Willing Learners yet Unwilling Speakers in ESL Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

To some of us, speech production in ESL has become so natural and integral that we seem to take it for granted. We often do not even remember how we struggled through the initial process of mastering English. Unfortunately, to students who are still learning English, they seem to face myriad problems that make them appear unwilling or reluctant ESL speakers. This study will investigate this phenomenon which is very common in the ESL classroom. Setting its background on related research findings on this matter, a qualitative study was conducted among foreign students enrolled in the Intensive English Programme (IEP) at Institute of Liberal Studies (IKAL), University Tenaga Nasional (UNITEN). The results will show and discuss an extent of truth behind this perplexing phenomenon: willing learners, yet unwilling speakers of ESL, in our effort to provide supportive learning cultures in second language acquisition (SLA) to this group of students.

Introduction

According to Thornbury (2005), there is not much difference between L1 and L2 speaking skills. Like L1 speakers, L2 speakers also produce speech through a process of conceptualizing, then formulating, and finally articulating, during which time they are also self-monitoring. Thus, the skills of speaking are essentially the same and should, in theory, be transferable from the speaker's first language into the second. As easy as this may sound, English teachers know that ESL learners seem to find transferring speaking skills from L1 to L2 complex and complicated.

It becomes almost an obstacle particularly when some of our active and willing learners do not and will not use English when the teacher is not within ear shot.

What might be the reasons behind ESL learners? reluctance to use English in the ESL classroom? In responding to this dilemma, English teachers can strive to make students' learning environment more conducive and supportive by not only referring to literature, but also analyzing and deliberating over the learners' own reflective experience. This study will bring forth learners' feedback and perspective regarding their state of unwillingness to speak in the process of acquiring English as a second language. Their experience will then be discussed and related to literature on second language acquisition (SLA) and English as a second language (ESL).

Literature Review

Speaking as a skill serves two general purposes: a transactional function where users convey and exchange useful information and an interpersonal function which fosters relationships. In order to interact, and particularly participate in the L2 classroom, learners need more than genre knowledge about language. They should also have discourse knowledge to organize and connect utterances, as well as turn-taking structures of interactive talk. The demand does not end here because learners also need to know about pragmatic knowledge, grammar, vocabulary and phonology. With such a long list of prerequisites, learners can easily succumb to reticence. They will not be confident enough to produce L2 utterances, what more to use it in everyday communication.

Several studies have been carried out regarding this concern in Malaysia. Some teachers consider that learners' passiveness in the classroom discussions is due to lack of motivation in learning the target language (Gaudart, 1992). Sharifah Sheha (2005) discovered that this problem is due to learners' lack of motivation to use English when they feel they can communicate using their own mother tongue. Gaudart (1992) further related low participation to learners' inability to function in oral communication.

Other related studies on Malaysia ESL learners report several other reasons that explain why learners are reluctant to speak English. Most importantly, learners' socioeconomic background, peer pressure, and lack of exposure to the target language also aggravates the situation (Jamali Ismail, 1991).

Elsewhere, the same attention has been given to study this phenomenon. Littlewood (2004) discovered they are 6 factors (that hinder participation in the classroom), from 567 Hong Kong students.

1. Tiredness
2. Fear of being wrong
3. Insufficient interest in the class
4. Insufficient knowledge in the subject
5. Shyness
6. Insufficient time to formulate ideas

Reluctance to speak in the second language can also be due to avoidance in certain cultures because of uncertainty when learners are not confident in a particular language (Hofstede, 1986). Besides, inadequate speaking practices in their secondary school and students' high expectation to perform well are other contributing factors to this problem. Learners who are unwilling to speak the target language may still communicate meanings by drawing creatively on their inter language resources. Rampton's (1987) study of ESL learners in a London language unit indicates one way in which this might take place. He observed learners using broken English forms such as 'me no like' and 'me too clever' to perform potentially face-threatening acts such as rejection or refusal and boasting. Rampton suggests that the learners made deliberate use of 'me' constructions to symbolize their cultural and social incompetence as a way of mitigating the force of these face-threatening speech acts.

Willing learners in an ESL setting who are unwilling to speak English within and beyond the boundaries of the classroom is not a trivial matter. Although we can relate this phenomenon to the 'silent period' or 'pre-production period' in SLA thus reducing our anxiety about it, we realize that education is a communication process whereby students must use speaking, listening, and writing skills to receive instruction, clarify their understanding, and demonstrate learning. Reticence becomes a challenge for English language teachers as language input and output are important in the learning of English language.

According to Brown (2001), learners "discover language by trial and error, by processing feedback, by building hypotheses, and revising these assumptions in order to become fluent". The same concern has also been raised by Freimuth (1982) who mentioned that unfortunately,

some students are "handicapped in the classroom by severe anxiety about communicating" despite the communicative demands of our education scenario". Hence, it's timely to understand this problem of learners' reluctance to speak English in ESL by inviting and understanding learners' own thoughts and experiences in their pursuit of acquiring and very soon, mastering English as a second language.

Objectives and Research Questions

In short, this study invites us to consider learners' perspective on this issue. First, it explores the learners' willingness to learn English as a second language. Further, it narrows the scope by focusing on learners' unwillingness to speak English either inside or outside of the classroom. The primary research question is what really happens that discourage them to use English in their communication even in an ESL setting. The study later elaborates on the participants' reflection, opinion and specific regarding the phenomenon. It hopes to suggest some tips or important considerations in order to understand this type of learners so that they are not wrongly labeled in any circumstance.

Methodology

Research Design and Procedure

Using the qualitative research design, the researcher immersed herself in the world of research participants via qualitative interviewing and document analysis in order to unravel the participants' perspective concerning the issue being investigated. The researcher constantly reflected on the data collection and compared the data with extant literature.

Qualitative Interviewing as a Research Instrument

Qualitative interviewing was used to elicit data from the subjects. Here, the researcher becomes an instrument. As mentioned by Kvale (1996), interviews are basically conversations. He defines qualitative research interviews as "attempts to understand the world from the subject's point

of view, to unfold the meaning of people's experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations".

There are several advantages of using qualitative interviewing. According to Meg Sewell (http://ag.arizona.edu/fcs/cyfernet/cyfar/Intervu5.htm), it allows the participant to describe what is meaningful or important to him or her using his or her own words rather than being restricted to predetermined categories; thus participants may feel more relaxed and candid. Besides, it provides high credibility and face validity; results "ring true" to participants and make intuitive sense to lay audiences.

In qualitative interviewing, open-ended responses to questions provide the evaluator with quotations which are the main source of raw data. Patton (1987) notes that quotations "reveal the respondents' levels of emotion, the way in which they have organized the world, their thoughts about what is happening, their experiences, and their basic perceptions". The interviewer cum researcher should provide a framework within which people can respond in a way that represents accurately and thoroughly their point of view. Quotations are valuable because they represent the actual words of participants which convey their powerful emotions. Compared to some quantitative results which are sometimes dismissed on political or methodological grounds by those who disagree with the findings, it can be harder to dismiss qualitative responses.

Qualitative interviews also allows the interviewer to probe for more details and ensure that participants are interpreting questions the way they were intended. In this case, the interviewer has the flexibility to use her knowledge, expertise, and interpersonal skills to explore interesting or unexpected ideas or themes raised by participants. In situations where there's no existing standardized questionnaires available that are appropriate for what the study is trying to accomplish, it would be best to utilize the qualitative interviewing technique as a means of exploring and gathering in-depth data from participants.

Journal Writing

Journal writing has been proven to develop learners' reflective skills which is a significant process and product of learning in an ESL classroom. In their journals, learners keep observations and experience. By doing so, it helps the individual to reflect on experiences, see how she thinks about them and helps anticipate future experiences before undertaking them (Raelin, 2000).

Moon (1999) surveyed the many purposes for which reflective journals may be used – to record experiences, to facilitate learning from experience, to develop critical thinking, to encourage meta-cognition, to increase active involvement in and ownership of learning, to increase ability in reflection and thinking, and to enhance reflective practice. She also notes that it can be a method of assessment in formal education and can be a means of communication between a learner and others.

Setting and Samples

A total of 28 students who followed the Intensive English Programme (IEP) at University Tenaga Nasional (UNITEN) took part in the journal writing procedure. Journal writing is incorporated in their IEP syllabus; so, they should have lowest degree of inhibition in expressing themselves regarding any journal topic. They come from a number of different countries like Sudan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam and Somalia. They have learnt English minimally back in their home country, where English is a foreign language. They follow the IEP as a prerequisite for them to register as an undergraduate student at UNITEN which uses English as its medium of instruction. As such, these students are learning English as a second language (L2), being taught in a culture where the target language is spoken and are provided the exposure to the language outside of the classroom.

From the group of 28, 11 students representing the different countries of origin were invited to participate to do a video-recorded interview on the research. All the participants consented to be interviewed. Two interviews were carried out with two small groups of students they have been together as classmates in the programme.

Instrumentation

The study employed the "Protocol for Interview" for data collection, as well as journal entry. A semi-structured interview protocol was designed by the researcher using open-ended questions.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data collected from the participants, the researcher followed the guidelines suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) to

develope empirically grounded sets of categories capturing learners' willingness to learn English and to gauge the reasons for their unwillingness to speak the language. The researcher followed an iterative process: first developing hunches, then comparing those ideas to new data, and further using the new data to decide whether to retain, revise, or discard the inferences.

Results and Discussion

An analysis of the raw data shows rich and interesting dimensions. The results will be presented in two parts in order to explain both the research questions deliberated for this study: 1) Learners' state of willingness to learn English 2) Learners' reasons for unwillingness to speak English.

Learners' State of Willingness to Learn English

Both the interview as well as an analysis of learners' journal entries show that the learners have strong willingness to learn English. At least two dominant themes emerge from the analysis.

Firstly, learners exhibit positive attitude and belief in learning English. Learners admit that they undoubtedly encounter several problems in practicing English in order to improve their proficiency; nevertheless, they strove to overcome the problem. Indeed, their ways and means of creating learning opportunities show their positive attitude and belief in second language acquisition. One of the learners wrote about his decision to handle the problem of unsupportive peers be it in class or at the students' hostel:

> "*...they don't support me in improving my English because they are speaking Arabic all the time in the apartment and sometimes in the class so I replay in Arabic. For that reason of I'm trying to sit away from them in the class and I think that was an accurate attitude because I felt the different*".
>
> (Journal entry # 4)

Learners also take the initiative to practice English outside the classroom whenever there's opportunity. In the interview, a participant form Sudan said that the Sudanese students planned to have an English day in order to have more practice. He said, "…on Monday we speak English, but it doesn't work…". Some of the students even have

monologues in English as well as expose themselves to English materials. As one learner wrote in his journal,

> "*... after classes I just lessened to English music or English TV shows or chatting with English people also I sometimes talk to myself by English*"
>
> (Journal entry #11).

This kind of attitude and belief is supportive of second language acquisition. According to Horwitz (1988), learners with positive beliefs could have good expectations about their learning capabilities. Many studies have been done that emphasize the importance and roles of language learning beliefs in influencing learners' choices throughout the learning. Furthermore, learners' beliefs are also a key element in language learning, which creates influence to learners' proficiency and manipulate learners' learning behaviors and learning outcomes.

Secondly, represent their willingness to learn english is embodied in their hopes and expectations to improve their English. One learner wrote about his dream and silent determination:

> " *I am waiting will came "to be use English frequently" its dream but I have work hard it I don't let it go and I'm nearly to reach…what time who knows…*"
>
> (JE #14)

In this study, the learners are doing the Intensive English Programme (IEP) at UNITEN in order to prepare them for Foundation and Degree courses. The language of instruction at the university is English; thus, these learners are equipping themselves to function in an ESL learning as well as a social environment. Besides, they are well aware of the difficulty of using English in a formal academic learning, or Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) as introduced by Jim Cummins. These learners have indeed made the choice to pursue their tertiary education in an ESL setting like Malaysia. [They realize that a university setting is very conducive for them to learn English.] This idea is expressed by one of the participants in the interview. He said,

> "*…in the university, you learn a lot about English, so…it's like…you practice it…you really learn English…the best place is in the university, not outside*".

Similarly, one learner expressed his perspective and hope in his journal entry:

"*…still, being here in Malaysia is better than my own country because I have to speak English in classes, with my foreign friends, in the shops…etc. In other words, I am indeed experiencing total immersion here, and I hope that I'll improve quickly*"

(JE # 19)

In short, the learners cum respondents of this study show willingness to study.

Learners' Reasons for Unwillingness to Speak English

Next, an analysis of both the interview as well as the learners' journal entries was done to elicit several emerging themes in relation to their reluctance to speak English, despite their willingness to learn the language. However, only five dominant themes will be discussed in this section.

The first theme that emerged from the analysis regarding learners' reason for reluctance to speak English is fear and worries. As reported in various SLA research like Horwitz and Young (1991) who reported that their research indicates "that learners frequently experience 'language anxiety', a type of situation-specific anxiety associated with attempts to learn an L2 and communicate in it", learners in this study also expressed their anxiety to speak English to the extent that they appear unwilling to use the target language in their everyday communication.

In this study, learners also expressed fear in using the target language. They are afraid of making mistakes, and they are also scared to use English with speakers who are already proficient. At least two of the learners communicated their fear explicitly in their journal:

"*…there is this fear that it is possible I speak wrongly or my pronounce be wrongly. So we prefer to be quiet. Especially this fear will be more when we wants to speak in public or in front of someone that is able to speak English professional…*"

(JE # 7)

"*…unfortunately, we people come from Arab countries and that makes us afraid to talk with English. In fact, that's the reason why I'm in Malaysia. I thought that this country will make me happy with my English…*"

(JE #16)

Some of the learners are also worried about others' reaction to their possible attempts to speak English, and this bothers them. In two of the journal entries, the learners are worried if their lack of proficiency impedes communication, or they may sound rude in certain situations:

"*…some times when I am talking to somebody most of the time I am worried about the my accent my grammar and that is what makes me angry and I think about it most of the time so it causes me to stop sometimes for me because I think maybe I am bothering my audience …*"

(JE#14)

"*…it will be rude…when I'm using English has some misunderstanding in my conversation…*"

(JE #23)

In the interview, one participant said,

"*…I am shy to speak English all the time, but sometimes when I talk my friends and somebody around me don't understand what I speak…after that, I feel…feel…disappoint.*"

The second theme that emerged in the study is the learners claim that learning English is not easy. In an earlier study comparing high and low proficiency learners' beliefs, Huang (2003) found that unlike higher proficiency students who perceive English learning as a "relatively easy task" and tend to believe "they would ultimately learn to speak this language very well", low proficiency students indicate that the process of learning is indeed difficult. Johnson (1998) found that "at-risk" learners assessed English as "very difficult to learn" because they had experienced problems.

In this study, several respondents expressed difficulty in coping with English. In responding to the interview question, a participant from Vietnam said, "…in university, I have to think carefully when I speak…" According to him, utterances in English will have to be correct and appropriate, which makes the task of speaking English rather demanding. Because

of this, some would stumble and resort to their mother tongue. He elaborates the significance of this problem:

"…*you are speaking English with Vietnamese, sometimes when you are stuck, your Vietnamese will flow…flow…you cannot control…*"

Another learner wrote in his journal entry:

"…*English here is completely different from that I learned in my country. Except grammar, all the remains English components seem to be hard for me.*

(JE #8)

In his book, Thornbury (2000) mentions that native speakers employ 2,500 words to cover 95% of their needs…A working knowledge of 1,500 most frequent words in English would stand a learner in good stead… top 200 most common words will provide…a lot of conversational mileage. So, when learners don't have the vocabulary to even carry out normal and casual conversations within the classroom, they will tend to shy away from using L2. With regards to this, a student writes:

"…*I don't have enough vocabulary to speak English all the time…I can't express my feelings in some situations for examples when I feel angry or when I have problem because I can't think I want to speak my language to express all my feelings…*"

(P #3)

Interestingly, Thornbury (2000) considers this issue to the one of unavailability of the knowledge rather than lack of knowledge. L2 has not become sufficiently integrated into their existing knowledge, or it has been so seldom accessed, that it is not yet easily retrievable. The process of arranging the grammar or retrieving the grammar is not yet automatic. This process will be more complicated when the learner tries to translate the utterances into L1, and when the learner in under pressure to be accurate. In such cases, self-monitoring process may be overused until it hinders fluent or expected production of L2. Excessive self-monitoring is similar to the term 'monitor overuser', as introduced by Stephen Krashen.

The third reason behind learners' reluctance to speak English is related to lack of opportunity provided by their background, prior to their current pursuit to study English. The journal entries below bear learners' reflections on this issue:

"…*teachers just cared about grammar; in the other hands there was something more important than grammar and it was speaking and students' pronunciation, and that's why you see Iranian students are good with grammar.*"

(JE #6)

"…*the funniest think, the teacher talks Arabic in the English class. So, if you want the meaning of a word, he will give you the meaning in Arabic…that's why our English language is weak…*"

(JE # 17)

"…*in Saudi Arabia, where I lived, they use Arabic all the time. They don't try to use English. Even Indian, Pakistan and the other foreign countries, which are staying there, forced to speak Arabic. So we can't use English a lot…*"

(JE #9)

This feedback from the learners is crucial. If neglected, such problem can lead to fossilization which is a term used to label the process by which non-target forms becomes fixed in interlanguage. This is due to lack of learning opportunity that deprive them of getting the necessary L2 input and also platform to use L2 (Bickerton, 1975).

The fourth emerging theme regarding learners' reluctance to speak English is related to their mother tongue or L1. The respondents, obviously, expressed their concern regarding the possible negative effects of L2 on L1. A student writes:

"…*that when I want to speak English I will be another person when you speak English you will be like another person…*"

(JE #11)

The study shows that the learners do not realize the 'magical connection' between L1 and L2 and seem to separate them totally. Whereas, in the case of L2 learning, learners clearly do not need to forget their L1 in order to acquire L2, although in some cases loss of the native language might take place eventually (Ellis, 2000). In fact, their experience in learning L1 helps them to learn L2. Some instances from the study that shows the learners ignorance to this connection are:

"…*I have been speaking my native language for 20 years it is difficult to change your live of 20 years very fast…*"

(JE #20)

When asked about the overpowering influence of their mother tongue in the interview, most learners decided to use L1 over L2 for three personal reasons. Firstly, they don't want to waste time figuring out the appropriate words and utterance in English to deliver intended meaning. This is due to their limited vocabulary and proficiency level that they struggle through English conversations.

Secondly, learners tend to speak their own language to talk about secrets, jokes or even when they quarrel, as reported in the interview:

> "…*when I make a quarrel, if I speak English, some words in English…I mean……when you scold them, you cannot use English because some words, you cannot translate Vietnamese into English…*"

Some of the learners use their mother tongue to discuss academic problems among themselves before getting further clarification with the teacher. In doing so, they feel more comfortable and it's always easier to communicate ideas. Besides, others won't know about their lack of proficiency in English.

Thirdly, as much as they are serious in learning English, they also want some fun and some time away from the demanding nature of the Intensive English Programme. Thus, by speaking their own language, the learners claim that they can reduce the pressure they face everyday. After all, they mentioned that they "*can't be too serious all the time*".

Lastly, the fifth emerging theme relates to the learners' unsupportive environment particularly from friends. Peer pressure and peer support contributes to the type of learners' language environment which creates a major influence in bilingual development. In fact according to Saville-Troike (1977), "the learning rate of the second language depends in part on the child's need and opportunity to use the language to communicate.

In this study, some learners choose not to speak English among friends who either don't speak the language at all or don't understand whatever they intend to say. Two examples from the study taken from the learners' journal entries show this evidence:

> "…*some times I am with some of my friends that they can't speak any language except my mother tongue. Sometimes the atmosphere when I am talking with my friends are like a way that I don't have any way excepted use my mother tongue…*"

(JE #23)

"…friends don't understand my jokes… I really can't say it like I joke in my own language…"

One of the participants said that he will feel or be made to feel awkward every time he speaks English with friends from his own country. Thus, he has no choice but to use his mother tongue to fit into the environment. He said:

"…this depends who I'm talking with. With my friends come from my country, I will talk, speak my mother language coz it's difficult to speak English, and somebody think they will laugh at me if I speak English with my countrymen…"

In several situations, learners choose to code-switch between L1 and L2. Nevertheless, this does not impose real problems because it shows that learners are comfortable using both languages to a certain extent, as long as it does not impede learning or understanding L1 or L2.

Research Implications

This study presents a perplexing phenomenon where learners have the aspiration to succeed in learning English; nevertheless, they face several daunting problems that make them reluctant to speak the target language in and outside of the classroom. The matter at hand is indeed delicate: it deals with the students' intrapersonal strength, personality, as well as the power of individuals around them that make up the learning environment.

We also learn from this study that learners that belong to this category require supportive environment from both, their teachers and friends. Most importantly, since they find strength in their L1, teachers should not reject the significance of their first language interference. Instead, this acknowledgement can be utilized to develop critical awareness, confidence, and make their learning experience less foreign or less stressful. In my own class, I have tried encouraging learners to keep a vocabulary book with entries in both English and their mother tongue. Later, when they have learned a longer list of English words, the students discovered that they could define some difficult English words using basic English vocabulary, no more translating them into L1.

As the saying goes, "practice makes perfect". Learners who are reluctant speakers need to use the target language more often. When

the students have acquired enough words, phrases and expressions in English, teachers should create opportunities for them to use them in class, while under expert guidance. Activities should start with less threatening speaking tasks done in pairs and groups, and more creative ones like one act plays, poems, and songs (with lyrics provided).

Finally, it can be concluded that a fairly structured and guided approach might be more advisable for international students once they leave the comfort of an Intensive English Programme. At least, in their first year of degree at university, there should exist a support group to continue this effort to encourage them to speak English and monitor their use of English for academic purposes. The process will be more gradual and structured for some, but it's always a good start for unwilling speakers, yet willing learners of English.

Conclusion

Students' reluctance to speak English may be a tough challenge for teachers because we will probably miss our target, that is to ensure that every student readily accepts and benefits from a total English immersion. Nevertheless, the real challenge of this phenomenon lies in our understanding of the learners' perspective on reticence. The learners, like us, are aware of their behaviour and their consequences. One student wrote in his journal, *"...I believe that refuse to speak English is normal and happened when just your brain feel that needs to do it and also it can happened to every body…" (JE # 14)*. Nevertheless, students should be taught to handle their "language continuum"so that they can discover the magical connection between L1 and L2. Herein, the problem resolves.

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