

Action Research for Pedagogical Advance

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ABSTRACT:

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Action research (AR) has gained a gradual popularity in the field of education and language teaching in general and the English as foreign language (EFL) context in particular. Its inherent potential of finding practical solutions to actual social issues has established it as rigorous research paradigm suitable for educational, professional, managerial and organisational development. One of the challenging issues in EFL settings is to involve learners in meaningful speaking activities so that they can utilise the language more actively to improve their speaking skills and enhance their oral performance. The present paper reports the results of a small scale pedagogical action research which aimed to foster EFL students' motivation to speak, increase their oral participation in class and make them engage 'voluntarily' in class discussions and activities during the speaking courses. At first, a classroom observation was carried out during two teaching sessions to discern students' speaking behaviours. Then, a focus group discussion and an interview with 'reluctant' students were initiated to discern the most frequent sources of the problem. In the light of the obtained results, an action plan was designed and implemented to minimise the impact of those causes. This plan involves (a) the statement of more specific course objectives, (b) the selection of a content based syllabus and (c) the adoption of a more participatory, learner-centred method that encompasses a redefinition of the teacher's and students' roles. At the end of this action plan, it was observed that both the frequency and quality of students' oral participation improved significantly. In addition, students' anxiety decreased drastically as follow up interviews with students revealed.

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I. Introduction

Modern teaching realities impose on language teachers more roles than the mere one of information diffusion. EFL teachers, more particularly, are commonly confronted with specific demands, including the needs to handle varied student proficiency levels, to integrate proper materials, media and technologies, and very often to adjust their teaching curricula to actual social settings. To be able to tackle such challenges and assume more innovative and efficient roles, language teachers need to be more acquainted with action research and consider it as an effective problem-solving instrument and an essential ingredient of their language teaching resources. Action research offers a structured methodology for educators to explore their own practices, produce contextualized data, and execute efficient interventions to deal with the specific needs of their EFL classrooms. Undertaking action research would enable teachers transcend their ‘conventional’ teaching roles to become researchers and practitioners able to design their own resolutions in order to surmount any language teaching issue.

II. Review of the Literature

II.1. Understanding Action Research

Having occurred in the literature mostly since the late 1980, action research (AR) is a relatively recent concept in the English language teaching sphere. However, it has quickly become a powerful tool for change and improvement at the local level- the classroom. Its combination of action and research has become a source of attraction to not only researchers and teachers but the academic and educational community as a whole. Although it seems to have been approached from different perspectives, most definitions highlight basic assets of the concept: a reflective, cyclic, collaborative and practical process of inquiry aimed at change and improvement.

AR is a type of research where participants-teachers, learners but also researchers- are actors in the classroom (Burns, 2005). Creswell (2012) argues that of all research designs, AR is by far the most applied and practical which addresses a specific, practical issue and seeks to obtain solutions to a problem. Carr & Kemmis (1986; cited in Kemmis, 2008) point at the meditative and evaluation trait of AR and conceive it as a self-reflective enquiry carried out by participants in social situations for the sake of enhancing their understanding of their own practices and the situations in which they are carried out. Reflecting on one’s practices involves taking some time to assess if something had happened well and if so, why or why not (Kuang & David, 2017). In addition to self-reflection, the teacher in AR engages in a critical, and systematic approach to investigate their own teaching settings with the aim of questioning one’s practices for the sake of providing better alternatives. In this sense, “a teacher becomes an ‘investigator’ or ‘explorer’ of his or her personal teaching context, while at the same time being one of the participants in it” (Burns, 2010, p. 2). Thus, AR is doing research with the purpose of finding a solution to a problem that has been

discovered by the teacher him/herself. It can be undertaken by the individual teacher, a group of teachers working cooperatively, a teacher(s) working together with a researcher(s), etc. (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007). It can be used in almost any setting where there is a perceived gap between an ideal and actual situation or a problem involving people, tasks and procedures cries out for solution.

II.2. Types of AR

EFL teachers can engage in different types of action research based on their specific goals and the scope of their inquiry. A review of major writers in language education and research (Kemmis, 1993; Burns, 2005; Burns, 2010; Burns, 2015; Newton, & Burgess, 2008; Creswell, 2012; Baby, 2018; Jacobs, 2018; Talluri, 2023) reveals that three basic forms are commonly discussed although Creswell (2012) focuses on only two of them.

Technical or scientific action research, seen in (Kemmis, 1993, p.3) words like “amateur research conducted under the eye of university researchers” by appointed practitioners, aims to improve the efficiency of educational or managerial practice. This type is done mainly to test a precise intervention made on the basis of a pre-specified theoretical framework (Newton & Burgess, 2008). **Practical** or deliberative action research, on the other hand, aims at, in addition to effectiveness, the practitioners’ understanding and professional development. It is guided by an interest in instructing practitioners for an eventual more sensible and cautious performance (Jacobs, 2018). It emphasises the perfection of immediate teaching practices and student learning improvement in the classroom. Action research is **emancipatory, participatory or critical** when it is guided by “an interest in emancipating people and groups from irrationality, unsustainability, and injustice and is based on a paradigm of praxis and critical theory” (Jacobs, 2018, p. 38). This type seeks to achieve, in addition to technical and practical AR’ aims, a shift in the system itself “or those conditions which impede desired improvement in the system/ organization” (Talluri, 2023, p. 3814). It emphasises “equal” collaboration, aim at empowering the participants, fostering democratic decision-making and collective action and results in the emancipated researcher (Jacob, 2018)

II.2. Procedures / Phases/ Steps of AR

Regardless of its types or forms, most action research projects follow a similar sequence of phases or steps. However, this sequence is cyclic or spiral; it is not linear from problem to action. Rather, AR is carried out in a series of repeated steps that can be illustrated as a spiral involving iterations of activities, wherein that the researcher “spirals” back and forth between reflection about a

problem, data collection, and action. The cycles will recur until the action researcher has achieved a satisfactory outcome.

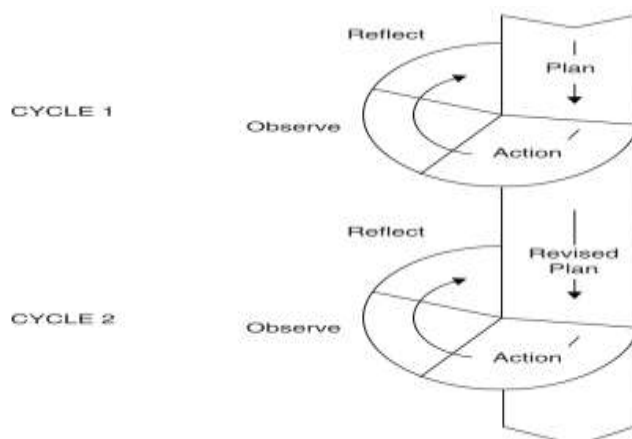


Figure 1. Cyclical AR model based on Kemmis and McTaggart (1988; cited in Burns, 2010, p. 10)

This pattern, or cycle always involves Kemmis and McTaggart's 'classic' model (1988; cited in (Burns, 2010) which involves: a series of steps carried out in a recursive, iterative fashion. These phases are (1) Planning: a problem or issue is identified and a plan of action is developed in order to bring about improvements in specific areas; (2) Action: the plan is put into action over a period of time; (3) Observation: the effects of the action are observed and data are collected; (4) Reflection: the effects of the action are evaluated and become the basis for further cycles of research. In practice, there are many models of AR that break these key phases down into smaller steps. (Creswell, 2012), for instance details 8 steps of an AR project.

Step 1. Determine if action research is the best design to use.

Step 2. Identify a problem to study which may be one faced in your practice or community and write down the problem or phrase it as a question to answer.

Step 3. Locate resources to help you address the Problem such as literature, existing data, colleagues, university personnel, or knowledgeable people in the community.

Step 4 : Identify information you will need. Plan a strategy for gathering data, including who can provide data, how many people to study, what individuals to access, and the rapport and support you can expect from them. It is important to consider the type of data needed, whether it is quantitative or qualitative.

Step 5: Implement the data collection involves implementing data collection, using appropriate qualitative, quantitative or both, instruments. Accurate record-keeping, data organization, and quality assessment are crucial steps.

Step 6. Analyse the data either by yourself or enlisting the help of other educators or data analysts. Keep the data analysis manageable so that you can identify useful

information in formulating a plan of action.

Step 7. Develop a plan for action which may be an informal statement about the implementation of a new educational practice or a strategy for reflecting on alternative approaches to addressing the problem.

Step 8. Implement the plan and reflect. The plan of action is implemented to see if it makes a difference. This involves trying out a potential solution to the problem and monitoring its impact. You may need to do further cycles of AR to improve the situation even more or in case you have not achieved an adequate solution.

II.4. Benefits of AR in EFL Settings

Although it is not always easy to establish the exact nature of its impact on teaching and learning (Burns, 2005), there are many advantages of incorporating AR in educational settings in general and English language teaching in particular. As far as teachers are concerned, engaging in AR and actively inspecting their own practices can be useful in numerous ways. Edwards & Burns (2016, p. 58) noticed many benefits for teachers who took part in action research in their own workplaces such as “greater self-efficacy, more positive views of teaching, deeper engagement with their learners, enhanced research skills, broader understanding of how their work relates to theoretical concepts, increased meaningfulness in relation to their work, and stronger sense of their own professionalism”. Likewise, Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2007) argued that teachers' professional development might be positively impacted by AR as the latter causes them to redefine their professional roles, improves their self-esteem and confidence, makes them more aware of problems in the classroom, alters their beliefs, makes practical theories and practices more consistent, and expands their perspectives on education, teaching, and society. AR may have a similar positive influence on EFL learners since it likens metacognitive training and experiential learning in practices by enhancing lifelong learning, raising motivation, and stimulating autonomy and critical thinking among them (Lounis, 2022). In addition, AR potential impact on the educational community as a whole has been equally highlighted since this approach permits teachers and other educators to be seen as learners who aim to reduce the gap between practice and their vision of education, promotes a democratic approach to education, empowers individuals through project collaboration, and incites educators to reflect on their practices and initiate a process of testing new ideas (Creswell, 2012)

II.5. Criticism to AR and Challenges to its Implementation in EFL

Although AR has gained support in education, it is not without critics. who are reluctant to view it as a legitimate form of inquiry (Amin, 2019). Some view it as an informal process of research, conducted by teachers and other educators who are not formal academic researchers (Talluri, 2023). More importantly, AR is often criticised for its lack of generalisability. In a typical fashion, AR generally concentrates on small-scale, local studies, within a single classroom or

educational situation which lessens the generalisability of its findings to other contexts or larger populations (Burns, 2010).

In addition, although it has been shown so far how teachers can improve students' performance and their own practices by implementing AR in EFL classes, such endeavours do not always go without difficulties. Challenges like time constraints and lack of institutional support can hinder its implementation (Edwards & Burns, 2016). AR requires teachers to conduct systematic observations, collect data, and analyze results, which can be time-consuming. Teachers' heavy workload (planning lessons, designing materials, preparing tests, scoring students in addition to other administrative tasks), often makes it difficult for them to find time for AR especially if they are teaching large classes or have limited class time (Burns, 2010). Moreover, not all EFL teachers do have sufficient training in research methodology, and many in fact find it too demanding to design a study, collect data, or analyze results effectively (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2008). Privacy, biases, and ambiguity in data interpretation and evaluation are all ethical issues that are also raised. As AR often entails collecting data from students through surveys, interviews, or recordings, teachers, researchers and practitioners ought to be cautious about how data is collected and retained, making sure it observes ethical standards (Creswell, 2012).

II.6. Teaching the Speaking Skill in EFL

Teaching and studying a foreign language is a challenging enterprise that calls for ongoing work to comprehend, generate, and use the target language abilities. While reading and writing are essential in FLL contexts, oral language exchanges constitute the bulk of daily classroom communication and continue to be the main discourse mode. Though speaking is a natural phenomenon, speaking in a language other than our own is far from being that simple. It is a particularly demanding skill for foreign language learners who need to consider several conditions while speaking such as cultural, phonological, social, psychological, linguistic, and physical ones. Thus, understanding the underlying principles of speaking is a crucial requirement if teachers want a healthy environment favourable to learning

II.7. Definition of the Speaking Skill

In communicative language teaching (CLT), listening and speaking skills are usually interwoven, and very often, EFL curricula that treat oral communication skills will simply be labelled as « listening/Speaking » courses (Brown, 2001). This is actually the case for the first and second years' oral expression courses at the ENSC. The third year course, which is the subject of the present study, is named *Speaking and Phonetics* implying a special emphasis of the speaking skills. That is why much of the focus in the present literature review will be on speaking skills.

Speaking has been defined by (Bailey, 2003) as « the productive aural/oral skill [which] consists of producing systematic verbal utterances to convey meaning » (p. 48). In a more pragmatic sense, it is the ability to carry on a conversation reasonably competently (Brown, 2001). It is usually measured in teaching contexts terms of two major criteria: accuracy and fluency. Accuracy means the correct use of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation practiced through controlled and guided activities whereas fluency is the ability to keep going when speaking spontaneously (Harmer, 2001). In CLT, both accuracy and fluency are essential goals to pursue. Still, while fluency may in some courses be an initial goal in language teaching, accuracy is attained by letting students concentrate on the elements of phonology, grammar and discourse in their spoken output (Brown, 2001). This seems to be the general orientation of the third year *Speaking and Phonetics* course, the object of the present study

II.8. Oral Participation

Students oral participation (OP) is one of the most important ingredients of the EFL teaching/ learning process. It refers to the way according to which students appear actively into the teaching/ learning process. OP has been defined as “the active engagement of learners in the lecture by speaking, asking, giving comments, and participating in pair or group discussions” (Azeez, 2023, p. 126). It involves the interaction between students and teacher and between students themselves. In a speaking class, it is a vital component, for it is the best opportunity through which the aural/ oral or speaking competence can be observed. In addition to encouraging students to actively participate in class activities and to consider and reflect on class-related issues, OP stimulates them to improve their language and oral/aural communication skills and to demonstrate them during class interactions with teachers and peers (Azeez, 2023). Furthermore, OP helps students improve their presentation and communication abilities through both individual, pair or group presentations. Last but not least, OP fosters an environment of equity where all learners have the opportunity to participate and cultivates respect for the opinions of others in cooperative and collaborative learning settings.

II.9. Factors Influencing OP and Motivation to Speak Participate

Getting students to talk in a speaking class is not always that easy, and participation may be low because students are just reluctant to speak. Participation may also be uneven, especially in large classes. Not all the students will have the same opportunity to speak and participate, and only few participants can speak at a moment. Very often also, and due to little training in turn-taking, some students dominate the talk while others, though not really reluctant will just listen (Dabiri & Pourhosein Gilakjani, 2019). Turn-taking serves to manage the run of a conversation. It is related to how the speaker and the interlocutor take turns in

speaking and how people should know when they start to talk and when other people reply (Brown, 2007; Setiajid, 2020).

Low or uneven OP is a complex process that is influenced by a number of factors such as **Personal factors**. Students, as individuals, differ in personality. Learner's personality traits like Confidence, perception, self-esteem, etc. can have a great influence on their learning behaviour. For example, shyness, anxiety, or low self-esteem inhibit students from participating and communicating instead of building their confidence through participation (Azeez, 2023). **External, logistic, or Environment factors** like classroom size, sitting arrangement, and type of the course do also influence students' participation patterns. For example, traditional row and column seating allows for less participation than a U-shaped/circular/semi-circular arrangement (Azeez, 2023). In addition, the teacher's role(s), attitudes and behaviours impact significantly learners' levels of participation. Students will be reluctant to speak if the teacher is not giving them sufficient attention or is neglecting some of their personal traits like shyness or anxiety. Therefore, contributions ought to be fairly evenly distributed (Azeez, 2023). The teacher's task is to strive towards engaging the passive learners and make sure that all students are involved in an equal way. To achieve this, the teacher needs to perform at least three roles in speaking classes: a prompter who assists students with fluency by offering suggestions and avoiding disruptions; a participant who helps in discussions, role-plays, and dialogues, but without dominating and a feedback provider on students' speaking content and language (Harmer, 2003). The method of teaching is also influential. A learner-centered methodology with its emphasis on each student's requirements, both demands and promotes the participation of both the teacher and the student (Trila, 2019). Finally, varying the choice of topics, themes and tasks is equally essential in order to engage students as some kinds of material and activities are more inviting to participate than others. For instance, the teacher can provide more opportunities for students to talk by using group work or pair work, and limiting teacher talk (Bailey, 2003).

III. The study

The present paper aims to disseminate the results of a small scale action research which aimed to provide solutions to an actual pedagogical issue in an EFL speaking class which is the absence of motivation to speak and lack of students' participation in oral class activities. By the same token, it intends to encourage language teachers to take in charge their own profession by conducting action research and initiating reflections in their respective classrooms.

III.1. Choice of the research design : AR with a qualitative design

Action research transforms an existing reality and provides workable solutions to issues in order to promote social change through actual acts. It was selected as the research design in the present study due to the tangible opportunities it provides

for resolving common issues in social and educational setting thanks to its cyclical procedure which makes it possible to carry out actions, check their feasibility and assess their influence when resolving a problem

III.2. Statement of the problem: Context, Questions and Population

The study was carried out at the Ecole Normale Supérieure Constantine (ENSC), a teacher training college, with a listening/speaking class, known as *Speaking and Phonetics* (Sp & Phon) delivered to 3rd year middle school teacher-students. The course which takes 2 sessions (3 hours) per week and runs over two terms is delivered to twenty-eight (28) students, aged between 19 and 21. As a common 'method', teachers of 3rd year classes usually agree to follow to assign students with a 30 to 45-minute individual oral presentation on a topic of their choice so as to provide them with more opportunities to speak, explore, and improve their speaking and pronunciation skills. However, as the first 2 - 4 presentations proceeded, the teacher noticed that the atmosphere in class was not a lively one and that students' participation was very low, not to say absent. The crystal-clear lack of motivation to speak and the absence of oral participation urged the teacher to initiate an inquiry into the possible source(s) of the problem and its potential solution(s). To this effect, the following research questions are asked:

- What causes 3rd year EFL students at the ENSC to be reluctant to participate in the speaking class?
- How can students' reluctance to participate in be resolved?

III.3. Data Gathering and Analysis

To help address the posed problem, an exhaustive, integrative literature review was conducted about two key concepts: action research and the teaching of the speaking skill in EFL contexts. Then, a qualitative descriptive methodology is adopted as it looks at, describes, interprets, and analyzes a phenomenon in a detailed way. By definition, a qualitative research collects non-numeric data using conversational tools (usually open-ended questions) in order to understand the experiences of individuals or groups from their perspective (Patton, 2002). To analyse the qualitative data in the present research, (Braun & Clarke, 2006) Six Phases of Thematic Analysis (TA) model is adopted. Braun, & Clarke (2006) define thematic analysis as « a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organises and describes your data set in (rich) detail ». The main concern of TA is making sense of collective meanings and experiences

III.4. Implementation of the Data Collection Instruments

After having the consent of students to take part in the investigation, 2 special, extra sessions, with 1h30 each (other than the weekly assigned ones) were organised for the specific aim of implementing a sequence of data collection

instruments to gather and record the required information in addition to a classroom observation which took place prior to this step.

III.4.1. Classroom observation

At first, a classroom observation was carried out during the first two teaching sessions to discern students' speaking behaviours.

III.4.2. Class discussion / focus group

Then, the class was set into 3 sub-groups, and a class discussion was initiated with each one in order to identify students' participation patterns by answering four main questions about students' prior experience with the listening & speaking class (in the 1st and 2nd year) in the ENSC. Every student had the chance to speak between 4-6 minutes, with an average of 4mn per student.

- Question 1: How often were you used to participate in listening & speaking classes?
- Question 2: How would you describe your motivation during the listening & speaking class?
- Question 3: How would you describe your personal experience with the listening & speaking course? Why?
- Question 4: What are your expectations for the present one (the 3rd year Sp & Phon course)?

III.4.3. Interview with reluctant students

Subsequently, An interview was designed and carried out with a group of students who were identified during the focus group discussion as 'reluctant' to speak in the listening & speaking class. The interview had as a starting question:

- Why were you reluctant to speak in the listening & speaking class ?

IV. Findings: Data Analysis

The findings are presented, analysed and reported according to the Six Phases of Thematic Analysis (TA) described by (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Phase1: Familiarization with the Data

In this phase, the researchers listened to the interviews many times and then started transcribing them exactly as they sound in a transcription type known as verbatim transcription (Rincon, 2018).

Phase 2 : Generating Initial codes

This phase involves creating preliminary codes from raw data. Computer-assisted word processing facilities such as 'search', 'copy', 'paste'...were used to apply the coding process. An illustration of this step is displayed in table 01.

Table 1: Generating initial codes

Raw data	Codes
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“I like the speaking class because it helps me practice speaking with my friends and the teacher, which makes me feel more confident when I talk”.	Positive perceptions
“Honestly, I don't feel very motivated during the speaking class”.	Lack of motivation

Phase 3: Searching for Themes

This phase consists of classifying data into potential themes, analysing recurring codes, and considering how they may combine to form an overarching theme as illustrated in table 2.

Table 2. Searching for themes

Codes	Sub-themes	Data extracts
-Shyness, -lack of self confidence, -feel of ridicule because of low level -‘stage fear ‘ and fear of public speaking, etc.	Personal factors	-“I often feel shy to speak in front of others”, -“I’m not confident in my vocabulary or pronunciation”. - “I make too many mistakes, it’s too embarrassing” -“Speaking in front of others is frustrating”

Phase 4: Reviewing the Themes

In this stage, it is matter of refining candidate themes based on internal and external homogeneity criteria. Some codes may be redefined; others left-out if not sufficiently related or explained (see. Table 03).

Table 3. Reviewing the Themes

Changed codes	Themes	Left-out codes
don’t like the course, ‘attend to avoid to be recorded absent’.	not motivated,	Teach us how to become
Students listen to some audio audio-visual material and respond to some questions	Listening activities	successful teachers

Phase 5 : Defining and naming themes

During this stage, each theme was well-defined and clearly discussed. The aim was also to ensure that there was not too much overlap between the themes and the sub-themes.

Table 4. Defining and naming themes

Theme	Sub-themes	Data Extracts
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Students' motivation regarding the speaking class	-Highly motivated to speak whatever the topic, the activity, teacher role -Relatively motivated depending on the topic, the activity, teacher role Not motivated at all	and always "I like the speaking class under all its forms" "sometimes I'm motivated, sometimes not, depending on the topic, the activity" "Honestly, I don't feel very motivated during the speaking class".
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Phase 6: Data Report and Analysis

The last step involves presenting the data in a concise, coherent, logical, and interesting manner. The following section is an analytic narrative which provide evidence of themes within the data, using specific examples to capture the essence of the point.

A) Students' participation patterns

As a result of the classroom observation, three types of students were detected: (1) students who 'always' speak willingly, regardless of the quality of their performance, (2) students who never speak, and (3) students who speak occasionally or only when pointed to by teacher or classmate.

B) Students motivation to participate in the speaking class

Table 5. Motivation to participate in the speaking class

4 students	4 students	20 students
Always highly, motivated	Relatively motivated	Not motivated,
"always motivated to speak whatever the topic, the activity, teacher role"	"it depends on the topic, the activity, teacher role"	"I don't like the course", "I impatiently' wait for the class session to end", "I attend to avoid to be recorded absent"

Table 05 reveals two small groups (4 students in each) which are either always motivated to speak whatever the conditions or have varied motivated (sometimes they are motivated; others they were not). Their motivation varied according to some external factors ("it depends on the topic, the activity, teacher"). However, the majority of the class said that they were either rarely or never motivated. Some provided striking responses like "I impatiently' wait for the class session to end", "I attend to avoid to be recorded absent"

C) Students' perceptions of their experience with the speaking course

Table 6. Students perceptions of their experience with speaking course

Category 1 (8 students)	Category 2 (20 students)
Positive/ perceptions experience	Negative perceptions/ experience

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>- “On the whole, I’m satisfied with my experience with the OE course. It is true, at first, I felt a little anxious because speaking in English is not always easy for me, but over time, I started to enjoy the class more. I learned a great deal, improved my speaking skills and I gradually got rid off my fears and shame”.</p> | <p>-“I don’t really like the speaking class because it makes me feel uncomfortable. The course did not help me a lot and I rarely engaged in oral discussions”</p> <p>-“I would never speak in class unless the teacher asks me”.</p> <p>-“In two years, I never spoke during the OE class; the only occasion I had to speak was during the oral exam”.</p> |
|--|---|

Regarding their perceptions of their overall experiences with the speaking class, table 06 shows two patterns of responses. A small category of 8 students were satisfied with their experience. They said they have learned a great deal and improved their speaking skills. The different speaking activities, especially the role plays, helped them get rid of their psychological problems such as stage fear, hesitation, shyness, etc. On the other hand, the vast majority (20 students) replied that they were not satisfied with their experience. They feel the course did not help them a lot as they rarely engaged in oral discussions. Some students said they would never speak in class unless they were pointed to by the teacher or a classmate. Four of them even said they had never spoken during the OE class; the only occasion they had to speak was during the oral exam.

D) Factors influencing students’ reticence to speak in the speaking class

Table 7. Factors influencing students’ reticence to speak in the speak class

Personal factors	Teaching factors
- shyness,	- types of speaking activities
- lack of self confidence,	- topics discussed,
- feel of ridicule because of low level and	- teacher’s roles and attitudes,
poor English and oral performance,	- lack of syllabus,
- ‘stage fear’ and fear of public speaking.	- lack of method

Table 07 displays responses to interview with the students who suffer from OP. before mentioning the factors, most students expressed their appreciation of the types of the speaking activities they experienced, namely listening tasks, class discussions, presentations (individual and group ones). Still, they could not always engage into those oral activities due to some purely personal factors, related to students’ personality traits such as shyness, lack of self-confidence, ‘feel of ridicule because of low level’ and poor English, ‘stage fear and ‘fear of public speaking. Such personal factors were totally ‘neglected’ by teachers as one subject commented *«I must confess that I’m at least 60% responsible of my poor participation in oral activities because of my personality traits; I’m too shy and introvert. But the teacher did not pay attention to those problems »*. The second type of factors are educational or teaching factors and include the topics discussed,

teacher's roles and attitudes, lack of 'syllabus', and lack of presentation 'method'. Those themes (factors) are summarised below.

▪ **Topics for Discussion**

The topics which were mostly chosen by the teacher with no consultation of the learners lacked interest. Very often, they did not appeal to students' interests nor did they seem to have any 'relevance' to their concerns or needs. Moreover, the topics are unrelated and do not fit into any coherent framework as one of the subjects commented, « scattered topics from here and there ».

▪ **Teachers' roles and attitudes**

According to subjects of this AR, the teacher did seem to have neither a '*method*' nor a '*syllabus*' for the listening-speaking course. They would expect students to present or perform in a particular way, but they rarely provided any training or guidance for such presentation or performance. More importantly, they did not seem to « care in the whole class participation during those discussions ». As a result, only a few number of students used to dominate the discussions (most often the self-confident ones) with no interference from the teacher to minimise their dominance and encourage the rest of the class to engage in oral activities. In addition, the teacher presented only general feedback using comments such as 'good', 'bad', 'unsatisfactory', etc., but as reported by students, « they rarely told us what was exactly 'good' or 'wrong' with our performance », or they « Just spotted pronunciation and grammatical errors ».

E) Expectations from the present course

Actually, the class was surprised at this question. They stated that they had never thought of it before, nor had they ever been asked or taught to think of or express 'personal goals/ objectives' or personal expectations. Thus, they found a great difficulty to think about an answer to this question, and the teacher-researcher had to reformulate it many times. Some students, answered they had 'no expectations' at all. The majority, however, expressed general 'wishes'. For example, most subjects want no more role plays and 'request' to have shorter individual presentations to allow more students to present and thus talk more. They also expect more debatable topics, more 'instructive' teacher's feedback and wish to have a training in presentation skills

Step 7. Action Plan

An action plan may be a statement about the implementation of a new educational practice or a strategy for reflecting on alternative approaches to addressing the problem. In the light of these results, an action plan was designed and implemented to restructure and improve the general framework of the *Speaking and Phonetics* course. This action plan involves a redefinition of course objectives, syllabus, method, teacher's and learners' roles and feedback provision.

1. Objectives

The statement of objectives in the official syllabus contains no expression to students' motivation (or lack of it) to engage in oral participation

« The trainees are supposed to develop the ability of handling long stretches of speech while talking to an audience (delivering a speech in class) about various topics of interest related to their own training; academic knowledge (literature, civilization, etc...), and special fields of science and thought (biology, physics, ecology, modern technology, religion, philosophy, sociology, psychology, etc...). The aim is to help them manipulate specific fields using specific functions of discourse while attempting to convince their audience. (*Extract from the official 3rd year syllabus, 2008, p. 28*).

Thus the following set of objectives regarding oral participation and students' motivation for it are formulated. The redefinition of the *Speaking and Phonetics* course is supposed:

- To foster EFL students' motivation to speak,
- To increase students' oral participation level,
- To make students engage 'voluntarily' in class discussions during speaking activities

2. Content-based syllabus

In consultation with two other 3rd year *Sp & Phon* course, a suggestion was made to unify students' presentations, discussions and debates around a common theme. An agreement was reached concerning the adoption of a content-based syllabus. Therefore, a content-based speaking syllabus entitled *Introduction to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)* was introduced with the aim to raise students' awareness of the issue and prepare future teachers who would recognize and manage such issues successfully in their teaching. Students will still choose a topic of their interest, but they have to relate it to one of the 17 goals of sustainable development (SD) established by the United Nations Organisation in 2012. SD is an approach to development that looks to balance different, and often competing, needs against an awareness of the environmental, social and economic limitations the world faces (UNESCO, 2012). The theme was chosen to provide a unified and meaningful content, that provides a sense of coherent context for the students and theoretical and conceptual background for their presentations. The selection was made on the basis of interest and academic relevance to students' future career as it aligns with themes and topics on the middle and secondary school textbooks. In addition, the theme is quite 'new' to learners, so it affords students with innovative perspectives for their presentations that move them away from the over-used and discussed topics like sports, immigration, pollution...

3. Participatory Teaching Method

The course is based on extended individual presentations (20 - 30 minutes) in the first term and extended group presentations (30-45 mn) in the second term. The

topics re selected by the students themselves but ought to be concretely related the SDGs. Presentation are to be done orally; using necessary material, media and technology. Two training sessions (1h30 per each) were carried out on individual presentation skills and public speaking. The aim was to introduce specific strategies, techniques, steps materials, media, activities ... to prepare and structure an academic presentation. A special attention is allotted to feedback provision and constructive criticism.

In order to increase the level of students' oral participation, we have to engage as many students as possible in the same speaking activity and at the same time afford equal chances for all learners to talk or speak. To do so, the teacher had to make sure that the classroom activity is not be dominated by a minority of talkative students. To this effect, two techniques were implemented with strict regulations for their implementation.

- a) **Mandatory participation** (Harmer, 2001) is installed so as to allow an even oral participation.
- b) **Turn-taking strategy** is introduced to the class and applied by the teacher and the students to guarantee that participation is evenly distributed. Turn-taking or taking the turn refers to how each participant or speaker has a chance and a turn to speak during a conversation (Dewi, Suharsono & Munir, 2018)

3) Teacher and students' roles.

To fit the 'new' participatory teaching methodology, it was necessary to re-define some of the teacher's and learners' roles. The approach is to minimise teacher's talk and maximise his efforts to guarantee the maximum of students' oral participation. Of the main roles (identified by Harmer, 2001), the prompter role needs to be reinforced to ensure support to students continuous interaction while reducing his/her 'participation' in class discussions, and speaking activities. The intention is to gradually share some of the teacher's roles and tasks with learners whenever possible.

- Student-moderator : for each presentation, a student is appointed as discussion moderator.
- Students as feedback provider: for each presentation, a group of 3-4 students initiate feedback provision using an evaluation rubric prepared by the teacher and enriched by learners.
- Teacher: Continues to play the coach, motivator, feedback provider, but intervening only when students are out of resources.

Step 8. Implement the Plan and Reflect.

The plan of action was implemented to see if it makes a difference. This involves trying out a new teaching framework, encompassing the implementation of a content-based course, based on a redefinition in the Speaking & Phonetics course

objectives, syllabus and method as a potential solution to the problem of lack of OP in the speaking class.

- Observation and Reflections: Outcomes and Future Actions

Upon reflecting on the data gathering processes and findings, we can say that the present small scale AR project has achieved more than its initially planned objectives. Indeed, most students, were willingly taking turns, even without being asked by the teacher, manager or other students. The ones who were at the beginning lacking confidence or were shy, hesitant or anxious and rarely or never engaged in speaking activities, were now more active than before, speaking spontaneously, making mistakes and correcting them without any embarrassment. It was also observed that the classroom atmosphere improved and became more alive than before. This important finding meets what other studies reached like (Ebata, 2008) who ascertains that « active participation in class, enhances students' relationships with one another, creating a positive influence on classroom atmosphere » (p. 5). The students who used to dominate the talk became more moderate, more selective of their intervention and turn taking moments. Consequently, they provided each time more genuine interventions such as bringing original information, making insightful feedback or delivering creative summaries. More surprisingly, even class attendance and discipline improved : students attended more regularly, and all of them came to class before class time. They eagerly stayed late after the class time (as it was the last course on the schedule). And many did in fact suggest to add some extra time to their presentations. Nonetheless, the AR design suggested some trajectories for further inquiry and research. For instance, although most of them ended up the process with more refined feedback provision skills (constructive criticism) as well as a more positive attitude towards teacher feedback, many students were still baring negative attitudes towards peer feedback. In addition, the 'newly' re-defined methodology did not seem to impact their debating skills. Finally, in spite of its valuable role in assisting EFL teachers to improve student outcomes, the actual integration of action research into classroom teaching practices may bring about some real challenges. Examples of these include time constraints, lack of research skills, and a classroom environment (Burns, 2010). Teachers may also face difficulties in obtaining administrative support from school administration, cultural resistance, ethical and confidentiality concerns (Creswell, 2012). In the context of the present study, the class size with a large number of mixed proficiency levels students (28 students) created a challenging environment to the teacher to implement AR interventions easily.

VI. Conclusion

Action research is an inquiry which approaches an actual social issue in educational, social, managerial, ... settings and suggests workable solutions so as to promote social change through actual acts. Examples of those areas for focus can be « classroom management, appropriate materials, particular teaching areas

(e.g. reading, oral skills), student behaviour, achievement or motivation, personal management issues (e.g. time management, relationships with colleagues/higher management” (Burns, 2005, p. 58). The present action research was conducted to solve an actual problem faced by the 3rd year Speaking & phonetics class at the ENSC which is the lack of motivation to engage in speaking activities and students’ reluctance to participate in those activities. After posing the problem, implementing appropriate qualitative instruments (namely focus group discussion and individual interviews) to explore its patterns and potential sources, an action plan was designed. Based on the newly identified students’ needs and expectations, the latter plan consisted in the redefinition of a speaking course framework which engages the learners more actively in the teaching / learning process. At the end of this action plan (10 weeks), it was observed that students’ motivation increased gradually but significantly, both the frequency and quality of students’ oral participation improved considerably; and students’ performance and achievement enhanced noticeably. In addition, students’ anxiety decreased drastically as follow up interviews with students revealed. Students were even more autonomous, initiative and innovative. They also progressively constructed a more tolerant attitude towards peer feedback, and their reactions to teacher’s feedback developed positively. They also improved their feedback provision skills (constructive criticism) and acquired further new skills such as coaching, moderating, etc. The success of the present action research to solve a pedagogical issue should be regarded as stimulus for teachers to shape the future teacher-researcher vector.

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