



## Factors that Influence Participation in English Language Learners at Beginner Level

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### *Abstract*

The purpose of this case study was to describe and discover the factors that influence participation in an English class of beginner level students at the Language Department of the University of Guanajuato. Knowing the factors that motivate or demotivate students' participation, can help teachers to create strategies and modify aspects in order to increase students' participation. The data collected for this study was gathered through observation, interviews and questionnaires. This process was carried out from October to December 2023. The three methods were triangulated to get a wider perspective about what factors that influence participation, and how participation is seen by the students. The results of the study suggest that students are aware of the importance of participation in a foreign language classroom. Moreover, results show that students feel free to participate when they are in a safe environment.

*Keywords:* classroom environment, participation, L1, L2, games, Mexico.

### 1. Introduction

Participation is one of the most important factors in Foreign Language Learning. According to Snyder (2003) classroom participation requires the student to take a more engaged role in learning, instead of taking a passive and disinterested role in the classroom. Fassinger (cited in Mustaphaa, Rahmanb & Yunu, 2010) defines participation as “any comments or questions that the students offered or raised in class” (p. 114). Since, participation is seen as the active role that students play in their leaning process in class, teachers show a great interest in participation because it allows them to weight students' progress, it is also one of the main means by which students can practice the target language. According to Abebe & Deneke (2015) “When students respond to the teachers' or other students' questions, raise queries, and give comments, they are actively involved in the negotiation of comprehensible input and the formulation of comprehensible output, which are essential to language acquisition” (p. 75). This process of involvement in active participation can help students in developing listening and speaking skills, while sharing their comments and ideas. In order for students to be part of a dialogue, they have to use the language resources available to them, which leads to the use of the target language in a meaningful way. In addition, participation becomes a key motivating factor for learners to keep learning the language.

- Participation in foreign language classroom plays an important role during language learning
- A good classroom environment increases students' participation
- Students who are conscious about the importance of participation in their language learning process take a more active role during their learning process
- The use of L1 during participation at beginner level has advantages

## 2. Literature review

This section presents the main concepts of this research, as participation, classroom environment, also it describes some previous finding that researched have done in this topic.

### 2.1 *Classroom participation*

Classroom participation is a key aspect when it comes to language learning, as it is through active practice that learners can internalize knowledge. Snyder (2003), states that classroom participation requires the student to take a more engaged role in learning, instead of taking a passive and disinterested posture in the classroom. This definition by Snyder has been taken as the foundation for this study, since participation in foreign language learning is seen as very important and fundamental to increase proficiency in the target language. Learning a foreign language goes beyond what can be taught by the teacher, foreign language learners need to implement strategies that help them to actively use the language inside and outside the classroom as a means to increase their practice of the language.

### 2.2 *Classroom environment and participation*

Classroom environment is one of the main factors that influence students' participation in a foreign language classroom. According to Sidelinger (2010), positive social interaction in the classroom, and a collaborative and supportive instructor-student and student-student learning environment, help to the co-construction of learning. Teachers are the main authority in classroom, they are who lead mostly students' participation. Even though little research has been done on how teachers can affect students' participation, it is well known that teachers play an important role in students' participation. A study carried out by Zacharias, (2014) in an Indonesian school, showed that participation was highly affected by past participation's feedback, which mostly resulted to be negative for students. Teacher's attitude can determine students' participation, since the more confident students feel in class, the more open they will be to participate. Teachers that show a positive attitude towards students' questions help to create a safe learning environment, where students feel more secure to participate. At the same time, student-student relationships can determine how secure they feel when participating. When students can experience a good relationship with their classmates, they can construct mutual help during the learning process. Patrick, Anderman and Ryan (2002) state that stressing mutual respect in the classroom fosters positive and open communication among students who can share tentative ideas without fear of ridicule. Students who have a good relationship among them feel more secure of participating.

### 2.3 *The use of games in the EFL classroom to promote participation*

It seems that participating in classroom activities through games is an effective way to engage students. Hadfiel (1990), defines games as “an activity with rules, a goal and an element of

fun” (p. 1). In foreign language classrooms, many teachers have opted for using games as a tool to engage students in learning. Research has been done in this field in order to analyze how games influence participation in foreign language classroom. According to Lukianenko 2014, games increase students’ interaction during pair and group activities. During activities as games, students show more active participation. They can agree or disagreed politely o with their classmates. At the same time, students are able to ask for help, and can maintain constant communication to each other.

#### *2.4 The use of the first language and foreign language during participation at beginner level*

The use of learner’s L1 is a controversial topic in the EFL field. Over the years the use of the L1 has been regarded as something that has to be reduced. However, research on this topic has found that the use of first language (L1) has advantages. Meyer (2008) states that the use of the L1 is essential to minimize language learning anxiety in classrooms. The use of the L1 during participation in beginner level students is more common, since it makes them feel secure. According to Nation 2003 (as cited in Almoayidi, 2018) students hesitate using the foreign language in the classroom, especially if they are not well-equipped with it. For these reasons, the use first language cannot be taken as something negative or that can prevent students from learning the second language. However, it is important to maintain a proper balance of the use L1 and use it only when necessary and until it results beneficial for students.

### 3. Methodology

This section presents the research design, and the methods by which the information was collected and analyzed. The context, participants, the results and limitations of the study are also presented.

#### *3.1 Research design*

The design of this study is qualitative, and it incorporates the social constructionism paradigm, which according to Gergen (1985) “is principally concerned with elucidating the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise in which they live” (p. 3). This paradigm seemed appropriate considering the objective of this study, which was exploring participation in the foreign language classroom. In addition, to know students’ opinions about participation and the factors that influence it. The research method used was a case study, which purpose is to “enhance our understanding of a phenomenon, process, person or group, not to experiment and generalize to other populations in the tradition of larger-scale survey research” (Paltridge & Phakiti, 2015: 120). The research question guiding this study was: *What factors influence participation of beginner level students of English in the language department of the University of Guanajuato?*

#### *3.2 Researcher positionality*

As a student of an English teaching education program in Mexico, I am interested in investigating participation in the foreign language classroom because I want to know the main factors that influence participation. This can help me in my future as a language teacher. Knowing more about participation will help me to make better decisions in the classroom that affect positively to my students’ participation.

### 3.3 *Research context*

This study was carried out in the state of Guanajuato in Mexico. At the Language Department of the University of Guanajuato. In this language school, several languages are taught: French, Chinese, Italian, Japanese, and English. The languages go from level 100 to level 600, 700 or 800 depending on the language, each semester counts as a level. In the case of the English language program, the course consists of 8 semesters or 8 levels (100 to 800 level) I decided to choose this school since it is highly prestigious in the city, and it follows a communicative approach. Most of the students in this school are also students of different programs of the University of Guanajuato, or they are high school students of the same University. English is one of the more demanded languages in the school.

### 3.4 *Participants*

This study was conducted with 14 participants (8 women and 6 men) they were between 17 and 22 years old. All of them are Mexicans, they were enrolled in the 100 level of English at the language department of the University of Guanajuato. Some were enrolled in high school, and the rest were University students of different programs of the University of Guanajuato. They are beginner English language students. I decided to carry out my research with them because they are students that in general are very motivated to learn the language and I wanted to know more about the aspects that influence them to participate.

### 3.5 *Ethical protocol*

Following ethical procedures is imperative in research. Gregory 2003 (cited in Ramrathan, Grange & Shawa, 2017: 432) states “Ethics are closely associated with morals and involve embracing moral issues in the context of working with humans.” In this study, all the participants were informed about the research before starting with the observations. Participation was voluntary, and a consent letter was given to them informing about the purposes of the research and the methods that would be carried out in order to collect the data. All the participants agreed to being observed, answering the questionnaire and being audio recorded during the semi-structured interview. The personal information collected included: gender, age and schooling of the participants. Pseudonyms were used in order to protect participant’s identities.

### 3.6 *Data collection instruments*

In order to collect the information about the factors that influence participation, three instruments were used. The first instrument was observation, the objective of observing the class was to identify the kind of activities used during class and how much these activities engaged students’ participation. “Observation is the conscious noticing and detailed examination of participants’ behavior in a naturalistic setting” (Croker & Hingham, 2009: 166). Four observations were carried out in order to have information of first-hand about the participation dynamic in the classroom.

The second instrument used was a questionnaire, this questionnaire had closed-response and open-response items. Croker and Hingham (2009), state “Open-response questionnaires provide a way to find out, in an unstructured manner, what people are thinking about a particular topic or issue. As such, open-response questionnaires often serve as the basis for further, more structured research” (p. 201) The questions in this instrument were developed in order to know more about students’ perception in participation in second language classroom and how they carried out their participation.

The third instrument was a semi-structured interview, the purpose of using this instrument was to ask participants a specific question. Magaldi and Berler (2020) states that semi-structured interviews, allows for discovery, with space to follow topical trajectories as the conversation unfolds. During this semi-structure interview, the purpose was to maintain a fluent conversation about the topic.

### *3.7 Data analysis procedures*

The analysis of the data collected was through thematic analysis. “Thematic analysis requires more involvement and interpretation of the researcher... thematic analysis move beyond counting explicit words or phrases and focus on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas, within the data, that is, themes” (Guest, MacQueen & Namey, 2011: 10) Since, this is a qualitative study the data collected was the ideas and perspectives of participants, which had to be interpreted and classified by the researcher in order to find patters that lead to the development of possible themes that could answer to the research question.

The analysis process consisted of several steps. First, the data collected of the three instruments was read, and the audios were listened. Secondly, the audios of the interviews were transcribed. Thirdly, the data was reread to highlight the patter in students’ answers in order to develop the possible themes. Finally, a table was made in order to organize the possible themes and classify the answers of the participants according to these themes.

### *3.8 Limitations of the study*

Some of the limitations found in this study was the amount of time to observe the classes, I only had the opportunity to observe four classes. This did not give me the opportunity to observe all the different activities carried out during the whole course and how students’ participation evolves through it. This is something that I would have changed, since the more time a class is observed, more details can be noticed.

## **4. Results and discussion**

This section presents the results and discussion of the study. The section is divided into six parts, each addressing a theme: (1) Students’ perceptions about participation in the second language classroom, (2) Group activities and class dynamics as motivating factors in participation, (3) Class environment, (4) Students’ personality, (5) Teacher attitude towards students’ participation and feedback, (6) The use of L1 and L2 during participation.

### *4.1 Students perceptions about participation in the second language classroom*

This theme revealed that for most of the students, participation is seen mainly as a means to solve doubts about grammar or vocabulary, while for others participation is a means to practice English. During the semi-structured interview, one of the questions aimed at finding out more about what students thought about participation. Students were asked if they liked to participate in class, and their answers showed that they had different perspectives on participation. Evidence also showed that their reasons for participating varied among each participant.

For some participants in this study, participation was useful for solving their questions about language, which results interesting since this revealed that they were more focused on accuracy. Students mentioned that participation helped them to be guided during an activity, for

these students, participation was mainly about asking questions that help them to complete the activities. These questions were related to grammar or vocabulary. In contrast to this, for some students, participation was a means to practice the foreign language. For example, participant 6 stated:

*“Participation is for me as if I were in a situation where I have to speak in English, for example, at a store or at a restaurant.” (Q, Q1.)*

In this extract, the student explains that for her, participation is a means to use English as she would use it in real-life situations. This shows that this student is conscious of the lack of opportunities that she has to use English outside the classroom. For this reason, she wants to take advantage of participating in activities such as role plays. In these activities, students use the target language in the classroom in a meaningful way, which prepares them for real life situations.

#### *4.2 Group and dynamic activities as motivating factors in participation*

One of the items in the questionnaire was focused on finding out if students felt they had enough opportunities to participate. Most of their answers showed that students felt comfortable participating in group activities, since they can compare their answers with their classmates and give their opinion freely. Moreover, students’ answers revealed that the dynamic of the class, where the teacher implemented activities, as games were very inclusive, and they all had the opportunity to participate.

Participants highlighted that when working in group activities, they felt more secure participating. This showed that individual participation can be more overwhelming than group participation. In small groups, students have more opportunity to participate and to express themselves without feeling exposed individually in front of the whole class.

Another motivating factor that came up during this data analysis was the dynamic of the class. All the students revealed that the dynamic in class motivated them to participate and made them feel included in the activities. Participant 6 states:

*“With the willingness, respect and inclusive dynamics of the teacher, nobody is left out of participation.”*

This student mentioned the importance of creating activities where all the class could participate. During the four class observations, the researcher was able to see that many of the activities were games, which engaged students to participate. During these activities, the class was very attentive and cooperative. Dynamic activities as games engage students to participate in class, they feel more relaxed. With dynamic activities, students see language learning as funny and not as tedious.

#### *4.3 Class environment*

This theme revealed the importance of the class environment in participation. Qiu (2022) states that a positive classroom climate is claimed to follow from both the teacher’s and students’ active engagement in social interactions, classroom rapport, and the co-construction of the learning atmosphere. All the students mentioned feeling comfortable participating in class because they felt their classmates were not judging, on the contrary, they tried to support each other. For example, participant 2 explained:

*“I feel comfortable expressing myself in class, I am not afraid of it, there is an environment of respect.”*

Participating in class is something that can be challenging for students, overall in the second language classroom, where they are trying to communicate something in a language that is not theirs. The answer of this student showed how having a safe environment can help students to feel secure when participating. When students participate freely and without the fear of being judged, the learning process can be enriched.

Another important aspect found was how students could change their feeling towards participation after creating a good class environment. For instance, participant 10 mentioned:

*“On the contrary, I feel that there is support among all the class, at the beginning I felt as if my classmates could make fun of me, but then I felt that it is a matter of creating confidence. Now we all support each other.”*

This answer was very interesting, since the student expressed how their feelings about participation changed after seeing the support of their classmates. During the observations the group showed having a good relationship, even the teacher mentioned that this class was noisier compared to his other classes. This was because some students were friends or couples, so they showed confidence in each other. Learning a second language implies a high level of social interaction, for this reason it is important to develop a good class environment, where teacher and students can use the language during activities in a comfortable way, without feeling judged, but supported.

#### 4.4 Students personality

This theme focused on students' personality. This is another important factor in participation. During observations, the students who demonstrated to participate more in class were always the same. Those students, who were more extroverted, showed more active participation in the different activities. On the other hand, that students that in the interview and in their answers in the questionnaire identified themselves as being shy and little participative, were the same identified by the researcher as less active during class activities. However, these students as the rest of the class showed being conscious of the importance of participation in the second language classroom in order to improve their skills in the language. Regarding in this, participant 2 mentioned:

*“I feel shy when participating, but I am starting to participate more.”*

This student has identified how much his personality influences his participation in class, but also, I could notice that he is conscious of the importance of participation. This has led him to take the step to participate more. When students become conscious of how participation can positively affect their learning process, they start to increase their participation. Also, this student could properly identify the emotion that is generated when participating. The more conscious students are about their emotions, the more they can implement actions to control them, participant 3 stated:

*“I [AN18] prefer to participate individually, I am very perfectionist, and sometimes I don't like what my classmates do.” (I, Q4)*

This participant clearly showed how her personality influenced her participation. She preferred to participate individually, in contrast to most of their classmates who preferred to participate during group activities. Personality can be very important in second language learning, even though it is not a factor that can determine the students' success in second language learning, it is an important factor that influences students' interaction and participation. Students, who are more open to participate in the L2 classroom have more opportunity to develop language skills. However, shy students can use different tools outside the classroom that do not require much interaction in order to improve their language skills.

#### 4.5 *Teacher's attitude towards students' participation and feedback*

The role that teachers play in motivating students' participation is unquestionable at any level. Feedback is a means to help and guide students in their learning process. It is necessary that teachers give positive feedback or help students to reflect on their mistakes in order to help them in their learning process. In theme, it is shown that participants felt comfortable in respect to the attitude of the teacher towards their participation, they mentioned that teacher showed a very positive attitude towards their questions about the questions. Regarding this participant 6 mentioned:

*"The teacher solves our questions, and he never has a negative attitude, he answers our questions nicely." (I, Q3)*

This student mentioned some attitudes that his teacher had when he participated and that made him feel comfortable and supported. As participant 2 described:

*"He gives us the confidence and help us with our questions; he lets us know that it is ok if we make mistakes." (I, Q3)*

This student mentioned that the teacher showed a positive attitude towards their mistakes, he created a safe environment where mistakes were not seen as something bad. During observations, the teacher showed having a good rapport with students and being very flexible. Teacher's attitude towards student participation is very important, since it can motivate or demotivate students' participation during class. Teachers who are flexible and show a good attitude in helping students during participation increase their students' confidence and motivation. Positive feedback after participation influences how students see their mistakes. When mistakes are seen as a means to improve, students do not feel afraid of making mistakes, and they feel free to participate.

#### 4.6 *Use of the L1 and foreign language during participation*

Language proficiency is another factor that during the interview and questionnaire, students could identify as being important when participating. Students stated that one of the main reasons they do not participate is that they do not have enough knowledge on English. Most of the participants said that they preferred to participate in Spanish because it was easier. On the other hand, they said that when they participated in English, it was because they felt that they understood the topic, which made them feel more confident, participant 4 mentioned:

*"I do not dominate the English language, yet. For that reason, it is easier for me to participate in Spanish." (I, Q4)*

This student highlighted her lack of proficiency in English; however, she still participated in class using the L1. This theme was relevant for me, since students are beginner level. It is important to give students the opportunity to participate in any language, with beginner students, participation can be in Spanish in order to give them the opportunity to participate, this can help them to gain confidence and then start using the foreign language, *participant 3 mentioned:*

*"When it is something that I already know, and I know how to pronounce it, it is easier to participate in English." (I, Q1)*

This participant highlights that until she felt secure about the language, she used it when participating. With beginner level students, the use of L1 when participating is common, however, this is not necessarily wrong. It is important that students feel comfortable with the interaction in class, and little by little they can integrate the use of foreign language during participation. During the observations, only few students used English and motivated their

classmates to use it. All the students agreed that they preferred to participate in Spanish until they felt more secure using English.

### 5. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to discover and describe the factors that influence participation in the second language classroom at beginner level. The findings showed that students see participation as an important means to improve in their language learning. Some of the factors that influence students' participation at this level are: students' knowledge of the language, teacher attitude, engaging activities, relevance of the topic, solving questions about the topic, classroom environment. Only for few participants, participation was seen as a means to get a better grade.

The sample size and the profile of participants limit the generalization of the results. Future research could include older students enrolled in different levels. Finally, the findings of this study could be useful for language teachers how are interested in increasing students' participation at beginner level. Knowing the main factors that decrease and increase students' participation can help teachers to implement strategies to promote participation in second language classroom and co-create a learning environment.

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