. In addition, they were the ones who had no classroom materials with them and who were dealing with completely irrelevant things such as playing with their mobile phones, sleeping,

daydreaming, etc. Therefore, the researcher decided to pick those students for the interview. The number of the students involved in the interview process was 8. One of the interviewees was female and the rest 7 students were male. The students were asked six interview questions (*see* Appendix). After a careful analysis of the videotapes and the interviews, action research cycle was executed.

Results and Findings

The findings from the interviews with the selected students are as follows:

Question 1: Firstly, in order to get a general understanding of interviewees, they were asked *whether they liked English language or not*. Surprisingly, during the interviews, none of these eight interviewees admitted to have a negative attitude towards speaking in the class and English in general. In contrast with what was observed during videotaping and class observation, except for two students, they all stated that they liked it and they wanted to be able to speak it but they could not. On the other hand, the other two interviewees said that they did not somehow like it although they wanted to learn it.

Question 2: Interviewees were asked *which language skill they found the most challenging*. 5 out of 8 students clearly stated that they had difficulties in the production of sentences in English (speaking). What was interesting was that 3 of those students were also aware of the fact that they suffered from the same problem in their mother tongue as well. The other two students attributed the reason of being unable to produce in English to the lack of word knowledge.

Question 3: In this question, the students evaluated *the frequency of their own participation in the speaking tasks*. They all had an awareness of not participating in them. Five of the interviewees replied this question as "*never*". Other three students stated that they "*sometimes*" intended to join the activities, but they gave up for some reasons.

Question 4: Students were asked to state about *the reasons for the problem* stated in Question 3. Most of them explained their reason that they had a fear of being humiliated by their classmates. Two of them, on the other hand, said that they sometimes attempted to produce something but other classmates were always quicker on their reply so they got discouraged in time.

Question 5: The answers to the question *"How do you feel when you are pointed to speak in English in front of the class?"* were approximately the same with one exception. Almost all of them stated that they were anxious as expected; however, one student expressed that he could only be able to speak English upon the teacher's pointing at him.

Question 6: They were also asked to give some *suggestions for the solution of their negative attitudes*. Their suggestions are listed as follows:

> S1: "Dialogues as much as possible. In addition, vocabulary games can be played to enhance our word knowledge. We can feel better then."

> S2: "Students should be made to talk even if they do not want."

> S3: "It depends on the person. There should be enough motivation."

> S4: "No idea."

> S5: "To be honest, I do not have any ideas."

> S6: "There should be fewer students. Maybe we can open out better then. In addition, there should be constant use of dialogues."

S7: "Specific speaking assignments for students can be very helpful. We can be prepared at home, come to the class and present it to the whole class. You did it once. It really worked."

S8: "The class is too crowded. There should be fewer students."

All of the qualitative data was analyzed with the content analysis method. The common themes were coded and they were labeled under the same category. In the light of the interviews, the underlying reasons for negative attitudes were listed with the coding system in Table 1:

Table1. *The analysis of the interviews with the students*

Category Label	Operational Definition	Example
feeling of inferiority	- in general - in comparison to others	"I refrain from my classmates. I sometimes look at them. When you ask something, they reply it immediately. When I see them, I feel as if they would humiliate me." S.8 "I am always worried that if I try to talk, my classmates will laugh at me. Because they often do, teacher. You know, my English is poor." S.7
lack of knowledge	- in English - on the topic - in L1	"I know that I don't participate in your speaking activities. This is because I don't know English. So instead of trifling, I'd rather not talk." S.3
previous learning experiences	- about teachers - about teaching methods	"My lack of participation, maybe, results from my teacher in the primary school." S.3 "I can't talk. Teacher, I swear, I just started to learn English this year thoroughly." S.8
personality factors	- in speaking English - in public speaking	"Of course, I do have something to say. But even if I know the answers, I do not raise my hand. This is not just in English. You can ask other teachers. I am always shy. This is me." S.5 "This is in fact what we used to do at home. When my brothers and I wanted to talk aloud, my father used to hush us up. Maybe that's why I am always shy while speaking…" S.6

Discussion

Upon the findings of the interviews along with the class observations, the cycles of an action research have been constructed as follows:

Cycle 1: Developing an action plan

Having determined the problem and gathered the required data, in order to create a strong action plan, first of all, the researcher asked one of the colleagues to videotape her one more time during the lesson, which was intended to be informative in spotting the weaknesses. The first thing the researcher noticed in this recording was that she was not in a slow pace for those who had a difficulty in oral skills. When the students tried to catch her and more active classmates, they got confused, which resulted in a surrender and from that point on they got distracted. Another important issue in her teaching was the lack of getting answers from the students in an order. She tried to create a non-threatening atmosphere just for the sake of promoting their learning by considering "older students who have got out of the habit of the study may find classrooms daunting places" (Harmer, 2010, p.15). However, what the researcher saw was she failed in activating the shy students' speaking out. For example, most of the time she had a tendency of getting the answers in chorus where only already active students led it, and at the end of which only those students were left to answer whereas the others refused to talk and participate in activities. On the other hand, one of the factors which had a very positive influence on her students' performances was her feedbacks and reinforcements. She tried to encourage them with positive feedbacks, praises and facial expressions immediately after their successful production by keeping in mind the fact that "the way in which we respond to students when they speak in a fluency activity will have a significant bearing not only on how well they perform at the time but also on how they behave in fluency activities in the future" (Harmer, 2000, p. 145).

Thus, the class observations and the subsequent interviews came up with some outcomes which would lead the researcher to a further step. By taking their ideas and suggestions into account, she decided to follow these steps:

- Try to be slower and clearer in the explanations
- Give students sufficient time to think for speaking
- Keep the balance between the leading and passive students
- Follow a democratic strategy while getting the answers
- Keep on giving feedbacks and positive reinforcements

Cycle 2: Implementation

The second cycle was to put the ideas developed during the previous stages into practice. The first step for the application was to inform the students about what would be done. Next, the teacher asked them whether they were ready for the game which she made up called "All for One, One for All". In the application process, she made use of the unit "places in a town" on page 21 in their coursebooks (English for Life). Then, she divided the class into small groups of 4 or 5 students. Knowing that there were highly enthusiastic students who could tackle the others' participation, the teacher paid a special attention to a heterogeneous distribution in the groups. She managed to include all the students even though it created a chaotic atmosphere because of the population of the class. After they all settled, she picked the less talkative students as "spokesman" of the group. She wrote the topic of the unit at the top of the board. Next, she wanted each group to utter words that came to their mind about those places. While they were brainstorming, she listed them on one side of the board until it was full of places of their own production. Then, she wanted each group to draw a map of an imaginary town that they would create and they would never show other groups until the end of the game. Each

group was supposed to finish it in 6-7 minutes. When they finished drawing their maps, each group was asked to choose an individual from other groups whose responsibility was to come to the board and to draw the maps of that specific group correctly by following the instructions of the spokesman. Here, all the individuals were competing on behalf of their groups. They followed the instructions coming from the spokesman with no interference from the class and drew the map. After the individual finished the drawing, the group showed the real map to see how close s/he was to the original. The individual who was able to draw the original map was the winner together with the spokesman. This game was followed by an activity in which two individuals from two different groups came to the board and acted out a dialogue where one of them was a tourist asking the way to a specific place s/he chose from the map on the board to the other student.

Cycle 3: Observation

By the help of group-work oral tasks during the implementation phase, it was aimed to create a non-threatening and warm environment for the students to change their negative attitudes towards speaking activities. In the light of the interviews, the researcher was trying to make them feel more secure because she thought that this feeling might also result from her attitudes towards them. In accordance with her view, Pooley (1949) states that:

> The insecurity regarding language is largely a product of our own methods of teaching. In the handling of facts about languages in school we have always been so terribly right and the student so terribly wrong that it is natural for a feeling of insecurity, or even despair, to develop. (p. 78)

In order to avoid this, she made use of the power of games which was also among the suggestions stated in the interviews. The purpose of such an activity was to assist the students who had difficulties in oral skills to include themselves naturally into the flow of the activity. Ur (1996) highlights that "classroom activities that develop learners' ability to express themselves through speech would therefore seem an important component of a language course" (p. 120). It was evident that this game evoked the students because even the least talkative ones spent considerable effort to be a part of it. During observations, the researcher saw them using their dictionaries to utter words, trying to create sentences in English and sharing their production with the whole class. At this point, the significance and influence of group-work activities on students' attitudes towards foreign language learning have been proved to be immense one more time because their interaction with other group members gave them a sense of security and self-esteem. The idea of acting out a dialogue evolved during the interviews. Some of the interviewees had stressed the efficiency of dialogues to be able to use the language communicatively. Indeed, the dialogue they created spontaneously was for real-life purposes and it was their own production. In accordance with this idea, Egan (1999) suggests that:

> Foreign language ability is measured by the ability to communicate in the language. This ability is demonstrated in the understanding of authentic aural and written materials and in the ability to generate spoken and written language for real life purposes. (p. 278)

Yet, it was inevitable for some problems to occur. For example, it was as if the students were more interested in the game rather than its function to learning process. Secondly, it was really hard to cool down the competition between the groups even though they were adults. Regarding the likelihood of excessive stirring effect of games, the researcher was able to handle it. Lastly, the use of mother tongue interrupted the flow of the activities in some cases but it was minimized by ignoring the answers of those who used mother tongue and by reinforcing the answers in English. Despite its limitations, these activities helped the

students gain an awareness that every single learner could be able to speak and learn a foreign language.

Cycle 4: Reflection

The results of this research have revealed that the problem in speaking skills of adult learners is merely one of the areas that need rational solutions in foreign language teaching. Language teachers working with adults face such problems every day. Moreover, there are many other problems awaiting in the foreign language classrooms. The process of this action research has shown the ways how to handle a problem, the techniques how to find a way out for that particular problem, and the possible outcomes that will emerge by following a sound course of action. Hence, the process of this research can be considered as invaluable as the outcomes it has brought out.

Conclusion

In summary, this research process is highly important in terms of the contributions it has made both to the learners and the researcher. From the students' perspective, it enabled them to be aware of the situation they were in. Moreover, it gave them a chance to face with the problems they had by showing some solutions. Students not only took place in the process as participants, but they also became the crucial part of it. Similarly, from the researcher's perspective who is also the teacher of that specific group, this action research study demonstrates that learning and teaching process never end no matter how much negatively the learners think about foreign language learning or what they have brought from their earlier experiences. All in all, with all its contributions, suggestions, and solutions it was quite a fruitful study.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

1. Do you like English lessons?
2. Which of the skills is the most challenging for you?
3. How often do you participate in speaking activities?
4. What are your reasons for not participating in speaking tasks?
5. How do you feel when you are pointed to speak in English in front of the class?

6. What are your suggestions to solve the problem of not participating the speaking tasks?

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