UNIVERSITATEA DE VEST DIN TIMIȘOARA

ȘCOALA DOCTORALĂ DE ȘTIINȚE UMANISTE

DOMENIUL FILOLOGIE

ABSTRACT

INVESTIGATING UPPER SECONDARY STUDENTS' AND TEACHERS' VIEWS ON MOTIVATION TO ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT IN THE EFL CLASSES. A CASE STUDY IN ROMANIA

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Timișoara, 2024

ABSTRACT

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KEY WORDS: EFL classes, upper secondary level, student motivation, active engagement.

INTRODUCTION

We are living in a world dominated by technology and fast developments that demand from us a constant search for the best solutions to cope with these changes that have a great impact on our professional and personal lives, whether we like it or not. For this, we need to be equipped with a variety of skills to succeed in life, skills that most people gain and improve during their formal education.

Thus, novelty in education is mandatory nowadays if we want our children to be better prepared for navigating the demands of tomorrow's world. Reforms are waiting to be designed, piloted and implemented by researchers and educational trainers working along teachers and students, reforms that bring novelty, motivation and genuine engagement into the classroom. What is important to be addressed by future educational changes, is creating the proper learning environments that foster creative and critical thinking, provide different ways of acquiring knowledge, spark students' curiosity to gain a better understanding of the world they are inhabiting and help them become the creators of a better future.

Another important aspect of the today's world is the necessity for communication among people from different places, who can share their experience, knowledge and various information with one another, so that they can bring the necessary innovations and solutions to transform the world. This need is strongly related to having a common language to facilitate the dialogue between people who do not share the same native languages.

During the last two decades, research has showed that English was used as the main instrument to connect people from different parts of the world, facilitate the creation of an international

job market, and allow access to international educational programs and enormous online content. This trend of using English extensively in our personal and professional lives, created the need for promoting educational policies to help people worldwide reach their English language potential. There are also many researchers who argue against this tendency of imposing the constant use of English language which they see as a means of serving the interests of corporates and annulling the importance of a language identity.

However, the benefits of creating a global community for commerce, technological advancements, education and international affairs, are hard to deny and they are strongly related to the wide spread of English language worldwide. As a consequence, in many countries English language is considered an important educational goal and students begin learning this foreign language form very early ages.

RATIONALE OF THE PRESENT RESEARCH

Romania is one of the countries that has prioritized the learning of the English language especially during the last two decades. Ever since it became part of the European Union countries, there have been many educational programs that underlined the importance of learning English and acquiring a certain degree of fluency in this language in our county. Consequently, Romanian students all over the country are acquainted with this language since very early ages and many of them learn it at school staring from preparatory grades. And the importance of English is constantly growing in our country, thus, English learning and teaching has become an important educational goal.

But the today's generations of Romanian students easily lose their interest in any school subject, especially if the teaching strategies fail to meet their needs. In addition, the Romanian educational system is constantly criticized for the lack of core reforms necessary for improving and innovating the teaching-learning process. The old-fashioned teaching strategies which prioritize listening to lectures and taking notes, the discrepancy between the importance placed on general knowledge and not on developing practical skills, the gap between what the students are taught during schooling period and what the employers ask from them later on, are but among the arguments for bringing real changes in Romanian educational system.

Because English fluency is an important life-long skill that can easily be acquired during primary and secondary education, it is teachers' responsibility to find ways to keep students active and engaged during English as a Foreign Language classes. This is the reason why teachers are in constant search for the most innovative and effective methods to motivate

students to become active learners of the target language and create the proper educational environment for learning to take place.

Being one of the teachers preoccupied about bringing novelty into the classroom and finding the best teaching strategies to meet my students' interests and needs, I began doing research on the efficiency of some methods while using them in the classroom. In addition, I was concerned about a discrepancy I could notice between the high level of English many of my students could demonstrate during primary and lower secondary education and the modest level English of some of my upper secondary students. First, I started to discuss my concerns with other teachers of English as a Foreign Language from some schools in the Western part of Romania. Then, I listened to my students' ideas about the topic of student motivation during upper secondary level. All the knowledge gathered led me to become interested in researching the issue in a more structured manner. Thus, I engaged in a study that tries to present both upper secondary teachers' and students' viewpoints about what leads to real engagement with the target language.

THE PRESENT STUDY IN SHORT

The present study offers multiple perspectives on what motivates upper secondary students from the Western part of Romania to learn the target language and what makes them become active participants of the English as a Foreign Language classes. Moreover, it emphasizes the fact that motivation plays an important role in upper secondary learners' interest for the foreign language and in their gradual improvement of various language skills.

The investigation also aims to present the interrelationship between student motivation and active engagement during the target language classes, and how these two aspects can lead to genuine learning of the target language. In this respect, many of the participants to the study agree on the fact that motivated students are the ones who are active during the classes and that the active learners are those who become proficient speakers of English language.

The purpose of this study was mainly to explore how English as a Foreign Language classes can be improved, so that students become motivated to participate actively in their own learning process of the target language. In addition, the unexpected situation created by the Covid-19 pandemic revealed a lot of issues the Romanian educational system had had for many years.

HYPOTHESIS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The central aims of the present study were to investigate what motivates upper secondary students to become actively involve in learning English as a Foreign Language and what teaching strategies and classroom aspects raise student level of motivation and participation in the foreign language classes. To make this happen, the research focused on exploring students' and teachers' viewpoints on motivation and on analysing the key-elements that contribute to students' genuine engagement in these classes. In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic generated several aspects on how motivation during English as a Foreign Language class can be acquired in the online environment, due to the fact that it happened while this study was conducted.

The hypothesis of the research was formulated at the beginning of the study: Upper secondary students in Romania participate more actively during the EFL classes if they are exposed to a variety of teaching-learning strategies, materials and tasks that motivate them to learn the target language. As a consequence, learners improve their English skills and perform better academically.

The research questions were designed to address the main aspects of the hypothesis and to help selecting the proper methods for collecting the necessary data for the present investigation. They were also formulated to lead towards the necessary changes that teachers of English as a Foreign Language in Romania should consider bringing into the classroom to raise their upper secondary learners' interest for, engagement with and fluency in English.

The research questions are the following:

Research Question 1. In what way is motivation related to students' engagement or lack of engagement in the EFL class?

Research Question 2. What are the aspects of teaching English as a Foreign Language that motivate upper secondary students from Romania to improve their foreign language skills and be active participants during EFL classes?

Research Question 3. In what ways did the pandemic affect Romanian teachers' and students' motivation for teaching and learning English as a Foreign Language?

Research Question 4. How can EFL classes be improved so that Romanian upper secondary students become more engaged and motivated learners of the target language?

RESEARCH METHODS IN THE PRESENT STUDY

The investigated topic of the present research is the correlation between motivation and active participation during English as a Foreign Language classes in the case of Romanian upper secondary students. It also refers to bringing the most effective teaching methods to help the target students continuously improve their level of English and become more active during these classes.

The complexity of the present study and the fact that different perspectives were implied, indicated that a mixed methods research type was the most appropriate method of collecting and analysing the data. The mixed methodology allowed gathering rich data about what motivates and engages students in the English as a Foreign Language classes. It also favoured using multiple methods and perspectives to gain a more comprehensive understanding of a research problem. In addition, the mixed method paradigm encompasses different methods which are suitable for different aspects of the investigation. Furthermore, the mixed methods approach reduces considerably the limitations of both the qualitative and the quantitative approaches, thus, giving the investigator the possibility to explore more angles of the topic.

Thus, the data for the present study was collected and analysed using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The two quantitative methods used were a student questionnaire and a classroom observation worksheet. The qualitative instruments used were: semi-formal interviews with Romanian teachers of English as a Foreign Language, a focus group discussion with Romanian upper secondary students, a 5-month case study and a teacher-researcher diary with notes and reflections on teaching English as a Foreign Language in the Western part of Romania.

The quantitative methods used in the present study helped collecting a large amount of information about what motivates upper secondary students to improve their English language. The data were transformed into numbers and figures that were analysed in a chapter in detail (Chapter 3). In addition, this instrument helped in connecting the findings to the general population of Romanian upper secondary students who learn English as a Foreign Language.

The qualitative instruments used in this study helped in presenting the topic under investigation as it is perceived by different observers and participants in the process of teaching and learning English as a Foreign Language in Romania. In addition, the qualitative methods encouraged reflecting on various angles the participants attached to the concepts of motivation and active participation in the classroom.

QUALITY CRITERIA AND ETHICAL PRINCIPLES IN THE PRESENT STUDY

In the present research, it was important to approach quality issues, especially validity, from different angles to avoid factors that might lead to false or invalid conclusions. To reach valid and trustworthy outcomes in this research paper, the following instruments were used: asking for colleagues' opinions, conducting semi-formal interviews with other teachers of English, writing down various ideas on the topic under investigation. Furthermore, I included different points of view on what motivates students to learn a foreign language and did a lot of written reflection in my personal research diary. All these led to establishing a relationship of trust and credibility with the readers and reviewers of my research paper.

Being a teacher of English as a Foreign Language for more than thirteen years, it was of outmost importance to create a balance between objective and subjective perspectives on the topic of motivation. The classroom observations and peer review helped in minimising the pitfalls of the highly subjective approach, that would have led to placing the research and the findings in jeopardy.

The ethical principles followed throughout the entire investigation referred to having the consent from the participants, confidentiality of information, protection of the participants, honesty of presenting the findings, avoiding plagiarism, full presentation of findings and acknowledging verbally the contribution of each of the participants.

Thus, the participants in the research were informed about the topic and the ethical issues (consent forms) from the beginning. After becoming part of the actual investigation, I reinforced the fact that anonymity is paramount in my research, especially to create a secure mindset for students and teachers to express their personal opinions (focus group, interviews) and answer questions (questionnaire) without any fear of being judged, emotionally harmed or punished in any way. Moreover, after finishing the paper I disseminated a summary of the findings to all the participants in the study and showed appreciation through letters of gratitude.

Regarding honesty, in the part of the paper dedicated to what I was able to find related to the topic under investigation, I presented everything in detail and without omitting anything, even the findings that contradicted the last part of my hypothesis. And to avoid plagiarism, all the quotations were marked accordingly and all the books and articles quoted were written after the conclusions, in the list of works cited (Bibliography).

OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTERS

The paper is divided into five chapters.

Chapter 1 represents the introductory part of the study. It is divided into three parts: the first part explains the main literature concepts used, the second part refers to the Romanian educational context and the reforms from the last thirty years, and the last part presents some of the articles related to the topic of student motivation and active participation during classes. In more detail, the first part offers an introduction of the theoretical background of the research and some important ideas related to the following concepts: English as a Foreign Language, language learning, language teaching, motivation, active participation, creativity and reflective teaching. The second part aims at presenting the Romanian educational context for the study with the already-done reforms, the pandemic element and the innovations that are necessary for today's upper secondary students. The last part tries to connect the present research with similar studies conducted on classroom motivation and on how Romanian teachers can transform their learners into fully-engaged and active participants of English as a Foreign Language classes.

Thus, the chapter aims at contextualising the present investigation and pinpoint its place in the array of the research studies on motivation and active participation of Romanian upper secondary students during English as a Foreign Language classes.

Chapter 2 focuses on the methodology used in the present research. It begins with a presentation of what it means to conduct good research. Then, the three main approaches to research are presented in more detail, highlighting the differences between them, and explaining the decision of choosing a mixed methods approach for the study. The next part of the chapter presents the hypothesis, the research questions and the methods used for collecting and analysing the data. Then, there is a summary of the pilot study conducted prior to the main investigation that helped in choosing the most relevant data collection methods for the proposed topic. The last part of the chapter is a detailed account of all the quality and ethical principles followed throughout the entire investigation.

Chapter 3 presents the analysis of data collected with the help of two qualitative methods, namely the questionnaire and the observational checklist. The questionnaire was administered in two different periods of time, one set before the pandemic and the second after the pandemic. The reason behind this choice was to see if there were notable changes in the attitudes of upper secondary students pre- and post-pandemic, but also because the student-participants were

different from one period to the other. For the classroom observation, one observational plan was designed that contained very specific information regarding various aspects of teaching and learning English as a Foreign Language in some schools from two counties in Romania.

The data collected with quantitative methods helped in obtaining different information about the foreign language lessons and how the teaching-learning process of this particular subject can be improved, and about how to motivate Romanian upper secondary students to become active participants during these classes.

Chapter 4 presents the analysis of the data gathered with the help of the case study notes, of the tape script from the focus group with students and from the semi-formal interviews with other English as a Foreign Language teachers, and of the reflections from a teacher-researcher diary with notes on improving teaching. The focus group discussion was held with seven students from a nineth grade from a Romanian theoretical school, which was the same grade followed throughout the 14-week period of the case study. The teachers selected for the interviews were all experienced teachers of English from different schools from the Western part of Romania.

The data gathered with qualitative methods was divided into three main themes and several sub-themes. These data provided valuable insights into the elements of English as a Foreign Language classes that motivate students to become actively involved in learning the target language. It also pinpointed the aspects that teachers consider to lead to their students' genuine engagement with the target language.

Chapter 5 discusses the findings and answers the four research questions of the investigation. This chapter makes the connection between the concepts and educational context presented in the first chapter, the choice for mixed-method research design described in the second chapter, and the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data from the third and the fourth chapter. The chapter also discusses the limitations and further directions for the present investigation.

CONCLUSIONS

The foreign language classrooms are places where teachers and learners work together to reach the end-goals of education, that is to prepare learners for adult life, and more importantly to provide them with the necessary skills to navigate the complexities of a global society. Thus, helping students become proficient in an international language should be perceived as a priority.

In Romania, English language is taught in the majority of our schools as the main foreign language. The process of learning it starts as early as primary education and students are invited to discover the complexity of this language throughout their entire academic development, especially during upper secondary education when they prepare for adult life. In this respect, improving the main aspects of the English as a Foreign Language class that motivate Romanian upper secondary students to become active participants in their own learning of the target language should be an important aim of education and for their teachers of English. Thus, the present research tries to answer the questions related to the best ways to help upper secondary students become aware of the importance of mastering English and motivate them to actively participate during English as a Foreign Language classes.

The data collected from Romanian EFL teachers and students revealed the fact that there are many classroom elements that influence learners' levels of motivation to become actively engaged with the target language. They refer to efficient teaching-learning-assessing methods, simulating real-life situations, keeping learners aware of their language progress and encouraging them to use and improve their knowledge of English inside and outside of the classroom. Moreover, investigating the different points of view of the participants in the study, I found out that student-centred teaching methods, collaborative and personalized learning, together with a positive, relaxed, non-judgemental classroom atmosphere, and challenging assignments lead to more motivated and actively involved students.

Other aspects connected to students' higher level of motivation to learn English is creativity and creative assignments, as they allow learners the freedom to use their imaginative power and enjoy the English as a Foreign Language classes, while keeping them engaged in their learning of the target language. The data was also consistent with previous studies on learner motivation which indicate that if we bring the essential novelty in the English as a Foreign Language classroom, we can transform these classes into places where students benefit from authentic learning experiences.

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