

Investigating the Effect of Process Praise on Classroom Engagement of Self- Conscious Iranian High School EFL Learners in Large Groups and Small Groups

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Abstract

Engagement in classroom activities is a vital part in language learning process. Most learners usually intend to participate in classroom activities but shy and self-conscious learners resist to engage in activities and share their ideas with the peers. In this investigation, the aim was to assess the effect of process praise rather than personal praise on classroom engagement of the self-conscious Iranian high school EFL learners in two contexts: classroom activities and group activities. The samples were selected by means of a shyness scale questionnaire. The research was done in three phases: without any praise, praise for classroom activity participation, and praise for group activity engagement. Video recorded observations and post hoc analysis resulted that in first and second phases, the participants showed no sign of developing in engagement, while in the third phase they improved significantly in group activities and communicating with groupmates. They committed in the post interviews that teachers' process praise privately and in small group has motivated them to participate in activities and has enhanced their confidence. The findings of this research can be effective for English language teachers in motivating the shy students to be more active in classroom activities, and consequently language learning will be facilitated for these learners.

Keywords: *Self-Consciousness (Shyness), Classroom Engagement, (Process) Praise*

Introduction

One of the vital parts of the learning process is participation of the learners in classroom activities. High school educational system usually searches for ways to provide students with opportunities to critically engage with subjects through pair work, group work and discussion and collaboration among the team members to do the tasks. In this way, deeper thinking and knowledge construction can be facilitated. When the learners engage through debate and small group work, they can benefit from interactive learning experiences, however, research has shown that many students avoid taking part in these types of personal interactions. Self-conscious students are different from ordinary students since they participate less frequently in classroom activities, are less likely to contribute in doing the tasks voluntarily, and give shorter and less elaborate answers to questions (Crozier, 2001).

Shyness or self-consciousness, which here are used interchangeably, is the learners' concern of impression management and low self-efficacy beliefs about one's social performance (Crozier, 2004). For students who self-reported as shy, being quiet in class was most related to some reasons such as: negative feeling of not having anything important to say, feeling anxious when they speak in front of others, being nervous about saying something silly, being a shy person, and being easily embarrassed.

Alternatively, shyness may be resulted from less satisfactory interactions with teachers. There is evidence that children's shyness can induce unsatisfactory patterns of interaction. Evans and Bienert (1992) suggested that teachers challenged the silences and minimal responses of shy children by producing further questions; however, this led to producing even more minimal responding when the teacher started to control the conversation rather than create the opportunity for them to take part in the dialogue.

Giving careful praise to the shy learners can be powerful way that the teacher can apply. When the teacher offers praise for students' work and efforts, s/he can alter their mindset so that students can begin to consider their own intelligence as something that can be developed (Dwyer, 2016). Process praise, which is the praise of students' efforts and specific work strategies and outcomes when they perform well, can foster a constructive mindset. It would be highly more effective rather than when praising them for their intelligence (person praise). Indeed, praising the learners for their efforts and strategies encourages them to seek more challenges and resilience than praise that focuses on learners' intelligence or abilities (Henderlong & Lepper, 2002; Kamins & Dweck, 1999; Mueller & Dweck, 1998). Besides, praising for effort and work strategies is useful since (a) it directly affects students' beliefs about the reason of their success or failure, (b) it increase their persistence, self-evaluation, resilience and motivate them intrinsically when students encounter obstacles and setbacks, (c) and it can increase learning and consequently leads to higher achievement (Dwyer, 2016). Therefore, the teachers should make sure that praising their efforts and achievements can fortify the idea that they will attain much more by working with a partner than they can alone.

Teachers need to be able to help students how to overcome the shyness and self-consciousness and help them socialize. Teachers should be familiar with techniques by which they can develop an environment that provides a sense of safety for each student. The students

need to understand that their thoughts, fears, and emotions are important and real. There are many classroom strategies and teaching techniques to help students increase their confidence and understand that their inhibitions are natural and common. Furthermore, there are different ways to encourage the students to take part in classroom activities.

Literature Review

Many shy and withdrawn students are among those who Borphy and Everson (1981) labeled *invisible*. Classroom observations revealed that these invisible students showed low rates of interactions with their teacher and general pattern of passivity in the classroom. Even in early childhood, as early as kindergarten, teachers expect their students to take part in classroom activities and to interact socially with their peers. On the other hand, shy children are not willing to answer questions voluntarily and often are not satisfied with their interactions with peers and adults (Rudasill & Konold, 2008). As Wilkens (2014) in regarding the relationship between the shyness and cooperative participation mentioned: ‘Shyness is likely negatively related to some, but not all, aspects of classroom participation. Perhaps because shyness inhibits tendencies to interact with classroom peers’ (p. 86).

Most teachers’ intuition and experience-based responses emphasized bringing shy students along slowly but surely. In this way, they feel comfortable and secure in the classroom and reassurance of their ability to handle classroom challenges. They can be provided special instruction or help if necessary, and be applied consistent but gentle and largely pressure for change indirectly. This change can be in the form of invitation and encouragement rather than demands or direct confrontation (Borphy & Bohrkemper, 1989).

A longitudinal study reported by Asendorpf (1994) found that judging those inhibited children by their teachers as less socially competent led them to remain inhibited over time. Furthermore, those self-conscious children who obtained lower scores on an intelligence test could be interpreted in terms of the children having less access to positive coping styles. Temperamentally shy children tend to less behavioral engagement in the classroom compared with their peers because of their self-consciousness. Behavioral engagement refers to students’ effort and interest in classroom activities which cause persistence and concentration in their participation (Skinner, Kindermann, & Furrer, 2009). There is a direct link between shy children’s lower levels of behavioral engagement in the classroom and their lower-level academic skills (Hughes & Coplan, 2010). Given the long term consequences of early academic skill difficulties (Alexander, Entwisle, & Kabbani, 2001), it will be necessary for the teachers to support the behavioral engagement of shy children.

Furthermore, teachers’ perceptions of students’ abilities may be influenced by levels of behavioral engagement of the students. Consequently, it leads teachers to rate students as less engaged as having lower-level academic skills than their more engaged peers (Maldonado-Carreno & Votruba-Drzal, 2011). On the other hand, praise can be a pragmatic and fruitful way to promote motivation in school contexts by giving the convenience and immediacy of praising a

student for success, (Haimovitz & Henderlong Corpus, 2011). Indeed, effectively administered praise have results such as increasing the intrinsic motivation (Corpus & Lepper, 2007; 1999), developing academic performance (Elawar & Corno, 1985; Hancock, 2002; Schunk, 1983) and promoting the self-efficacy (Schunk, 1983), as well as decreasing behavioral problems in the classroom. However, a growing body of research indicates that praise may just as easily lead to decrease in motivational outcomes and task interest. Moreover, praise may have no observable influence depending on the context in which it is given and the message that it communicates (Corpus, Ogle, & Love-Geiger, 2006; Henderlong & Lepper, 2002).

Plenty of works have done on various aspects of the effects of praising such as how to decrease behavioral problems in the classroom (Madsen, Becker, & Thomas, 1968), increase the learners' academic performance (Miller, Brickman, & Bolen, 1975), and increase the intrinsic motivation of the students (Haimovitz et al., 2011). However, less studies have been done on investigating the effect of process praise of the self-conscious learners on their participation in large groups and small groups.

The present research is an attempt to find the effect of process praise on the classroom engagement of the shy students and help them to overcome their shyness and fear of taking part in teams and groups by means of oral process praise. To do so, the teachers can help the students by encouraging them to understand and recognize that they are each different and unique. For example, different experience of the students which may be naturally more outgoing than others and may find it easier to talk to others. The concern is that 'shy' children may find it easy to fall behind and remain in the shadows; once they do, it tends to be harder for them to begin to accept attention when it is given. The teacher can ensure all students, especially those who are 'shy', have a responsibility in the classroom. The goal is to attempt and give shy learners a job which makes them possible to feel they are contributing to the classroom and feel connected to other students. In addition, the teacher should encourage them to interact with other students. Commenting on learner's work positively, build communication, encourage interaction, and, again, allow 'shy' students to feel proud and improve their self-esteem. By the way, shy learners try to display their work where other students can see it and comment as well.

This study aimed to address the following research questions:

1. Does process praise have any effect on classroom engagement of self-conscious Iranian high school EFL learners?
2. Does process praise have any effect on activity participation of self-conscious Iranian high school EFL learners in small groups?

Methodology

Participants

The setting of the research was Navaee High School in district one of Isfahan, Iran. The target group contained 82 females fourth graders aged between 16 and 18 who were placed in three classes. They were taught English two sessions a week. The fourth grade English book contains practices and drills that should be done interactively and the teacher also tried to teach

interactively. The teacher observed and noticed that some of the students didn't take part in classroom activities at all, it means they didn't answer any question, didn't suggest any point, and didn't ask any question even if they had. The teacher also found out that they prefer to ask question from a nearby classmate instead of the teacher. Although they have done the practice and answer the question, they didn't intend to propose in to all. When they were asked to read and answer the question, they weren't happy to answer though they did it right. Criteria for selecting the subjects were "The Revised Cheek and Buss Shyness Scale (RCBS)". Among these 64 students, seven of them had the score above 65 and they were marked as self-conscious students. An interview was done and voice-recorded for each privately to know about their attitude about classroom participation. They admitted their being quiet in class was most related to reasons such as: feeling as though they have nothing to say, feeling nervous about speaking in front of others, worrying about saying something silly, and being easily embarrassed.

Instruments

The researcher, as mentioned, used 'The Revised and Buss Shyness Scale (RCBS)' for determining the high level of shyness in the students and consequently self-conscious participants were distinguished. The questionnaire contained 20 items ranked in Likert Scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree (from 5 to 1). Four items were reversed (items 4, 7, 10, 13, 16, & 19) so they ranked reversely (from 1 to 5). In the scale revision/construction sample, the alpha coefficient of internal consistency reliability for the 20-item shyness scales was .94 ($M = 51.8$; $SD = 13.6$) and it correlated .90 with the original Cheek & Buss 9-item shyness scale. Melchior and Cheek (1990) reported that the 20-item scale had a 45-day test-retest reliability of .91, and correlated .69.

As the participants were fourth graders in high school, the English book Four was used as the teaching textbook. Some power point slides prepared by the teacher and short clips were used during sessions as the teaching aids.

Data Collection Procedure

As a teacher, the researcher is aware that it is hugely beneficial to get students to engage in group activities. It encourages team work and mutual support and can bring a competitive dimension to learning and motivate students for results. It exposes the students to other people's thought processes and problem solving abilities. In addition, classroom engagement helps students to develop their own reasoning skills. But not all students find it easy to take an active role within a group. They can tend to feel overwhelmed when the focus is put on the shy students in class. However, it may take much time, patience and skill to draw them out and help them to contribute in group activities confidently. The instructor would be sure to praise their efforts and achievements (process praise), rather than their intelligence, to reinforce the idea that they can gain much more by working with a partner than they can do alone and allow shy students to build up gradual participation. It could be started by using polls and surveys to seek consensus within the group. The teacher may ask them to comment on or ask a question about another student's

contribution since they will find this less daunting to begin with than offering their own opinions. When shy students are comfortable expressing their views for the first time, the teacher can start to elicit more detailed contributions by asking questions. This will help them reason out their responses and get their meaning across clearly. The students will gain both persuasive skills and confidence when they are encouraged by praise as a result.

All children are willing to be accepted by their peers. An opportunity to achieve this is working in a group, so it's the teacher's responsibility to make even the most reluctant participants see this by providing them with an environment where they can speak there freely without fear of judgement or embarrassment. The teacher can engage them in small groups firstly and give opportunity to talk and comment on few partners and praise their effort either privately or in a small group. Consequently, they can get eager to take part in larger groups and finally in whole classroom activities. One of the great pleasures of being a teacher may be watching shy students blossom and gain confidence by means of collaborative and interactive learning.

This research which has a time series design contained three phases. In the first phase, the teacher during eight sessions tried to do classroom interactive tasks and carefully monitored the students for their degrees of participation in the activities. It should be mentioned that all the sessions during the whole periods of research video recorded in order to play back and post hoc analysis. The teacher used a tally sheet for recording the times of classroom engagement of the students. During the first phase the teacher just observed the students and in the eight session 'The Revised and Buss Shyness Scale (RCBS)' questionnaires were completed by the students. After analyzing the questionnaires, based on its guideline, the sum of seven of the students were above 65 as they were distinguished as self-conscious students. Three of them were in class one, two students in class two and also two shy students in class three.

The second phase of the research was started focusing on praising the shy students for everything they did in the classroom including doing homework, their handwriting, etc. The teacher tried to encourage them to participate in activities by means of praising. Besides, the teacher tried to praise their effort, participation, and activities, if they have any, rather than their intelligence or talent. After each session the teacher played back the video recorded films and recorded the number of the samples engagements in classroom activities. During eight sessions the teacher didn't observe significant progress in the samples rate of engagements. So she decided to put the students in small groups and continue the study.

In third phase, the students were grouped of four to five participants. In this phase, the teacher also tried to motivate the self-conscious participants by process praising them in their groups. The teacher sometimes praised them by writing a note or saying an encouraging comment privately. Careful observation of the classroom videos showed that they had more active participation in their groups and the frequency of their engagement increases considerably. In some cases, they interestingly became the speaker of the group. Besides, they did the tasks more happily. After eight sessions, they were interviewed for the second time to find out if there were any changes in their attitude toward classroom activities and also about their feeling towards the praise. Five out of seven believed that the classroom atmosphere became more pleasant for them.

They admitted that they had less stress and anxiety while talking and commenting in the classroom. All of them found the classroom participation more delightful than before. On the other hand, they believed when they were praised in the classroom loudly, they got embarrassed and anxious and they wished they hadn't been praised.

Data analysis procedure

The data collection methods contained questionnaire, two interviews, observations and video recording of the sessions. The results of the questionnaire were calculated simply by summing up the scores of each items. The students with results above 65 were determined as self-conscious students. The interviews which were mixed method interviews, including some fixed questions and the researcher also was free to compose new questions related to the feeling and attitude toward engagement in classroom and group activities before and after praising and to know the effect of process praising on encouraging them to participate in activities. The interviews were recorded and then analyzed and categorized based on positive or negative view.

The frequencies and the percentages of the participations were calculated according to using a tally sheet while playing back the video files. The mean and standard deviation of their participations during these three phases were also calculated. In order to compare the rate of the participation in three phases, Friedman Test was used and the participation of the self-conscious participants in first, second and third phases of research were compared by means of a pairwise comparison.

Results

Preliminary analysis

In the first phase of the research, based on the instruction of the questionnaire (The Revised and Buss Shyness Scale (RCBS)) the students whose score were above 65 were considered as self-conscious students. The results of questionnaire scores showed that seven students out of 82 were shy. Based on Table 1, which shows the frequency and percentage of the self-conscious students in three classes, 91.5 percent of the students in these classes are sociable ones and 8.2 percent are self-conscious and shy.

Table 1. Frequency and percentage of shy students

	Class1		Class2		Class3		Total	
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%
Shy student	3	10.7	2	7.4	2	7.4	7	8.5
Sociable student	25	89.3	25	92.6	25	92.6	75	91.5
Total	28	100	27	100	27	100	82	100.0

The analysis of the interviews results also shows that they mentioned reasons (for their shyness and consequently less or no participation in classroom activities) such as feeling as

though they have nothing important to say, feeling embarrassed while speaking in front of others, and being nervous about saying something silly.

Secondary analysis

Table 2 shows that in the first phase of the research, in which the shy students received no praise, none of the self-conscious students participated in classroom activities. On the other hand, in the second phase (eight sessions) where the shy students were praised in the classroom, no significant engagement was observed (two times during eight sessions). While in the third phase, that the shy students were praised because of their participation in group activities, 140 times engagements were observed among seven shy students during this period. The minimum of their participation was 11 and the maximum was 28 times in eight sessions.

Table 2. Classroom participation of shy students during three phases of the study

	Number	Min.	Max.	Sum	Mean	SD
Phase 1	7	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00
Phase 2	7	.00	1.00	2.00	.29	.49
Phase 3	7	11.00	28.00	140.00	20.00	5.60

In order to compare the classroom participation of the shy students in three phases, Friedman Test was used. Based on the results of Table 3, there was significant difference between their engagements in three phases ($p < 0.05$).

Table 3. Friedman Test Result

N	7
Chi-Square	13.130
df	2
Asymp. Sig.	.001

Besides, the results of post hoc analysis (Table 4) showed that there wasn't significant difference between the engagements of shy students during the first and second phase of research, while there was significant difference between the first and third phases and also second and third phases ($p < 0.05$).

Table 4. *Pairwise Comparisons*

Sample1-sample2	Test statistics	Adj. Sig
Phase 1-Phase 2	-0.286	1.000
Phase 1-Phase 3	-1.643	.006
Phase 2-Phase 3	-1.357	.033

Discussion

The findings of this research showed that although praise seemed to play the role of a positive encouragement on improving the participation of the shy and self-conscious students, it highly depended on the condition the students are in. In other words, the results unexpectedly showed that whenever shy students were praised in large scope i.e. the whole class, it didn't encourage them to be more engaged in classroom activities. But they preferred to be praised privately or in small group.

The results of the present study are in accordance to what Borphy (1998) mentioned as applying consistent but gentle and largely indirect pressure for change in the form of invitation and encouragement in order to make the shy students feel comfortable and secure in the classroom, making them sure about their ability to handle classroom challenges, and providing special instruction or help if necessary, since the findings of this research also showed that through encouragement and praise, the self-conscious students felt more relaxed and secured, and also more confident about their abilities and strengths.

Haimovitz et al. (2011) showed in their study that pragmatic and fruitful effect of convenient and immediate praise of a student for success promote motivation in school contexts which were confirmed by the results of this study on motivating effect of process praise on increasing classroom engagements of the students, specially the shy ones.

Corpus, Ogle, and Love-Geiger (2006) indicated that praise may just lead to decreases in motivational outcomes and task participation and it also has no observable impact depending on the context in which it is given and the communicating message. The present study rejected the concept of the previous research on decreasing motivational outcomes and task interest of the learners, but it confirmed that the degree of the influence of praise depended on the context in which it was given.

The findings of this study enhance our understanding of the effect of praise on encouraging the learners in activity participations although the instructors should be notice to the context and the population of the peers in the groups. This study can shed light on the psychological ways of enhancing the learners' confidence and self-awareness about their abilities.

A number of caveats need to be noted regarding the present study. Time constrains should be mentioned as one important factor influencing the results. Therefore, with a small sample size, caution must be applied, as the findings might not be transferable to all the students in high school. Gender, age and culture are other factors influencing the results which cannot be expanded. This research can be replicated in different setting like elementary of junior high school, among male participants and also in larger populations with different social and cultural backgrounds. However, this study is not complete by itself and the findings are limited to the particular context and setting of this study. Further research is needed to confirm or disconfirm the findings of this research study.

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