



Libyan EFL Higher Education Students' Perceptions of Using their Voice in the Classroom

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Abstract

This paper examines Libyan EFL higher education students' perceptions of using their voice in the classroom. A qualitative study was undertaken targeting a group of 12 undergraduate university students majoring in English as a foreign language who were studying fulltime in a college of education at a university in Libya. The study was guided by the following aim: to explore the views and experiences of Libyan EFL higher education students regarding the use of their voice in the classroom. The study employed semi-structured interviews to gather data for analysis. Data analysis revealed little room for student voice in the classroom. Students were not encouraged or even allowed to participate in making decisions linked to their educational issues. They had a chance to use their voice only in situations related to exams and homework assignments. In the light of these results, the study suggests creating a more responsive classroom environment in which students find a chance to participate in making decisions linked to their educational issues and play their full part in implementing the curriculum.

Key words: student voice, classroom, teaching and learning, higher education

Introduction

Recently, students have been viewed as central to the teaching and learning process rather than recipients of knowledge imparted to them. They are now engaged not only in the teaching and learning process but also in making decisions linked to their educational issues. Their voices are heard and their ideas and thoughts are valued and implemented in the classroom in particular and

in the educational institution as a whole. Giving students a say in the teaching and learning activities is vital in creating a classroom environment in which students act as active agents.

Drawing on this cultural shift in education which supports students to have presence and authority in their educational institution (Shaffi, 2017), and through discussions with students as a tutor in my college, and in some other higher education institutions, I had observed students commented on the lack of opportunity to have a say in making decisions linked to the teaching and learning activities in the classroom. This situation motivated me to undertake this study to find out more about this phenomenon from students' perspectives. Based on this, the aim of the study was to explore Libyan EFL higher education students' views and experiences regarding the use of their voice in the classroom. To achieve this aim, the study targeted 12 Libyan higher education students majoring in English as a foreign language as a case study, employing a qualitative research approach through semi-structured interviews to collect data for analysis to answer the following research question: How do Libyan EFL higher education students perceive the use of their voice in the classroom?

Literature Review

Studies in Western countries have shown that student voice is a recent concept in educational research when a group of educators, in the 1990s, observed the absence of learners' voices from discussions linked to the teaching and learning activities "and began to take steps toward redressing it" (Cook-Sather, 2006, p.3). Czerniawski et al. also point out: "the idea that the voices of learners can influence educational policy and practice has been a more recent phenomenon" (Czerniawski et al. 2009, p.7) and in the Libyan context, to the best of my knowledge, this issue has not been the focus of policy makers, educators and educational researchers yet. This thinking of the role of student voice has since led to considering the student as an integral part of the classroom academic community influencing the teaching and learning process.

Specifically, student voice is defined as "any activity in which students exercise any degree of control or communicate their feelings" (Jonson, 1991, cited by Richardson, 2001, p. 7). It is also

defined as “empowering learners by providing appropriate ways of listening to their concerns, interests and needs in order to develop educational experiences better suited to those individuals” (Rudd, 2007, cited by Czerniawski et al., 2009, p. 6). Shaffi (2017) puts forward the notion that student voice has appeared as a term in scholastic research incorporating a collection of initiatives that supports the role of the learner in educational transformation. Cook-Sather (2006) also considers student voice to be a genuine conception, manifestation and a dynamic part in education.

The mainstream orientation has been that student voice is focused on certain aspects of the educational culture and elicited through student unions and councils. In spite of the importance of these bodies, using student voice has been restricted as these institutions do not have a direct influence on students' learning performance. Regarding the curriculum, Richardson (2001) conducted an action research study to examine the concept of student voice in the elementary school and to develop techniques for improving it in the curriculum. Findings of the study showed that there was a difference in the instructors understanding and raising of student voice. Allison also carried out a study to examine multiliteracies, students' voice, and scientific practices in two elementary classrooms and found that: "these two classrooms were enriched with multiliteracies that serve metaphorically as breeding grounds for student voice" (Allison, 2015, p. ii). Brooman et al. (2014) conducted a study to examine the prospective value of supported student participation in higher education curriculum improvement. In their study, the researchers stated how an arrangement with student voice enabled the emergence of perceptions not obtained by usual feedback strategies. All these studies point to the vital role of student voice in relation to the curriculum. As it is not possible to explore all the dimensions of the topic of student voice, this study focuses on the use of student voice with regard to implementing the curriculum in the classroom.

According to Richardson (2001), the curriculum is a means to listen to more learner voices than student council. Czerniawski et al. argue that offering learners' choice in the curriculum implemented, the strategies of their assessment and "over study options or modules which appeal to them, they can then construct their own curriculum from a range of choices both academic and

vocational’’ (Czerniawski et al., 2009, p.9). The curriculum then offers many opportunities for the tutor to listen to student voice in the classroom. Through curriculum, students find a chance to voice their views concerning the teaching and learning material and the assessment policy. They engage in discussions, asking questions, answering questions, commenting on certain courses, discussing exam results, suggesting or criticising certain elements of the syllabus or a lesson.

Richardson states: ‘‘most educators associate voice with empowerment which meant students would be given input into any decision affecting them’’ (Richardson, 2001, p. 7). The concept of empowerment has traditionally been viewed as equipping students with skills for competition. The democratic educator perceives empowerment as offering options on how to spend time and energy and the connectionist holds the belief that students are accountable for others who deal with them (Goodman, 1992 cited by Richardson, 2001). This development in the conceptualisation of student empowerment suggests that educators should not only equip students with the knowledge and skills they need as has traditionally been held but also encourage them to participate in decision and policy-making regarding matters linked to their learning. By so doing, students would be aware of the responsibility for themselves and for others who are with them in their educational institution and in their wider society. Winter argues: ‘‘we must seek to empower our students...and thereby empower ourselves on a justifiable basis’’ (Winter, 1998, p.55). Richardson also believes: ‘‘empowerment may be seen as opportunities provided for students to express their voice’’ (Richardson, 2001, p.14). Creating an inclusive and responsive environment in the classroom would offer an opportunity for students to feel empowered and have a voice in decision-making whilst at school or university and this would in turn prepare them for decision and policy- making relevant to societal issues in the future. Ultimately, we as policy makers and educators of today empower ourselves. This does not, however, mean that the tutor remains passive and conceals his/her leading role in decision-making, but rather he/she needs to balance his/her role as a leader of the class with that of students through offering them a chance to make decisions linked to the curriculum implemented. The tutor’s knowledge and experience are integral to the teaching and learning process.

This study draws on these discussions and argues that offering Libyan EFL higher education students a chance to have a say in the classroom academic community would motivate them to participate in the teaching and learning process and improve their learning performance. On the contrary, institutionally centralised decisions might discourage students' participation and lead to passivity.

Methodology

In order to examine the topic of Libyan EFL higher education students' perceptions of using their voice in the classroom, I needed to employ a qualitative research approach to allow me understand the topic investigated from students' perspectives. Denzin and Lincoln believe that qualitative research involves investigating issues in their natural environments and this helps a researcher to understand or “interpret the phenomena” in terms of “the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008 p.4). Thus, this approach suits the study in terms of the social nature of the phenomenon investigated and the context of the study, which represents a group of people in a certain setting, being a group of Libyan EFL higher education students. Employing this approach in the study offered me a chance to examine the phenomenon researched from the perspectives of the participants through exploring their views and experiences (Hennink et al., 2011) regarding the use of their voice in the classroom.

Stating the aim of the study indicates the sampling techniques and procedures. Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) point out that in qualitative research, it is not always possible to explore all the population targeted in a research project, but only portion of it can be accessed. Linked to this, Silverman (2006) states that purposive sampling enables the investigator to select a case, because it demonstrates some features a researcher needs to consider. On this basis, a purposive sample of 12 EFL undergraduate university students was selected, as a case study demonstrating the characteristics of Libyan higher education students as its relevant population. The sample included students from second year, students from third year and students from fourth year. First year students were not included as they were regarded new entrants and relatively unfamiliar with the higher education culture. It is worth noting here that the intention is not to generalise the results of this research to the student population targeted but to describe (Dawson, 2009) the

learning environment of these higher education students and its impact on the use of their voice in the classroom.

Since the gender variable was not to be targeted in this study, all the students were females, of Libyan nationality and native speakers of Arabic. They were aged between 21 and 22 years. They graduated from some secondary schools and were now studying as fulltime students at the department of English in a college of education at a Libyan university during the academic year 2018-2019. They were taught by 11 Libyan tutors and 2 tutors of other nationalities with MA or PhD qualifications in teaching English as a foreign language. By the time of the study, these students had been learning English, as their major, for at least two years, which meant that they had experienced the use of student voice in the classroom. As participants of the study, these students were interviewed to comment on executing their voice concerning the curriculum implemented in the classroom.

For ethical considerations, according to Dawson (2002) and BERA Guidelines for Educational Research (2011), I had obtained consent from the students targeted in the study. Before they participated in the study, I had explained to them the aim of the study and the importance of their participation. In the findings section, I refer anonymously to the university, the college, teaching staff members and aliases are used to conceal the participants' identities.

Regarding data collection, semi-structured interviews were employed to elicit data for analysis. Backing this type of interview, Bloom and Crabtree indicate: ‘‘semi-structured interviews are often the sole data source for qualitative research’’ (Bloom and Crabtree, 2006, p.315). This type of interview can reconcile between the interviewer and his/her interviewees as they are offered an opportunity to talk freely and uncover the complexity of their perspectives and this is what a researcher seeks to attain (Hammersley, 2008). As they are of the semi-structured type, the interviews were guided by a list of questions that had been prepared in advance. To offer the participants a chance to provide as much information as possible avoiding any language barriers, the interviews were conducted in the participants' L1 i.e. Arabic. After the interviews, I transcribed and translated the obtained data into English.

Approaching the analysis process, a researcher should consider the research questions guiding the study. This is supported by Basit (2010) who believes that in the analysis process, the task of the researcher is to find accounts from descriptions. He/she uses his/her skills to identify data that are related to the research questions and analyses these data in the light of them. Employing the inductive technique (Mertler, 2009), the data obtained were repeatedly read, thematically categorised and coded. This technique enabled me to describe and interpret the data in light of the research question guiding the study in order to obtain a coherent and insightful account of the topic researched.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the data analysis of the research group of Libyan EFL higher education students' perceptions of using their voice in the classroom. Brief quotations from the actual interviews are italicised and provided to support the discussion of findings.

Unheard Voices

Regarding the status of student voice in the classroom, the majority of students in this research were critical of the reality of their classroom environment regarding the use of their voice in making decisions linked to the curriculum. Concerning the syllabus, the students believed that their voices were not considered in preparing the syllabus items. The syllabus, they said, had been prepared for them and they were not allowed to add, modify or omit any part of it. Salwa commented: *It is impossible for the student to take part in preparing the syllabus. We are not allowed to add, modify or omit any part of the syllabus or even the lesson.* Iman added: *I have been studying in this college for three years, and I have not seen student participation in preparing the syllabus.* Even when the students attempted to add an element to a lesson, most of their tutors, they said, responded negatively. Tutors seemed to believe that students lack the knowledge to take part in this activity. Huda said: *The tutors think that we are students and we do not know as much as they do. Accordingly, we do not have the right to add to the syllabus or to a lesson.* Arwa added: *When we try to participate in preparing the syllabus, the tutors respond negatively and say that we are students and that we do not know how to participate in preparing the syllabus. They do not treat us as university students.* These comments indicate the view held

by the tutor about the student's role in preparing the language items to be targeted in the classroom situation. Tutors seemed to be following the "doctor-knows-best approach" which although accepts that students have "different preferences and beliefs, discounts these on the grounds that the teacher is the expert and that learners' views are irrelevant" (Nunan, 1991, p.178, 179). They view the task of preparing the syllabus or a lesson is exclusively their own right and students are incapable of participating in making decisions linked to the language components preparation.

Many of the students were also critical of the lack of opportunity to use their voice in making the assessment policy. They stated that their role in addressing this aspect was concealed as they were not allowed to participate in this activity. Salwa commented: *Most of the tutors do not encourage or allow the students to participate in making the assessment policy. They consider it as their own right and the students do not have the right to participate in making it.* Marwa added: *Most of our tutors do not accept student participation in making the assessment policy. We sometimes offer suggestions but they do not accept them.* When they attempted to participate in making their assessment policy, their voices were not valued or heard. This suggests the traditional modality of pedagogy in which the teaching and learning process is teacher centred and the student is usually treated as passive.

Some of the students were also critical of the assessment policy adopted in their classroom. Sara commented: *Assessment is approached in traditional methods, memorising and unpacking knowledge on examination papers. I do not agree on this strategy of assessment.* Salma suggested: *There should be a variety of assessment strategies like doing research papers in addition to taking exams.* These comments indicate that these students are not only critical of the established assessment policy that relies solely on exams but also able to suggest the alternative and express their need to be engaged in making decisions linked to their learning performance. Harmer argues: "although, as teachers, we are ideally placed to provide accurate assessment of student performance, students can also be extremely effective at monitoring and judging their own language production" (Harmer, 2007, p.140). It is therefore evident that, if offered a chance,

students have the ability to participate in making policies and decisions related to their learning performance.

However, many of the students appreciated being engaged in making decisions linked to taking exams and doing homework assignments. Zahra said: *We are allowed to participate only in making decisions linked to taking exams, like assigning the date of taking an exam.* Hana added: *Some tutors offer choices of the deadline for handing in homework assignments.* It seemed that this was the only opportunity in which these students were allowed to participate in making decisions linked to their learning. It also suggests that there is little room for student voice in the classroom.

Lack of Empowerment

Concerning student empowerment, the students believed they were not empowered in the classroom. Empowerment is defined as "confidence, control, decision authority, influence, autonomy, and self-trust" (Rapp et al., 1993 cited by Hardina, 2004, p. 12). The students said they were not empowered through engagement in the teaching and learning process. Razan commented: *Nothing encourages us to have a word in the classroom. Most of our tutors do not use an engaging style of teaching.* Sara added: *The teaching style is usually traditional and the students are not encouraged to participate in the classroom.* This suggests that the student is not treated as central to the teaching and learning process. Kara points out: "the attitude of the teacher obviously influences students' success and their continuation in the language course" (Kara, 1992 p.133). These students seemed to be affected by the view of the tutor about the role of the student in the classroom. They were rarely encouraged or offered a chance to participate in decision-making or even suggesting learning activities. Marwa said: *The tutors rarely provide us with an opportunity to give our opinion. The decisions are mostly taken by them and only rarely that we take part in making decisions.* Huda added: *Most of our tutors do not encourage the students to have a voice in the classroom. They think that the students do not have the right to participate in making decisions.* This indicates the traditional approach of pedagogy according to which the tutor's task is to impart knowledge and to set exams ignoring creating an environment in which students feel empowered to use their voice in the classroom. The tutor does most of the

teaching activities and students' task is just to remain seated and follow the instructions given to them. Dubin and Olshtain state: "the learning is viewed as a self-realisation experience in which the learner has considerable say in the decision making process" (Dubin and Olshtain, 1986, p. 77). However, these higher education students did not seem to be empowered to participate in making decisions linked the teaching and learning activities.

In addition, most of the students blamed their tutors for the paucity of learning activities in the classroom. Learning activities, they said, such as pairwork, group-work, plenary discussion or giving feedback were not suggested or encouraged. Salwa commented: *Most of the tutors do not encourage doing learning activities in the classroom. We are not encouraged to give our opinions regarding the teaching style.* Hana added: *The students are not encouraged to comment on the teaching style in the classroom.* According to Larsen-Freeman, one of the teacher's "responsibilities is to establish situations likely to promote communication" (Larsen-freeman, 2000, p.128). Although they are important, these engaging activities did not appear to be employed in the classroom situation, depriving students of participating and developing a sense of empowerment. Suggestion of learning activities and encouragement of giving feedback, if found, would offer valuable opportunities for students to practise the target language in real classroom situations and participate in making decisions linked to their learning performance.

Conclusion

Data analysis revealed concerns regarding using student voice in the Libyan classroom. The students were not encouraged or even allowed to have a say in preparing the syllabus items or a lesson. Even when they attempted to do so, they were not welcomed. They rarely found a chance to participate in decisions linked to the teaching and learning activities. This indicates that student voice has little room in the classroom context. Their criticism of the assessment policy adopted and suggesting the alternative demonstrate their ability to participate in decision and policy-making and their awareness of their learning needs.

It was also evident that the students were not empowered to have a say in the classroom owing to the traditional view held by the tutor and the paucity of the teaching and learning activities. This

situation seemed to constitute a barrier not only to using student voice in the classroom but also to student participation in the teaching and learning process.

In the Libyan context, educational policies are seldom based on student participation. Therefore, this section shows how these students' perceptions of executing their voice in the classroom could inform future educational policies and decisions.

Educators in general need to reshape their view of student voice, consider it as central to the teaching and learning process and use whatever at their disposal to create a responsive classroom environment. This would encourage students to have a voice in their educational issues rather than remaining passive.

Instead of centrality of decision-making, tutors are recommended to regularly hold classroom meetings. Such classroom meetings would offer valuable opportunities for students to voice their views and feel a part of the classroom academic community.

They are advised to adopt a more dynamic and professional approach to teaching to promote students to participate in class discussions, asking questions, adding elements to the syllabus or to a lesson, suggesting activities for their learning, commenting on the teaching practices and giving feedback. This would offer a chance for them to use the language in real classroom situations and participate in implementing the curriculum.

The concept of student voice is originally a Western concept and some of its features may not suit the Libyan local culture. However, in this study colleagues might find aspects that can be adapted to their own beliefs and values and to the Libyan educational culture.

Regarding the limitations of the study, these points need to be made:

In carrying out this study, I employed semi-structured interviews to collect data for analysis. Although, I assured the interviewees that they could talk freely, my presence during the interviews, the nature of the topic investigated and being recorded may have influenced their answers and comments.

The data were gathered in the students' L1, i.e. Arabic and then transcribed and translated into English. I constantly read the written data and listened to the recordings many times to comprehend and convey the exact meaning of every word or phrase. However, there might be some words or phrases that may not have had their intended meanings because of the process of translation.

For further research, these are some recommendations:

This study explored student voice regarding the curriculum implementation in the classroom. More studies are recommended to be carried out in order to investigate the other aspects of this topic.

The study explored the topic of student voice from students' perspectives. Further studies are suggested to be conducted to examine the topic from the tutor's perspective. Conducting more studies would extend our understanding of this topic as an element of the classroom environment.

This is a small-scale study targeted a group of Libyan EFL higher education students using only one method of data collection, triangulated case studies are recommended to be conducted in order to confirm its results and gain a broader picture of the topic of student voice in the Libyan classroom. Learning more about this topic would help policy makers and educators in making suitable educational policies and decisions regarding promotion of young people's voices in higher education institutions in particular and in the wider society more generally.

As a final point, the topic of student voice is very broad and needs a lot of research. This small-scale study attempted to explore the perceptions of some Libyan EFL higher education students concerning the use of their voice in the classroom. The study offered some useful insights in terms of using student voice as an important aspect of the relationship between the tutor and students. Promotion of student voice is fundamental in order to improve the educational environment for both the tutor to arrive at a satisfactory level of professionalism, and students to enhance their learning performance. This is to achieve the desired goal of education, which is preparing young people to be capable of participation in their educational institutions today and in their wider society in the future.

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تصورات طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية بالتعليم العالي في ليبيا لاستعمال صوتهم بالقاعة الدراسية

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تبحث هذه الورقة في تصورات طلاب اللغة الانجليزية بالتعليم العالي في ليبيا لاستعمال صوتهم بالقاعة الدراسية، حيث تبنت الدراسة منهجية البحث النوعي واستهدفت اثنتي عشرة طالبة نظامية يدرسن بقسم اللغة الإنجليزية بكلية التربية في إحدى الجامعات الليبية، وكانت الغاية من الدراسة هي استكشاف آراء وتجارب الطلاب فيما يخص استعمال صوتهم بالقاعة الدراسية، واستخدمت لجمع البيانات طريقة المقابلة الشخصية شبه المركبة. من خلال تحليل البيانات تبين أن مجال صوت الطالب بالقاعة الدراسية ضيق جدا ولا يوجد تشجيع كاف ولا حتى سماح للطلاب بالمشاركة في اتخاذ القرارات التي تتعلق بقضاياهم التربوية. الفرصة الوحيدة التي تتاح لهم بأن يستعملوا صوتهم هي فيما يتعلق بإجراء الامتحانات وعمل الواجبات. في ضوء هذه النتائج تقترح الدراسة توفير بيئة أكثر استجابة للطلاب بالقاعة الدراسية بحيث يتمكنوا من المشاركة في اتخاذ القرارات التي تتعلق بقضاياهم التربوية ويلعبوا دورهم كاملا في تنفيذ المقرر الدراسي.