EFL Teachers' Perceptions of Classroom Participation in Japanese Universities

Cheikhna AMAR

Abstract

　本論文は、日本の諸大学における EFL 教師の幾人かが、授業への参加に関する自身の教授実践とその際に直面する困難さ、ならびにそれらの困難さを克服して学生を授業活動に参加させる方法について話したことを分析している。データは、日本の大学の EFL 教師たちの 4 組が、自分たちの教育経験に関する見解や信念について議論したものに基づいている。

Keywords: EFL Education, Classroom Participation, Learner Engagement, Pedagogical Practices（EFL 教育、授業への参加、学習者の関与、教育実践）

1. Introduction

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers use various approaches to successfully deliver their learning material and engage their students in classroom activities. The aim of these approaches is to enhance the quality of learners' participation. However, these approaches differ from situation to situation and in many cases, teachers need to adapt and change their strategies in situ based on learners' reactions and behavior. This paper analyses what some EFL teachers in Japanese universities share about their teaching experience in relation to classroom participation, learners' engagement, and their perception of how to improve learning outcomes. I decided to pursue this topic as I was faced, as an EFL teacher in Japanese universities, with

the issue of how to create a space where students can participate in learning activities. While I am still coming up with solutions and ways to improve my students' learning journey, I thought it would be worthwhile to hear the voices of other teachers who face similar situations. This initial investigation can therefore serve as a reference to any EFL instructor who aims to improve the quality of classroom participation.

Research Questions

The study addressed the following questions as a basis for analysis.

1.   How do these EFL teachers describe student participation in their classroom?
2.   How do these teachers describe their teaching practices in EFL classrooms?
3.   What are these teachers' recommendations for achieving greater student engagement in learning activities?

2. Data and Methods

2.1 Data and participants

The data in this study are derived from four peer discussions of EFL teachers in Japanese universities. The data are based on these teachers discussing classroom participation, challenges facing them, and their recommendations for achieving teaching and learning goals. The data were video recorded and transcribed. See the table below for more information about the participants.

Table 1

Participants' information

Pairs	Teacher code	Nationality	Gender	Experience (Years)
Pair 1	T1	Japan	M	10+
	T2	Russia	F	10+
Pair 2	T3	U.S.A.	M	15+
	T4	Brazil	F	10+
Pair 3	T5	Australia	M	10+
	T6	U.S.A.	M	10+
Pair 4	T7	U.S.A.	M	6+
	T8	U.S.A.	F	10+

These pairs of teachers were asked to discuss classroom participation, the situation of EFL classrooms in Japanese universities, and the challenges they encounter while delivering their lessons. It was an open discussion, and the participants covered several topics related to their teaching practices during the discussion.

2.2 Methods

This study uses an inductive approach to qualitative content analysis (Cho & Lee, 2014; Silverman, 2013). Firstly, the author collected and transcribed the data. After that, a thematic mind map was created using NVivo 12. The data then were divided into themes that are derived from the participants' discussions. Finally, the relevant themes were selected using data reduction methods (Cho & Lee, 2014). In addition, to using NVivo 12 for data analysis, the author also coded the data manually and sent it to another researcher who checked it independently. All these thorough stages of analysis enabled the researcher to qualitatively analyze the data.

3. Thematic Analysis

The following themes were identified based on the participants' discussions.

Table 2

Themes

Main theme	Subthemes
Classroom participation	Teachers' questions Students' responses Speaker selection
Teachers' recommendations	Model response The use of wait time Humor

This section will present an analysis of the themes that are shown in table 2. As shown above, there are two main themes with six subthemes. First, the analysis will cover classroom participation which includes teachers and students' practices in classrooms. The second part will reveal some of the recommendations that these teachers consider to be of value in improving the quality of teaching and learning experience.

3.1 Classroom participation

3.1.1 Teachers' questions and students' responses

This section documents the participants' discussion regarding their practices related to classroom participation. Some of the topics that they discuss are related to teachers' questions and students' responses. The notion of question type is salient to students' engagement because teachers' questions affect students' participation and their responses. Teachers' questions can be used to serve various functions, such as focusing the groups' attention and engaging students in classroom activities (Farahian & Rezaee, 2012). During

their discussion, the teachers talk about the types of questions they ask in classrooms, their reasons for doing so, and the kinds of responses these questions get from students. I divided the types of questions they report asking into; closed/display questions and open/referential questions. The teachers claim that they sometimes use closed questions as a warm-up before asking follow-up questions or to check students' understanding (see Waring, 2012). They argue that they do not use this type of questions often because it usually gets a minimal response from the students and sometimes even just an embodied response. This contradicts the findings of some earlier research that demonstrate the majority of teachers' questions in language classrooms are display questions, not open and referential questions (Lee, 2006; McNeil, 2012; Yang, 2010). On this point, T7 says "It is amazing when you ask yes/no questions. They will have a debate and then 'no'. 'That is all you come up with. Can you elaborate on that a little?'" T1 raises a similar point, "yes/no questions are closed questions, they do not have to utter something. The response could be a nod. Those kinds, the gesture without saying anything." Building on this T2 says, "I think, I mostly use WH-questions because yes or no questions are probably only framing the task, like 'did you understand me, yes or no?'" The same idea was raised by T5, "most tasks are based around the questions which they can actually answer in a bit more detail." The participants also talked about the difficulty of getting students to respond to any of their questions, even if they are display questions as we can see from this brief discussion between two of the teachers.

01 T6   It is hard to get students to respond.

02 T5   Like to display questions?

03 T6   Yeah, actually any kind of questions hehe.

In this interaction, T6 describes the difficulty he faces getting his students to respond and participate in classroom activities. Another participant discusses the quality of questions and argues that he asks, "genuine questions." He claims that "fake questions" should not be asked and that teachers should only ask questions they are interested in knowing students' opinions about them which enables the students to provide the teachers with new information (Yang, 2010). According to this teacher, this leads to a more natural interaction between teachers and students.

> T5: I try to ask as many genuine questions as possible, like, I really do not know the answer to this, or I am really interested in your opinion about this. I try to make it as real as I can if that makes sense.

Another teacher raises the issue of teachers' expectations of students' responses. He argues that the answers are supposed to be in English, "if I ask something, the answer should be in English." It is interesting to note that the only teacher who brings this issue up is a Japanese EFL teacher, which might indicate that the students may use their native language sometimes to interact with the teacher if they know he or she speaks it. Some participants talk about how they ask their questions and how this affects students' responses. For example, T8 says:

> I often put them into smaller groups and say, "okay talk about this question. What do you guys think about it?" They have time to sort of bounce their ideas off one another and say, "okay talk about it one more minute and I am going to ask you guys to share an answer." I think it takes away a little bit of that fear. It could be face-threatening to have to express your ideas in front of everyone. If you can do it on a smaller

scale, it is a bit less scary and like you said, it is a bit quicker to reply if they do it that way.

According to this teacher, giving students time to discuss and think about their answers is an important way to make them produce appropriate responses. This can make students feel comfortable and reduce the wait time for responses. Another topic that was raised by the participants is how best to correct students when their responses are wrong. The teachers argue that they do not use explicit corrections because that might discourage students from answering in front of the whole class.

T8: If I just ask them a general question and they take a risk and answer even if it is wrong, I usually say Yeah. I will not say it is wrong. I say yeah that is possible, then I will start talking and give the right answer. I just do not want to tell them when they took the risk to speak out in front of everyone.

The teachers show their preference for implicit correction because it is not as face-threatening as explicit correction, which can lead to the students being embarrassed by making mistakes and as a consequence do not volunteer to speak up in future classroom activities.

When a question is asked, a response becomes relevant (Schegloff, 2007) and if the response is missing speakers can use various interactional practices to pursue it (Pomerantz, 1984). This is true for classroom interaction also; when the teacher asks a question they expect a response from students, but in many cases, the students' responses are delayed. In such cases, the teacher typically pursues the missing response. In this study, the participants talk about how they enact that pursuit and what practices they use to accomplish this task. The

first thing they discussed was the reasons for delayed answers in Japanese EFL classrooms and they attribute this to the mismatch of expectations between non-Japanese teachers and Japanese students. Non-Japanese teachers are often used to classes where students answer very quickly, while Japanese students are not used to classes where they have to answer many questions. T6 raises this point:

> Yeah, it is kind of a mismatch of expectation, like you know the EFL teacher expects some, like, "let's talk". You know, give me some answers right away and they are not used to that in their classes. They are not expected to do that.

Another teacher argues that the long delay after the questions is mainly due to understanding issues because students need time to understand the question and translate it into Japanese and formulate the answers. All these steps require time and teachers should be aware of that and give students enough time to come up with the answer. After they identified the reasons for delayed responses, the teachers discussed their perceived interactional practices for pursuing those responses. Some of the main practices they report employing are reformulating, rephrasing, and repeating the questions, as we see from this comment; "I reformulate the questions, sometimes it is not even reformulated in different words it just saying the same question again." This aligns with prior research that shows teachers often reformulate and rephrase their questions to pursue students' responses (Filipi, 2018; Svennevig, 2012).

The discussions reveal what these EFL teachers say about their use of various types of questions and the responses these questions receive. They argue that they use open and referential questions most of the time (see Farooq, 2007) because these sorts of questions elicit more extended learner

responses than closed questions. This is supported by Brock's (1986) findings that show referential questions elicit longer and more syntactically complex answers from students than display questions do. The teachers note that they use display questions to address the whole class while they use referential and open questions to address small groups or individual students (Farahian & Rezaee, 2012). This section also covers how the participants pursue students' responses. The participants share various practices they use to pursue students' responses when they are missing. They argue that they reformulate and repeat their questions (Svennevig, 2012), use electronic devices, and write the questions. The teachers also recognize the importance of wait time after the question because it allows students to prepare for their answers and gives opportunities for more students to participate (Hosoda, 2014; Rowe, 1986).

3.1.2 Speaker selection

The following part of this paper moves on to speaker selection, another topic that the participants cover during their discussions. Their talks include various tactics and practices they use in order to achieve appropriate speaker selection of the sort that leads to getting responses from their students. The majority of the teachers in this study agree that they select small groups of learners most of the time to answer their questions. They argue that selecting a small group of students has many benefits as shown in the following comment:

> T2: Here in Japan this technique is the most helpful one. When you actually get them to answer your question is when they are in a small group. Because sometimes, it is really difficult to get a detailed answer or any answer at all from individual students.

This teacher claims that it is easier to get students to provide responses when

they are in small groups than when they are individuals. The same argument was supported by another teacher:

> T3: Yeah, I also like to put them in pairs or work in small groups of three or four. That makes them think of the ideas, the questions, and the concepts beforehand. So, they are more eager and willing to share and more prepared.

This comment explains that selecting small groups makes students willing to answer because it provides them with the necessary time to prepare for the response. Another teacher claims that he selects students who have a "useful" answer as a model for the rest of the class.

> T3: I am monitoring, and I walk past and if I heard someone gives an answer that was useful to other people. Then I would select that person knowing that they would feel comfortable repeating what they have said. But going back to make people feel comfortable speaking, I do not really like putting people on the spot.

In this comment, the teacher explains that he selects the students who have the right answer. According to him, this is useful to the rest of the class because they can hear a model response which can help them in formulating their responses. It is also not face-threatening because the selected students have already prepared the answer and are ready to share it. T7 shared a similar idea:

> I go around and then I say, "oh what do you think?" and they will tell me, and I say, "that is a great idea." Then I will call on them. After that, they will answer right away. They feel like they have got approval or

something for their response and they are willing to say it. I find that works really well.

As the previous teacher does, this teacher also walks around the class, but instead of just listening to the students, he asks the small groups first. If their answers are correct, he asks them to share their response with the rest of the class. According to him, this facilitates active participation from the students because they have already received approval for their response. The selection, in this case, has two stages; the first one is on a smaller scale (small groups) and the second one is on a larger scale, which is the whole class. Some of the teachers argue that sometimes they select individual students by name as this comment shows: "I use disposable chopsticks. I have them write their name on it. I would randomly say 'Yusuke what is the answer' instead of 'you'" (T6). This teacher selects students by randomly calling their names. He does not discuss how this technique works and if it makes students willing to participate or not. The only thing that it seems to be achieving is personalizing the selection by using the names instead of using pronouns. However, it does not allow for teacher perceptions of whether or not the student is ready to answer. Others argue they rarely select one individual student: "selecting one student by name very rare" (T7). If they do it, they claim it is for disciplining the students who are engaged in inappropriate behavior: "if they are on their phones or something I will call them by name and they will be like, 'eh?'" (T7).

Together these results provide important insights into how these teachers view speaker selection in their classes. The teachers divided student selection into two main practices. The first one is selecting a small group of students. Most teachers in this study report using this practice, and they argue it elicits responses from students and makes them more willing to participate. It also provides the students with adequate time to prepare for their responses. These

findings are consistent with that of Kato (2016) and Storch & Aldosari (2013) which indicate that small group discussion creates a positive and relaxed learning environment and increases students' participation. However, other studies point out that some students are left out of the discussion in small groups (Foster, 1998). Also, small group discussion sometimes shifts to the native language instead of the target language (Chen & Hird, 2006). The second practice is selecting one individual student, the teachers argue they do not use this practice very often. They argue that they select individual students to discipline those who are engaged in activities that are not related to learning tasks (see Lauzon & Berger, 2015).

3.2 Teachers' recommendations

Throughout the data, the participants discuss their views and perceptions regarding how to enhance the quality of classroom participation. During these discussions, they provided some recommendations for effective practices to engage EFL learners in classroom activities. Such recommendations can be beneficial to other teachers in similar situations. One of the practices that all teachers agree on is putting students in small groups. They argue that this practice increases the use of English in EFL classrooms and creates an active environment that is not based on a teacher-centered approach. This idea was raised by T4, "I like to put them in small groups of (three or four) that makes them discuss and share the ideas in a good way." Another recommendation was that the teachers should model the responses for the students. They do this by either selecting one of the students who have the right response or the teachers themselves provide the response to make the students build on it in formulating their answers: as T5 puts it, "I would ask the students to ask if it is a discussion. 'Please ask me' and then I would provide my answer first, so they would get an idea of what kind of things you are expecting."

Interestingly, some teachers recommend using electronic devices such as microphones in classrooms. According to T8, this creates a fun atmosphere and makes students willing to participate. The participants also discuss the use of Japanese in the classroom for humorous purposes. One of the teachers argues that using Japanese for making jokes eases the tension in the classroom and creates a fun environment. "I only use Japanese for, you know the jokes or the Kansai ben (local dialect) or stuff like that, just to make the classroom a little bit more fun" (T4). This section has provided some of the recommendations that teachers believe are effective in creating an active environment in EFL classrooms.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This paper set out to investigate some of EFL teachers' perceptions regarding teaching and learning practices in their classrooms. The study has identified a range of topics that the focal group of teachers in a Japanese university discussed. Firstly, it demonstrated their views regarding classroom participation, their teaching practices, and the students' engagement. This study has found that generally, the participants argue that they mostly use referential and open questions in the classroom because these types of questions help elicit more talk from the students than display and closed questions (Farooq, 2007). The teachers also discuss the practices they use to pursue students' responses when they are missing or delayed. They argue that the reason that some learners take a long time before providing answers is that they are not used to being expected to answer in classrooms where the teachers speak most of the time. This is where the disjunct in expectations between non-Japanese teachers and Japanese students can occur. They also argue that not providing enough wait time for learners to think of their answers can delay or even prevent them from formulating answers (Rowe, 1986).

Another theme that was covered by the teachers is speaker selection. They argue that they select small groups of students most of the time because, according to them, it enhances the learning experience (Storch & Aldosari, 2013). They claim that they rarely select an individual student unless it is for disciplinary purposes. Other research in this area shows that teachers often select individual students by name and embodied actions (Kääntä, 2012).

This study has provided rich data in which EFL teachers in a Japanese university expressed their voices and discussed their ideas with their peers. Taken together, the findings of this study added to the literature on EFL teachers' perspectives in the Japanese context by covering areas that have yet to be investigated such as teachers' perspectives on their practices for asking questions and selecting speakers. Even though this study is based on the discussions of a limited number of participants and the aim is not to generalize the findings, other teachers who face difficulties in engaging their students in classroom activities can use these findings to help them better engage students in classroom interaction. In addition, the findings can be used for teacher training programs by addressing some of the teachers' concerns and including some of their suggestions.

One limitation of this study is that none of the participants are novice teachers. It will be interesting to investigate novice teachers' perceptions to analyze the differences between novice teachers and experienced teachers' perceptions of EFL classrooms in Japanese universities.

References

Brock, C. A. (1986). The effects of referential questions on ESL classroom discourse. *TESOL Quarterly*, *20*(1), 47-59.

Chen, R., & Hird, B. (2006). Group work in the EFL classroom in China: A closer look. *RELC Journal*, *37*(1), 91-103.

Cho, J. Y., & Lee, E. H. (2014). Reducing confusion about grounded theory and qualitative content analysis: Similarities and differences. *The Qualitative Report*, *19*(32), 1-20.

Farahian, M., & Rezaee, M. (2012). A case study of an EFL teacher's type of questions: An investigation into classroom interaction. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *47*, 161-167.

Farooq, M. (2007). Exploring the effectiveness of spoken English classes of Japanese EFL learners. *The Journal of Liberal Arts*, *3*, 35-57.

Filipi, A. (2018). Teacher practices in establishing understanding in a foreign language classroom. *Hacettepe University Journal of Education*, *33*, 36-53.

Foster, P. (1998). A classroom perspective on the negotiation of meaning. *Applied Linguistics*, *19*(1), 1-23.

Hosoda, Y. (2014). Missing response after teacher question in primary school English as a foreign language classes. *Linguistics and Education*, *28*, 1-16.

Kääntä, L. (2012). Teachers' embodied allocations in instructional interaction. *Classroom Discourse*, *3*(2), 166-186.

Kato, Y. (2016). What do we want small group activities for? Voices from EFL teachers in Japan. *The Electronic Journal of English as a Second Language*, *19*(4), 1-15.

Lauzon, V. F., & Berger, E. (2015). The multimodal organization of speaker selection in classroom interaction. *Linguistics and Education*, *31*, 14-29.

Lee, Y. A. (2006). Respecifying display questions: Interactional resources for language teaching. *TESOL Quarterly*, *40*(4), 691-713.

McNeil, L. (2012). Using talk to scaffold referential questions for English language learners. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *28*(3), 396-404.

Pomerantz, A. (1984). Pursuing a response. In J. M. Atkinson & J. Heritage (Eds.), *Structure of social action: Studies in conversation analysis* (pp. 152-163). Cambridge University Press.

Rowe, M. B. (1986). Wait time: Slowing down maybe a way of speeding up. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *37*(1), 43-50.

Schegloff, E. A. (2007). *Sequence organization in interaction*. Cambridge University Press.

Silverman, D. (2013). *Doing qualitative research: A practical handbook*. Sage.

Storch, N., & Aldosari, A. (2013). Pairing learners in pair work activity. *Language Teaching Research*, *17*(1), 31-48.

Svennevig, J. (2012). Reformulation of questions with candidate answers. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, *17*(2), 189-204.

Waring, H. Z. (2012). Any questions?: Investigating the nature of understanding checks in the language classroom. *TESOL Quarterly*, *46*(4), 722-752.

Yang, C. C. R. (2010). Teacher questions in second language classrooms: An investigation of three case studies. *Asian EFL Journal*, *12*(1), 181-201.