

Factors Affecting Students' Active Participation in English Speaking Class: Grade 8 in Focus

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Abstract

This study intended to explore factors affecting students' participation in speaking English classes. To achieve the objective of the study, the researcher used a mixed research design involving both qualitative and quantitative methods. All grade 8th English teachers and students of the school were taken as the population of the study. The students were selected in purposive sampling and teachers were selected using comprehensive sampling. The data were collected using a questionnaire, interview, and classroom observation. Data obtained from the questionnaire was analyzed quantitatively by using graphs and percentages and open-ended questions were analyzed qualitatively using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that students encountered many difficulties that caused students to be poor participants in speaking classes. Anxiety, lack of motivation, lack of encouragement, fear of criticism by peers, teachers' approach of teaching, classroom management, classroom environment and the intense use of Amharic in class were the major factors affecting students' active participation in speaking classes. Moreover, some teachers lack the required training, strategies and techniques to manage a speaking lesson. Other factors that the study unveiled were related to the educational and surrounding environment, in terms of using technological teaching aids and a convenient number of students in class. Besides, the findings also revealed that students had no communication or limited communication during English class between the teacher and among students. Students could not achieve the objective of the course being passive participants in speaking classes. To this end, teachers' methods of teaching, classroom management, and care of students should be boosted through training.

Keywords: factors, active participation, speaking skills

Introduction

Education has an important role in the social-political and economical development of the country. It is one of the imperative aspects that not only inculcates the essential skills, abilities, and knowledge among the individuals but also leads to the overall growth and progress of the individuals, community, and nation as a whole. An educated person is not only able to accomplish his desired goals and objectives but is also able to render an efficient contribution to the well-being of the community. The inculcation of academic knowledge, skills, abilities, and proficiency among individuals is enhanced through learning and academic performance.

Indeed the government of Ethiopia had given greater emphasis to improving education quality and continuously revises its educational policy in a bid to make it fit with the changing circumstance and socio-economic and political goals of the country (Alemayehu, 2012) and (Seyoum, 1996). The contemporary government of Ethiopia had evaluated the pros and cons of the previous

educational policy and came up with a new educational policy in which the government intended to implement in September 2019(MoE, 2018).

One of the challenges which are identified as the most potential setback behind quality education and students' low academic performance is the teaching-learning strategy employed by teachers' and students' involvement in the teaching-learning process. Many studies, as we will try to review in the next chapter, implicate that students' involvement in the teaching-learning process had a strong influence on students' academic performance. Especially at the elementary level, students' involvement in the class is very essential since it is at this level those students' overall personalities began to mold.

Besides its significant impact on the learning process, active participation will allow students to prepare for the class, develop their communication and presentation skills. It will also enhance students' interactivity skills.

Thus, this study is conducted on factors affecting students' active involvement in the teaching-learning process in English class at speaking lessons in the case of grade 8 students of Kolladiba primary School.

The Statement of the Problem and its context

Kolladiba General Full Cycle Elementary School is found in East Dembia woreda in Central Gondar Zone, the Regional state of Amhara. It was founded in 1977 and has been playing its role in creating a literate society and bringing the socio-economic and political development of the country. It was one of the few elementary schools in the Central Gondar Administrative Zone where the highest points in the regional examination had been achieved. Despite the successes, it had achieved throughout all these years, however, recent data analysis from the grade 8 regional exam implicates that there is a continuous reduction in both regional and classroom examinations, especially in English subjects. (Annual report of the School, 2009, 2010, 2011)

The educational policy that we are implementing now stipulates clearly that the teaching-learning process should be student-centered and students should engage actively in the teaching-learning process. It states active involvement of students in the class is crucial to achieve the intended objectives and to improve the academic performance of the students. Even though students are expected to engage actively in the class, the case in Kolladiba Full Cycle Elementary School Grade 8 students is different. Students tend to remain silent and passive in the teaching-learning process instead of involving in the class.

Most of the students in the class hesitate to ask/answer questions during English class. Even when there is a contest among grade 8 students, students' reaction to English questions forwarded to the audience is too low. Besides the pilot study result which is conducted by the researchers and the Minimum Learning Competency Test (MLCT) result of the students speaking skills implicates how critical the problem is. Moreover, there is no available research conducted to find out the factors behind low students' involvement in speaking up in English class at Kolladiba Full Cycle General Elementary School. This is the prime drive that instigates researchers to research factors that affect students' involvement in English class and its impact on their academic performance.

Basic Research Questions

A deep investigation was made in a bid to answer these fundamental questions:

- What are the major factors hindering students' ability to speak up in the class?
- What are the impacts of students' low participation in the English speaking class?
- What possible solutions should be made to alleviate major factors of students' low involvement/participation in English Speaking classes?

Methodology

The main issue of the study is entirely focused on identifying the major factors that affect students' engagement in the teaching-learning process in English class, particularly in speaking skills. For this study, a mixed approach was employed. In other words, both qualitative and quantitative data were gathered during the data collection process. In doing so, the researchers employ the qualitative data analysis method for the data gathered from interviews and classroom observation while quantitative data analysis was made for questionnaires.

The population of the Study

The reliability of data gathered from the respondents is very indispensable in the process of conducting research. Hence it is important to determine from where relevant data will be collected. In this case, the main participants of the study were Grade 8 students of Kolladiba Full Cycle General Elementary School and respective English teachers of the same grade level were also included in the study.

Sample Size and Sampling Technique

The implementation of an appropriate sampling technique is essential to ascertain the reliability and representativeness of the data. There are 600 Grade 8 students who are segmented into ten sections in which each section has 60 students. In these sections, five English language teachers were assigned to teach the subject. Since it is very difficult to inculcate all students into the study, the researcher selected the top three students via purposive sampling from each class i.e 30 students in total to take part in the questionnaires. Two class representatives of each class i.e 20 students were also be made part of the study purposefully. A total number of 50 students were selected from each class using the purposive sampling technique. Students were selected mainly based on their academic performance and their maturity and experience since most class representatives are older than the rest of the students in respective sections. These students could be a potential source of data concerning the major factor behind students' failure to engage in the teaching-learning process of English speaking class, especially factors related to the teaching-learning process, students' motivation, the major factors that hinder students to speak up in the class and other related issues of the study. English Language teachers of the same grade level were also selected through purposive sampling for interviews and classroom observation. All grade 8 English as foreign language teachers i.e 5 teachers were made part of the study for interview and classroom observation.

Data Collection tools

The researcher has employed a questionnaire, interview, and classroom observation as a data collection instrument. To collect data from students, the researcher has devised both close-ended and open-ended questions. The questionnaires were designed to see three thematic areas i.e. concerning teachers' approach, students' motivation and gap, and class environment. Similarly, the researcher has employed a semi-structured type of interview in dealing the English language teachers to see factors affecting students' speaking up in the class, be actively involved in the teaching-learning process, and see solutions to be made to alleviate the problem. Moreover, the researcher has employed classroom observation to see factors affecting students' participation in the class.

Data Analysis Technique

Data gathered through the questionnaire were quantitatively analyzed. Each questionnaire was collected and interpreted numerically in terms of percentage. The researcher has employed a bar graph to implicate the reaction of the participants to the questions forwarded by the researcher. Data gathered from observation and interviews were transcribed carefully and translated after thematizing the data. It has been used to triangulate the data that come from the questionnaire. Data gathered

from observation was also carefully transcribed and used to support arguments developed in interviews and questionnaires.

Results

Background of Participants and Data Collection Procedure

Concerning participants, a total of 50 students composed of each class were made part of the study. These students were selected based on academic performance and the responsibility they shoulder in their respective classes.

Table 1. Sex composition of participants in the questionnaire

Sex	Top performing Students		Class Monitor-Representatives		Total	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
Male	23	77%	10	50	33	66
Female	7	23%	10	50	17	34
Total	30	100%	20	100	50	100%

As it can be seen from the table a total of 30 (60%) students were stood for 1- 3 ranks in each class, and 20(40%) students who shoulder extra responsibility in their respective class were made part of the study. Since some of the high achiever students were also class monitors, the researcher made class representatives part of the study and were involved in reacting to the questionnaire. Regarding the sex composition of the participants, 33(66%) of them were male students while 17(34%) were female students as can be seen above.

Concerning the interviewee's personal information, as it can be seen here from Table 2, 2(66.6%) of them were male teachers while only one (33.4) female English teacher were made part of the study. All of the interviewees were 10+3 graduates from Gondar Teacher College with more than 16 years of experience.

Table 2. Personal background of the Interviewee

	Sex			Educational Qualification			Years of Experience		
	Male	Female	Total	Diploma	BA Degree	MA Degree	6-10yrs	11-15yrs	16>yrs
Interviewee	2	1	3	3	0	0	0	0	3
Percentage	66.6%	33.3%	100%	100%	-	-	-	-	100%

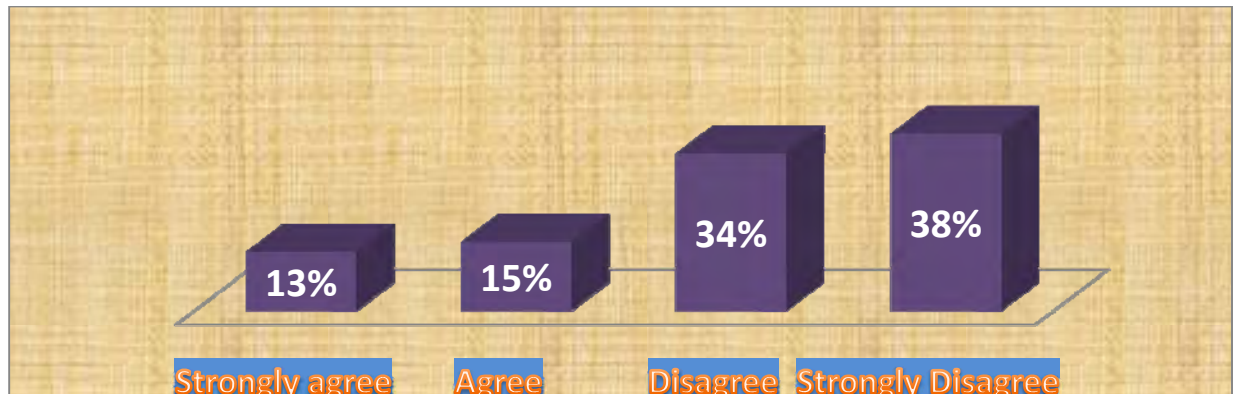
In addition to the questionnaire and interview, the first cycle observation in the teaching-learning process in the class was made on all Grade 8 English Teachers. Data obtained from observation are made part of the study and used to triangulate data recovered from questionnaires and interviews.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Analysis of questionnaires

- Factors Obstructing students to speak up in the English Class
- Students' talk time given by teachers

Hereunder in this graph students', talk time given by teachers during teaching and learning of speaking class is presented as follows.

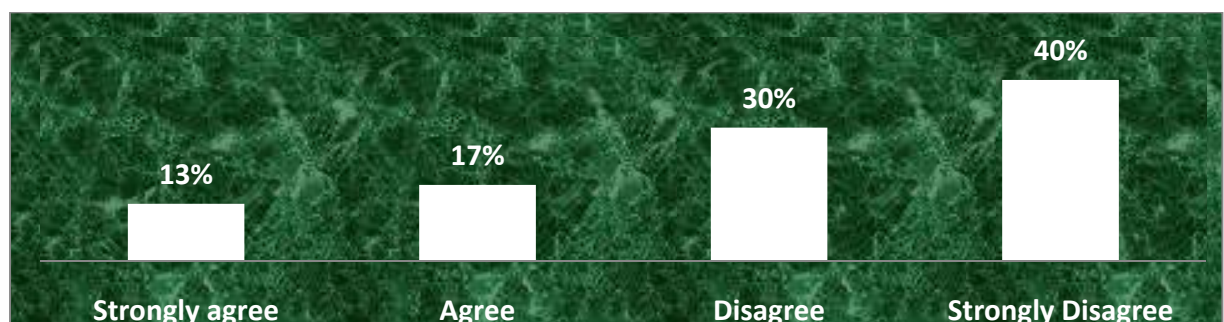


Graph 1. Teachers give more time for students to speak in the class.

As can be seen from the graph, 38% of the respondents strongly claim that the teachers did not give more time for students to speak up in the class. 34% of the respondents were also inclined to believe that the teachers did not provide students with enough time to speak up in the class. 13% of respondents strongly argued that the teachers give enough time for students while the rest 15% of respondents were inclined to believe that the teachers give more time for students to speak up in the teaching-learning process. Generally speaking, 72% of respondents claim that the teacher did not provide students with sufficient time to speak up in the class. From the above data, it is fair to conclude that the teachers allotted insufficient time for students to speak up in the class.

Teachers' motivation

Below the graph shows the teachers' motivation and encouragement made during speaking classes.



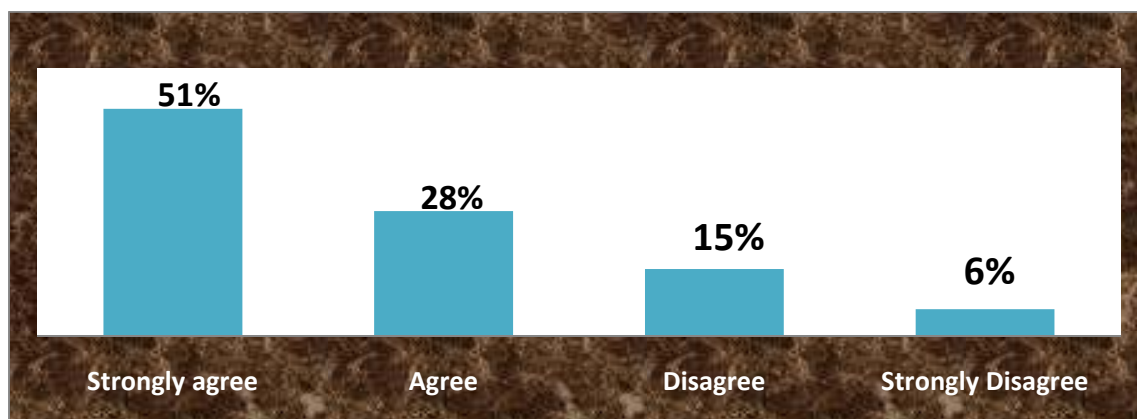
Graph 2. Teachers motivate students to speak up in the class.

The data from the questionnaire as it can be seen in graph two revealed that that 40% of respondents strongly claimed that teachers failed to motivate them to speak up in the teaching-learning process. Besides, 30% of them agreed that the teachers had failed to motivate them to speak up in the class. However, 17% of the respondents believed and agreed that the teachers motivated them to speak in the class and the rest 13% them strongly agreed that their teachers motivated them to speak

up in the class. We can infer that 70% of teachers didn't encourage their students to be good speakers of the language and make an attempt to bring progress in their speech.

Teachers' interaction with their students

The graph below marks the extent of teachers' interaction with their students during teaching-learning of speaking classes.



Graph 3. Most of the time teachers interact with high achiever students.

Graph three revealed that 51% of respondents strongly agreed that teachers gave more time and focused on higher achiever students than treating other students in the class and outside. 28% of the respondents also agreed that teachers failed to involve all students with different academic performances and were more focused on high achiever students during the teaching of speaking classes. Nonetheless, 15% of respondents agreed that their teachers gave equal opportunity to all students. Likewise, 6% of respondents strongly agreed that their teachers gave an equal opportunity for all students irrespective of their academic performance. Thus, we can conclude that teachers' interaction during the teaching-learning of speaking was biased to a certain group of learners.

The chances or opportunities given for the students by teachers

The graph hereunder presents the chances or opportunities given for the students by teachers.



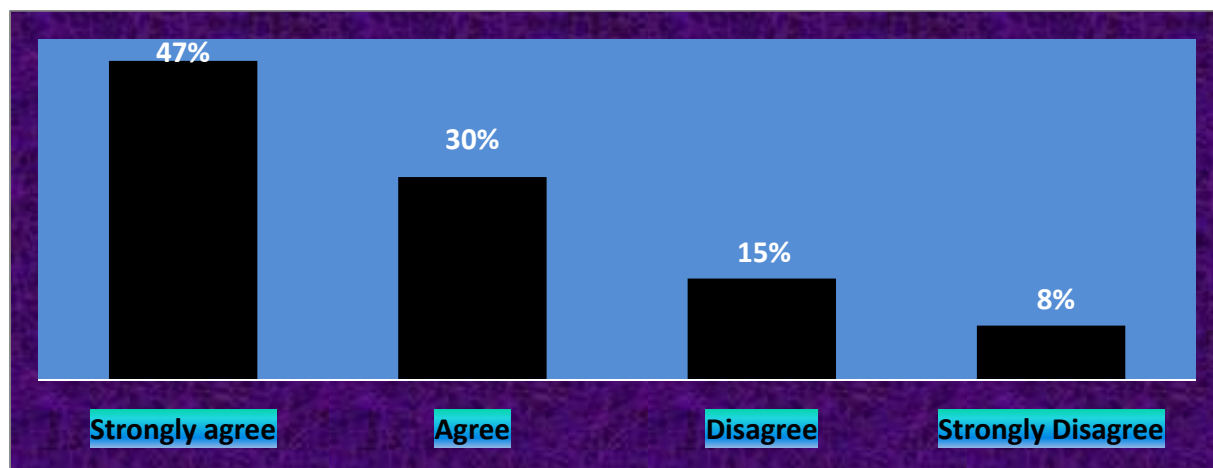
Graph 4. The teacher gives more opportunities for male students than females.

Graph four demonstrates that 44% of respondents strongly agreed that teachers gave more opportunities and focus for male students in the class than female students. In addition to that 43% of them agree that teachers focused and gave more opportunities to speak up in the class for males than females in their teaching. However, only 13% of them disagreed with this argument and claimed that teachers were inclusive in treating students in the class. To this end, we can that teach-

ers were giving due consideration to male students than female students during speaking class of English.

Students' frustration to speak

Below the graph illustrates the extent to which students get frustrated to speak in speaking classes of English.

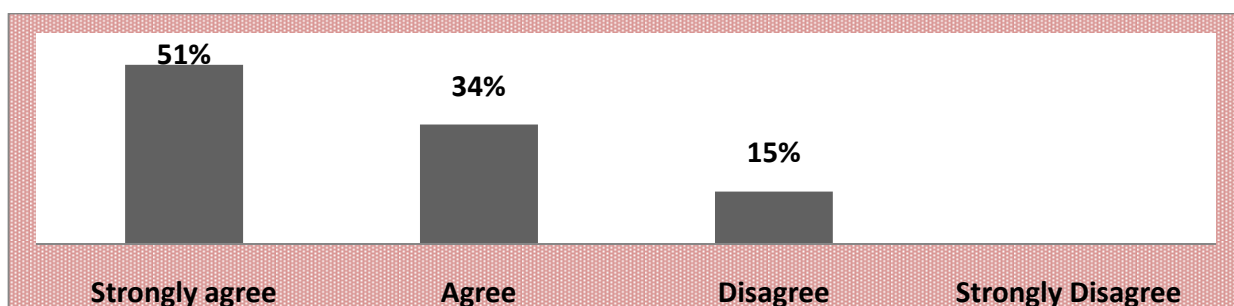


Graph 5. Students are frustrated to speak up in English class

47% of the respondents strongly agreed that students frustrated to speak up in English speaking class during learning speaking. More to the point, 30 % of them also agreed that students frustrated to speak up in English. Conversely, only 13% of respondents disagreed and 8 % respondents strongly disagreed that there was language anxiety on behalf of the students which affects them to speak up in the class. To make it brief, students are frustrated to speak English in the classroom.

The frustration of students to interact with their teachers

Beneath the graph shows the degree to which students get frustrated to interact with their teachers during speaking lessons.

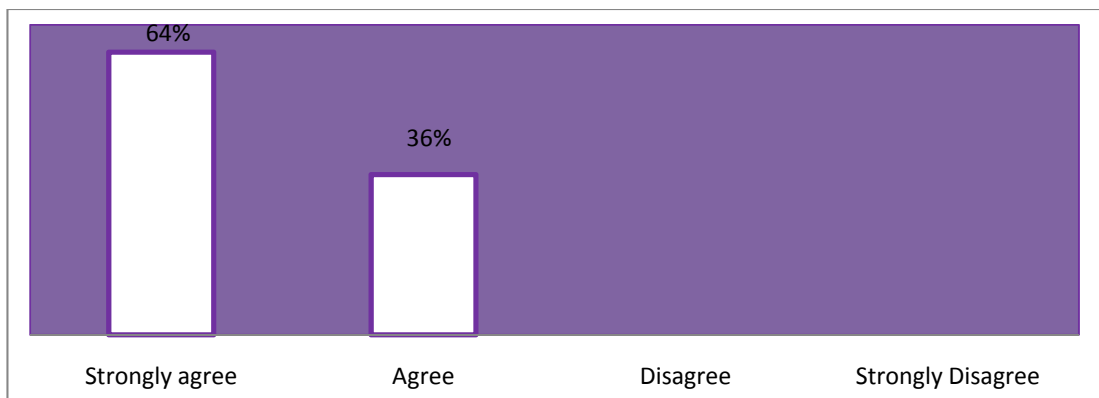


Graph 6. Students are frustrated to interact with their English teacher in the class.

As is marked above, 51% of the respondents strongly agreed that students were not comfortable communicating with their English teachers. Along this side, 34% of them had also agreed that they were not interested in having a dialogue with their English teachers unlike 15% of the respondents who were feeling comfortable communicating with their English teachers. This indicates that students were reluctant to openly communicate with their English teachers.

Students' peer interaction

This graph analyzes the degree to which students feel to interact with one another during speaking lessons.

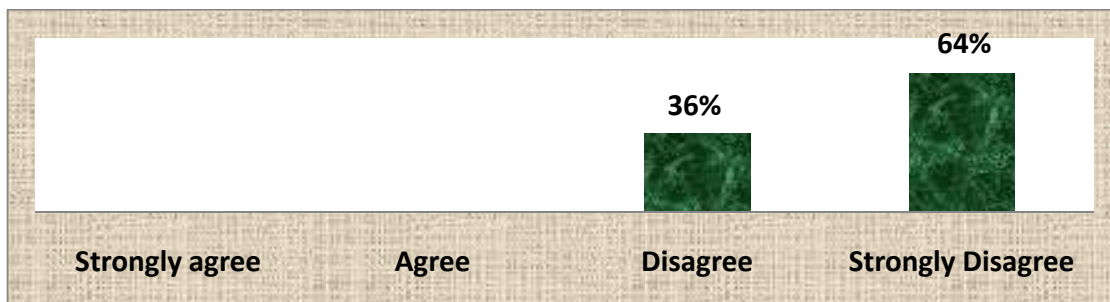


Graph 7. Students feel free to interact with one another in the class.

The data recovered from respondents implicates that students felt free to interact with one other during speaking. 64 % of respondents strongly agreed and 36% of respondents agreed that students felt free to interact with each other in the class. Worthy mentioning, students were interested in communicating with one other and understanding the lesson or what the teacher is asking during group discussion though most of them used Amharic to communicate with each other during group discussions. Largely, this points out that students felt free to interact with their peers though there shift in the medium of instructions.

Students' use the English language in the classroom

The graph below shows the English language used by students to interact with one another.

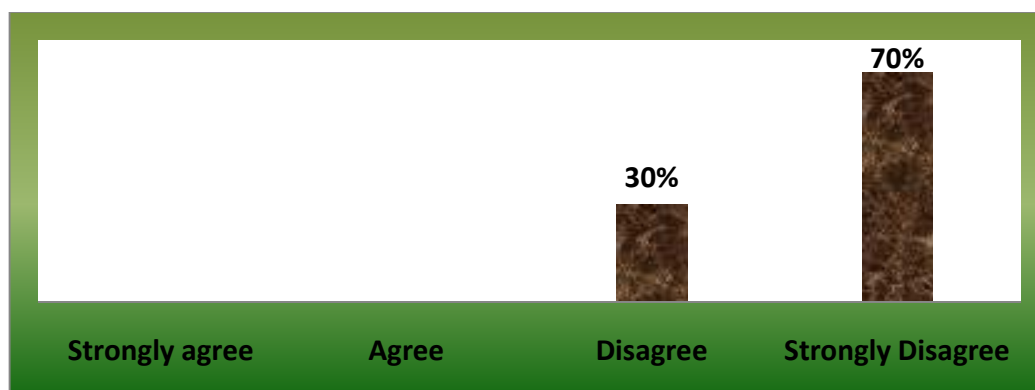


Graph 8. Students used the English language to interact with one other in the class.

Here, the data implicate that students failed to use the English language to communicate with one another in the class. 64% of the respondents strongly disagreed that students used English to communicate with one another. Further, 34% of them also disagreed with the idea that students used English as the medium of communication in the class during group discussions. By and large, we can infer that students failed to use English as the medium of instruction during their interaction in speaking classes of English.

Students interested to reflect group discussions

This graph presents students' interests to reflect the result of group discussions.

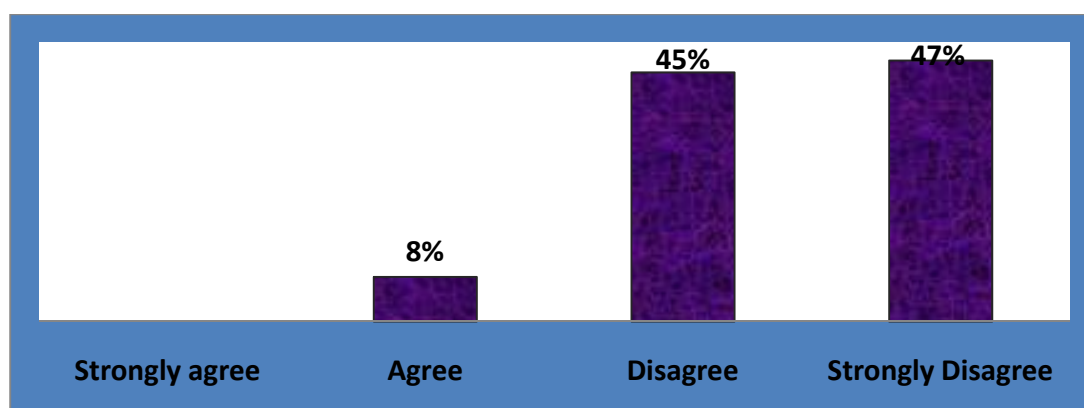


Graph 9. Students are interested to reflect on the result of the group discussion.

It has been also found that students were not interested to reflect on the result of group discussion. 70% of the respondents strongly disagreed with the idea that students are interested in reflecting the result of group discussion. The rest of the respondents 30% also disagreed that students are interested to reflect the result of group discussion. This reveals that students lacked interest and willingness to take part in group discussions during speaking classes.

The nature of the classroom for speaking

This graph marks the extent to which the classroom environment invites all students to speak up.



Graph 10. The classroom environment invites all students to speak up in the class.

It has also been found that 47% of respondents strongly agreed that the classroom environment including the table arrangement in the class was another factor that affects students to speak up in the class. 45% of them also agreed that the classroom environment was not comfortable for students to speak up in the class. Hence, the classroom environment makes it difficult for the teacher to capture students' attention and engage them in the class.

Analysis of Interview

Impacts of Students' Low Participation to speak up in English Class

Teachers were interrogated to reflect their feeling about the impact of low participation of students in English-speaking classes.

All in one asserted that students' ability to speak up actively in the class using the English language has paramount significance for their academic achievement and performance of students since the medium of instruction is English. In this regard teacher, one (T₁) stated that:

the students cultivate speaking English skills can ask whatever confusion they have on the subject matter, can develop confidence, can understand the subject matter better, boost confidence and develop speaking skills with the teacher and even after they graduate it will make them competitive in the international market. He argued that students with good speaking skills are high achievers student and are selected by different professions. The vice versa is also true.

Furthermore, in line with it, teacher (T₂) asserted that:

Students having good speaking skills and capable of communicating freely with their teachers and friends in English are good at their academic performance and have a better understanding of the subject matter. However, students having no communication or limited communication during English class between the teacher and among students failed to attain the intended learning outcomes of the subject.

The rest teachers all in one argued that students' speaking skill is one of the keys to the improvement of their academic performance. According to them, students could not achieve the objective of the course being passive participants in speaking classes. They also claimed that without integrating students in the teaching-learning Process, maintaining communication skills between the teacher and students, among students during English classes didn't bring academic success in language teaching. To conclude, students speaking skills had a positive impact on the improvements of students' academic performance and it is unthinkable to be fruitful in ones' life because speaking skill is the key to unlocking different jobs today.

Possible Interventions

Teachers were also interviewed on the possible solutions or interventions of low participation of students in speaking classes. Participants of the interview asserted that the teachers should integrate various methods of active learning, give more time for students to express their ideas and thoughts. They stressed that the teachers should employ different and appropriate methods of teaching which engage students in the teaching-learning process interactive.

Another remark forwarded in the interview was that teachers should give equal opportunity for students regardless of their sex and or academic performance to speak up in and outside the class and be cautious while motivating and correcting students.

All in one stated that:

They state clearly that the classroom environment should be made conducive enough to precipitate effective learning, capture students' attention, and speak up in the class. Besides they also came to argue that the school administration, Mini-media center, and Department of English Language should work co-operatively to create a wide and conducive environment for students to practice speaking English in and outside the class, develop confidence and avoid shyness. Moreover, teachers' methods of teaching, classroom management, and care of students should be boosted through training.

Teacher one and teacher two (T₁ and T₂) assured that:

the language teachers should use a variety of strategies (e.g. verbal problem-solving, role-playing, presentation, intonation, and body language, etc.) to encourage his/her students to speak the English language fluently and accurately in front of his/ her colleagues.

Thus, we can infer that making the school environment conducive and launching new language learning programs at the school to develop speaking skills are interventions to reduce factors that obstruct the participation of students in teaching speaking skills.

Analysis of Classroom observation

In this regard, the researcher has seen the following activities during the teaching-learning process of speaking. The researcher observed that teachers intervened and tried to correct students repeatedly while students were trying to speak up in the class. The researcher also found out that some gestures and reactions of the teachers to students attempted to speak in English very inconvenient and demoralizing for students. Such kind of reactions of the teachers paved the way for other students to develop a bad habit of mocking and laughing at students who stumble to speak in English which eventually discouraged them to speak up in/outside the class. Moreover, teachers were spending much more of the time speaking other than letting their students practice speaking skills in the classroom. This made students passive listeners and speakers of the time.

The researcher has also observed teachers' capacity and approaches to teaching speaking skills. Researchers also observed that there was a huge gap (knowledge and skill) in employing learner center teaching methods and inefficiency in Classroom Management on facilitating speaking skills. Accordingly, the deficiency of practical knowledge, skill, and willingness to employ student center teaching methods was observed during the teaching of speaking skills. That is to say that almost totally the class was dominated by the teachers. During observation, the researcher conducted on five of the English teachers of Grade 8. 80% (4) of teachers failed to provide sufficient time for students to speak up in the class. Therefore, I understand that most teachers didn't give enough time for all students to speak up in the class, for there isn't enough time to address all of them that is why the time allotted for a single English class is only 40 minutes and it is very difficult to address all the students to speak up in the class and cover the content.

In addition, the researcher's observation also yielded that 80% (4) teachers have failed to motivate students in the teaching-learning process and initiated them to speak up in the class. Nonetheless, some attempts were made by the teacher to make students participate in the teaching-learning process and speak up in the class. Hence it is possible to conclude that there was a critical problem in motivating and integrating students to speak up in the class.

The data from the observation of the researcher also implicates that the students hesitated to speak up in English class. Students murmured here and there but they were frustrated to raise their hands and speak up in English. Especially female students were not interested in speaking English class. Only a few male students were interested in having a dialogue with the English teacher. However, most of these students stumbled to speak English and used Amharic words in the middle of their response. Amharic and English had been used as a means of instruction in English class on the observation I made in some classes. The researcher observed that Amharic has been used more than English in teaching the English language.

Discussion

In the discussion, the research questions were addressed by triangulating the results obtained from the different data analyses. In this part of the study, an attempt has been made to integrate, explain and triangulate the results of the data gathered through the three instruments to answer the basic research questions. In addition, the findings of the study were high lightened and presented in connection with the literature review.

The first research question was on discovering factors that challenge students' ability to speak up in the classroom. The finding of the study obtained from the questionnaires revealed that teachers allotted insufficient time for students to speak up in the class; teachers didn't encourage their students to be good speakers of the language and make an attempt to bring progress in their speech; teachers' interaction during the teaching-learning of speaking was biased to a certain group of learners; teachers were giving due consideration for male students than female students during speaking class of English; students frustrated to speak English in the classroom; students failed to use English as the medium of instruction during their interaction in speaking classes of English, and students lacked interest and willingness to take part in group discussions during speaking classes. Most scholars in the field argued that creating a favorable and participatory teaching-learning environment for all kinds of students is one of the most important factors that determine students learning of the speaking process (Radika, 2018, M. Susak, 2016). All students, irrespective of their academic performance and sex, should be made part of the teaching-learning process. Teachers should give equal opportunity and focus on all students to achieve a better learning outcome. The researcher's observation also implicated that most students were not interested in presenting the result of the discussion. The English teachers also failed to engage other students in the group to reflect their ideas. They entirely focus and allow few group leaders to reflect on the result of the group discussion. The findings obtained from the interview also go in line with the findings obtained from classroom observations and questionnaires that students remained passive and develop a dependency on their group leader. The data recovered from the interview also implicates that the teachers, most of the time, focused on high achievers and Male students due to primarily in a bid to 'cover the content within the allotted timetable'. It's partly because students lack motivation and/or frustration to engage and speak up in the class. The researcher's observation in the class also yielded the same result. Most teachers spent more time with higher achiever students. Students with low academic performance were not made part of the learning. The major factors, mentioned during FGD, which obstruct students to speak up in English class, were students' frustration, shyness, and poor language proficiency. According to the participants, when students try to express their ideas in English most will either mock and laugh at them or gossips and offend them for trying to speak in English in and outside the class. According to Susak (2016), fear and anxiety of students is one practical factor that affects students' participation and effective learning process. The study had also yielded the same result. The data from the questionnaire also indicates that the students are not comfortable interacting with the teacher in English class. The data recovered from observation also implicates that the classroom environment is a potential factor for the problem. The classroom environment was also another factor discussed in the interview where the number of students, classroom environment, and table arrangement of the students as a potential factor that hinders students to speak up in the class. Accordingly, it is very difficult to give equal opportunity to all students in the allotted time.

The second research question was on assessing the impacts of students' low participation in the English-speaking class. the findings obtained from the interview demonstrated that students had no communication or limited communication during English class between the teacher and among students who failed to attain the intended learning outcomes of the subject. In this regard, Poor classroom participation affects students' language learning process. According to Jalongo et al. (1998), participation in the classroom helps students perform better and they can master the course materials. Moreover, active students can perform better in classroom assessments such as tests, homework and examinations. Mustafa et al. (2010) claim that students who actively participate in

the classroom are expected to get better results. Thus, poor participation may affect students' academic achievement.

The last research question was asked on possible solutions that should be made to alleviate major factors of students' low involvement/participation in English Speaking classes. Therefore, teachers could give effective strategies to overcome students' problems. The language teachers should use a variety of strategies (e.g. verbal problem-solving, role-playing, presentation, intonation, and body language, etc.) to encourage his/her students to speak the English language fluently and accurately in front of his/ her colleagues. In line with Susak (2016) asserted that Communication is key in the classroom: successful teaching is generally considered to require only 50% knowledge to 50% communication skills. It has been proven that supportive relationships between students and teachers have a positive impact on class engagement, participation, and the student's achievements.

Conclusion

This study was conducted to identify factors affecting students' active participation in speaking in English class. After analyzing the data recovered from the questionnaire, interview, and observation, the researcher found that major factor obstructs students to speak up in English class. Teachers dominated the class taking the lion's share of speech. Almost all the time teachers were spending their time speaking. Hence students could not have sufficient opportunity to express their emotions and thoughts in the class. Therefore it is fair to conclude that domination of the teachers in the teaching-learning process is one of the major factors that obstruct students to speak up enthusiastically in English class. Moreover, teachers also failed to motivate students to speak up in the class. Some form of punishment taken by the teachers had also discouraging factor for the students to speak up in the class. Besides, most teachers focused on giving due consideration to male students and students with high academic performance. In other words, other students were not allowed or given enough opportunity to express their/ group ideas in the class. Hence the approach that the teachers had towards students is another factor of the problem. More to the point, language anxiety of students is the most pulling factor which frustrates them to speak up in English class. Gossip and mockery of students who try to express their ideas in the English language and inappropriateness of some English teacher's way of punishment are among major sources of students' frustration. To this end, the researcher also found that co-curricular activities practiced in the school are essential to improve students speaking skills is weak. Students were not exposed to practice speaking outside the class via using Mini-Media, flag ceremonies, and special occasions like parent day. Unfortunately, students were not given such an opportunity to practice speaking the English language.

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