

EFL Learners' Engagement: Empowering EFL Young Learners to Initiate Speaking Through Personalizing Meaningful EFL Classroom Activities

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Abstract—The study aims to determine whether personalizing classroom activities with meaningful and realistic situations can encourage EFL beginners to apply their learning experiences to verbal practices. The study employs a pretest, a posttest, and an interview as tools for data collection. Although the learning material was the same for both groups, the control group's participants were taught in a classroom using a traditional method based on one-size-fits-all instruction, whereas the experimental group's participants used a personalized learning method. The findings show that participants in the experimental group, whose class uses the personalized learning method, outperform participants in the control group, whose class uses the traditional method based on one-size-fits-all instruction. Hence, personalizing classroom learning experiences is an effective means of empowering EFL beginners to initiate speaking, particularly at the early stage of their learning. Thus, it recommends personalized classroom activities as an effective means for engaging beginners in verbal practices.

Index Terms—personalized, learning, classroom, speaking, EFL beginners

I. INTRODUCTION

One-size-fits-all instruction does not work for the majority of students since every learner is unique. For this reason, it is important to create a classroom environment where each learner has a voice and a choice (Bray & McClaskey, 2013). In class, students have gained information about the course book's characters. The information that students require in exchange must be invented or assumed as a role. Although this type of activity is beneficial, students will often learn more if it is personalized by incorporating their own experiences, opinions, and feelings. Thus, it has been observed that most EFL Sudanese basic school students at the early stages exhibit inadequate communication skills in real social situations. That may be because they are not equipped to apply the knowledge they have learned in class to their own concerns. Because the ultimate goal of second language instruction is not to transmit knowledge about the language, but to cultivate the competence required to write or speak independently. In order to better engage EFL learners in classroom learning, this study will assess how well the personalization strategy works by contextualizing meaningful and realistic situations. The emphasis will be on contextualizing classroom situations by personalizing them for what students have learned in the class. Since, teaching a foreign language inevitably results in a lack of communicative situations outside of the classroom. Without contextualizing meaningful and realistic situations, classroom learning cannot be sufficient for communicative needs. Relevance in language learning is crucial for inspiring students to apply lessons in their own unique contexts, allowing for more effective and long-lasting learning (Kember et al., 2008). Thus, engaging students in classroom learning often depends on how appropriately the classroom learning situation is contextualized, which undoubtedly increases students' exposure to the language.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

At school and in university, test scores are the only way to determine a student's progress because knowledge is valued in and of itself. However, in corporate language training, actual usage of the target language in professional and everyday contexts rather than a final exam serves as the gold standard of competence. Grant and Basye (2014) suggest that the educational system must create relevant learning experiences to prepare students for the issues they will face in the future and reflect the realities of their everyday lives outside of the classroom. Classroom activities that are related to the students' daily lives bridge the gap between the inside and outside classroom contexts. Clark and Mayer (2011) propose that personalized contextual supports in classroom settings are the factors that increase students' motivation to take ownership of their learning. All the students need a reason to get involved in classroom activities; therefore, personalizing activities makes them more relevant as well as memorable. Personalized learning is defined as a method of customizing learning content to individuals' learning needs, interests, goals, and prior experiences in order to improve knowledge and skill acquisition while also supporting psychological need satisfaction and intrinsic motivation

(Alamri et al., 2020; Aberbach et al., 2021; Bray & McClaskey, 2013; McCombs, 2013; Watson & Watson, 2017; Garn & Jolly, 2014). It focuses on the needs and interests of the learner and enables customization and change to suit individual learning objectives. Learners cannot relate language course material to their own lives and experiences if it does not seem relevant to them. Such classroom activities do not prepare students to communicate effectively in real-life situations. Therefore, the majority of class time is spent on activities that present language that is out of context (Hatch 1992). Thus, teachers must be able to offer language activities in a way that allows students to relate them to their lives to some extent. Schneider (2005), for example, suggests incorporating community issues into the classroom because "it provides a chance to make learning more interesting and relevant because students have the opportunity to grasp new content in terms of their own lives and reality." Utilizing contextualization helps teachers make language learning more relevant for students by providing comprehensible input for their learners. Thus, the practice of making the content of a piece of content or a lesson relevant to students' interests and educational or professional needs is known as personalization and is one of the contextualization strategies. Personalization substitutes for the traditional, one-size-fits-all educational paradigm that depends on time, place, and speed with one that engages students to satisfy their individual needs, goals, and interests (Redding, 2014). Students are more likely to feel supported in terms of their relatedness and competence when a learning environment fosters learning interests (Chen et al., 2020; Matuk et al., 2020; Garn & Jolly, 2014). Therefore, personalization in the classroom is crucial for a variety of reasons. It makes language more relevant to learners, makes communication activities more engaging, and aids in memorizing because it can occur at any point in a course. Furthermore, students' interests and abilities are utilized in authentic, real-world activities.

III. METHODS

The study used both experimental and descriptive methods. For four weeks, data was collected using an oral achievement test with a pre- and post-test and a parent interview. The Cambridge Assessment English Pre-A1 Beginners Speaking Test 1 was used as a pre-test to assess the homogeneity of participants' speaking abilities (EFL starters), and a post-test was utilized to gauge how well they had improved. The test's reliability was determined using the test-and-retest method. In this regard, a pilot sample of 10 children was drawn from the population. The correlation coefficient of the two tests was determined to be 0.82, which is appropriate for the research. The interview data is to examine parents' perceptions and experiences of how personalized learning practices affect their children's verbal interaction and to identify any additional comments or suggestions for improved performance. The study's participants were divided into two groups: group A is the control group, and group B is the experimental group. Group A had 20 participants, while Group B had 20, ranging in age from 6 to 7. The participants were systematically and purposefully chosen based on the pre-test's results that showed the significance (P) value was higher than 0.05, and the statistical result indicated that there was no statistically significant difference in the mean scores between groups "A" (mean: 6.55) and "B" (mean: 6.65).

A. Procedure

Both groups were taught the same content by the same teacher, who has over 20 years of experience teaching English as a foreign language. The learning material is based on the content of the Cambridge English qualifications books, specifically the Pre-A1-staters, Pre-A1-stater classroom activities, and wordlist pictures, which have been bilingually adapted specifically for those who are just beginning to learn English. Group A (the control group) is taught in a separate class (class B1) using a traditional method based on one-size-fits-all instruction. In the class of group A, teachers serve as informants and prompters, and the participants practice what they have been exposed to without adapting the content of the course book to match their needs and interests. A personalized learning strategy and contextualized learning environments are used to teach the experimental group in class B2. The teacher in group B's class fills the positions of an organizer, participant, observer, and tutor. Due to their shared cultural backgrounds and nearly identical beginner-level language proficiency, all participants in Group B would benefit from any single personalized learning situation that was created. Both groups are provided with a language exercise as part of their home work to expand their language practice outside classroom contexts by engaging their parents. For effective involvement, two workshops were held with the experimental group's parents, and explainer videos were provided for the parents of both groups. The first workshop was held before collecting data to familiarize parents with how to play the role of interlocutor with their children by putting learning into action by personalizing learned items. Following the post-test, another workshop was organized to interview the parents and expose their observations, comments, clarifications, suggestions, and so on. The explainer videos were created to help parents in each group understand what to do with their children and how to do the language exercises that were provided. The parents of group A were trained just to assist their children in performing the course book's exercises as they are described in the workshop book. While the parents of Group B were trained to play the role of interlocutor in the exercises that purposefully teachers designed and adapted for personalizing what they had learned. Several processes were carried out during the treatment, including observation by the EFL teacher and the parents of the children in the experimental group, recording the children's progress in the classroom and at home, and receiving feedback from the parents.

B. Personalized Classroom Practices' Sample

Throughout the four weeks, group B participants' interactions were recorded, checked, and then the feedback was made to be taken into account for the next. Personalizing practices cover some areas of language (nouns, adjectives, action verbs, and prepositions), particularly those related to the everyday lives of the children. All personalizing activities began with yes/no questions and then progressed to "Wh-questions." Yes/no questions and wh-questions are intended to have answers that are interconnected. Thus, the answers to wh-questions are an expansion of the answers to yes/no questions. For example, in the first class, we discussed the expression "have" to express possession. Its purpose is to teach children how to tell what they have and don't have. Participants, for example, exchange questions that test positive and negative responses, such as "Do you have a tap?" "Do you have a red pen?" "Do you have a green book?" and then expanded by the questions to list what he or she has based on the answers they produced in the yes/no questions, e.g., "What do you have in your bag?" What do you have in your room? What do you have, and what do you lack? In the next classes, the participants were engaged to express the foods they liked and those they did not. To begin, we assessed their attitudes toward various foods by asking them questions such as, "Would you like an egg?" "Would you like chicken?" or "Would you like chips?." These questions are followed by the wh-questions: "What would you like to eat?" or "What would you like to eat for breakfast or lunch?". Questions like "Would you like milk?" and "Would you like orange juice?" were expanded by the question "What would you like to drink?". Thus, yes/no and wh-questions are extended to cover the area of prepositions and adjectives, for example (prepositions such as in, on, under, over, behind, in front of, next to, and adjectives such as short/tall, small/big, thin/fat, high/low, etc.).

Then the focus of the classes shifts from producing nouns to expressing or describing the activities that they could perform. In these classes, students engage in practicing possibilities and impossibilities to express the actions that children can do or the ones that they can not do. For example, positive expected answers include "Can you write?" "Can you paint?" "Can you read?" "Can you walk?" "Can you play video games?" "Can you run?" and negative expected answers include, "Can you swim?" "Can you drive a car?" And then there are wh-questions such as "What can you do?" and "What are the things you can't do?". The class of group A introduces the same lessons as group B's class, but mainly the practice depends on the original form of the language used in the course book texts. For example, the children of group A use the characters in the texts when engaging in practice of what they have learned (e.g., they indicate that Jane can write, John has a book, Khalid would like chicken, etc.) or what he/she can do, what does he or she have in your bag/room?, and what would he/she like?ect.

IV. FINDINGS ANALYSIS

The study aims to improve EFL beginners' ability to take action in speaking by personalizing learning activities both inside and outside of the classroom. The collected data is primarily used to determine whether the performance of the experimental group's participants has improved as a result of the treatment's personalization of classroom learning when compared to the control group's participants, who use a traditional method that relies on one-size-fits-all classroom instruction. EFL children from both groups are accustomed to practicing what they are taught in the classroom at home with their parents.

A. Pre- Test Analysis

TABLE 1

| Group | N | Average | Std Deviation | t | Sig(2-tailed) |
|---------|----|---------|---------------|------|---------------|
| Group A | 20 | 6.55 | 1.352 | .000 | 1.000 |
| Group B | 20 | 6.65 | 1.638 | .000 | 1.000 |

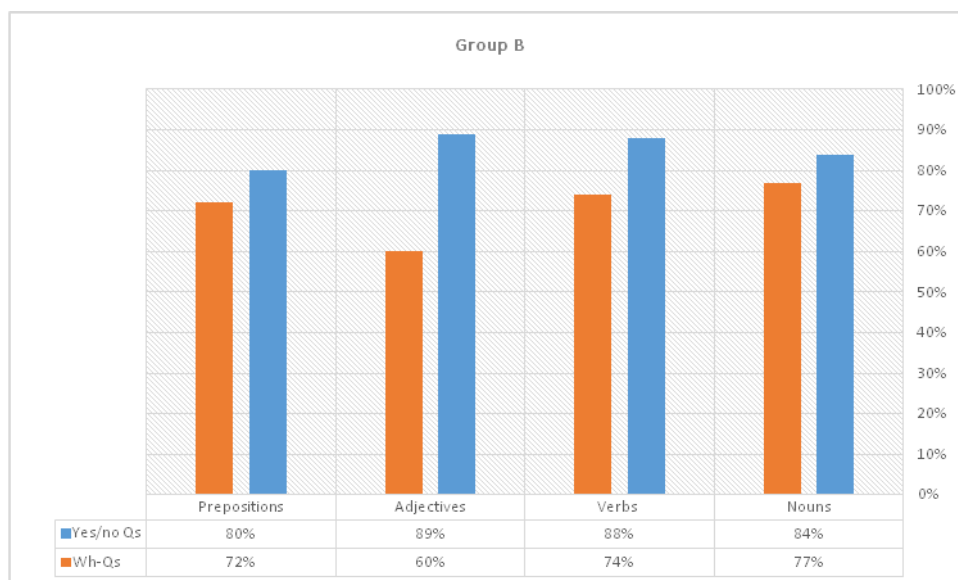
Table 1 shows that there was no significant difference in the means of scores between the control and experimental groups in the pre-tests. The obtained result is due to the fact that both groups' participants are beginners who had only learned the English alphabet and a few basic English words prior to taking the test. They were teaching English to EFL beginners, with a strong emphasis on learning to speak English. All of the participants studied English as EFL beginners in the same class that was used to teach them speaking for the purposes of the study. Thus, the pre-tests produced roughly the same results in both groups that achieved homogeneity.

B. Post-Test Analysis

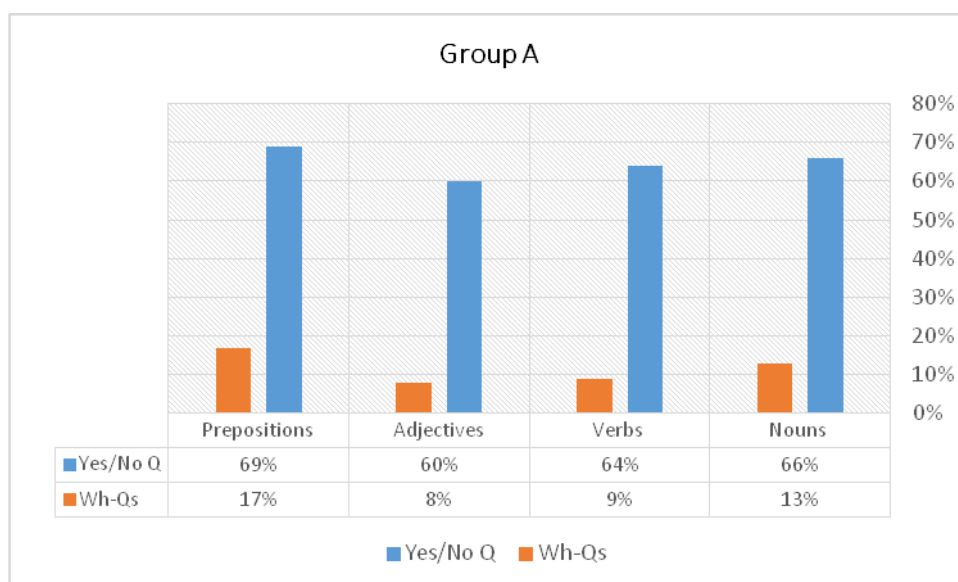
TABLE 2

| Group | N | Mean | Std Deviation | t | Sig(2-tailed) |
|--------------------|----|------|---------------|------|---------------|
| Control Group | 15 | 9.53 | 1.34 | .000 | - 23.684- |
| Experimental Group | 15 | 2.20 | 2.18 | .000 | -23.684- |

The statistical analysis of the post-test data in Table 2 reveals a significant difference between the control and experimental groups' mean scores. There were significant differences favoring the experimental group. This is because by transforming traditional classroom instruction into personalized learning strategies, it empowers EFL beginners to put what they have learned into practice by adapting it to their own needs.



The statistical results clearly revealed that the majority of the participants were well aware of how to deal with yes/no questions as well as appropriately interact with wh-questions. Participants interact positively in all four areas of language and perform exceptionally well with yes/no questions. The results show that 84% of the participants were able to deal with questions with nouns as key words; 88% interacted positively with questions with verbs as key words; 89% of the participants answered questions with adjectives as key words; and 80% of the participants answered questions with prepositions as key words. It means that yes-or-no questions that directly probe children's concerns are effective. It means that yes/no questions that directly address children's concerns are very effective and appropriate to be used as warm-up exercises before engaging learners in informative questions for the purpose of classroom interaction. The participants' performance in the wh-questions was admirable and courageous. It was found that participants responded to questions requiring key words as follows: 77% of participants provided answers that required nouns as key words; 74% provided answers that required action verbs; 60% dealt with questions that required descriptive language (adjectives); and 72% provided answers that required prepositions.



The results in the above figure 2 have shown that the majority of the control group's participants find no difficulties in dealing with yes/no questions. As it has been shown, the participants were aware of how to deal with yes/no questions in all the areas specified, as follows: nouns (66%), verbs (64%), adjectives (60%), and prepositions (69%). In spite of the adequate performance of the participants in group "A" in yes/no questions, that was not reflected in their performance in wh-questions. The participants do have poor performance in wh-questions, as in nouns: 13% of the participants could answer, 9% could answer the question's key word, action verbs, 8% for adjectives, and 17% of the participants did the adjectives. It is obviously the case that the participants were unable to use yes/no questions' answers for listing connected ideas all together, as it was done by the participants in group B.

C. Interview

The interview asked parents to reflect on their personal experiences and observations. Then, parents shared their perspectives on their child's progress over the past four weeks. The same classroom activities that children have already practiced and dealt with are customized to be homework exercises managed by their parents. It is the responsibility of parents to reinforce what their children have learned and practiced in the classroom, as well as to connect their children's learning experiences with actual everyday activities and actions. Furthermore, cooperative contexts between parents and their children maximize parent-child involvement in spoken activities, which increases children's confidence and interest in acting to speak freely. The interview was discussed from the parents' perspective of personalized learning's contribution to engaging children to speak outside of classroom contexts as a supportive means of verbal interaction. According to seventeen out of twenty parents, personalized learning fosters a friendly verbal communicative environment, allowing their children to initiate speaking in an interesting way. *Some different parents' feedback is as follows:*

Parents A:

"What facilitates the process of practicing and makes it interesting that all the items that intend to be learned are available as real objects in our surrounding environment."

Parent B

"I found it easy to point out things around us, and my child found no difficulties in responding to my suggestions. "I think because my child was interested in dealing with things that he already practices and is familiar with."

Parent c

"Personalized exercises create a vivid context that definitely relates to my child's environment. When I asked him what foods he liked, he eagerly listed every type of food he enjoyed."

Parent D

"My child enjoys telling me about things that he has and things that he does not have. He confidently describes the location of objects around us with prepositions like "my book on the table, my bag behind the TV, my shoes under the bed, and so on."

Parent E

"When I point to any object around us—I mean the ones that he has already learned—he immediately responds by telling me its name, color, and location. I enjoyed his interaction and responses to my questions".

Parent F

"I spent much time and effort to make sure that I accurately pronounce the items that I intended to review with my child."

Parent G

"When I try to expand discussion with my child, I intentionally stimulate him with things that he does not has or like. The purpose of this exercise is to see if my child can correct me. When I tell my child, "You have a black book," he responds, "I don't have a black book, I have a green book," and so on."

Parent H

"My child feels relaxed and spontaneously responds to my questions, such as by listing things he has or expressing actions that he can perform."

D. Discussion

One of the most important outcomes of the study was that it allowed the children to engage in verbal interaction as EFL beginners, which increased their confidence in their early stages of learning and helped them express themselves confidently. Furthermore, adequate and spontaneous practice in the classroom, with extension at home with their parents, prepares the children to feel relaxed during any verbal interaction. Parents came to the conclusion that the practice was enjoyable for both themselves and their children. It assisted their child in becoming more aware of their surroundings, associating objects with their names, and being more eager to verbally express their emotions to peers and teachers when needed. Furthermore, familiarity among the children with the simple vocabulary words enables them to make appropriate connections.

However, personalized areas of the language that can be interesting and fit spoken skills in the very early stages of development are extremely limited and difficult to customize. Personalizing learning materials is a difficult task for any teacher. Thus, personalizing processes necessitate a highly skilled teacher as well as a significant amount of effort to match individual differences. Furthermore, EFL parents must be continually trained on new learning material forms, structures, the correct pronunciation of some new language items, and so on. Maintaining consistent motivation is one of the most difficult challenges for EFL learners, which is difficult because children quickly lose motivation and interest.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Parents and EFL teachers undoubtedly provide ongoing support in a variety of ways for their children to advance in their language learning, but this motivational support won't be useful unless it's accompanied by technical assistance that shows them how to include their children. One of the best methods for assisting with the process of putting learning into practice is personalizing learning. Personalizing learning experiences and connecting them to daily activities and

actions are effective ways to pique EFL beginners' interest and encourage them to initiate conversations about their likes and dislikes. The study aims to empower EFL beginners to initiate speaking by personalizing their classroom learning experiences. Thus, the study's findings indicated that using personalized learning is an effective way of stimulating EFL beginners to begin speaking English as a foreign language. The statistical results show that the experimental group that employed personalized learning methods outperformed the control group that relied on traditional methods based on one-size-fits-all learning instruction. As a result of their regular practices of their learning experiences inside and outside of classroom contexts, the children's interaction inside classroom contexts increased significantly. Based on the findings, it is recommended that EFL teachers who teach EFL children as beginners use a personalized learning strategy to engage them in verbal classroom activities. The study suggests that instead of a four-week analysis, the study should last at least three to six months to confirm the significance of personalized learning methods in developing children's speaking skills.

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