

CRITERIA FOR CLASS PARTICIPATION SCORING IN IRANIAN PRIVATE LANGUAGE SCHOOLS

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Abstract

While the Class Participation Scoring (CPS) is a topic of considerable importance, little has been done regarding the subjectivity and objectivity of the class participation scoring in ESL/EFL contexts. The numbers of school managers, experienced teachers and intermediate EFL learners who were interviewed to extrapolate their belief and enforced practices concerning CPS in the given sites were orderly 9, 10 and 30. The topic coverage and content of pre-service and in-service TTC programs in the respective institutes as well as final scoring worksheets were surveyed to see the amount of attention and weight attributed to CPS. Overall, this study did not find a significant variation among Class Participation (CP) scores in these institutes. Moreover, it was also found that the weight of CP score ranged between 40-60%. Considering the importance of formative assessment, it is hoped that this study could raise more awareness on the need to devise detailed, objectively verifiable checklists for optimizing CPS system.

Keywords: Class participation scoring criteria; formative assessment; Iranian private language schools

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1. Introduction

In our country, like other parts of the world, the number of students who want to learn a second language is increasing day by day. In fact, by the turning of the world into a global village, the growing need of learning English as the language of communication is felt more than any time before.

English classes in our educational system differ from one another depending on the focus of them on different factors including CPS (Class Participation Scoring) or CPS criteria. According to the recent trends toward formative assessment and CPS as a result, there are a lot of English schools these days that consider significant share of scoring for CPS. The big differences they possess are mostly due to the criteria they have for CPS.

When students know that they are going to be evaluated according to a standard, detailed checklist, they will be motivated more. Scriven (2005, cited in Martz, 2010) remarks that checklists reduce the chance of forgetting to check something important, are easy to understand and validate, and reduce the influence of the halo effect by forcing the evaluator to consider each relevant dimension of merit.

A learner who knows that there will be some criteria to indicate how much he/she has learned, he/she enjoys being active and doing a lot of activities to show him/her in the best way. The class and learning situation would turn to a pleasant place resulting promising and rewarding outcomes.

Thus, the importance of criteria for CPS cannot be neglected. For example, if a teacher considers a class without any plan for what to focus on, without any checklist to score, she will consider a single subjective score for all different activities. In this kind of class, teacher is the only person who can decide on what basis to score and his/her judgments will determine students' scores and students may feel that their scores are unfair.

Consequently, in order to have a more successful language educational system, teachers and learners must be aware of what is going to happen in the class. In fact, criteria allow teachers to write their feedbacks regularly and allow students to discuss their sense of success and failure. Thus, it seems that one source of the existing problem of language education in Iran may be traced in the difference being hidden in the minds of teachers, learners or policy makers. Knowing more about what is going to be taught and what is going to be assessed, teachers and learners would be able to reflect on their activities and make appropriate changes and modifications.

The present study attempts to identify the teachers and learners' ideas about CPS as well as documents or checklists which exist for CPS in Iranian private language schools. Based on the analysis of data, the researcher hopes to find a way towards understanding the teachers' and learners' beliefs and assumption along with a framework for CPS.

Although in Iran a lot of attention is paid to CP and changing the procedure of the classrooms toward formative assessment and process oriented approaches, it seems that there is not any specific rubric for grading these activities. This study is significant on the promise that one of the problematic areas in language learning education in Iran is going to be scrutinized and would try to provide schools with a comprehensive framework for CPS and thus help them to transform the status quo to a more rewarding situation. So, this study is going to provide a better situation for language teachers and learners by demystifying one of the problems of language teaching and learning in Iran.

Following innovation in the field of ELT, CPS (Class Participation Scoring) is a new topic which has recently attracted a lot of attention. Although this area of research is still in its infancy in ELT, it seems that the idea can shed more light on the puzzle of English language learning and teaching. It seems that there is no systematic kind of scoring even in the most popular schools. The study maps out the picture of private language schools clearly and sheds light on policy makers', teachers', and learners' perceptions regarding CP as well as the quality of checklists in order to outline a possible structure for CPS system in Iranian language schools. It provides insights of how CPS system and what criteria for scoring are applied in Iranian private language schools. On particular, it aims to discover if there is any specific framework for CPS and short term activities and whether if the kind of scoring is subjective or objective.

2. Literature review

According to Popham (2008), Assessment means announcing to students how much language or skills they have learned and to what degree they have achieved. "In recent years, some applied linguistics have shifted from the outcomes of instructions, i.e. the knowledge and skills to be gained by the learner, to the process through which knowledge and skills might be gained" (Nunan, 2008, p.40). Formative assessment provides feedback which leads to students recognizing the learning problem they have and to solve it (Harlen, 1998). Fitch, Drucker, and Norton (1951) found that students who had weekly quizzes were more likely to try different activities in the class and participate in voluntary discussion groups and earn higher grades as a result, and Townsend and Wheatley (1975) found that students who took short daily quizzes had higher course grades than students who took longer or less frequent quizzes.

Learners and teachers have particular beliefs about language learning which can be the source of creativity and changes in the system of teaching. Therefore, it is very important to let them express their views and concerns regarding language learning. In this regard, there was a study which has been done with nursing students as participants. In this exploratory content analysis study by Loftin et al (2010), nursing students were asked what encourages them to participate in the classroom, namely asking and answering questions or giving comments. Four themes emerged after analyzing the data from the participants. These themes were common to all or most of the students. The data reflect the participants' experiences regarding classroom participation.

Theme 1: faculty influences

Most of the participants looked to the instructor for verbal and visual cues before speaking. Students further discussed the eye contact and body language of the instructor as important medium that encourages or discourages them.

Theme 2: other student influences

A second theme identified in this study indicates that students were sometimes affected by their classmates. They were unwilling to risk negative feedback from their classmates, even if they had a strong willing to ask or answer questions.

Theme 3: environmental influences

The physical environment of the classroom also played a role in whether or not students felt relaxed to participate. Their comments included that they preferred to hear and see what was going on in the front of the room to be able to interact. The students were less eager to interact in a larger classroom setting.

Theme 4: intrapersonal influences

The fourth theme identified in the study was how the student's characters affected their participation. ESL students believed that they are reluctant participants. They hesitated to ask for clarification, or offer comments, because they thought that based on their prior experiences in the classroom, they would not be understood.

Practice tests or class participation allow students to know what their teachers expect and to be prepared for tests and examinations in the class (Snook, 2004). "The use of feedback is one means of making the function of assessments formative" (Askew, 2000, p.34). It is reasonably well established that regular quizzing or any kind of in class activity can improve grades and comprehension of material. In one study by Marcell (2008), students in 1 section of introductory psychology who took "open-book" quizzes on daily readings were compared to students in another section who did not take quizzes during that unit. Analyses indicated that quizzing had relationship with increases in both the number of students' questions and the number of students who read the assigned material at home. It was resulted that that the immediate feedback provided by quizzes is useful in identifying areas of misunderstanding and in challenging students.

The vast majority of genuine formative assessment is not formal; with interactive and routine feedback (Black & Wiliam, 1998). There was a study by Lee (2008) in Hong Kong secondary classrooms. This study investigated the reactions of students in two Hong Kong secondary classrooms to their teachers' feedback. Student data from different tools including questionnaires and different checklists were gathered and feedback analysis was applied to situate student reactions in their specific contexts. The results suggested that the teachers' feedback, which was mostly teacher-centered, made students passive and reluctant. The paper suggested that teachers should be aware of the impact of their feedback practices on student expectations and attitudes.

CP helps learners to improve their knowledge and use it contextually as a result (Jones 2008). One of the courses in teacher training programs that inform teacher candidates about the use of CP in teaching can be how to score CP. Using it as an assessment tool and rewarding students by way of marks seems to be the only way forward. Sutton-Brady & Stegemann(2010) from universities of Australia did a study in business education. A questionnaire is used to investigate the concept of student participation in class discussions. It looked specifically at students concerns with participation and worked on the effectiveness of various methods used to improve overall participations. Their findings support much of the literature on class participation, grading students did increase participation and it motivated them when graded. Dancer & Kamvounias (2005) also found that releasing marks during the semester (rather than telling them at the end of semester) motivated them to participate because they realized that they were doing not in a right way.

Another study by Mustapha et al. (2010) aimed to outline influencing factors that shape undergraduate students' participation in Malaysian classrooms. Interviews and observations were carried out. Around 85 students from two classes were observed over the period of two semesters. The results strongly endorse that teacher traits and classmate traits play a significant role in improving student participation. The study discovered that lecturer traits were the most influential factor in encouraging participation among students. Inability to focus and fear of making mistakes were reported to be the influential factor on students' participation. Findings have shown that classmates' traits are highly effective in encouraging or discouraging students to participate.

A scoring rubric can be a scoring method to demonstrate certain learners' behavior according to pre-determined standards (Picket & Dodge, 2007). Scoring criteria will establish an expectation for students to participate and will help them know what their teachers expect them. Today, teachers should have the necessary skills of using the CPS criteria for both effective teaching and learning. Therefore, the fact that all teachers know about CPS criteria and use it in their classes will certainly increase the quality of teaching.

2. Methodology

It will be an exploratory qualitative research to explore and show the position of Iranian private language schools. In this regard interviews have been administered with policy makers, teachers and learners. Finally, different documents in different schools have been considered in the study. It is multi-paradigmatic because it pays attention to many elements at the same time. Its openness and flexibility is worthy which may help the researcher to modify the design of the study or the procedure during the study.

To have a clear picture of the class participation scoring system in Iranian language schools, data is collected from multiple sources: (a) CPS and/or roll call checklist as well as institute documents (TTC topics, CP and final score sheet, CPS guidelines or criteria); (b) Interviews with policy makers (school managers and supervisors), students and teachers.

By reading through all the checklists, the researcher found which factors weigh more in the classrooms. Through analyzing the available documents and frameworks in language schools, the framework and criteria for CPS was revealed to a large extent.

Semi-structured, open ended interviews were conducted with school policy makers to extrapolate and describe their beliefs, and enforced practices concerning CPS in the given sites. Three classes of each school were selected randomly in order to have some real scores of the learners. By observing the scores of different classes in different schools, some illuminating data were provided to see the share and ratio of the scores to the total scores and the maximum and the minimum scores which were received by the learners.

The framework of different schools were gathered to see which of them had some checklists and by interviewing those who had some checklists, we could find out what were expected from the teachers during the semester. The topic coverage and content of pre-service and in-service TTC programs in the respective institutes as well as final scoring worksheets were surveyed to see the amount of attention and weight attributed to CPS. By investigating TTC topics, the researchers could clearly see whether novice or in-service teachers received any instruction and training to score their learners' classroom participation activities. Allocation of any scores for CP was revealed through analyzing the attendance sheets in the given sites.

Some well-known Iranian private language schools including Shokouh, Iran Language Institute (ILI), Kish, Safir, Jihad Daneshgahi, and Urmia Language Center, in three different big cities of Iran including Mashhad, Rasht, and Urmia were selected for the study. Nine schools in total were chosen for the study from which about three or four classes were at intermediate levels. The total numbers of participants were about 10 teachers, 30 learners, and 9 policy makers from the selected institutes who participated voluntarily. The interviews were transcribed, summarized, and coded carefully. The teachers who voluntarily participated in the study have had teaching experience ranging from 3 to 8 years. The learners were selected from intermediate levels to have more valid data according to their views because they were well informed of the principles and regulations of the schools where they studied for quite a considerable time.

The real scores of the learners were surveyed randomly to see whether if there was any significant difference among scores or not. Similar scores were shown in the scores of the students. It was not a good evidence of the careful scoring to CP because there was not any variation among learners. It is maybe because of the subjectivity and judgment of the teachers instead of well designed criteria.

3. Results and discussion

As a qualitative exploratory study, this study provides us with a clear picture of Iranian language schools' CPS policy. To this end, interviews have been administered with policy makers, teachers, and learners to crystallize their beliefs and practices. In the following sections, the analysis and explanations regarding the questions and documents have been clearly described in details.

3.1 Policy makers' and supervisors' views on CPS

The first instrument used to elicit relevant information regarding CPS was interview. To further supplement the data for this study, interviews were done with nine policy makers, supervisors and managers in some cases. The interview data demonstrated that some institutes such as ILI (Rasht, Urmia and Mashhad) which are better known than other institutes paid attention to the importance of class participation scoring more; however, they still did not have any clear, detailed checklist in order to record CPS. The share of CPS in different schools was different. In some schools, it was considered 60 % for CP and 40% for final scoring. In other schools the scores for CP, final score and midterm exams were orderly 25%, 45 %, 30% or 20%, 40%, 40%.

In some institutes, the documents and teachers were assessed once in a semester by some experts from Tehran, the main centers. In others cases, assessments were done by supervisors through observation two or three times in a semester. In an institute there was a hidden camera in different classes. This tool let supervisors check every session of each class randomly.

3.2 The status of CPS in school documents, TTC programs, and checklists

Most of the institute refused to show any document or checklist regarding CPS but some institutes provided the researcher by some real scores randomly. The scores of students regarding CP, midterm exams and final scores were analyzed to see how much variation exist among scores or what scores are higher. The list of scores showed that CPS was mostly higher than final exams and there was not much variation among scores. Much variation was observed among final exams. This happen because final exam scores were more objective and teachers' believes or judgments did not play roles in their methods of scorings. Measuring learners' behavior without any criteria or instruction is a very difficult job. Some difficulty in grading was reported by Jacobs and Chase (1992) who identified several reasons for not grading class participation: professors generally do not provide instruction on how to improve participation; interpretation of student behavior is difficult and subjective; participation often depends on a student's personality thus disadvantaging shy or introverted students; record-keeping is problematic. Students believe that grading motivate them more for being active in the class. This finding is in line with what Sutton-Brady and Stegemann(2010) stated in their study. Their findings support much of the literature on class participation, grading students does increase participation and it clearly only works to motivate them when graded.

Different documents such as attendance sheets were analyzed to see if there was any place for teachers to record CPS or not. There was not any special separated checklist for teachers to check or write students scores. In most of the cases, there was a column in attendance sheets for CPS along with midterm exams and final exams. In most of the cases, however teachers wrote their comments in their personal note books. They did it because there was not any document to record learners' CPS. This might be difficult to score according to some open-ended comments and it would be time amusing. It would be better to record CPS in more systematic way. Hoehne (2009) stated that it might take time to create some criteria but it will save a lot of time in long time. He went on to say that instead of writing comments after feedback you can circle on the rubric or give a score to learners.

Regarding TTC, mangers were interviewed and TTC coverage papers were analyzed to investigate if CPS was covered or not. There was no special topic regarding CPS in TTC programs to be covered, however, the share of final scores, CPS and the criteria for them if there was any, were claimed to be stated orally.

3.3 Teachers and learners' overall views on CPS in their schools

Qualitative analysis of some questions has been done in the following section:

3.3.1 External factors that affect CPS according to learners' views

1. family or any other friendly relationship between teacher and student
2. the sociability and good social relationship of the students
3. self-confidence
4. handwriting or writing
5. friendly relationship between parents and student
6. good appearance or clothing
7. travelling abroad

There were some other factors that learners mentioned that are obstacles for their active learning and class participation. One of them was class size. They complained about the size and seating of the class. They stated they can't move easily nor does group activities. It may have some other reasons. This section of results is maybe in contrast with the fourth theme of Loftin's study which was mentioned in literature review. They preferred to have comfort zone in small classes.

Another factor which has been mentioned by learners was fear of peers. They thought that their peers would make fun of them so they did not feel well or relaxed. The mentioned bad feelings of learners may consequently block

their learning because they lose their self confidence. Some other students afraid of their teachers' complain about their way of speech. They reported the same feeling as peer disapproval about their teachers. Lack of confidence in front of teacher was one of the reasons they did not want to participate in class activities. Similar to these findings were mentioned in theme two of Loftin. The students in that study were unwilling to risk negative feedback from their classmates.

3.3.2 Main criteria for CPS duo to EFL teachers and learners views

The main criteria for CPS categorized as follows according to data that was gathered by researcher.

- offering creative suggestions
- punctuality
- voluntary participation
- respectfulness
- attention
- observing the rules of the institute
- absence or presence
- projects
- skills (writing, reading, speaking and listening)

3.3.3 Teachers' ideas about CPS

According to teachers' views, CPS assigns fairly scores to learners depending on their language abilities. CPS makes students try to learn better and more. Class participation is of great importance (Lyons, 1989; Petress, 2006; Weaver & Qi, 2005). It is the best time for evaluation because teachers can see the progress of students, their talent and overall ability and they can distinguish them easily as a result. It makes learners more active and cooperative, important factors for learning English. "Participation is a way to bring students actively into the educational process and to assist in enhancing our teaching and bringing life to the classroom" (Cohen, 1991, p. 699). Teachers stated that CPS helps students improve in language skills. Students are more motivated to participate in class activities and teachers do not have to focus only on final exams.

4. Conclusion

At present all the participants regarding teachers and learners believe that there are not any specific criteria for CP or they are too general to be considered. These checklists lack systematic diagnostic criteria for assessing learners' performance. Specifically, teachers need clearer criteria with transparent overall objectives and more specific items to push students to pay attention to their activities more carefully and be aware of what exactly is going to be considered for the overall results. The checklists need to be constantly updated to meet needs of new students while teachers and learners should be involved in the preparation of items in addition to managers and policy makers. Since the population of this study was teachers and students from only three cities of Iran, additional research with teachers in other areas of Iran would be desirable. More research with teachers in public schools and universities in addition to private language schools and in relationship with learners, doing research at different levels from beginning to advanced levels could be more comprehensive than this study.

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