

Iranian Medical Students' Perception about Classroom Participation in General English Course and its Grading Criteria

Laleh Khojasteh¹, Nasrin Shokrpour^{1*} and Reza Kafipour²

¹Department of English, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Shiraz, Iran

²Department of English, International Branch, Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, Shiraz, Iran

ABSTRACT

The classroom is considered a social institution in which the social interaction that happens between students and professors in a university setting is of prime importance. Accordingly, classroom participation as an important variable in this setting and pros and cons to grading the students' class participation have been considered to be researched further to answer four research questions regarding EFL students' perception toward: (1) their class participation; (2) the common factors that hinder or encourage their participation; (3) grading or not grading class participation; and finally (4) positive and negative effects of grading class participation. To answer these questions, this study applied a qualitative descriptive research method using a case study to collect data first from 120 medical students through four close and open-ended questions and then through interview with 10 students. The results showed that majority of the students (85%) do not consider themselves as active participants in their English classes, and psychological, physical and teacher factors are regarded as intensives for their class participation while cultural norms, textbook and teacher factors are among the factors that prohibit students' class participation. Furthermore, about half of the students reported that they are indifferent about whether class participation is graded or not because they are not intrinsically motivated to even study English. Pedagogical implications based on the above mentioned findings have been provided for teachers in this article.

Keywords: Class participation, grading class participation, student participation, EFL context

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 13 March 2016

Accepted: 07 November 2017

E-mail addresses:

khojastehlaleh@yahoo.com (Laleh Khojasteh),

shokrpourn@gmail.com (Nasrin Shokrpour),

rezakafipour@gmail.com (Reza Kafipour)

*Corresponding author

INTRODUCTION

Since classroom is considered a social institution, the social interaction that happens between students and professors in a university setting is of prime importance

because both professors and students bring with them certain understandings of the normative behaviours which are expected of them. One of these normative behaviours expected of students in academic settings is their active participation in class which is believed to foster their learning. What is considered ideal classroom participation? Not long ago this term was defined as asking and answering questions raised in the class; however, today a new version of classroom participation includes the silent form of students' engagement in the classroom experience by listening actively to others' comments (Meyer, 2009, p. 12). Unfortunately, even if silence is regarded as a measure to serve communicative functions, there are still students who prefer to fill in the role of passive participants who occasionally nod, smile or pretend to take notes when they are actually involved in other things. In other words, as teachers, we are usually bemoaning the fact that some students choose to detach themselves from what goes on in the classroom no matter how much we try to solicit participation from them. One possible reason mentioned in the literature is that seemingly students tend to be more comfortable to actively participate in arts and social science courses than natural sciences (Crombie, Pyke, Silverthorn, Jones, & Piccinin, 2003). Since English language courses fall under the category of humanities and social sciences, one may believe that students are more willing to raise questions and offer comments in the class. However, we barely observe this in our classes. So why is participation of students so low and

what hinders the students to actively get involved in their classes?

To answer this, so far many researches have reported various reasons including professors' characteristics and their teaching styles (Fritschner, 2000; Fritschner, 2000), class size and class design (Crawford & MacLeod, 1990; Fritschner, 2000), age (Karp & Yoels, 1976), gender and cultural differences of students (Weaver & Qi, 2005), consolidation of responsibility (Karp & Yoels, 1976) and finally classroom participation grading criteria (Meyer, 2009; Rogers, 2011) which is another focus of this study. It is also believed that in high grade-orientation cultures, students tend to value just that part of the course which is graded. According to Bean and Peterson (2002), "When students see that their participation is being graded regularly and consistently, they adjust their study habits accordingly to be prepared for active participation" (p. 33). To further investigate this, the next section of this article reviews opposite views mentioned in literature regarding grading class participation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Why is Participation Important?

A lot of scholars have emphasised the role class participation plays and the impact it has on students' learning. Various theories in education revolve around this concept such as cognitivist notions of social constructivism and active learning, information processing theory's deep processing, social-interactionists' views of cooperative learning and learning

communities. Based on active learning, it is learners' duty to take responsibility for their learning and that this learning opportunity should be offered by teachers in student-centered learning environment. The theory behind this viewpoint comes from the constructivism theory which stresses on developmental process of learning through social interactions with peers and the teacher. By taking greater responsibility and having greater involvement in the learning process, learners not only develop deeper levels of understanding, but also learn how to take control over their learning (Rogers, 2011). This outcome leads us to the next important theory regarding class participation which is information processing theory (Craik & Lockhart, 1972). Based on this theory, the more meaningful the learning environment is, the deeper the level of processing the information would be. Therefore, it is expected that the information gained in this way would remain longer in the memory and have the highest subsequent retention. For example, in one study conducted by Rau and Heyl (1990), the results showed that students had a better performance on the test material when they discussed it in the group earlier. This, has been supported by another study carried out by Handelsman, Briggs, Sullivan and Towler (2005).

To Grade or Not to Grade University Students' Class Participation

With or without rubrics, some professors at universities allocate range of marks for levels of students' classroom participation because it is believed that this participation

can usually be encouraged by grading policies (normally ranges from 10% to 20% of the total mark for the subject). However, the question of whether or not this participation should be graded has generated two schools of thought.

The opponents of grading classroom participation believe that class participation is more than merely raising the hand and picking out a good seat. They believe that although participation grades might measure the frequency of student participation, they often do not account for the quality of participation and cannot measure cognitive learning (Dallimore, Hertenstein, & Platt, 2013). As Wood (1996) explains, "what is abundantly clear is that a class participation requirement neither promotes participation nor does it effectively measure what a student learns in class" (p. 112). In addition, since participation grades typically fail to actually measure the quality, it is doubtful that participation grades truly result in the type of participation desired by instructors. Furthermore, since grading classroom participation is often subjective, students may consider themselves and their peers as more active in classroom than their professors think they really are (Dancer & Kamvounias, 2005) and this indicates that in college context, students and professors have different viewpoints about classroom participation. Therefore, if not appropriately applied, the use of participation grades may not only possess a potential measurement problem, but also, students may believe the grading criteria is nothing but bias and includes favoritism (Shindler, 2003). This

skepticism about grading the participation of students especially in colleges and universities further comes from Karp and Yoels (1976) who coined the term “consolidation of responsibility” which refers to the norm that in each session only a few students “five to seven” account for most of the interaction that takes place in each classroom (talkers) and the rest of the students are just passive observers (non-talkers) (Karp & Yoels, 1976, p. 429). So is it fair to grade the participation of students in such classes which on top of that may follow the traditional passive instructional delivery still prevalent in many university classrooms all over the world?

Despite the above-mentioned objections, supporters of grading classroom participation believe that it is not really fair to students if they are evaluated based on one or two tests. According to Galyon (2012), it is not rational to give more credit than they deserve to term papers or homework because they cannot be fair indicators of what students have learned. He further condemns this kind of assessment because he believes the systems which subscribe to such evaluation criteria do not pay enough attention to the inequality of standard deviation of both midterm and final examinations if both tests are supposed to contribute 50% to the composite score. Logic aside, others (Carstens, 2015; and Dallimore et al., 2013) believe by grading, teachers can send positive signals to students about the kind of learning and thinking an instructor values, like growth in critical thinking, active learning, development of

listening and speaking skills needed for career success, and the ability to join a discipline’s conversation. Dallimore et al. (2013) also believe that when participation is part of grading criteria, students tend to adjust their study habits in order to prepare themselves for active participation in the classroom. Moreover, substantial evidence suggests that students with high grade orientation value only those portions of a course that are visibly graded (Carstens, 2015). Indeed, the ratio of classroom participation allotted in the final grade of students has been found to be effective in students’ willingness or unwillingness towards classroom participation (Smith, 1992). Even if this participation is not voluntary, by random cold-calling, students are motivated to become more involved in the learning process (Dallimore et al., 2013). Whether it is part of students’ grades or an extra credit, Rocca (2010) emphasises grading students’ participation and informing students where they stand in terms of participation midway through the semester. Finally, from the viewpoint of behavioural psychology, Shindler (2003) believes that when classroom participation is graded objectively, even trouble-makers become better students as a result.

Studies on Class Participation

Looking thoroughly through the studies on class participation, we can see that there are a lot of disagreements among scholars as to the grading criteria. For example, in one study conducted by Fassinger (2000), the viewpoints of both students and professors

in 51 college classes were obtained with a questionnaire about class participation. The results revealed positive viewpoints from both students and professors regarding high-participation classes. Although it is not really clear what criteria students referred to when they perceived themselves as active participants, the results showed that active students perceive their professors as more approachable, and more stimulating and find the classroom environment to be less threatening. Another interesting finding revealed from this study was that less active students had less positive perception towards their classes and professors than the professors who had much more positive perception about their classes. Similar findings were also stated by Crombie, Pyke, Silverthorn, Jones and Piccininn (2003) who reported that the higher the level of participation of the student, the more favorably he or she perceives his or her instructors' attitude and behaviour. The opposite seems to be true too. There are numerous studies including the ones conducted in Malaysia (Mustapha, Rahman, & Yunus, 2010; Liu & Jackson, 2007) which reported that instructors' trait can have undetected direct or indirect complex influence on students' class participation.

Although these studies did not report anything about the grading criteria which existed at the time the studies were conducted, the question remains here is that whether grading or not grading the class participation would make a difference in students' viewpoints towards their instructors, and the class participation itself. In one study

carried out by Howard and Henney (1998), the results showed that despite allocated graded participation system, more than half of the students present in the class were silent throughout the discussion. In another graded participation study, Fritschner (2000) observed 344 class sessions and reported that a small number of students accounted for the majority (79%) of all the students' talk in the class. This, however, is not in line with what Dallimore, Hertenstein and Platt (2004) reported when studying the perception of students regarding class participation when it is graded. In that study, the results showed that if students know their participation is graded, they would participate more in the classes that instructors assign a large percentage of the overall grade to class participation activities. In another study conducted with the same team of researchers a few years later, Dallimore, Hertenstein and Platt (2012) evaluated a classroom strategy that included cold calling and marked participation and reported that cold-calling even expands students' comfort zone in terms of higher participation in the classroom.

Wood (1996, p. 111), however, argue that "we must get away from the false assumption that the amount one learns is directly connected to the amount one does (or does not) talk". She argues that grading classroom participation only motivates over-talkers to dominate the class and does not really help those quiet students who despite everything, prefer to remain silent. Meyer (2009) believe that grading class participation can have

negative consequences for teachers too because the quality of their class would not necessarily improve even if the number of students who participate increases as a result of grading policies. More than grading criteria, Fritschner (2000) believes it is the instructor's verbal and nonverbal behavior (such as facial expressions and voice) that significantly affects students' participation.

Based on whatever has been discussed in the last two sections, it seems that although participation grade can have numerous benefits, its drawbacks should not be disregarded especially when both teachers do not know how to assess it and students do not know exactly how they are evaluated based on their participation (Meyer, 2009).

The Gap

In Iranian setting, like in many other colleges and universities around the world, participation grades are often included in instructor syllabi because active involvement in classroom is believed to be associated with students' higher-order-learning. Despite the promising results active participation might bring about, there are also some Iranian universities in which classroom participation used to be graded in the past. The researchers' informal discussions with some professors of universities suggest that since grading policies were defined neither to teachers nor to students, when it came to that five to 10% that was supposed to be allotted to measure student participation, free pass was usually

given to all students. Due to persistence of problems over several semesters, the university authorities withdrew the grading process and voted for not grading class participation at all. Did they really make the right choice? Did students themselves have a say in this decision?

According to Meyer (2009), students' feelings about participation grades are worthy of investigation because if they like being graded, they may be persuaded to engage actively in the classroom. Meyer (2009) continues claiming that there is a strong relationship between student's perception and his or her participation habits. "If, ..., students believe they have a right to remain silent in the classroom, they might be more likely to have a silent engagement style [even with the existence of a participation grade]" (Meyer, 2009, p. 14). Accordingly, knowing about what Iranian students think about classroom participation and why they decide to actively participate or remain inactive throughout the class prompted the researchers to conduct this study. Indeed, most studies on class participation were those that evaluated class participation while it was graded. Interestingly, this study is among the first ones from its nature to study students' perceptions about class participation and its grading criteria while the class participation is not even graded. The sampling that this study used was pooled among EFL learners who take English classes as part of their credit fulfillment but none of these classes allocate any marks for class participation. Hence, Iranian EFL students' perception

about classroom participation, the grading criteria and how much lack of participation grade may or may not affect their willingness towards in-class participation is worth investigating.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions were posed:

- 1) What is the perception of EFL students regarding their class participation?
- 2) What are the common factors that hinder or encourage students' class participation?
- 3) Should class participation be graded?
- 4) What do EFL students think about the effects (both positive and negative) of grading class participation?

METHODS

This study applied qualitative descriptive research method and was conducted at Shiraz University of Medical Sciences in the fall of 2015.

Participants

After determining the target population and referring to Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) table, 120 students were selected through random sampling. Krejcie and Morgan specified the standard and logical sample size based on population size. They specified when the population is around 600, the standard and acceptable sample size should be around 120. Fish and Bowl technique was used to select the samples

randomly from among the students in Shiraz University of Medical Sciences. According to this technique, each student receives a unique number and then the determined number of samples is drawn randomly. To do so, the student number was used as the unique number; then 120 students' numbers were drawn randomly. All 120 students were students of Medicine and were 18 to 24 years old. A number of 70 students were females and the rest (50 students) were males. As all of them were first semester students, their level of English proficiency was intermediate. The students were required to obtain intermediate level of English language at National University Entrance Exam if they wanted to be admitted to Shiraz University of Medical Sciences, one of the leading medical universities in Iran.

Instruments

Two close-ended questions (questions number 1 & 3) as well as two open-ended questions (questions number 2 & 4) plus a supplementary interview were designed to enable the researchers to answer research questions one to four. The close- and open-ended questions are as below:

1. If being active in the classroom means asking questions, answering questions and being involved in class activities even if it is in silent form, how active do you think you are in your English classes?
2. What encourages or hinders you to be an active participant in your English classes?

3. Should class participation be graded?
4. If class participation was graded in your English class, how do you think this would affect (both positively and negatively) your performance in and out of class?

Due to the low response rate in answering the above-mentioned questions and to enrich the data as well as to collect supplementary qualitative data, 10 students were also interviewed. The researchers applied convenience sampling in selecting the interviewees. Thus those who tended to participate in interview, were selected. Selection of 10 interviewees is based on the grounded theory methodology which proposes the sample size of 10 to 12 as an accepted sample size for interviewees (Creswell, 1998). All the interviewees were 18 to 24 years old, and were students of medicine while their level of English proficiency was intermediate as determined by National University Entrance Exam. There were six female and four male interviewees who were included in the sample.

Procedure

The researchers collected data from two sources. First, with the permission from authorities, two closed-ended questions and two open-ended questions were presented to students at the end of one of their English classes and 15 to 20 minutes were allotted for them to answer the above mentioned questions.

Subsequently, one of the researchers conducted a semi-structured interview starting with four open and close-ended questions allowing the students to adapt to her commentaries and feel comfortable at the interview. The interviewer began with more general questions about students' number and types of English courses they had previously passed and if they had enjoyed learning English. Then, they were asked four core questions that allowed them to talk about as much as they want. These questions were revised forms of the open and close-ended questions to motivate and encourage the interviewees to provide more complete data and fill the information gap in open and close-ended questions asked before (Nakamura, 2000). The following questions were asked to participants:

1. What does class participation mean to you and do you believe there is value in class participation?
2. How much do you actively participate in your English classes as a whole? Elaborate.
3. What factors influence your level of participation in a given class?
4. What would increase your participation level in class and what do you think prevents you? Elaborate.

The interview took approximately 45 minutes and was audio recorded to prevent any inevitable omission during note taking at the interview.

Data Analysis

After data collection, the researchers coded and analysed each data source separately. All the transcriptions were analysed based on content analysis and were coded thoroughly based on the key concepts, namely, teachers' traits, students' traits, classroom environment, and size of the class. All these concepts emerged from literature review. However, it is worth mentioning that based on the researchers' specified objectives of the interview, narrow transcription was not entirely applied here and the researchers transcribed the interviews at a "very broad level of delicacy" as stated by Cusen (2005, p. 115). After the entire data were coded, all code words were listed and similar codes were grouped; this then enabled the researchers to search for meaningful themes. The researchers extracted the themes and showed their frequency of occurrence through percentage (descriptive statistics).

FINDINGS

In response to the first research question (What is the perception of EFL students regarding their classroom participation?), the results revealed that 85% of the students believed that they were not active in their English classes. Only 10% of them claimed that they were active and 5% of the students said that they didn't really know whether they were active or not. By referring to the interview responses, it can be seen that students are not motivated enough to participate in classroom activities because as one respondent said, "My English is bad, and even if I participate and read the answers

of questions, My English is not going to improve". Another interviewee said, "What participation? Most of my friends bring the books of former students to the class and read from those responses. I can also do that, but this is not participation. I let my friends do that". Although it not directly mentioned by any of the interviewees, it seems that the only thing that requires students' participation in English classes is reading through the questions from the book and answering those questions.

To find out more about engagement in class participation, the researchers referred to an open-ended question - What encourages or hinders you to be an active participant in your English classes? The results obtained were three main reasons: (1) psychological factors; (2) physical factors; and (3) teacher factors.

Factors that Encourage Students' Class Participation

Psychological Factor. This factor which encompasses the students' motivational factors has been mentioned in 89 responses (74%). The following are representative comments for this factor: "If teachers memorise our names and call us with their first name, we feel good about wanting to participate more in our classes." Another pertinent comment was:

"We don't really know our teachers; sometimes we don't even know their names even at the end of the term. It would be great if we go to field trips together, or even sit at

university cafeteria and eat or drink something together. This way we can talk to one another and get to know our teachers better. In that case, I would personally want to talk more with my teacher in the class.”

External motivation is another reason mentioned by at least 40 students (33%), although except a few, most of the students did not really mention what type of reward (for example, extra marks, or social reward which includes attention, praise, or thanks) they have in mind to be encouraged to participate more in classroom discussions. For example, a comment by one of the participants was: “It would be great if teachers reward us any time we participate in class discussions; most of our teachers don’t really care whether we talk or not.”

Physical Factor. The physical layout was mentioned by 65 students (54%) as an important factor for welcoming students who tended to participate more. In descending order “classroom space” was frequently mentioned by the students. One of the comments was “if our classes were bigger and nicer, I would feel more comfortable even sitting in the class.” Another student believed that:

“Our class was held in the amphitheater, sometimes we didn’t even hear our teacher’s voice let alone our friends’ comments. I think if English classes were held in a place that we could sit in a

circle, we could see each other and encouraged to talk to each other.”

The second important factor mentioned by the students was the number of students in a class. For instance, one comment was: “if, for example, there were 20 of us in one class, I, very much, wanted to participate and get engaged in class discussions”, another one said: “if we didn’t have so many people in our class, I probably wanted to talk more in my class”. And the final factor mentioned was interior design of the class (11 responses) – “classes should look nice, with beautiful paintings or even plants; we don’t have anything in our class”, or “it would be nice if we had more positive atmosphere in our classes such as flowers, plants and even colourful more comfortable chairs!”

Teacher Factor. Last but not least are factors that attribute to what teachers can do to encourage more class activities (63 responses). The most frequently mentioned factor was teachers’ teaching style. Students believed that if teachers followed communicative style, they would be more encouraged to actively participate in classroom discussions. The following comments represent students’ voice in this matter: “only focusing on reading skill, doesn’t really encourage anyone. We want music, movie, videos, et cetera to be encouraged to even listen to teacher’s lecture”, “our class is very boring, I guess if the class was fun and our teacher was fun, I personally wanted to contribute more”, and

finally “if we had group work, I would be more comfortable participating in group; our teacher never does that”. In addition, 63 students thought that teachers are the ones who need to make the lesson more interesting for students, while 25 students mentioned that they need more experienced teachers because they know how to manage class discussions professionally. One comment for example, was: “our teachers are not very experienced. Sometimes teaching us is their very first experience in teaching at university. I guess more experienced teachers knew how to provide better opportunities for students to talk” and another one said, “teachers are key factors in this; an experienced teacher knows exactly what to do.”

Factors that Hinder Students' Class Participation

Cultural Norm. It is interesting to note that among all the other factors, 49% of comments (59 responses) were related to cultural norms in participating in class discussions. Many students believed that they don't even know how to voice their opinion both in Persian (their native language) and in English. The following are representative comments for this factor: - “not knowing what to say and how to say it is my major problem.” Another comment made was:

“We haven't been taught how to share our views in public. I guess, that is our biggest problem. We need to be taught!” and “if I talk too

much in the class, my classmates think I am showing off, why?”

Textbook. Another very important factor that hinders students' participation in class is their textbook. Textbook was mentioned by 51 students (42.5%) but this factor can be classified as: (1) the content in the textbook; and (2) emphasis on only reading skill in their textbooks. Many comments represent the fact that ESP textbooks written by university lecturers themselves have not been well-designed to meet students' needs. For example, one participant said, “I want to learn English in order to talk to native speakers; this book doesn't teach me that. I cannot relate to even one of my book chapters”, another remark was, “the topics chosen for this book are very boring and old. If topics were more relevant and updated, I would probably get encouraged to search more about it and talk in the class”. And others believe that the textbook that is written for reading skill, doesn't really provide an opportunity for students to talk: “Our book has 12 boring reading passages, I don't have any information regarding these topics”.

Teacher Factor. Teacher factor was mentioned by half of the students (50 responses) as the factor that has discouraged university students to participate in class activities. These factors have been further classified as the teacher's trait, teacher's teaching style, and teacher's professional experience. Frequent negative teacher traits (40 responses) which were cited were being

impatient, boring, without sense of humor, demotivating, and unapproachable. The following are representative comments for teachers' negative traits:

“Teachers should allow their students to think and answer the questions asked. Both my teachers in GE1 course and GE2 course always asked the question and answered it immediately. I think teachers never allow us to try to answer any of the questions.”

Another related comment was: “Teachers should be motivated enough to encourage us students to participate in class activities. In my class, my teacher was always tired of working too hard. She was just coming to finish the lessons and go” and “what discourages students in the class is teachers. All my English teachers were very unfriendly. They did not know students' names, they don't tell jokes or laugh with us and they just teach, teach and teach”.

Instructional pace and teachers' method were also occasionally mentioned to be the reasons that hinder participation (25 responses). Out of the 25 comments attributed to teacher's teaching style, 20 of them mentioned teaching-centeredness as the factor that makes the students passive listeners with an end goal of testing. One of the comments was, “Teachers tell us that we should talk but they are the only ones who talk in the class”, or “our class is always quiet. My teacher is the only one who talks!”

Finally, there were also comments regarding instructional pace (five responses):

“My teacher is always in a hurry to finish the book; we even have to go to make up classes to be able to finish the units assigned. I don't think I am encouraged to talk when teachers constantly tell us we are behind the syllabus.”

Another participant said: “The amount of materials that we have to cover is too much. My teacher teaches so fast that even sometimes ask us to keep our questions for after class”.

There were several comments (10 responses) regarding teachers' lack of experience and its link to class participation. Of all the responses related to this factor, there were students who had compared their current English teacher with their former English teacher at high school or language center they used to go. For example, one student said:

“Teachers should be more experienced. My Kanoon [a famous language center] teacher had 25 years of experience and she knew how to make us talk about various topics, but this teacher is young and doesn't seem to know how to handle the class.”

This comment was reverberated by another participant: “Lack of teaching experience can hinder class participation; I am sure our class is my teacher's first experience!”

Interview Responses

Although students were asked to explain about the factors that either encourage or hinder their class participation, the comments received on behalf of interviewees were mainly about factors that hindered students' class participation. It is worth mentioning that this can be considered as a limitation of the study because although the interviewer asked the question regarding the factors that encourage students to participate in the classroom, combining two factors in one single question, or asking double-barelled questions (What would increase your participation level in class and what do you think prevents you?) might have unconsciously led students to talk more about the negative factors that hindered their participation rather than the ones that encourage their participation. As a result, out of the 10 people interviewed, there were only random comments as regard to factors that encourage students' class participation like teachers' teaching style, more interesting books and class activity grade.

Of all the comments provided in the interview about the factors that hinder students' class participation, lack of teaching management and books were the most frequently derived themes. Seven out of 10 students interviewed (70%) believed that lack of time management on the part of their teachers created a major problem not only in giving students a chance to participate in class activities but also in learning the lessons in general. These students believed

that at the beginning of the semester, many teachers maintain a slow pace in teaching but from the middle till the end, teachers teach as quickly as they can to complete what is assigned in their syllabus and keep the course tightly structured. One of the comments for this factor is as below:

“I don't know why quantity is more important than quality. We have to cover so many units while we don't even have time to grasp and understand many of them. My teacher is constantly worried about us finishing the units that sometimes she forgets we are not English students [students majoring in English like TESL].”

Another comment was:

“My teacher doesn't ask us many questions. He just goes on reading the paragraphs and calling some names to read the exercises without asking us any specific questions for us to discuss”, “...except for the first few minutes before any unit, we do not discuss or answer any questions, except the questions about the meaning of certain words in English or Persian.”

Almost all the students (nine out of 10) claimed that the topics included in their books are not encouraging enough for them to inspire them to talk more in class. To describe their books, students

used adjectives like “boring”, “tiring”, “irrelevant”, “removed from our own modern experiences” and alike.

In response to the third question (Should class participation be graded?), 45 % of the students believed that class activity should not be graded, 5% believed it should be graded, and 51% of the students stated that it did not really make a difference for them if their class activities were graded or not. By referring to the students’ interview response, it is believed that the most repeated key concept is “stress”. Almost all respondents (nine responses) said that they are already under so much pressure from other professors, university staff, and parents as well as a large number of assignments and projects that they cannot handle other types of pressure from their English classes for attendance, class activities and alike.

In order to answer the fourth research question (What do EFL students think about the effects (both positive and negative) of grading class participation?), the researchers referred to both the open-ended questions which the 120 students had to reply in a written form as well as to the interviewees’ responses since not many students had written their comments in written form.

Although this question (If the class participation was graded in your English class, how do you think this would affect (both positively and negatively) your performance in and out of classroom?) was placed on students’ paper in order to be answered by all the 120 students, only 25 students had written short comments in

this regard. Despite looking for repeated words to come up with themes, the researchers found only a few random positive comments (10 responses) and a few negative comments (15 responses) about grading criteria. The comments that were related to positive outcomes of allocating any grade to class participation were “higher class participation”, “better discipline on behalf of students”, “better prepared students” and “more attendance”. Negative outcomes that would result from grading class participation were “rule-governed system”, “poor incentive”, “forced attendance” and “poor assessment criteria”.

Analysing the interviews, the first theme which emerged was “attendance”. However, this theme seems to both positively and negatively be the result of grading class participation. About seven students (70%) believed that the only good effect of grading class participation was that it inspired them to attend all the classes. For more clarification, it is important to note that according to departmental regulations, medical university students are allowed to be absent for only four sessions in the period of 17 weeks, of two classes per week. However, it is often seen that many students at the end of the semester convince their professors that their absenteeism is justified, so trying to understand their students, some professors tend not to be strict about the university’s attendance policy. On the other hand, they were 40% of students who mentioned “attendance” as a negative factor that is brought about by grading class participation. One student said, “if

class participation is graded, we have to constantly be worried about our attendance; this causes anxiety for us”.

Another theme which emerged from the positive outcome of grading was better preparation on behalf of the students. It was found that six out of 10 students (60%) agreed that if students knew class participation would be graded, they would prepare themselves better before they attended their English classes. For example, one student stated: “My friends and I usually use former students’ book to read the exercises in the class if we are called on. If the class participation were graded, I would spend some time before the class to prepare myself for the exercises we do in the classroom”. To clarify, we should add that, unfortunately, it is not compulsory for the students of this university to buy a new book. Hence, it is often seen that many students use their friends’ used books which contain written answers of all the exercises and the English or Persian meanings of the vocabularies can also be seen all over the books.

DISCUSSION

As regard to the first research question the results showed that most of the students do not perceive themselves as active students in their English classes. This result is in line with Karp and Yoels’s (1976) study which reported that only about 10 out of 40 students participated in class discussions, and typically, just five dominated discussions. This lack of participation in English classes could be resulted from students’ lack of

motivation for learning English. One reason for this, especially for Iranian learners, may be the fact that they start learning English since junior high school, if not in early ages at private English institutions. Nevertheless, after all these years, many still cannot even handle the simplest English conversations. This as a result may lead to loss of motivation to learn English by the time they enter the university (Khojasteh, Shokrpour, & Kafipour, 2015). Ryan and Deci (2000) believe that when students lack enough interest in learning, they are unable to produce high academic achievement and long-term retention of what they have learned.

Another factor which was revealed from interviews with students is that many students do not even know what active participation really means. Based on their reports, many think that reading the answers of questions from the textbook is participation. This can be attributed to the fault of teachers who sometimes assume that students already know how to participate and how much participation is enough for them to be graded (Meyer, 2009).

The results of second research question showed that among the factors that encourage students’ participation, we can point to psychological factors such as knowing students’ names, having more approachable teachers and enhancing their external motivation. The above mentioned factors can have other positive effects on students’ participation which have been reported by other similar studies such as Dallimore et al. (2012) and Fassinger

(2000). In another study conducted by Mustapha, Rahman and Yunus (2010) in Malaysia, the results showed that teachers who are encouraging and approachable can positively affect students' participation in class. With regard to memorising students' names and its association with better class participation, the result of this study is in line with that of Herzog's (2002).

Physical appearance of the class was another factor considered effective by the students in encouraging participation. This link has been verified by various previous studies conducted in different countries all over the world such as the United States (Meyer, 2009), China (Peng, 2014), and Pakistan (Suleman & Hussain, 2014); all these studies came to the conclusion that classroom physical environment has a significant effect on students' academic achievement. According to Suleman and Hussain (2014), students who feel more comfortable in their learning environment can better retain information from class discussions. Seating position, classroom design, density, privacy, noise, and the presence or absence of windows are the factors that have been mentioned as integrating or mitigating factors on students' behaviour, attitudes, and achievement (Meyer, 2009). It is also stated that by changing the classroom physical environment, students' disruptive behaviours can be minimised (Gaurdino & Fullerton, 2010). The positive association between appropriate class size and opportunity of interaction and participation has also been

emphasised by Howard, James and Taylor (2002).

The third factor that was considered encouraging to class participation by the students is the teacher factor. While boring, dry and unconvincing teaching style are discouraging, encouraging teaching style enhances students' reflective thinking and problem solving skills which eventually lead to better retention and better grades. Another teacher factor that encourages student participation is having experienced teachers. This has been supported by a study conducted by Doganay and Oztürk (2011) who did a comparative study between experienced and novice teachers. The results revealed that experienced teachers use more metacognitive strategies in class which accordingly can have positive effect on students' class participation.

Regarding factors that discourage student participation in the classroom and cultural norms, textbooks and teachers, yet again, can be mentioned. According to Girgin and Stevens (2005), students who come from non-participatory cultures are reluctant to participate in class discussions. This as well as language factors are major reasons behind Asian students' unwillingness in class participation (Nataatmadja, Sixsmith & Dyson, 2007). Nataatmadja, Sixsmith and Dyson (2007) stated that "most Asian countries have large class sizes: if the students ask questions in class, the lecture would not finish on time, and therefore the instructor prefers students to discuss any issues that they have after class" (p. 74).

Insufficient English proficiency was another factor mentioned hindering students' verbal participation. This has been supported by many studies including Davison and Trent (2007) and Gyungsook (2014).

Textbook was another factor that was mentioned by many students discouraging their class participation. Apart from presentation of materials and textbook layout, suitability of materials for different learning styles, appropriateness and authenticity are among the factors that motivate students to learn (El-Sakran, 2012). For an English textbook, Deuri (2012) believes subject matter should be based on students' environment, psychological needs and interests.

The results of this study demonstrate that while positive teacher traits can encourage students' participation in class, negative teacher traits can negatively correlate with participation. Teacher's experience and strategies he or she adopts to foster effective participation plays a fundamental role in encouraging students, especially Asians (Nataatmadja, Sixsmith, & Dyson, 2007). In fact, according to Gorham and Christophel (1992), "motivation is perceived by students as a student-owned state, while lack of motivation is perceived as a teacher-owned problem" (p. 240). Teacher's verbal and non-verbal behaviour has also been reported by Fritschner (2000) to have a significant effect on students' degree of participation in class. Even sometimes teachers' own lack of motivation and job dissatisfaction might lead to demotivated students (Hekmatzadeh, Khojasteh, &

Shokrpour, 2016). Furthermore, it is stated that teacher's lack of knowledge and teacher-centered teaching style are limiting factors to students' participation (Fritschner, 2000). Equally true is the fact that impatient teachers who are specially facing crowded classes seem to have shorter "teacher wait-time" which this results in teachers who immediately answer their own questions before giving their students enough time to think and respond. Indeed, it has been proposed in the literature that students are reluctant to participate in classes where the teachers wait "no more than a few seconds" to answer the questions asked in class (Fritschner, 2000, p.356).

The result of this study also show that lack of teachers' time management skills and instructional pace can deter class participation. While moving along too slowly can be boring and distracting for students, moving along too quickly can also be discouraging because students may feel defeated and unchallenged. So, it is fundamental to align instructional content to match learners' skill levels.

Considering the third research question (Should class participation be graded?), the result of this study show that 45% of the students believe that their class activities should not be graded while about half of the students do not even care about whether their participation is graded or not. As it was mentioned earlier, "stress" is repeated as one of the main reasons why students are reluctant about the idea of graded participation. University students today experience high levels of stress in many

areas of life due to poor sleeping and eating habits, academic pressure, full schedules and many more. According to Behere, Yadav and Behere (2011), some medical students experience stress in such level that needs medical interventions. Students should then adopt active coping strategies instead of avoidance and they should receive consultation on how to manage and cope with stress (Al-Dubai, Al-Naggar, Alshagga, & Rampal, 2011).

Finally, the results of the fourth question (If the class participation was graded in your English class, how do you think this would affect (both positively and negatively) your performance in and out of classroom?) reveal that improved attendance and better preparation are the positive aspects university students relate to when it comes to grading class activities. At the same time, some students believe that attendance can be a daunting factor if class activities are graded. In either case, we can conclude that students seek external factors in order to force themselves to sit in their English classes. Indeed, it refers to external motivation. If students are not instrumentally motivated, they will not continue attending classes unless they find them sensible and practical. This implies that the participants of this study are not entirely aware of the rationale as to why attendance is necessary. Moreover, it implies they do not find classes useful and fruitful to be encouraged to attend classes regularly. Therefore, it is important that instructors change their teaching strategies and styles to make students interested in English classes.

Ideally, teachers can interactively motivate students; this leads learners to maximise achievement. Therefore, teachers should try to instrumentally motivate learners to give them a tangible reason to attend classes.

Although the researchers of this study thought grading policies can motivate students to be more involved in class activities, the results of this study show that students who don't like to participate in class will still remain silent even if grading is proposed to encourage better participation (Fritschner, 2000). So according to Meyer (2009), if participation grade is implemented for such students, they will be more disadvantaged because they probably employ silence regardless of the grades associated with participation. Therefore, other motives should be considered apart from grades.

The results of this study also show that 85% of our students do not assume themselves as active participants in their English classes. Since they are more or less reluctant to be graded for their class activities, it can be concluded that this result doesn't support the association between grading class participation and higher student motivation, as asserted by Rattenborg, Simonds and Hunt (2005). This is also in contrast with the link between using participation grades and more frequent participation from a greater number of students proposed by Dallimore et al. (2012).

Hence, based on students' remarks, there are other measures that need to be considered to encourage students for more participation.

For example, smaller class enrolment, better classroom environment and physical appearance, appropriate instructional pace, discussion-based instructional methods for creating more participation opportunities, more communicative textbooks, are a few pertinent considerations. It is also important to culturally know our students because some students, like the ones in this study, come from cultures that simply value silence in the classroom. So for these type of students, Balas (2000) suggests instead of monopolising the discussion, it is best to utilise small group activities to facilitate speaking in class.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study show that most students do not perceive themselves as active students in their English classes due to physical appearance of the classrooms, textbooks in use, and the characteristics of teachers and their teaching styles. It is interesting to note that although it seems that the participants of this study looked for external motives to increase their tendency for class participation, about half of these students reported that they would not prefer graded participation to be applied in their English classes. According to them, this would add another hurdle to many other existing problems they face in their academic life.

Given the pros and cons to grading students on class discussion, EFL teachers should consider two important points. First, the students who are active in class are not necessarily the most attentive students in

class discussions; sometimes, they talk to impress their teacher. Furthermore, the shy students usually don't speak up in class. Therefore, if the teachers plan to grade class participation, they should probably make their expectations clear to students. They need a rubric that defines the elements of quality class participation including attentive listening, preparation before class, and comments based on discussions. It would also be useful for teachers to help students distinguish between speaking a lot in class and participating in a meaningful conversation. EFL teachers need to clarify the grading policies, standards, criteria, timeliness, consistency, and grade disputes to the students of the course so that these students are adequately aware of what is expected of them for real participation in class. We also need to include grading policies, procedures, and standards in the syllabus and distribute the grading criteria to students at the beginning of the term and remind them of the relevant criteria. According to Ko and Rossen (2017) whatever participation activities (such as contributing to discussions, answering and asking questions) are going to be included in the final grade of the students, teachers should explicitly explain and elaborate these in the syllabus, and make them known to students at the beginning of the course. Finally, it is important not to consider grades as the only motivation to encourage students to attend class actively as it will not work definitely for all students. Although previous research found class participation difficult to assess, hence, even if graded participation is implemented, assessment

experts who support fair and reliable scoring of any criteria should devise the rubrics to overcome the problems of teacher bias and unfair penalisation of less vocal students especially in countries like Iran, where students have proficiency issues and need more time in organising their thoughts. It is also important to apply an assessment policy that actually evaluates students' learning and not students' behaviour in terms of frequency of participation. In summary, McDonald's (2017, p. 311) contention that "it is unfair to grade a student on what could very well be a personality issue" holds true.

REFERENCES

- Al-Dubai, S. A. R., Al-Naggar, R. A., Alshagga, M. A., & Rampal, K. G. (2011). Stress and coping strategies of students in a medical faculty in Malaysia. *The Malaysian Journal of Medical Sciences: MJMS*, 18(3), 57–64.
- Balas, A. (2000). Using participation to assess students' knowledge. *College Teaching*, 48(4), 122-127.
- Bean, J. C., & Peterson, D. (1998). Grading classroom participation. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 1998(74), 33–40. doi: 10.1002/tl.7403
- Behere, S. P., Yadav, R., & Behere, P. B. (2011). A comparative study of stress among students of medicine, engineering, and nursing. *Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine*, 33(2), 145-148. doi.org/10.4103/0253-7176.92064
- Carstens, B. A. (2015). *The effects of voluntary versus cold-calling participation on class discussion and exam performance in multiple sections of an educational psychology undergraduate course*. (Unpublished doctoral thesis). University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Retrieved from trace.tennessee.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi
- Craik, F. I. M., & Lockhart, R. S. (1972). Levels of processing. A framework for memory research. *Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior*, 11(6), 671-684.
- Crawford, M., & Macleod, M. (1990). Gender in the college classroom: An assessment of the "chilly climate" for women. *Sex Roles*, 23(3-4), 101-122.
- Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. USA: Sage, Thousand Oaks, CA.
- Crombie, G., Pyke, S. W., Silverthorn, N., Jones, A., & Piccinin, S. (2003). Students' perceptions of their classroom participation and instructor as a function of gender and context. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 74(1), 51-76.
- Cusen, G. (2005). *Investigating vocabulary learning strategies: A case study of Romanian undergraduates with a professional interest in learning English as a foreign language*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Lancaster University, United Kingdom.
- Dallimore, E. J., Hertenstein, J. H., & Platt, M. B. (2012). Impact of cold-calling on student voluntary participation. *Journal of Management and Education*, 37(3), 305-341.
- Dallimore, E. J., Hertenstein J. H., & Platt M. B. (2004). Classroom participation and discussion effectiveness: Student generated strategies. *Communication Education*, 53(1), 103-115.
- Dancer, D., & Kamvounias, P. (2005). Student involvement in assessment: A project designed to assess class participation fairly and reliably. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 30(4), 445–454.
- Davison, C., & Trent, J. (2007). Contradictory discourses: Learning and teaching in and through English in an English-medium university in Asia. *Fremdsprachen Lehren und Lernen*, 36, 200-216.

- Deuri, C. (2012). An evaluative study of textbook in English at higher secondary level. *International Journal of Science, Environment and Technology*, 1(1), 24-28.
- Doganay, A., & Ozturk, A. (2011). An investigation of experienced and inexperienced primary school teachers' teaching process in science and technology classes in terms of metacognitive strategies. *Kuram ve Uygulamada Egitim Bilimleri*, 11(3), 1320-1325.
- El-Sakran, A. T. (2012). Evaluation of an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) book for students of Islamic and Arabic studies. *English for Specific Purposes World*, 34(12), 45-53.
- Fassinger, P. A. (2000). How classes influence students' participation in college classrooms. *Journal of Classroom Interaction*, 35(2), 38-47.
- Fritschner, L. M. (2000). Inside the undergraduate college classroom: Faculty and students differ on the meaning of student participation. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 71(3), 342-362.
- Galyon, C. E. (2012). *Analysis of the role of homework in predicting and improving exam performance*. (Unpublished doctoral thesis). University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Retrieved from trace.tennessee.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi
- Girgin, K. Z., & Stevens, D. D. (2005). Bridging in-class participation with innovative instruction: Use and implications in a Turkish university classroom. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 42(1), 93-106.
- Gorham, J., & Christophel, D. M. (1992). Students' perceptions of teacher behaviors as motivating and de-motivating factors in college classes. *Communication Quarterly*, 40(3), 239-252.
- Guardino, C., & Fullerton, E. (2010). Changing behaviors by changing the classroom environment. *Council for Exceptional Children*, 42(6), 8-13.
- Gyungsook, J. L. (2014). Why students don't participate in English medium instruction classes in a Korean university: A case study. *English Teaching*, 69(1), 91-117.
- Handelsman, M. M., Briggs, W. L., Sullivan, N., & Towler, A. (2005). A measure of college student course engagement. *Journal of Educational Research*, 98(3), 184-191.
- Hekmatzadeh, M. H., Khojasteh, L., & Shokrpour, N. (2016). Are emotionally intelligent EFL teachers more satisfied professionally? *International Journal of Applied Linguistics and English Literature*, 5(2), 97-107.
- Herzig, A. H. (2002). Where have all the doctoral students gone? Participation of doctoral students in authentic mathematical activity as a necessary condition for persistence toward the Ph.D. *Educational Studies in Mathematics*, 50(2), 177-212.
- Howard, J. R., & Henney, A. L. (1998). Student participation and instructor gender in the mixed-age college classroom. *Journal of Higher Education*, 69(4), 384-405.
- Howard, J. R., James, G. H. III, & Taylor, D. R. (2002). The consolidation of responsibility in the mixed-age college classroom. *Teaching Sociology*, 30(2), 214-234.
- Karp, D. A., & Yoels, W. C. (1976). The college classroom: Some observations on the meaning of student participation. *Sociology and Social Research*, 60, 421-439.
- Khojasteh, L., Shokrpour, N., & Kafipour, R. (2015). EFL students' perception toward class participation in General English courses. *Indian Journal of Fundamental and Applied Life Sciences*, 5(2), 3198-3207.
- Ko, S., & Rossen, S. (2017). *Teaching online: A practical guide*. Routledge: New York.

- Krejcie, R. V., & Morgan, D. W. (1970). Determining sample size for research activities. *Educational and Psychological Measurement, 30*(3), 607-610.
- Liu, M., & Jackson, J. (2009). An exploration of Chinese EFL learners' unwillingness to communicate and foreign language anxiety. *Modern Language Journal, 92*(1), 71-86.
- McDonald, M. E. (2017). *The nurse educator's guide to assessing learning outcomes*. New York: Johns & Barlett learning.
- Meyer, K. R. (2009). *Student classroom engagement: Rethinking participation grades and student silence*. (Unpublished doctoral thesis). Ohio University, Ohio, USA. Retrieved from https://etd.ohiolink.edu/rws_etd/document/get/ohiou1242164691
- Mustapha, S. M., Rahman, N. S. N. A., & Yunus, M. M. (2010). Perceptions towards classroom participation: A case study of Malaysian undergraduate students. *Social and Behavioral Sciences, 7*, 113-121.
- Nakamura, R. M. (2000). *Healthy classroom management: Motivation, communication, and discipline*. Australia: Wadsworth Thompson Learning.
- Nataatmadja, I., Sixsmith, A., & Dyson, L. E. (2007). *Improving class participation by Asian students*. Paper presented at the IRMA International Conference, Vancouver, Canada.
- Peng, J. E. (2014). *Willingness to communicate in the Chinese EFL university classroom*. Multilingual Matters: Toronto.
- Rattenborg, A. N., Simonds, C. J., & Hunt, S. K. (2005). Preparing to participate: An exploration of student engagement through student work and instructor's observations. *Basic Communication Course Annual, 17*(1), 94-133.
- Rau, W., & Heyl, B. S. (1990). Humanizing the college classroom: Collaborative learning and social organization among students. *Teaching Sociology, 18*(2), 141-155.
- Rocca, K. A. (2010). Student participation in the college classroom: an extended multidisciplinary literature review. *Communication Education, 59*(2), 185-213.
- Rogers, S. L. (2011). *Grading participation in college courses: Instructor attitudes and practices*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Albany, New York.
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist, 55*(1), 68-78.
- Shindler, J. (2003) Creating a more peaceful classroom community by assessing student participation and process. *Online Journal of Peace and Conflict Resolution Spring, 5*(1), 28-54.
- Smith, D. H. (1992). Encouraging students' participation in large classes: A modest proposal. *Teaching Sociology, 20*(4), 337-339.
- Suleman, Q., & Hussain, I. (2014). Effects of classroom physical environment on the academic achievement scores of secondary school students in Kohat division, Pakistan. *International Journal of Learning and Development, 4*(1), 71-82.
- Weaver, R. R., & Qi, J. (2005). Classroom organization and participation: College students' perceptions. *The Journal of Higher Education, 76*(5), 570-601.
- Wood, J. (1996). Should class participation be required in the basic communication course? *Basic Communication Course Annual, 8*(1), 108-124.