



AN INVESTIGATION OF HOW TO MOTIVATE LIBYAN EFL STUDENTS TO PLAY AN ACTIVE ROLE IN THEIR LEARNING PROCESS BY USING COMPETITIONS

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Abstract:

Traditional learning allows students to study and memorize ineffectively in order to pass the tests. On the other hand, learning, in its real and new context, encourages students to apply information and improve their critical and imaginative thinking, mental creativity, and other different life skills. This study investigates the advantages and the effect of using competitions in EFL context. The participants of this study are 60 sophomores and juniors who were divided into four competing groups. The competition includes three tasks. In order to collect the data, the researchers have observed the students' performances and attitudes during and after the time of the given task. Furthermore, an open-ended questionnaire was used to investigate students' thoughts and opinion of the participation in the competition. The results showed that students' participation in the competition enhanced their motivation and awareness of their language use, critical thinking and creative abilities. In conclusion, although this was a small-scale study, the students' participation in the competition shows that the new teaching ideas can be implemented successfully despite of the limited resources and the time pressure as the competition was set at the end of the academic year.

Keywords: life skills, competition, EFL, motivation

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1. Introduction

Cooperative learning has a significant role in students' learning processes. The learning environment and the interactions among students have a great influence on personality progress, social growth, and education appreciation. While students go through the educational system, there is an emphasis on marks and test results and this strengthens social comparison and competition among students. Competition is a kind of motivation, that can be a significant driving force in learning, and motivation to learn is essential to accomplish good results and to make students learn a certain amount of new knowledge. Consequently, competition is present at many fields of the education. It is present in the system itself, as it is more or less selective in all parts of the life aspects such as sports, work, art, festivals...etc. Competition is also present in the entrance exams both at the secondary and higher education level in most of the countries.

Therefore, it is highly important for teachers to have a clear understanding about it, be able to manage the competitive processes and prepare students for competitions in life. As a consequence, teachers should focus on teaching them how to compete while keeping themselves to implicit and explicit rules of competition and how to cope with the emotional consequences of competition. Thus, the teachers play a vital part in creating significant and competitive atmosphere. They plan, organize activities, encourage their students actively, and achieve the intended outcomes easily.

2. Literature Review

Verhoeff (1997) clarifies the relationship between the two terms, education and competition. In the broader sense, he identifies *“education and competition are two universal ingredients of all human culture”*. In addition, he investigates the importance of competitions in education, especially nowadays education. Since competition is part of every culture and since education should transmit culture, it is necessary to integrate competitions into education to help learners get used to it in their daily life.

Joseph mentions that *“many schools integrate these competitions into their course work...”* (as cited in Schuster et al, 2006) while others prefer to combine the competition with outside materials that are not related to the curriculum (Schuster et al, 2006). Furthermore, other researchers argue that competitions are very good technique for motivating learners and their feedback is useful to the teachers to improve the education system. Consequently, most often, the students have found themselves using the curriculum for tools analysis to achieve their aims. Accordingly, this builds *“lifelong*

learning skills that are difficult to get in the standard classroom environment" (Schuster et al, 2006). Therefore, competitions should be associated with the school materials and curriculum provided in schools, and *"the competition results should be used to evaluate students (like an exam)"* (Verhoeff, 1997).

As a matter of fact, Schuster et al (2006) claim that both of these two modules, integrating the curriculum into the competition or not, have negative and positive points. For instance, when the competition is graded, the learners will concentrate more on this course project than other classes. They also mention another advantage of combining coursework with competitions, *"...this model provides a teaching credit for the advisor."* In addition, the instructor will guide the design team and that would be included as his normal teaching load. On the other hand, one disadvantage is *"bringing the efforts into the classroom seems to result in the advisor taking more of a lead because of the roles of student and professor."*

Verhoeff (1997) points out that in countries such as Germany and The Netherlands, the modern framework being developed for upper secondary education permits learners to count the results of the competition towards their final examination. Guo (2011:247) explores that most English classroom instruction and activities in Taiwan adopt textbook pre-selected materials. Although the curriculum provides very useful information, learners show little interest in them. But, if the regular curriculum is not really encouraging, how will the situation be look like? Well, Verhoeff (1997) answers this question and suggests that *"If the regular curriculum is not motivating, then good students should be encouraged to participate in extracurricular competitions."* However, despite the opposite point of views about how to conduct such competitions, he believes that doing competition in the education associations is useful for the latter. He also thinks that competitions should challenge the students to perform well.

Harmer-Adams et al (2002) have noticed that students have poor level to write and solve problems. So, they wanted to use different teaching methods in order to investigate if they *"could generate any of the 'Deep Thinking Skills' identified as important by the Qualifications Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA) though such competitive activities"*. The assigned competition had taken a place for many weeks in different classrooms such as, hair and beauty, and engineering. The researchers distributed 100 questionnaires to students who belong to different levels. According to the researchers, 75% liked the idea of copying from the board, 70% of the students liked the games and preferred practice because they think it helps them to learn easily and 80 % feel interested to compare their performances against each other.

Based on the findings of the above-mentioned research studies, this research aims to investigate research gaps addressing the use of competitions in EFL contexts mainly in the Libyan context.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants of this study are English Language students who study at Sabratha College of Arts, Sabratha University in Libya. A total of 60 students participated in this study. They were students in second and third year. To provide a sense of shared purpose in the competition, sophomores and juniors were divided into four mixed groups. It was very easy to divide them because the researchers followed this strategy: sophomores who studied in group "A" join those juniors who studied in group "A" as well. It is the same case with the other three groups, "B", "C", and "D". Moreover, the participants have been chosen according to three major categories: their English proficiency level, their interest and their great performance in class. The majority of the groups gender are females except group "A" which has an only male, and group "B" which has two male students. However, each group is guided by one person whom so-called, "the leader" and another student is "the assistant". More than one student was "the photographer" and "the reporter". These roles provide our students with a good understanding of carrying responsibility and making their work more authentic.

3.2 Procedures

We decided to organize a competition that emphasizes the importance of cooperative learning and active participation. Therefore, we followed Verhoeff's (1997) basic phases for holding a competition: preparation, execution, and follow-up. The first phase prepares the whole picture such as, competition rules, competition tasks, judging procedures. In this stage, we set up the goals and rules of the competition. Close to the end of the study year 2015, the researchers met several times to plan for the topic and the ideas of the competition. As soon as the plan was ready, we scheduled to meet our participant to define the tasks and the rules of our competition. It was on March 15th, 2015.

The next phase *"is where the actual competition is carried out: the participants do the competing and are evaluated"*. The researchers scheduled to meet the students at particular times. It was every Sunday when the participants submit their finished task reports and learn about the next one. So, each task lasts for one week to be done. If any student misses a meeting, the leaders inform their members about the task and the

assigned instructions. However, we divided tasks into three main stages; from broad to narrow. The first task is a social task where students should think creatively about ways to collect money in order to draw the smile and help poor people in their neighborhoods or their city. The second task is an educational task in which students teach some free English lessons to other college students or even other younger students who live near them. An open task is the last task for our learners where they have to do something nice and useful for the college. After those three stages were done, students had to present their tasks at Sabratha College of Arts for their colleagues.

By using those tasks, the researchers aimed, first; to improve the students' soft skills such as time management, creativity, and teamwork. Second, to develop their social skills, such as decision making, communicating, using emotional intelligence, and trusting others. Third, inspire and encourage other students by sharing their ideas and experience with the outside world. Finally, broaden students' perspectives on learning effectively.

The last phase is, as Verhoeff (1997) mentions, very important for the effect of the contests in which the results are analyzed and presented to the learners, but he admits that *"but it is very time-consuming and currently often receives too little attention"*. To enhance the value and the challenge of the competition, the students are evaluated regularly after each task. The main elements of the assessment are teamwork (division of roles), creativity (the idea), discipline (instructions/ following the roles), time management (the division of task according to the days of the week, deadline), task achievement (overall evaluation), and written report (description of all the stages). Each criterion is evaluated out of five, a total of 30 points.

Then, a short questionnaire of 3 open ended questions was administered to the students to collect their views about the stages of the competition, the advantages/disadvantages and how it can be improved.

3.3 Research Question

This study aims to investigate the use of competitions in enhancing EFL undergraduate students' academic and social skills. As a consequence, this study aims to go a long way towards supporting the use of competitions by investigating the advantages of using competitions in English language classes. In addition, it aims to provide a useful model of competitions that can be used in other contexts. This study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. To what extent, we can use competitions in Libyan University level?
2. What are the advantages of using competitions in the EFL context?

4. Findings and Discussions

Analyzing the students' answers to the questionnaire and our observations to their performance identified the following points:

Most of the answers were in favor of competitions due to the following point:

1. The competition offered the shy students a sense of comfort and self-esteem. Another good benefit is that participation out-of-class environment allowed those introverted students to have the courage to step forward and plan and engage well for the tasks as the same as those sociable students. Thus, students' rejection to work in groups decreased. What's more, student 22 stated '*this stage gave us a sense of courage and self-confidence about giving free lectures and lessons for other students at any time*' (Group A students). For instance, when group C performed a comic show, they felt satisfied and said that '*they caught two birds with one hand, and they '...[made] the audience [the students] forget their stress... and collected a good amount of money for the charity which was a part of the competition*'. The study revealed that the competition has a positive impact on most of the participants.

S11: '*the competition was wonderful experience. It conceives plenty of significant values that we are greatly in need of these days. Competing each other for good deeds was a bright idea*'.

2. College is a place where people meet, interact and learn. Therefore, in education, teachers should maintain this characteristic in order to develop students' creativity and encouragement towards their learning process and self-improvement. T9 (group D) mentioned, '*at first surly faced some difficulties in finding the suitable lecture time and the organization of explaining the subject, but at the end with some group work, we could go on*'.

3. The competitions are good chance for students to try other tasks such as organizing events, buying snacks, helping in catering and cleaning to help people for free, student 1, '*the feeling is amazing when you see the smiley happy faces because you helped them for free*'. However, this made them more concerned about being productive citizens in the society. Group A students whose positive energy and behavior was very clear from the very beginning, explored that, '*So, we said why we don't make use of what we had studied and use it as a weapon... for good seeks and noble deeds.*'

4. One of the challenges which faced our participants is that they needed to think in a creative way. Because we (the researchers) always reminded them of the winning policy, students worked hard to be distinguished. In stage one, students were asked to make/design a product and sell it to help poor people in return. Students came up with ideas the researchers have never expected. For example, one of the students drew caricatures with some expressions, on white t-shirts of different sizes and bought them

on campus. Perfectly, two of the groups acted two English short stories from their last year class (2014). There were tickets, costumes, snacks, and big audience. Most importantly, they planned and prepared it well within the assigned time frame; additionally, they made their audience feel very interested. It was exactly as cinema atmosphere, and this is something we lack not only in our college surroundings, but also in Libya. Some different students thought of building school locker where only English students could keep their heavy books and dictionaries; instead of carrying them every lecture. They did it successfully. This was something needed and students felt the place started to look like English schools. Their thinking went really out of the class walls. Students could be easily very creative in different ways, teachers just need to be supportive and offer their students the chance to turn their ideas into reality.

5. Concluding Remarks

This study showed that students can be motivated by using competitions, mainly when it is combined with interesting tasks. The success students experience with competing each other will help them to gain confidence as college students. With clear goals and instructions, competitions offer students the opportunities to not only learn English, but also to actively participate in that learning. Finally, it is worth mentioning that these competitions are flexible. Teachers can change them according to their context and their students' level and needs.

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