THE ‘BACKBENCHERS’ OF THE CLASSROOM: The Case of an ESL Classroom at UTP

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Abstract: Teaching large classes has always been a problem to many teachers. This situation becomes more problematic when the teacher has to deal with a passive class, where majority of the students are unresponsive and avoid interaction with the teacher. Usually, in this type of class there will be a group of students who will always be sitting at the back seat of the classroom and they are the really passive ones. This group is called the ‘backbenchers’ of the classroom. Teachers always perceive these students as the ones with bad attitude and not interested in the lesson. But is that really so?

The focus of this paper is to look into the reasons why these ‘backbenchers’ behave the way they do and understand why they always occupy the back seat in the classroom. Several observations were conducted to a classroom of 60 students. Several in-depth interviews were also carried out with some of these ‘backbenchers’ to obtain more detailed information. This paper will further discuss how the teachers can motivate these students to be more active and participative in the classroom in order to enhance the learning process.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the field of teaching ESL, theorists and teachers have agreed that the affective side of the learner is one of the most important influences on language learning success or failure (Brown, 2001; Littlewood, 1992; Oxford, 1990). Anxiety is considered the most serious problem in English language learning. (Horwitz, Howitz, & Cope, 1986). As such, learners “language learning anxiety” which, if not attended to properly by the language teachers, can have a debilitating effect on the learning process (Tsui, 1996). Students with high level of anxiety or feeling of low self-esteem can also be masked by their actions in the classroom.

Studies conducted by Tsui (1998), Chou (2002) mention about the observable behavior of high-anxiety level students. O’Neil et. al (1969) indicated that personality dimensions of students can attribute to the different type of anxiety levels exhibited by students.

Thus, the purpose of this study is to find out the probable reasons as to why a particular group of students would act in a certain manner as reflected through their chosen actions and behaviors in the classrooms. The researchers were particularly interested to observe students
who chose their seats at the back of the classroom. These students would willingly position
themselves at the back row of the classroom during all language learning classes. Was this
action a masked reflection of their inner anxiety? Was it due to a feeling of low self esteem? Or
lack of self confidence?

2. BACKGROUND

Many ESL students are reluctant to speak in class because they feel that they cannot master the
correct form of the language and hence remain passive during the lesson. Some of these
students choose to remain low profile in the class so that the instructor will not notice them and
thus, will not ask them questions in class. These low profile students would usually sit at the
back row of the classroom so that they are far from the instructor. This is especially so in a
class with a large group of students.

This study was originally conducted to find out the best way to maximize learning in a large
ESL classroom. An ideal number of students in a language class should not be more than 30
but sometimes the instructors do not have the say in the number of students they have in their
classroom. Most of the time, this is due to lack of resources or manpower. The authors are also
trapped in such situation. With this idea in mind, the researchers decided to conduct this study
in an ESL writing classroom of 69 students, taught by one of them. They decided to conduct a
qualitative study and began by doing several observations.

According to (Marshall & Rossman, 1995),

In the early stage of qualitative inquiry, the researcher typically enters the
setting with broad areas of interest but without predetermined categories
or strict observational checklists. The value here is that the researcher is
able to discover the recurring patterns of behavior and relationships. After
such patterns are identified and described through early analysis of field
notes, checklists become more appropriate and focused observation is then
used at later stages of the study, usually to check analytic themes to see, for
example, if they explain behavior and relationships over a long time or in a
variety of settings. (p. 79).

Thus, during the first observation, the researchers did not have any particular aspect to focus
on. The observation was done at the times when the students came to class, where they sat in
the classroom, how they did their group discussion and whether they asked questions to seek
clarification or not, and so on. On that particular day, they had to work on a written exercise
based on the earlier topic, and they had to do this task in small groups. On the second
observation during the lecture, the researcher noticed that some students sitting at the last row
had to stick their necks out or some would go to the extend of standing, in order to see the
notes written at the bottom of the screen. For the lecture, computer slides presentation was used
and the screen fills up the wall from top to bottom. The lecture room was not so big, but big
enough to accommodate around 80 students. There were 69 students in this group, so the room
was quite full. However, there were still some empty seats in the front row. But when the
students at the back were asked to come and sit in front, they refused to and said that they did not mind sitting at the back.

This was when the researcher came to the idea for the focus of this study. The researcher wanted to see in the next observation whether these students would sit at the back again in the next class. So, in the third observation, the focus of the observation was narrowed down to the group of students sitting at the back of the class and the researcher and her team decided to call these students the “backbenchers” of the class. In this observation, almost the same students sat at the back. The door of the lecture room was positioned at the middle of the room, so the distance between the front row and the back row is the same. They came into the class and headed straight to the back row. They did not even look at the middle or front row, as if they had already set their minds to sit at the back before coming to class. The researchers believe there are reasons behind this act and would like to find out more about it. Thus, the purpose of this study is to find out the reasons why these students like to sit at the back of the classroom. These students are called the ‘backbenchers’ of the classroom. The research questions for this study are:

- Why do some students become ‘backbenchers’?
- What are the implications of this?
- What can educators do to assist these students in their learning?

For the purpose of this study, ‘backbenchers’ is defined as the students who habitually sit at the back row of the classroom. These students would sit at the same place for every class session, no matter whether they come early or late for the class.

3. METHODOLOGY

The data was gathered through literature reading, observations and interviews. Observation entails the systematic noting and recording of events (Marshall & Rossmann, 1995). Through observation, the researchers would be able to learn about the students’ behaviors and the meaning attached to such behaviors. Interviewing is a data collection method relied on quite extensively by qualitative researchers. Qualitative interviews are more like conversations where the researcher explores a few general topics to help uncover participant’s meaning perspectives. Marshall & Rossmann (1995) stressed that this is an assumption fundamental to qualitative research – the participant’s perspective on the phenomenon of interest should unfold as the participant views it, not as the researcher views it.

3.1 Observations

The type of observation that was employed in this study was covert observation because it is more likely to capture what is really happening as compared to overt observation. This is because people may behave quite differently when they know they are being observed compared with how they would behave if they were not aware of being observed (Patton, 1990). The observations were done to a group of 69 students in an English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom for one semester.
3.2. Interviews

The form of interview used in this study was the focus group interview. This is because the students might not have reflected on the topic and felt unprepared to respond. Krueger (1988) claims that “The questions in a focus group setting are deceptively simple; the trick is to promote the participants’ self-disclosure through the creation of a permissive environment” (p.18). In other words, the students might need to listen to their friends in the group’s opinions and understandings in order to form their own ideas. Four groups were interviewed, two groups of the ‘backbenchers’, which consists of 6 out of 8 ‘backbenchers’, and two groups of three students who are not ‘backbenchers’. The later group was interviewed to gauge their perceptions towards the ‘backbenchers’.

4. FINDINGS

From the observations and interviews conducted, the researchers found that these students prefer to be the ‘backbenchers’ of the classroom due to the feeling of comfort, at ease and classifying themselves as mediocre students.

4.1 Comfort

From the observations, the researchers noticed that these “backbenchers” are always the same students. It is as if they have already had the agreement from the others that the seats are theirs and nobody else would sit there. That’s because when they came into the class they straight away head to the back of the class. Where they sit was predetermined, meaning they have already set their minds where to sit before coming to class. This is apparent from the interview with them.

Q : How do you choose your seat in the class?
A : The seat that I am comfortable with.
Q : At the back?
A : Yeah

Q : How do you choose your seat in the class?
B : I sit at the back.

The students also mentioned that they always sit at a place that they are comfortable with. When asked to define what they mean by “comfortable”, they mean the place where they feel safe. They feel safe from being questioned by the lecturer. To them, sitting in front will make them visible to the lecturer and thus making them easy targets for the lecturer to ask them to answer his or her questions. This was indicated by Student B during the interview:

Q : So, you sit at the back so that the lecturer can’t see you?
B : [Laugh] Yes, I am a low profile person. I don’t want the lecturer to notice me.
Q : Oh, I see. Some students say that those sitting at the back will have the tendency to be
called by the lecturer, same like those seating in front?

B: Yes, that’s true. It happened to me once.

As lecturers themselves, the researchers would always ask questions to the whole class especially those sitting at the back. It was not that the other students were ignored, but because they would like to check whether these students could hear the lecture clearly. Those sitting in front and in the middle, of course could hear clearly, but those at the back were quite far from the lecturer. Furthermore, the researcher found that these “backbenchers” could get easily distracted so by asking them questions, it would get them back on track. This way could also help the students to check their understanding of the subject, which results in refinement and revision of what is retained. These students also would like to remain low profile in the classroom just like what Student B mentioned in the interview. If possible, they would like to just sit back and “blend” with the wall, so that the lecturer will not notice them at all. The researchers reckoned that these students do not want their presence to be felt because if they are absent, the lecturer will not notice it.

4.2 At ease

The students also feel that they are at ease when sitting at the back because the lecturer will not be able to see them clearly and thus, they are able to talk to their friends. In the observations this act was glaring. The researchers could see that some of the students were talking to their friends, giggling and not really paying attention. But when the students were asked about this, they insisted that they did pay attention in class. They said that they only talked when they had to ask their friends about the points that they cannot understand or they missed in the lecture. In other words, they talk to their friends to seek clarification, not because they were not paying attention. They insisted this in the interview:

Student C:
Q: When you say comfortable, what do you mean?
C: I feel relax, at ease. If I sit in front, I have to pay attention all the time. I cannot talk, I have to look at the lecturer all the time and I have to be prepared all to time, in case the lecturer ask questions.
Q: You like to talk while your lecturer is delivering the lecture in front?
C: No, I only ask my friends if I don’t understand what the lecturer says or I missed some points from the lecture.

Student D:
Q: So, you must sit with your friends?
D: Yes
Q: Why is that?
D: Because if I don’t understand something, I have someone to ask. If I sit in front, I can’t talk to my friends because the lecturer can see me clearly and will get angry with me. At the back, the lecturer can’t see me.

4.3 Mediocre students
The researchers did ask other students about their perceptions on these “backbenchers” and most of them have negative perceptions toward this group. They perceive this group as students who are naughty, not serious in their studies and noisy. To them, this group likes to make noise at the back and this distracts them. When students who were not the Backbenchers’ were asked on their opinion on the students sitting at the back, they responded:

Student W and X:
Q: Why do you like sitting in front of the class?
X: At the back of the class, it is very noisy. We can’t pay attention, which is why we sit in front.
Y: We’ll be able to pay more attention in class if we sit in front.
X: In the back, people sit there to pass their time.

Student Y and Z:
Q: What do you think of the people who sit at the back of the class?
Y: They also want to prevent themselves from being asked questions.
Q: Do you think people who sit at the back the class are not too bright?
Z: No, I don’t agree.
Q: Why?
Z: Cause, well, they probably sit at the back because they have not studied or practiced yet.

During the observation the researchers also noticed that once in a while during the lecture, one or two of the students turned around and gave the ‘backbenchers’ the “annoying” look when they were a bit noisy. They could get the message quickly and kept quiet. When the perception that other students have toward them been told to them, Student A and B denied that they were not serious in class.

Student A and B:
Q : Some students say that those sitting at the back are the naughty ones, not serious in the class. What do you think?
A : No, that’s not true. We are serious. It’s just that we like to sit at the back. I can still see the screen, can still take notes. I have no problem with that.
B : No, not me. I take my studies seriously and I take down all the notes.
Q : Do you learn anything sitting at the back?
A : Oh, yes we do. We listen to the lecturer, we take notes.

From the observation it was true that these students did take down notes, and they were serious about it. If not they would not have gone to the extent of getting up from their seats in order to see what was written at the bottom of the screen.

From the interview, the researchers also gathered that these students think that they were just mediocre students and thus, should behave as such. They perceived those students sitting in front as smart students.

Student A and C:
Q : What is your perception toward those students sitting in front?
A : To me these students are the intelligent and hard working students. They always like to ask questions and like to volunteer in class.
C: People in the front row are good in English. They can discuss with the teacher because they are good in English.

Student E
Q: Do you think they sit in front of the class because they are very smart?
E: Yeah, because they understand the teacher very well. Sometimes the people at the back don’t understand the teacher well.

Student F:
Q: What is your perception toward those who sit in front?
A: They are the smart ones. But sometimes the front row is for the latecomers.

5. DISCUSSION

From the data gathered, the researchers could conclude that these ‘backbenchers’ behave this way because they were anxious and have low self-confidence in the subject, since the subject is pitched at advanced level.

5.1 Anxiety

Anxiety is a basic human emotion consisting of fear and uncertainty. Anxiety has its good and bad sides. On the one hand it helps avoid dangerous events that can be life threatening. On the other hand it causes people to freeze as they avoid non-dangerous situations (Sarason, 1986). One event that causes minds to freeze, but not dangerous is answering and/or asking questions in public. From the interviews, the ‘backbenchers’ mentioned that they prefer to sit at the back to avoid being seen, which could lead to being questioned by the teacher. Tittle (1997) claims that ESL students “experience a kind of anxiety that is related to test anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and communication apprehension” (p.1). Communication anxiety manifests itself differently depending on the individual and his or her culture. The ‘backbenchers’ prefer to sit with their own groups, people with the same culture and background, and from our observations, they seldom mix or communicate with other students in the class. They also consider themselves as ‘not so smart’ students. Therefore, being passive in class, lateness, talking in class and the inability or unwillingness to respond to questions posed in class are symptoms of anxiety for ESL students (Dornyei, 2001a). In general, anxiety results in lowered student motivation, inhibition and unwillingness to take any kind of risk. That is why these ‘backbenchers’ prefer to sit at the back.

5.2 Low self-confidence

How students perceive their competency and how they judge the amount of control they exert in the learning process greatly affects how they will perform. The ‘backbenchers’ perceived themselves as mediocre students. They may have high intelligence but lack confidence in their ability to complete tasks successfully. If they lack confidence, they will approach learning challenges with dread. Low self-confidence is another reason why these ‘backbenchers’ behave
the way they do. By sitting at the back they thought they would be safe from being noticed by
the teacher who usually ask questions to the students about the subject. They did not want to
answer the questions because they were not sure whether they could answer correctly or not.

6. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTRUCTORS

Instructors can have significant impact on levels of student motivation. Students find their
instructors as a source of assistance to learn attitudes, which facilitate learning and promote
relationships between teachers and students in a way conducive to learning (Dornyei, 2001b).
In the case of the ‘backbenchers’, teachers should create a sense of competence in these
students as this could boost up their self-confidence. Increasing learners’ self-confidence is
critical to maintaining motivation. In classroom learning it is natural for learners to have the
tendency to get tired or bored and succumb to an attractive distraction. Therefore, the teacher
with her authoritative role should control and foster approaches that could create a climate of
learning and lets go of some aspect of power to encourage ‘fun’ in the classroom (Hall, 2004).

In one of the observations, the researchers noticed that these backbenchers’ like to volunteer
their friends to do the exercise on the board when the instructor asked for volunteers. They
started to show active participation, thus instructors should make full use of this situation to
make them feel that their suggestions were taken into account. The instructor did call upon the
name that they suggested and they were very happy and excited about this. Biehler and
Snowman (1990) suggested that students seem to respond more positively when their feelings
and opinions are taken into account, and when they are invited to participate in making
decisions. This action could also create some ‘fun’ in the classroom.

In an inherently face threatening environment full of power play such as a classroom it is
useful to consider positive approaches which purport to help learners self-confidence (Dornyei,
2001a). In terms of classroom practice, building on success is important for learners to develop
their self-confidence. Dornyei further suggested that favorable self-conceptions of the subject
learned could be promoted by providing regular experiences of success. The instructor may
first ask these ‘backbenchers’ questions but be sure that the questions are simple, easy for them
to understand so that they are able to give the correct answers. Let them experience success in
the class. Then, when the instructor feels that these students have gained their self-confidence,
more challenging questions could be asked. Each task should be set at a level higher than the
previous one, thus with each task students will build confidence and become motivated to
move on to the next step. Instructors should be generous in praising and giving positive
feedback because a positive reaction from the instructor will get students to go a step further
and without realizing it with each step the students will gain courage (Cimcoz, 1999).

Anxiety in the classroom can be reduced by making the learning context less stressful
(Dornyei, 2001a). Classroom climate is important. A tense classroom climate can undermine
learning and demotivate learners. If students experience the classroom as a caring, supportive
place where there is a sense of belonging and everyone is valued and respected, they will tend
to participate more fully in the process of learning. The observations showed that these
‘backbenchers’ seldom ask questions when the instructor was in front of the class but they did
ask questions when the instructor went to the back of the class and stood near them. This was obvious when they were in small group work. When the students worked in groups, the instructor would walk around the class to see what they were doing and also to attend to their questions. These “backbenchers” would be raising their hands and asked questions for further clarification. The researchers found this interesting and in the opinion that when they ‘backbenchers’ are far from the instructor and since they thought they were just mediocre students, the instructor would not pay attention to them and would only pay attention to the smart ones, the ones who sit closer to her – the front row. But when the instructor went near them, she was more accessible and approachable and thus, they felt more comfortable to ask questions. In this respect, the researchers suggested that instructors walk around the class especially when the students are doing group work to get closer to them and to build good rapport with them. A classroom with good instructor-student rapport could make the learning context less stressful, and therefore could reduce classroom anxiety.

According to Thanasoulas (2002), when students have positive learning environment where they feel comfortable, they become motivated and begin to grow academically, socially as well as emotionally. In the case of the ‘backbenchers’ the researchers suggest that the instructor should just let them sit at the place that they are comfortable with. Do not force them to sit in the front because this will create more stress to them. But the teachers should ensure that the learning process is taking place and they do participate in the class discussion and activities. It is important that the instructors organize and manage the classroom as an effective learning environment. Because anxious students are unlikely to develop motivation to learn, it is important that learning occur within a relaxed and supportive atmosphere (Good & Brophy, 1994).

7. CONCLUSION

Regardless of the choice of sitting position in the classroom, language teachers or instructors should not have a preconceived notion of the learning capabilities of students in an ESL classroom. Instead, a fun environment coupled with personal attention, close rapport and effective management by resilient language instructors encourages language learning in the classroom. The limitation of this study is that it is done in only one classroom although this phenomenon does occur in other ESL classrooms. Perhaps future studies could be conducted on more than one ESL classrooms. Cross-disciplinary studies can also be carried in other areas of discipline to ascertain if such behavior of backbenchers also exist in other classes other than the ESL classrooms.
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