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## **EFL STUDENTS' PERCEPTION TOWARD CLASS PARTICIPATION IN GENERAL ENGLISH COURSES**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Many studies have shown that students who actively participate in the learning process learn more than those who do not. On the other hand, there are still scholars who have remained skeptical about the whole process. In Iran, too, there are still doubts about not only what EFL students think about class participation, but also whether classroom participation should be graded or not. This study aimed to explore how Iranian students perceive class participation, investigate the relationship among the students' perception toward class participation and their gender, identify the relationship among the students' perception toward class participation and the type of their English course, and find out the EFL students' perception about participation grade. The participants consisted of 189 randomly selected graduate students at medical and paramedical faculties of Shiraz University of Medical Sciences who answered the modified questionnaire on attitudes towards class participation. The results indicated that not only students do not have any interest in learning English but also professors their course instructors do have a great impact on their lack of motivation. Although our the study findings also showed that altogether the students are not motivated enough to even care about their class participation or whether their participation is graded or not, the literature is full of evidence that reveals that the course instructors have a significant role in encouraging or discouraging the students to participate in class activities. Pedagogical implications are also provided; some measures should be taken to enhance the students' trust and hence motivation. It is important for course instructors at the university to encourage students to participate in classes by making them feel appreciated by using more verbal and nonverbal approaches

**Keywords:** *Class Participation, University Students, Professors, Perception*

### **INTRODUCTION**

It is strongly believed that students who actively participate in the learning process learn more than those who do not (Weaver and Qi, 2005). Some of provided justifications for such strong claim are that active participation can facilitate both the retention of information (Bransford, 1979) and critical thinking (Garside, 1996). Furthermore, it is claimed that students who actively participate in class perceive their instructors more favorably than those who participate less (Crombie *et al.*, 2003; Fassinger, 2000). Despite the promising results these studies provided, there are still scholars who remained skeptical about the whole process. They believe that although most instructors acknowledge the value of active participation in the college classroom, achieving success in eliciting it appears more difficult. Only about 10 out of 40 students participate in class discussions, and typically, just 5 of them dominate the discussion (Karp & Yoels, 1976). Karp and Yoels (1976) refer to this overriding pattern of participation in the classroom as the "consolidation of responsibility." On the other hand, it is argued that participation grades do not promote participation and do not effectively measure what a student learns; hence, instructors' assessment of student participation should not be restricted to oral interactions (Wood, 1996). Furthermore, Wood (1996) believes "what is abundantly clear is that class participation requirement neither promotes participation nor does it effectively measure what a student learns in class" (p. 112). In Iran, too, there are still doubts about not only what EFL students think about class participation, but also whether classroom participation should be graded or not. These are important questions specifically in English classes where the teachers believe being silent in the classroom doesn't bring about much

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learning and the only way we can equip ourselves to encourage not only classroom participation but also attendance is by grading it. Few years ago, however, university authorities and head of English department advised against grading classroom participation and since then no additional grade is allocated to the students' class participation. It seems that this is a problem many instructors are faced with because in her extensive literature review, Rocca (2010) summarized that although some attention is given to the quality of the class participation, its grading criteria which is most of the time subjective usually lead to measurement challenge. Furthermore, since in each semester students are allowed to have 4 allowed absences, there is no way to grant more grades to those who are 100% committed to their English courses. All these often create a dilemma for course instructors at the end of the course, when grades are announced, because many students feel that they have not been treated fairly considering how active and committed they were in their classes as compared to their counterparts. Not grading classroom participation as well as facing the problems teachers encounter each and every semester after announcing their students' grades prompted us to conduct this study to see how students themselves feel about grading classroom participation. According to Meyer (2009), students' feelings about participation grades are worthy of investigation because if they like being graded, they might be persuaded to engage actively in the classroom. Meyer (2007) and Meyer and Hunt (2004) continue claiming that there is a strong relationship between the student's perception and his or her participation habits. Hence, if students prefer to remain silent personally or culturally, they remain silent regardless of the imposed participation grade (Meyer, 2009). Finally, except for few random comments exchanged between students and teachers, we still don't know anything about our students' feelings on oral participation and its grading criteria specifically when class participation is not even graded in this particular university where this study was carried out. Implementing learner-centered approaches to language education, we think we need to know our learners' viewpoints on their learning needs and their preferred learning styles. Indeed, it is often argued that the mismatch between the beliefs, attitudes and perceptions of teachers and learners should be addressed if the aim is set for maximizing L2 instruction (Barkhuizen, 1998; Kumaravadivelu, 1991; Peacock, 1998). Another important gap in the literature that this study tends to fill is that most of other studies reviewed in the literature have focused either on class participation among children, or if the college students were the target of the study, the reports of these students were some global reports involving professors and classes in various disciplines. What hasn't been fully uncovered is what EFL students think about class participation in ESP classes when it is not graded.

### **Objectives**

The main objective of this study is to explore the ways in which students perceive class participation. We aimed to identify how Iranian students perceive class participation, investigate the relationship among the students' perception toward class participation and their gender, identify the relationship among the students' perception toward class participation and the type of their English course, and find out the EFL students' perception about participation grade. The results of this study will be significant to be considered by university instructors to tackle their problems with students' lack of regular attendance in their classes. Therefore, the research questions posed in this study were as follows:

1. What are the Iranian students' perceptions towards class participation?
2. Is there any relationship between the students' perception toward class participation and their gender?
3. Is there any relationship between the students' perception toward class participation and the type of their English course?
4. What are the EFL students' perceptions about allocation of participation grade?

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

### **Method**

The research design for the overall study required two stages: the development and piloting of a survey instrument through, and a subsequent primary study utilizing the refined survey instrument. Because no existing scales measure the exact concepts and variables under investigation in the specific situations and settings desired, a survey instrument was prepared for the present study based on exploratory study by

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Meyer (2009). Then, the pilot study was conducted to test the survey instrument, establish its validity and reliability, reduce the data, and categorize the items through factor analysis of the survey items. The pilot study and processes mentioned earlier led to validity and reliability of the instrument and made it ready to be applied in the main phase of the study.

#### **Participants**

The participants consisted of a randomly selected sample of graduate students at medical and paramedical faculties of Shiraz University of Medical Sciences. For the pilot study, we aimed to evaluate the survey instrument, rather than compare the groups, so only 30 students majoring in medicine were used as participants in the pilot study. Thus, the target population for the pilot study was medical students, whereas the accessible population participating in the main study consisted of graduate students from various medical fields such as midwifery, nursing, medicine, dentistry, and pharmacy. Finally, after the instrument was validated, 189 students participated in this survey.

#### **Instruments**

A survey questionnaire was developed for this study because scales developed by previous researchers lacked a conceptual fit. Survey items consist a 5-point Likert scale, asking students to indicate their level of agreement with the items, from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Since the variables under investigation in the present study sought the perceptions of the participants, Likert items were an appropriate way to measure their opinions, beliefs, and attitudes (DeVellis, 2003). The questionnaire was translated and then back translated to enhance its reliability; its validity was confirmed by a panel of experts in the department.

Classroom participation which is the dependant variable in this study is loosely defined as any comments or questions that are offered by students in the classroom. Our questionnaire included fifteen questions to measure class participation. The questions vary from more general aspects of classroom participation to some specific ones. For example, in one question, students are asked to respond if, at all, they enjoy participating in class discussions and more specific ones ask students to state whether they usually volunteer for class participation or they prefer to wait to be called on. Two questions also ask students to compare the participation of their peers with theirs; for example, “In most classes, I participate more than my peers in classroom” or “most of my classmates don’t participate in my English classes”. Since these English classes are those which focus more on reading skill rather than listening, writing and speaking ones, two questions investigate the type of participation, for example whether students raise their hands in order to read the reading passages in their book or they simply participate in order to be involved in the classroom discussion. It is worth mentioning that instead of asking students about the number of times they actively participate per session (Fassinger, 1996), we focused more on general aspect of participation during one semester.

For our independent variables, we mainly focused on reasons behind students’ intention or lack of it to participate actively in class. This was measured through sixteen questions about students’ fear of peer disapproval as well as fear of appearing unintelligent and even in some cases more intelligent than others that we thought might hinder some students not to want to be in the spotlight all the time. Due to some religious and cultural background, in this category, we also added one question that exclusively focused on the gender issue and ask students if the presence of different genders in the class hampers their participation in the classroom. Four questions measured class environment including class dynamics, class structure, professor’s characteristics, and the book. Three questions measured the students’ effort for class preparation. This study investigated preparation by asking whether students put some effort to review the lesson which is going to be taught beforehand, and if yes, whether this makes a significant difference both in their learning and class participation. And finally, there were 3 questions on the method of grading. In these questions, students were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the following items: 1) if the classroom participation was graded, I would have devoted more time and energy to have an active participation in and out of the class; 2) if the classroom participation was graded, I still would prefer to remain silent during the class sessions; 3) I believe that grade should be allocated to active participation in the classroom.

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### Procedure

This case study was conducted during fall semester 2013 at Shiraz University of Medical Sciences. Therefore, findings based on this case study may not be generalizable to institutions other than universities. We collected data on the students' perception about class participation and grading criteria at the very last session of the semester because it was believed that going through the entire course, they have a clearer understanding about their learning process and the ways in which lack of participation grade may have influenced their performance in and out of classroom walls. It took students about 25 minutes to fill in the questionnaire which was translated to Persian language for the sake of better understanding.

### Data Analysis

To analyze the data, Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 21, was used. To answer the first research question, descriptive statistics was applied and Independent sample t-test was applied for the second, third, and fourth questions.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

To answer the first research question (what are the Iranian students' perceptions toward class participation), descriptive statistics were applied and the mean scores of the items in questionnaire obtained. The most frequently reported items are depicted in Table 1. As it is seen in the table, item 39 (Due to demanding behavior of my teacher and his unfriendliness, I am not interested in participating in class activities) and item 29 (I have no desire to learn English but I have to pass this unit) have been mostly claimed by the students while item 32 (when I participate in class activities, I better learn the lessons) and item 28 (As a student, I have to participate in class activities) were least frequently claimed items.

**Table 1: Descriptive statistics for the most and least frequently reported items in the questionnaire**

Item	N	Mean	SD
Q39	189	3.78	1.30
Q29	189	3.56	1.95
Q32	189	2.00	0.91
Q28	189	2.05	0.91

To answer the second research question, to determine if the difference among male and female students' perception toward class participation is significant, descriptive statistics and independent sample t-test were applied. According to the results, the difference between male and female students was found significant only in items 10 (The topics covered in our English textbooks are not really the ones we can have classroom discussions about), 13 (My English teacher knows my name and usually calls me by name), 18 (I usually review the lessons before I attend my English classes), 24 (I prefer to do something other than listening, because I don't benefit from my English classes), and 33 (Having or not having class activity doesn't have any particular impact on my learning), as tabulated in Table 2. According to the results, females mostly reported items 10, 13, 24, and 33 while the only item which was reported mostly by male students was item 18.

However, the gender of the instructor only affected one aspect of the students' perception toward class participation, that is item 37 in the questionnaire (Class activity in my class is just reading from exercises without being called on). Mean score of the male students was 3.15 and that of female students was 2.52. This difference was found significant ( $p = 0.001$ ); that is, male students more frequently believed that they just read from exercises without being called one by the teacher. To answer the third research question, to determine if the difference among the students' perception toward class participation with regard to their English course is significant, again descriptive statistics and independent sample t-test were applied.

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**Table 2: Mean differences between male and female students toward their perception about class participation**

Item	Mean	SD	N	F	t	Sig.	
10	Male	2.71	1.36	52	2.29	2.74	0.007
	Female	3.27	1.18	120			
13	Male	2.36	1.34	52	3.26	3.11	0.002
	Female	3.01	1.10	120			
18	Male	3.36	1.17	52	0.177	2.17	0.031
	Female	2.91	1.24	120			
24	Male	3.03	1.29	52	0.8.3	3.11	0.002
	Female	3.66	1.17	120			
33	Male	2.90	1.61	52	6.32	2.38	0.018
	Female	3.45	1.30	120			

According to Table 3, students’ perception was significantly different in items 1 (I enjoy participating in class discussions), 3 (I prefer not to be called on by my English teacher to answer questions), 14 (I usually volunteer myself for reading exercises), 22 (I don’t usually benefit from sitting in my English classes and it’s from my own effort that I get good marks), 24 (I prefer to do something other than listening, because I don’t benefit from my English classes), 28 (As a student, I have to participate in class activities), and 30 (This semester I have been very active in the classroom) of class participation with regard to their English courses, General 1 and 2. As shown in Table 3, students who were studying General 1 mostly reported items 1, 14, 28, and 30, while students who were studying General English 2 mostly reported items, 3, 22, and 24.

**Table 3: Mean differences between male and female students toward their perception about class participation**

Item	Mean	SD	N	F	t	Sig.	
1	General1	2.16	0.981	108	0.00	2.02	0.044
	Gener12	1.85	0.938	62			
3	General1	2.68	1.39	108	0.578	2.25	0.026
	Gener12	3.17	1.33	62			
14	General1	2.83	1.14	108	0.764	2.29	0.023
	Gener12	2.41	1.10	62			
22	General1	3.05	1.15	108	1.22	2.48	0.014
	Gener12	3.53	1.28	62			
24	General1	3.27	1.20	108	0.133	2.71	0.007
	General2	3.80	1.25	62			
28	Gener11	2.13	0.869	108	0.002	2.38	0.018
	General2	1.80	0.884	62			
30	General1	2.80	1.24	108	1.22	2.05	0.042
	General2	2.41	1.04	62			

To answer the fourth research question, students’ perception toward participation grade, the mean score for relevant items in the questionnaire was obtained. Items 40, 41, and 42 evaluated the students’ perception toward participation grade.

Descriptive statistics showed mean score of 2.56 for item 40 (If any score was allocated to class activities, I would devote more time and energy both in and before my English class.), mean score of 3.46 for item 41 (Even if any score was allocated to class activities, I would be still inactive in my English classes), and mean score of 2.17 for item 42 (I believe class activities should be graded). Referring to the mean scores, students most frequently claimed item 41; that is, they do not consider grading as a stimulus for class

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participation. Thus, they believed that they would not participate in class activities even if it was graded by the instructor.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

As was said earlier, most of the students claimed that due to demanding behaviour of their teacher and his/her unfriendliness, they are not interested in participating in class activities (item 39); moreover, they claimed they had no desire to learn English but they have to pass this unit (item 29). These results obtained from this study are a bit alarming because it seems that not only students do not have any interest in learning English but also professors do have a great impact on worsening this matter. Indeed, lack of integrated motivation to learn English has not given students a reason to learn and a desire to attain the learning goal; this, as it can be seen in the results of this study, has led to negative attitudes towards learning and effortless behavior (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991). Moreover, the students claimed that they have to pass the course while they have no desire to learn English. It highlights the role of instrumental motivation in pursuing learning English over integrative motivation. Instrumental orientation refers to occupational or practical goals for learning a language, such as attaining an academic diploma or for job advancement. Gardner and Bernaue (2008) suggested that, in the long run, integrative orientation would be a better predictor of L2 proficiency than instrumental motivation, because of the positive attitudes towards the target community. Moreover, the students who are instrumentally motivated prefer memory strategies rather than cognitive strategies in learning English; thus, they only deal with short term memory (Kafipour *et al.*, 2010). Lack of interest in learning English, Ryan and Deci (2000) believe learners cannot really show high academic achievement and show a long-term retention of what they have learned. One reason for this might be the fact that Iranian students start learning English since junior high school if not in early ages in private English institutions. Nevertheless, after all these years, many cannot even handle the simplest English conversations which as a result might lead to losing their motivation to learn English by the time they enter the university. It seems that university professors' verbal or nonverbal behavior, too, is another reason for students' discouragement. Indeed, according to Berdine (1986, p.23) students whose professors are "boring, bored, pushy, moody, close-minded, too opinionated, condescending, and unfriendly" are less likely to participate. This claim confirms Fritschner's (2000) that instructors' facial expression and voice can have a great impact on students' class participation. On the other hand, when students don't participate in class, it is believed that they less favour their instructor (Crombie *et al.*, 2003) which, as a result, can have a direct relation with their motivation. This vicious cycle, as it can be seen in our findings, resulted in students who might completely dismiss their active role as students all together. The result of this study also confirms what Freire (1985) calls the "banking model" which refers to the hierarchical nature of our education system in Asian settings. In Iran, students are not allowed to call their professors by their first name and professors do not call students by their first name, either if at all they are called on. Calling professors by the title "master" and calling students by titles "Mr." and "Ms." from one hand and considering faculty as an "expert" authority on the other hand, do not really allow openness and equality (Crone, 1997, 2001) which ultimately may lead to students who withdraw into silence because of not having much to contribute (Weaver and Qi, 2005).

As it was revealed in the findings, female students did not think that the topics covered in their General English textbooks are the ones that inspire them to get involved in class participation. According to Ur (2006, p.20), one of the most important reasons behind the "dryness" of many textbooks is their lack of variety. However, for further clarification we need to add that designed and prepared for medical students for this particular university, the topics covered in General English 1 and General English 2 books are mainly medicine-related topics (e.g. health and longevity, indoor air pollution, comic relief, meditation, malaria, etc.) with some exceptions covering topics such as school/education (International students) or general life topics like "Are these the best years of your life?" which are mainly international topics rather than local or national topics. To discuss such unanticipated result is very difficult but to our personal view teaching these classes many times, we believe there is definitely a difference between what we teachers thought might be interesting for our students and what they really think is interesting. We were definitely surprised by such discrepant finding because, for example, being a female researcher in this study, I

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always thought topics like yoga, stress relief and home remedies would be very interesting for both genders especially for my female students because these topics were always among my favorite topics. This shows the mismatch between teacher intention and learner interpretation which can inhibit desired learning income (Kumaravadivelu, 1991; Garrett & Shortall, 2002). This also shows that further investigation needs to be carried out regarding our learners' preferences in terms of general medicine-related topics in their textbooks and for that some modifications need to be done if our aim is fostering our learner's learning.

This study shows that professors call female students by their names and this result is not concurrent with Hall and Sandler's (1982) famous term, "chilly climate" towards female students and not learning their names as quickly as professors do for male students. This finding might indirectly be related to our previous finding that since female students do not think textbooks topics are interesting enough for them to participate in class activities, by memorizing their names and recalling them more often, their professors have a better chance to make them more involved. Our next finding also indicates that our male students tend to prepare themselves before they sit in their English classes and this might be an indicator that male students are more active than female students because by volunteering themselves, they don't need to be called on all the time. However, this hypothesis is rejected by another finding of this study which indicates that male students in this university think that the main activity they have in their classes is just reading from exercises without being called on in class. This shows that professors in this university favor their female students more by memorizing their name, calling their names and encouraging them to participate in class activities while this is not true for male students. This finding is quite unique because as it was discussed earlier the studies which have focused on gender-biases at universities either indicate that female students are disadvantaged or revealed limited evidence that support the fact that professors act differently in college classrooms (Boersm *et al.*, 1981; Corneliu *et al.*, 1990). In discussing the role preparation plays in students' active role in class, findings viewed in literature review are contradictory as Howard and Henney, (1998) and Howard *et al.*, (2002) found a direct relationship between students' lack of preparation and their nonparticipation while others like Fassinger (1995) and Weaver and Qi, (2005) don't seem to see any relevance between students' preparation and their class participation. In our case, our study's finding is parallel with the latter studies because it doesn't seem that preparing the lessons before class makes our male students active participants in their English classes. Likewise, our finding doesn't support Fassinger's (1995) argument that confidence affects participation because although male students usually review the lessons before their English class and hence tend to be more confident than their female counterparts in getting involved in class activities, they neither feel nor want to be active participants.

Based on our other findings shown in Table 2, it seems that the only reason behind the fact that professors pay more attention to their female students is that female students reportedly prefer to do something other than listening (because they don't benefit from their English classes) and that they believe that having or not having class activity doesn't have any particular impact on their learning. So what we can see here is that although professors try their best to motivate their female students by calling on them as often as possible (to prevent them from doing something else in class), female students do not really think this participation play any significant role in their learning process. As it was discussed earlier not having intrinsic motivation has an effect on informal structure of the classroom too (Weaver and Qi, 2005). In fact, not being close to their professors, students rely more on one another to meet their needs which makes peers as powerful sources in the classroom (Gareth, 1986). This is very dangerous in situations like ours in which many students in the class prefer to do something else in the class because they do not seem to trust their educational system. According to Terenzini *et al.*, (1999, p. 619), "the most powerful source of influence on students' learning appears to be students' interpersonal interactions, whether with peers or faculty".

Another interesting finding we got was about two semesters that students pass General English 1 and General English 2. It seems that in the first semester that students attend General English 1 classes, they have some motivation to participate in class participation and to volunteer for class discussions. Most

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important of all, they think that as a student they have to participate in class activities. However, by entering their second semester their motivation fades away and they prefer not to be called on and worst of all they tend to do something else in the class rather than learning what is taught there because they think they don't usually benefit from sitting in their English classes and it's from their own effort that they get good marks. This finding seems to disagree with Fritschner's (2000) claim that class participation in upper level classes is more probably more than lower ones.

Again to discuss the finding for our fourth question (students' perception about grading or not grading the class participation) we, once again, should refer to students' lack of motivation which, once again, shows that our students do not even have instrumental motivation to participate in their English classes. This shows that even when they know that their activeness is going to be rewarded by grade at the end of the semester, this doesn't enhance their motivation. One of the most important reasons behind the ways in which our medical students tend to shut down on learning English is that perhaps they do not see any relevance between what they learn and what they need at present and future. Living in an EFL context and not having access to the most famous English websites in the world due to filtration, students have no desire to learn English. Another point we think might be the fact that the reason for students' lack of motivation to learn English at university level is that students don't seem to find any relationship between their desire to learn English and their grades. In other words, even without having desire to learn English, they can pass their English courses, even sometimes with very good grades. This is supported by Vijchulata and Lee (1985), Gardner and Lambert (1972), Lukmani (1972), and Oller *et al.*, (1977); in their studies a negative correlation was found between integrative motivation and language learning.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

Some measures should be taken to enhance the students' trust and hence motivation. It is important for professors at the university to encourage students to participate in classes by making them feel appreciated by using more verbal and nonverbal approaches. The most important of all is learning students' names even when the classes are large. Based on the reviewed literature, this is something that only 27 percent of instructors do (Boersma *et al.*, 1981), so we hope our study's findings act as a warning for all institutions specially the ones in Asian settings with their more lecture-based approaches where the professors tend to call on their students only at the end or at the beginning of the class for attendance. After surveying both students and professors, Fassinger's (2000) findings revealed that non-threatening climates according to students are the ones that professors know their names and in which the classes are student-centered and supportive by the professors. Another way that students are encouraged to be active in classrooms are by asking questions of interpretation rather than questions that are based on facts which have only one correct answer (Gravett, 1985). In the former case, McDaniel (1984) suggests asking questions that even professors themselves do not know the answers mixed with questions which ask students if they agree or disagree with their peer's comments. Furthermore, although in Asian settings, especially in Iran, it is not very common for professors to get very close to students, Merwin (2002) suggests that professors should use empathy allowing their students to feel like they are mattered. Although our findings show that altogether our students are not motivated enough to even care about their class participation or whether their participation is graded or not, the literature is full of evidence that shows that the course instructors have a significant role in encouraging or discouraging the students to participate in class activities.

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