Building EFL Learners' Confidence and Belief System through Collaborative Learning: The Power of Topics of Interest

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Abstract

Background:
English Language Learners (ELL) are perceived to bring their beliefs, attitudes, self-efficacy, and other related factors along with their cognitive and metacognitive learning strategies to gain satisfactory performance both in the process and their language learning achievement. The level of performance varies among learners, and factors affecting this performance remain questionable.

Methodology:
This qualitative research paradigm utilizes four research instruments to gather the data such as questionnaire, stimulated-recall discussion, observation, and semi-structured interview. All these four instruments were triangulated to strengthen each other. All the transcribed data were then stored, coded, classified, and interpreted. The pattern of the findings is reflected in the final part of the finding section.

Findings:
The current study has shown two different ways teachers practice their teaching. One is slavishly following the materials suggested by the syllabus, and the other is providing extra materials that are stimulating and motivating. Teachers are faced with new students every semester, and these students come with a different attitudes, belief systems, self-confidence and self-determination. With proper teaching strategies, topics presented for language exercises, and the application of collaborative learning, learning goals can easily be achieved in addition to the provision of a more enjoyable classroom.

Conclusion:
Tasks and activities are creatively developed by teachers to help build EFL learners' confidence in speaking performance. These teachers proved that collaborative learning involving topics of interest plays essential role in directing the EFL learners' belief system to optimize the grab of English, especially in productive skills.

Originality:
This research demonstrates teachers' creativity in building up learners' self-confidence and directing their belief system through collaborative learning, empowering topics of interest. In contrast, learning has never been conducted at the tertiary level.

1. INTRODUCTION

In any classroom context, English Language Learners (ELL) are perceived to bring their beliefs, attitudes, self-efficacy and other related factors along with their cognitive and metacognitive learning strategies to gain satisfactory performance both in the process and in their achievement in language learning. The enormous development of technology and communication has dramatically changed communities, globalization, and the educational system (Goh & Luen Loy, 2021; Hanafiah et al., 2022; Murdoch et al., 2021). This challenges the competence of English teachers in such a context to develop more strategic pedagogical nuance that suits their students learning demands and thus become the current art of knowledge elaborated more in this study.

The level of performance varies among learners, and factors affecting this performance remain questionable. This query has inspired this study to be conducted in which some essential points were discovered. The teaching and learning process leads the ELL to strengthen their belief system and self-confidence for better performance in language learning, especially speaking skills (Hassan et al., 2021; MacIntyre & Wang, 2021). Compelling evidence has been documented to leave traces for those curious to elaborate on these detrimental factors for success in language learning. Students' backgrounds as refugees or members of other oppressed groups, in addition to their struggles with English language acquisition, become their own source of frustration (Asmali & Sayın, 2021; Ortega, 2021). Furthermore, Cultural concerns are undeniably present. The length of time it takes to adjust to language learning activities in the classroom is a critical concern (Koirala, 2021; Schilling et al., 2021).

In relation to speaking skills, Mayr et al. (2020), Pilkington & Lawton (2014) reported an evaluation that shows that even in the United Kingdom (UK), in which English is the medium of instruction, pupils lack of opportunity to engage more in the oral practice in class because teachers do not follow a proper structural framework for listening and speaking activities. Another issue with learning English is writing. Teaching tactics, lesson plans, and assessments are all major concerns (El-Dakhs & Ahmed, 2021; Goodhall & Atkinson, 2021).

The above studies confirm that both internal and external factors that learners are exposed to play crucial roles in second language learning (L2) success. However, among these studies, none has been done on observing teachers' effort to build up the learners' confidence and direct their belief system through collaborative learning in which topics of interest are empowered when learning is taking place (Arimbawa, 2012; Hanafiah et al., 2022; Mohlabi-Tlaka, 2016).

In the subset, the result of the study is intended to fulfil the desire of the writer to share knowledge about how essential creativity is to be owned and developed by English language practitioners, especially teachers and curriculum designers on English speaking skills.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study is conducted using a qualitative paradigm. 124 students and 4 (four) English teachers from four universities in Eastern Indonesia, i.e., Universitas Hasanuddin (UNHAS, Universitas Muhammadiyah Parepare (UMPAR), Universitas Muslim Indonesia (UMI) and Universitas Islam Negeri Makassar (UIN) were invited to participate in this study. Four types of research instruments were utilized to gather as much data as possible to maximise the study's result: questionnaires, interviews, classroom observation, and stimulated-recall discussion. The following tables display the number of participants from each research site with the type of research instruments assigned to them.

Table 1. Number of participants from each research site

Research site	Total number of students
UNHAS	22
UMPAR	34
UMI	46
UIN	22

Table 2. Type of instruments and the number of participants

Type of Instruments	Number of participants			
	UNHAS	UMPAR	UMI	UIN
Questionnaire	22	34	46	22
Interview	10	16	20	12
Classroom observation	22	34	46	22
Stimulated-recall discussion	5	8	12	8

Due to the different intake times of these four research sites, the data gathering had to be adjusted based on the availability of the participants. Of the four instruments, the questionnaire and classroom observation was fully attended, while the other two were only attended by half of the participants. The data gathered is considered sufficient to gain the objective of the research.

At the initial stage, the questionnaire was distributed to all the participants. They were requested to fill out the questionnaires at once to avoid the questionnaires being left unfilled.

A stimulated-recall discussion was only administered to those whose answers needed more elaboration. In order to keep the data valid and reliable, all the participants were homogeneously selected. The four classes comprise 3rd-semester students who were taking Speaking Class at the time of data collection, and each class was alternately observed three times over the period. This observation was conducted to gather data on how classroom tasks were assigned by the teachers and how students responded. Details about students' physical responses and their reactions to the tasks given were entirely recorded using the video camera. A matrix was provided to highlight any unusual phenomena during the observation. A semi-structured interview was also utilized to gain more information about the learners' confidence, their belief system and topics presented by the teachers during the teaching and learning processes. All the data collected were transcribed to have a deeper understanding of the people depicted in the study.

These instruments were triangulated to strengthen each other. All the transcribed data were then stored, coded, classified, and interpreted. The pattern of the findings is reflected in the final part of the finding section.

3. FINDINGS

Three research questions posed earlier in this paper are thoroughly answered in this finding section. (1) how tasks and activities developed by teachers at some universities in South Sulawesi build EFL learners' confidence in speaking, and (2) how those teachers involved direct the EFL learners' belief system to optimize the grab of English as a foreign language.

3.1. Tasks format

Three classroom observations were conducted during the data collection. The teachers pre-designed all the classroom tasks before they enter the class. Both big-size and small-size classes were mostly given small group activities and only very few whole class discussions. The individual presentation was given to only one group of students. The interesting finding in this particular task format is the similarity of the teachers' idea to provide discussion topics within the area of the students' interests. The topics provided in each class during the observation are shown on table 3.

Table 3. Topics of Speaking task during observation

Research Sites	Class size	Topics presented		
		Observation-1	Observation-2	Observation-3
UNHAS (A)	22	My dream house	My favorite politician	Flood and daily human behavior
UMPAR(B)	34	My future plan	My hometown	My favorite toy
UMI (C)	46	My bedroom arrangement and decoration	My future plan	Food that I like most and how to make it
UIN (D)	22	My favorite TV presenter	Things I have at home	My parents and their expectation about me

Teachers in all the classrooms observed commenced their instruction by asking about the students' well-being. Most teachers give some constructive advice about how to be successful in oral English before they assign the students to start working in groups of 3, 4 or 5. This advice comprises communicative strategies that students may use to express their ideas or interact with competent English users (most students need speaking skills for scholarship purposes in which they have to be interviewed in English – data from questionnaire). From the observation, teacher-learners and learner-learner interactions seem to develop harmoniously as the teachers are well aware of the importance of being friendly to avoid high anxiety in their classroom.

Some samples of notes taken from the classroom observation are shown in the following section. Label A, B, C, D in each excerpt indicates (=) research sites (see Table 3); Observation + number = observation time. FT = Female Teacher, MT = Male Teacher, HPS = High-Proficiency Student, and LPS = Low-Proficiency Student. (See App.3)

Excerpt 1 (A/Observation-1)

"Good morning guys… How's everyone today? [smiling..] Anyone wants to tell us about their activities over the weekend?" (FT)

Excerpt 2 (B/Observation-1)

"Hi everyone… good afternoon… How's your day? Did you manage to do your homework?" (FT)

Excerpt 3 (C/Observation-3)

"Good afternoon students…. Have you all had your lunch?" [looking closely at students' eyes in the front row] (MT)

Excerpt 4 (D/Observation-2)

"Hello guys… Good morning… Is everybody happy today? Yenni… Why didn't you come to class the other day?" [while looking at a female student who suddenly grins] (FT)

At the beginning of the class session, the greetings bring a friendly atmosphere to the four classes. This can be seen from how students react when the greetings are conveyed. The loud voices of the students in responding to the greetings indicate the excitement to get involved in the learning process. All four teachers seem to be very friendly and have a strong emotional bond with the students. When these teachers were asked, "How do you develop a friendly learning environment in your class?" They mostly responded that they had known the students since they enrolled in the university, and they had all taught them English since the 2nd semester.

3.2. Teachers' delivery format

All four teachers who participated in this research have more than 15 years of teaching experience. Their awareness of the importance of appropriate material for their students is unquestionable. During the observation, three teachers consistently stick to the syllabus's material. When interviewed, the only one who did not use the provided material stated that he got bored with all the teaching procedures written in the material. He added, "Maybe because I've been using this material for so long. Nothing new in it" (MT/C). The other three confirmed that they just do not want to bother with additional material because the students they teach are different every semester.

Viewing the classroom atmosphere every time the data collection is carried out, it is assumed that the teachers successfully approach the students to engage actively in all the speaking activities. This indicates that pre-developed material is not a determinant factor in providing a pleasant learning environment for students in the classroom. It is mainly determined by the delivery format of teachers in the teaching process. Some of the teaching segments during the classroom observation show the patience and friendliness of the teachers in managing the class, especially the big-size class with 46 students attending. The mixed-ability classroom makes it hard for the teacher to arrange the grouping. In addition, she has to raise her voice to make her hearable. This big class is noisy even when the teacher is already standing in front of them.

Excerpt 5:

> *"The best strategy in handling big size classroom is putting them in group. This way all students have similar opportunities to practice"* (MT/C)

Excerpt 6:

> "*The students with better English always dominate the discussion if I allow them to pick their own group. Sometimes I have to arrange the group myself so these better students can help the weaker ones. I think this is quite a help."* (FT/A)

All teachers in the four universities face similar problems in big classes. Even the other two teachers, whose class size is smaller, stated that they have to deal with the same problem in different classes every semester. Grouping is the only choice they can utilize to help achieve the lessons' objective.

3.3. Enhancing Self-confidence and belief system: Teachers' strategy

In all four English classrooms under study, it is found that high proficiency students (HPS) always sit in the front row of the seats. Because of this preference, they are easily recognizable, and teachers can always confront them with whatever tasks are being assigned. They also show comfortable postures, and through this body language, they show a very positive attitude toward the tasks. They primarily respond quickly to any questions posed by the teachers at any given time. In contrast, the low-proficiency students (LPS) remain calm and prefer to sit in the middle or back rows. These particular phenomena indicate lack of confidence that hinder learners from participating actively in speaking class.

From the observation, two teachers (FT/A and FT/B) who are well aware of this situation apply various strategies to take both HPS and LPS to participate in the group discussion. By approaching the silent groups and talking to them in a low voice, the LPS students start to speak. This can be seen in the following segment.

The class comprises 22 students: 14 females and eight males. There are six groups of 4 and 3 discussing the topic of "Flood and daily human behaviour". Only recently, a flood covered most of the lower areas in Makassar and caused serious damage everywhere. Because of this topic, the students seem to be very excited about taking part in the group discussion. Some of them are suffering from this flood.

Excerpt 7 (D)

"*Ray, why do you think this flood happens?* (HPS-1)

"*This is caused by the irresponsible people who threw their rubbish anywhere they like*"(HPS-2)

"*You can't blame everyone. Only certain people who don't have rubbish bean in their home.*(HPS-3)

"*What about you Rika? Any idea?*" (HPS-1 is looking at LPS-4, who seems anxious since the beginning of the lesson). *After a while, there is no answer. Teacher A approaches and asked "Did you see Rika on TV how terrible the flood was?*"

"*No Mam. I see it in the sosmed in my handphone". "Oh… Good. So you are safe ya*"?

"*Yes Mam. I live near this university. Not far away in the flood". (speaking with hesitance but smiling…*)

The body language that the teacher demonstrates in this segment has a perfect effect to raise the student's self-confidence. There is no threatening face that most students try to avoid when speaking activities are concerned. This kind of approach also strengthens the students' belief system that learning a language is not something to be afraid of.

4. DISCUSSION

The crucial aspect scrutinized during the observation is the way teachers explain the task after giving instructions. Three out of four teachers mostly speak more in class. They walk around to help every group completing their task. Most of the time, they attend to groups which are not very active in doing discussion. When asked why they do so, the three teachers respond in similar tone. The students are scared of having bad grade if they stay silent in a speaking activity. This indicates the crucial role of teachers in deciding which students deserve high grades and which ones do not. It seems that students' awareness of high grade is quite significant. They lack self-determination and efficacy that the group work is a way to help them improve their speaking performance. Lack of confidence in speaking seems to be the main cause of the students' reluctance in expressing their ideas orally. From the data about the students' performance in other skills, e.g., writing and reading, and knowledge about grammar rules most students are already in intermediate level. It is ironic that their speaking performance does not go in line with other skills. This becomes the center of attention of the current study. and will be elaborated in detail in the next section. All the four classes under study are fortunately taught by warm and highly qualified teachers in addition

to their long-time experience in teaching. All other observed classes are approached in similar way that leave an impression of well-handled and managed classrooms (Derewianka, 2003; Fatimah & Santiana, 2017; Permatasari & Andriyanti, 2021; Rustipa et al., 2021).

When all these teachers were asked (during the stimulated-recall discussion) about the problems they face in enhancing the learners' self- confidence and strengthening their belief system in language learning they respond almost similarly. They all stated that topic of interest plays significant role in asking them to speak in L2. They are interested because they are familiar with the topic, and it is within their area of knowledge. All types of exercises can easily be accomplished when the learners like the topic even though they have limited vocabulary to produce (Scull et al., 2021; H. Zhang & Koda, 2021).

In relation to topics of interest the teachers provide for their speaking class, one which was favored very much by the learners was when the topic of discussion was My Dream House. Classroom work was firstly assigned by the teacher (A) and everyone can raise their hand, followed by group discussion. All the HPS raised their hand at once and the teacher pointed only 3 of them to speak alternately. With fluent English the three students completed the task at ease. During the group work, both HPS and LPS were excitedly participating in the discussion. When asked why they enjoyed this exercise, they responded similarly that the topic is very interesting. Everybody dreams of a lovely, comfortable house in which they can enjoy living with their family. Selecting the right topic is one way of enhancing the learners' confidence in expressing their ideas. Teachers who stick to the syllabus can be hindered to creatively pick more authentic materials, more updated issues to be discussed in classroom and thus failed to stimulate the learners' engagement in classroom tasks. With proper teaching strategies, and topics presented for language exercises, along with the application of collaborative learning, learning goals can easily be achieved in addition to the provision of more enjoyable classroom (Chung, 2022; Slaughter et al., 2022; Y. Zhang, 2022).

5. CONCLUSION

Teachers are required to facilitate learning no matter how difficult the situation they are facing. Factors contributing to success and failure in learning vary greatly, but the biggest responsibility is always put on the teachers' shoulders. This is always a great challenge that makes teachers continuously equip themselves with better pedagogical insights. The current study has shown two different ways teachers practice their teaching. Of the four teachers, three slavishly followed the materials suggested by the syllabus, and only one provided extra

materials that she found to be stimulating and motivating. She admits that sticking to the syllabus is a must but that does not mean that being creative in making the classroom more enjoyable is not allowed. Teachers are faced with new students every semester and these students come with different attitude, belief system, self- confidence and self-determination.

6. REFERENCES

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