Eradication of Mute English Phenomenon Inside Iraqi EFL College Classrooms

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Abstract

Speaking is among the most important skills aimed at in EFL college classes, and yet it seems to be ignored since many students fail to express themselves for various reasons, although they have some adequate knowledge in English to do this. This phenomenon is called 'Mute English' which is a serious problem that prevails in Iraqi EFL college classes. It is important to investigate the reasons behind this phenomenon and to look for techniques to eradicate it.

Hence, the present study aims at:

1. investigating the reasons behind the Mute English Phenomenon in Iraqi college classrooms.

2. eradicating this phenomenon through adopting certain techniques that are designed to develop students' speaking ability.

To fulfil these aims, the following hypotheses are postulated:

1. Instructors and students agree on the reasons behind the Mute English phenomenon.

2. There is no statistically significant difference in the mean scores of the oral posttest between the experimental group that is taught reading comprehension through using the adopted techniques (Brainstorming, Discussion, and Debate) and that of the control group that is taught reading comprehension according to the traditional questioning techniques.

3. There is no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental group in the oral pretest and posttest.

The present study is limited to:

1. instructors of English in the colleges of education and basic education in the Iraqi universities.

2. second-year college students, Departments of English, Colleges of Basic Education, Universities of Mustansiriyah and Missan for the academic year 2011-2012 .

3. teaching reading comprehension texts taken from the prescribed textbook (Developing Skills, Alexander,1967).

To achieve the aims of this study, a number of procedures were followed. First the researcher constructed a questionnaire of 42 items as possible reasons of Mute English for both students and instructors. The questionnaire validity was assured by exposing it to a jury of experts, whereas its reliability was ensured by using two methods: the split-half and alpha Cronbach methods yielding reliability coefficients of 0.939 and 0.957 respectively. Then the quasi pretest-posttest nonequivalent-groups experimental design was utilized. The researcher also designed a pre-post speaking test consisting of 40 items; each student was asked ten questions in a form of a semi structured interview. The test validity was ascertained by exposing it to a jury of experts, whereas its reliability was found to be 0.974 using the interrater method. Then

a pilot study was conducted on 24 students to provide data for item analysis.

A ten-week experiment was conducted to apply the techniques. Fifty-eight students were chosen randomly and divided into two equal groups, experimental and control, and the subjects of the groups were statistically matched in a number of variables. The researcher herself taught the two groups. She taught the experimental group by using the techniques of brainstorming, discussion, and debate and the sub techniques of using fillers, bringing the task within students' experience, tolerance of first language use when appropriate, and making the classroom environment a non-threatening place, and taught the control group by using the traditional questioning techniques.

After the statistical treatment of data using the t-test for two independent samples, the findings show significant statistical differences between the experimental group and the control group in the speaking skill test and in favour of the experimental group. Thus, both null hypotheses are rejected. It is concluded that the adoption of the techniques of brainstorming, discussion and debate has eradicated the Mute English phenomenon.

Finally, a number of useful recommendations concerning the EFL learners, instructors, and syllabus or material designers, are presented and several pedagogical suggestions for further research are stated.

Conclusions

   Breaking the boundaries between traditional courses and modern ones by integrating speaking skills improves students' communicative competence. The techniques used in this study for integrating speaking and reading skills deepen students' understanding of the reading materials and provide them with authentic speaking practice that improves their fluency.

   In the light of the empirical evidence revealed in this study and in relation to the researcher's own observations during the experiment, the following conclusions are drawn:

1. There are a variety of reasons that prevent students from speaking English fluently inside their classrooms and in different types of situations. Some of these reasons may be personal; for instance, students may be suffering from communication apprehension, having nothing to say, afraid of criticism, lacking motivation, etc. Some of the reasons are related to the teachers' perception such as the method of teaching adopted, ignoring oral speaking assessment, allowing a limited number of students to dominate interactive activities, the use of the mother tongue in the class, etc. The other reasons are related to the material itself in addition to the nature of the educational system in Iraq. These reasons, operating

individually or together, lead to the same result which is Mute English learners.

2. The Mute English phenomenon can be eradicated through using new techniques or strategies as proved in the result of the current study.

3. Using techniques such as brainstorming, discussion and debate is an effective way to motivate the students to speak freely and improve their fluency significantly. This may be due to the interesting, challenging and motivating atmosphere that these techniques provide to the students, since they allow the students to express their own opinions and points of view.

4. Integrating the speaking skill in other courses has a positive effect on the students' achievement in both developing the speaking skill and establishing the subject matter of the lecture.

5. Bringing authentic topics to the classroom through posing realistic moral or social issues is a good way for encouraging students to speak at an unconscious level.