EFL Learners' Attitudes towards the Use of Communicative Activities to Improve Spoken Communicative Competence

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Abstract

The present paper aims to investigate the learners' attitudes towards using speaking activities in the classroom to promote their spoken communicative competence. More importantly, it sheds light on the effectiveness of communicative activities in enhancing the learners' communicative abilities. A quantitative approach is adopted, and a questionnaire is administered to thirty third-year English students at the University of Ouargla. The results revealed that most students are interested in developing their oral capacities through structured communicative activities. However, the flow of speaking cannot be devoid of obstacles that may lead to learners' passivity (e.g., shyness, lack of motivation, lack of confidence, lack of linguistic competence, and so on). As a remedy, EFL learners can overcome their reluctance and improve their oral capacities by creating group discussions outside the classroom where they have opportunities to participate in real-life communicative contexts.

1. Introduction

In the realm of language acquisition and learning, various theoretical frameworks have emerged to elucidate the process by which individuals acquire and develop linguistic proficiency. Two prominent theories in this domain are communicative language teaching (CLT) and socio-cultural theory. CLT which gained prominence in the 1970's and 1980's represents a departure from traditional grammar-focused approaches to language instruction. CLT approach has been become substantial way in teaching process in English language teaching since its emergence in the 1970s (Little wood, 2007). At its core, CLT emphasizes the importance of real-life communication and interaction in language learning contexts. To make high understanding and mastering the number of learners who are able to effectively communicate in English. (Littlewood, 2007). Rather than solely focusing on grammatical structures, CLT prioritizes the development of learners' communicative competence which encompasses not only grammatical accuracy but also fluency, appropriateness, and sociolinguistic awareness. According to CLT, the use of communicative activities to help learners become more proficient communicators represents a pedagogical approach that blends pragmatic skills and language proficiency. Learners are given the chance to navigate authentic communicative scenarios through purposeful tasks and structured interactions, which help them, hone their comprehension, production, and negotiation skills. Through discussions, role-plays, debates, and group projects, students develop their productive and receptive abilities, which strengthen their capacity for effective interpersonal communication. Participating in these communicative

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activities helps learners improve not only their linguistic fluency but also their socio-cultural awareness and communicative flexibility. The strategic incorporation of communicative activities into educational settings allows students to internalize language structures and conventions, allowing them to articulate their ideas with precision and coherence in a variety of contexts. These activities, which combine language form with pragmatic function, encourage learners to exercise their communicative autonomy, resulting in a dynamic exchange of ideas and perspectives.

According to abovementioned, the following problematic is raised in the present research paper: What are the learners' attitudes towards the use of communicative activities to develop their oral communicative competence? In the light of this research question, it is hypothesized that most of learners are interested in developing their oral communicative competence through using communicative activities.

For the aim to prove the research hypothesis, an overview on the main principles of CLT will be elaborated in details. Also, different types of communicative activities will be clarified. Furthermore a discussion of learners' attitudes towards communicative activities will be highlighted.

2. Literature review

The ability to effectively communicate orally in a foreign language is a crucial issue of language learning and proficiency. In recent decades, there has been a paradigm shift in language education towards communicative language teaching (CLT), which prioritizes real-life communication and interactive language use over rote memorization of grammar rules. Central of CLT are communicative activities designed to engage learners in meaningful interactions that develop their oral communicative competence. Several authors interested in discussing the effectiveness of communicative activities on learners' communicative abilities.

Phisutthangkoon (2012) conducted research with the following three objectives to explore students' attitudes about the use of communicative activities in the classroom, to investigate students' perceptions of the use of communicative activities in the classroom, and to examine the effect of communicative activities on first-year diploma students' English-speaking skill. The approaches used in this study were the variables, data, population, sample, study context, and research tools. Following the use of these techniques, the study's findings about the improvement in speaking ability following the experiment and the difference between the overall mean score of the pre-test and post-test are as follows: the difference in catch function mean scores between the pre-and post-tests, as well as students' attitudes on the usage of communicative activities as revealed by their responses to a self-rating questionnaire.

Nanthaboot's research (2014) would look at how employing communicative activities affects the English-speaking ability of Mattayomsuksa 3 students as well as the students' opinions. The quantitative data's pre-test, post-test, and self-rating scores comprised the information gathered for this study. The study discovered three students' speaking skills improved after learning communicative exercises. Students' speaking abilities have improved because of communication exercises in the classroom.

Derakhshan et al. (2016) present readers with engaging information, intriguing activities, and techniques to enhance their speaking skills when developing EFL learners' accuracy and fluency. Role-playing, films, flashcards, and graphs are the exercises utilized in the study to help students improve their speaking skills. Role-playing, images, flashcards, charts, chants, and interviews are excellent teaching techniques that help students with their pronunciation, grammar, everyday speech, and real-world activities.

The study "The Effect of Communicative Activities on Libyan Secondary School Students' Speaking Performance in Malaysia" (Owen & Razali, 2018) examined the impact of implementing communicative activities, particularly linguistic games, and a knowledge gap, on students' speaking abilities in secondary schools in Libya. The study used research subjects, tools, and data-gathering procedures. The study's findings show that various communicative activities improved students' oral speaking abilities. The study's exercises can give pupils practice speaking the language in open communication. Compared to their mean pre-test scores, the experimental group's mean post-test scores improved.

Hernandez-Cherrez et al. (2021) used methods like giving subjects and following the influence of employing communication games to build speaking abilities in high school tenth-grade students at Unidad Educativa General Eloy Alfaro Delgado will be studied by groups of students from the morning and afternoon schedules. The final data gathering and analysis for the study will be done using data collection tools. There was a slight enlargement in the group of students as a result. Games are a popular way for students to improve their English communication abilities.

3. Communicative Language teaching

During the 1940's and 50's, audiolinguilism was the most applied method in teaching English as a foreign or a second language. It had a great focus on manipulating language structures through "pattern-drills" regardless of meaning (Celce-Murcia, 1989). As an alternative, a group of experts in 1971 suggested a new system to develop language courses in which each task was divided into portions to suit learners' needs (Richards and Rodgers, 1986). They worked on Wilkins's Research (1972) in which he defined language from a communicative perspective that serves for designing communicative syllabus for language teaching (Richards and Rodgers, idid). Later on, Wilkins (1976) developed a book entitled 'Notional Syllabus' which contributed a great deal in the development of CLT.

3.1 Principles of CLT

Communicative language Teaching CLT is based on several key principles that guide language instructions towards promoting communicative competence.

✓ Communication as the goal: according to Richards and Rodgers (1986) CLT starts from a theory of language as communication. Therefore, the primary goal of classroom instruction is for learners to acquire the necessary skills to convey meaning and understand others in the target language. CLT prioritizes the development of learners' competence to communicate effectively in real-life situations.

✓ Authentic materials use: CLT focuses strictly on the use of authentic language materials and tasks that reflect realistic communication. Within CLT, Students are given the opportunity to respond to genuine communicative needs in real-life contexts. This helps learners to develop their own strategies to understand language as it is used naturally by native speakers. (Larsen-Freeman, 1986).

✓ Meaningful Interactions: according to Larsen-Freeman(ibid), the process of 'negotiating meaning' is an essential element in CLT, i.e., learners spend most of their time sharing information and interacting with each other in small group activities. Hence, through pair work, group discussion, role plays, and simulations, learners have opportunities to practice language in context, negotiate meaning, and develop their communicative skills collaboratively.

✓ Task-based learning: CLT aims at advocating for task-based learning, where language learning tasks are designed to achieve a specific communicative goal. Within CLT, learner's needs as he is not in need to learn about rules and structures but he needs

to use them to use language creatively to accomplish a task or solve a problem in a given social context(Larsen-Freeman, ibid)

✓ Student-Centered Approach: CLT adopts learner-centered approach that empowers learners to take an active role in their own learning. According to Salimbene(1983), learners are more responsible managers for their own learning since they do most of the speaking to discover answers for themselves.

✓ Focus on Fluency and Accuracy: Harmer (2001) proposed two aspects of CLT. The "what to teach" aspect which emphasizes language functions over grammar and vocabulary, i.e., learners are able to communicate smoothly and spontaneously in a variety of contexts. The "how to teach" aspect which focuses on providing learners with opportunities to use the target language in authentic situations. CLT seeks to strike a balance between promoting fluency through meaningful communication and addressing accuracy through focused language practice and feedback.

✓ Cultural Awareness: Language learning is based on cultural contexts, and learners are exposed to diverse cultural perspectives through authentic materials and interactions with speakers of the target language. (Larsen-Freeman, 1986)

✓ Integration of Skills: Rather than treating each skill in isolation, CLT encourages holistic language learning experiences that allow learners to integrate multiple skills in meaningful communication.

By adhering to abovementioned principles, CLT aims to create dynamic and engaging language learning environment that foster the development of learners' communicative competence and empower them to use the target language effectively in authentic contexts.

4. Communicative Activities

Communicative activities are instructional tasks or exercises designed to promote meaningful communication in the target language. They contribute a great deal in developing learners' ability to communicate using the target language. In this vein Riggenbach and Lazarton (1991) argue that: "many classroom teachers have concentrated on promoting communicative competence in language learners by using 'communicative activities'".

4.1 Types of communicative activities

Riggenbach and Lazarton(1991) suggested four types of communicative activities:

✓ Linguistically-Structured Activities: they are activities in which teachers focus on providing learners with 'pre-packaged' structures. Within such activities meaning is also taken into consideration. Learners are supposed to practice new structures under the teacher's control. This helps learners to exchange information, repeat and reinforce specific structures. Examples include language games where learners will practice manipulated structures with fewer errors. (ibid)

✓ Performance Activities: they are activities where learners are supposed to deliver a speech to a group, to explain a process or to tell a story in front of the class. Within this type of activities, learners acquire the ability to evaluate language performance confidently and create an atmosphere for spontaneous interaction between learners (ibid) . Examples include role plays and drama. In role plays, learners are asked to play a role of a particular situation that may occur outside the classroom. This helps learners to communicate authentically in different contexts. While in drama, learners are asked to play an imaginary person in an imaginary situation (Holden, 1981).

✓   Participation Activities: Since they create a natural setting for practice, participation activities are considered as the most interesting oral activities. Examples include guided discussion where learners are asked to discuss in small groups: a topic, to suggest a solution/ resolution or complications (ibid). this helps learners to have the opportunity to engage in turn-taking and topic control with an appropriate chance to check their pronunciation and their grammatical accuracy. The audio-taped conversation is another type of participation activities where learners interact with native and fluent speakers through transcribing the recording conversation. This activity helps learners to discover much about the natural language use. (ibid)

✓   Observation Activities: Within these activities, learners are invited to observe/ to record verbal and non verbal interactions of native speakers of the target language. This type of activities helps learners to be aware of how language is used naturally in different realistic situations.

Besides promoting learners' oral communicative competence, communicative activities seek to fulfill other several purposes such as:

✓   Improving motivation

✓   Allow natural learning setting

✓   Create a supported learning context

✓   Provide 'whole-task practice' (Littelwood, 1998)

5. Learners' attitudes towards the use of communicative activities

To describe the concept of attitude, the scholars have offered many important and useful definitions. According to Oskamp (1977, p. 19), attitude is responding positively or negatively to a particular object or item. In Oskamp's (1977) definition of attitude, three components of attitude can be seen. First, a cognitive component is related to a person's ideas and beliefs toward the object. The affective component deals with the person's feelings and emotions about the object. The last one is a behavioral component that is a person acts towards the object. "Attitude toward a language is someone's mental attitude or feelings towards the position of their language or other's languages" (Amin, 2020, p. 29).Gardner (1985) emphasizes the importance of attitude in language learning because students' success or failure in language learning is related to it. If the learners have favorable attitudes towards language learning, they will experience satisfaction in the learning process. Positive attitudes lead to improved language proficiency. Conversely, negative attitudes affect students' perceptions unfavorably.

In addition, the teacher and the methodology influence learners' attitudes in the classroom. Experienced language teachers that are interested in learners' needs can increase their learners' positive attitudes through using attractive teaching methodology. Learners' satisfaction with activities, classroom atmosphere, and methodology of teaching can encourage their attitudes towards the target language learning positively.

From the above-mentioned points, it can be concluded that learners' expectations, interests, and experiences in learning the class environment and teaching methodology can affect their opinions towards learning a new language. Having positive perceptions to language learning leads the learners to successful learning.

6. Methodology

According to Kumar (2006), a questionnaire is made up of a large number of questions organized under various headings that cover the research topic being investigated by the researcher. These questions are then sent or read to the respondent (the study's sample),

and the researcher or respondents fill out the questionnaire. These responses are then analyzed, and the results are presented as a table.

Questionnaires can also be defined as a set of research or survey questions posed to respondents in order to extract specific information. It has four main purposes: collecting relevant data, making it comparable, facilitating analysis, minimize bias when formulating and asking questions and create engaging and varied questions.(ibid)

As far as the aim of this study is concerned, the questionnaire is structured. That is the answers are already given and the respondent has to tick mark the most suitable answer. In most questionnaire the responses to most questions are exhaustive and still if a person wants to give a response aside from the responses mentioned in the questionnaire, there is a column indicating "any other response, specify". (ibid). The aim of this study is to investigate the learners' attitudes towards the use of communicative activities to enhance their oral communicative competence a questionnaire is needed. The questionnaire describes and analyses the attitudes of EFL learners towards the integration of different types of communicative activities in the classroom. The questionnaire consist of twelve(12) items which aim at eliciting responses that may ensure some aspects related to the successful usage of such type of activities. Questions are of open-ended types which require either yes/no answers or opt for one of the given options. The subject of this study is thirty students of third year at Kasdi Merbah University.

7. Data Analysis

The main objective of a graph is to present data in a way that is easy to understand and interpret, and interesting to look at. Your decision to use a graph should be based mainly on this consideration: 'A graph is based entirely on the tabled data and therefore can tell no story that cannot be learnt by inspecting a table. However, graphic representation often makes it easier to see the pertinent features of a set of data' (Minium 1978: 45). In this study, results are analyzed through graphs which illustrate the learners' responses to the twelve items of the questionnaire. The analysis of data is figured as the following:

Item one: Do you think that your primary goal in learning English is to be able to communicate effectively?
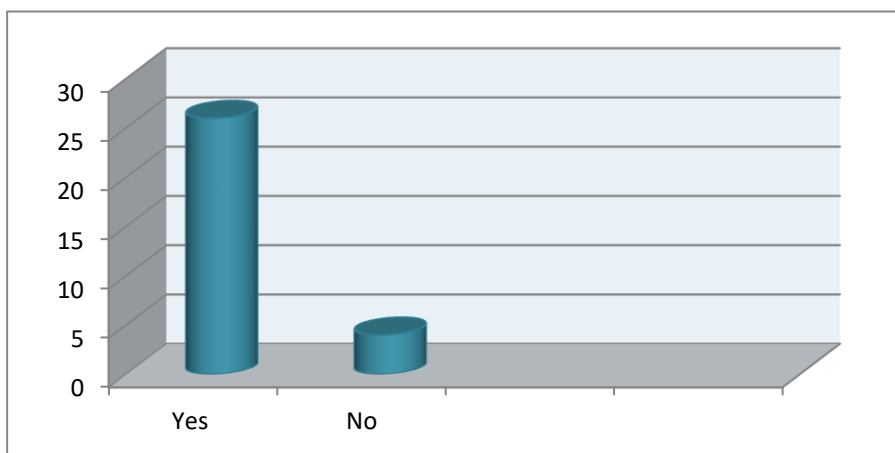

Figure1: Learning English as a primary goal

As it is displayed in the graph above, twenty six (26) of learners out of thirty (30) have responded positively to the first item, because they think that their success in learning English as a foreign can be judged in terms of their ability to express themselves orally especially with native speakers if any opportunity is offered to them. Some of them believe that 'language is communication'; 'the ability to communicate provides the opportunity to interact with foreigners', 'through communication, the meaning is

conveyed'. By contrast, four (04) learners respond negatively to the given question because they tend to give more importance to get on contact with other cultures which can be fulfilled through reading.

Item Two: During speaking, are you interested in:

-Accuracy (grammatical correctness)   -Fluency (communication)   -Both
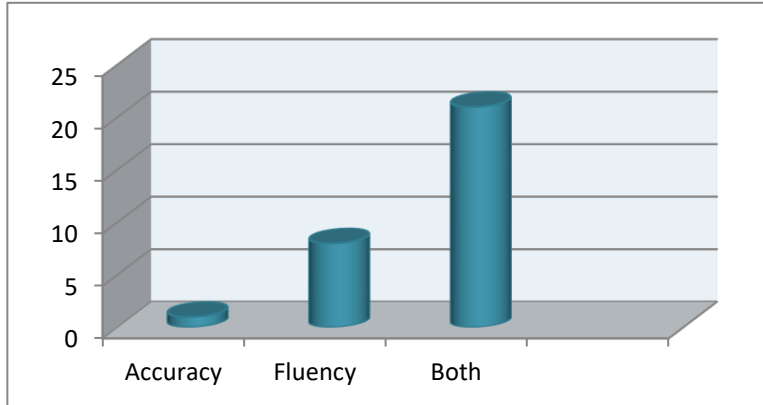

Figure2: The most interested Linguistic features

Twenty-one(21) learners opt for the third option (both) because they think that both accuracy and fluency should be taken into consideration when speaking. In other words, expressing ideas should be in the same flow without any hesitation or interruption. Whereas, eight learners (08) have chosen the second alternative; this indicates that they prefer fluency over accuracy to convey their intended meaning easily neglecting completely the grammatical rules. While, only one learner (01) have chosen the first alternative (accuracy) because he considers grammatical competence as a prerequisite to avoid misunderstanding when communicating.

Item3: Do you think that listening to native speakers' conversations is important?
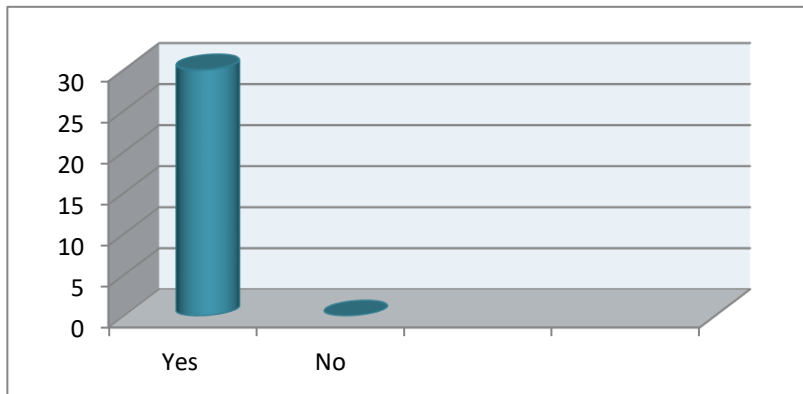

Figure 3: the learners' attitudes towards the importance of native speakers' conversations

It is clear from graph3 that thirty (30) learners answered "yes". This means that they appreciate listening to native speakers' conversation as an important activity. Most of them confirm that such activity is a very useful tool to improve their pronunciation; others think that it grants them the opportunity to get in contact with foreign cultures and discover the way they interact with each other in real-life situations.

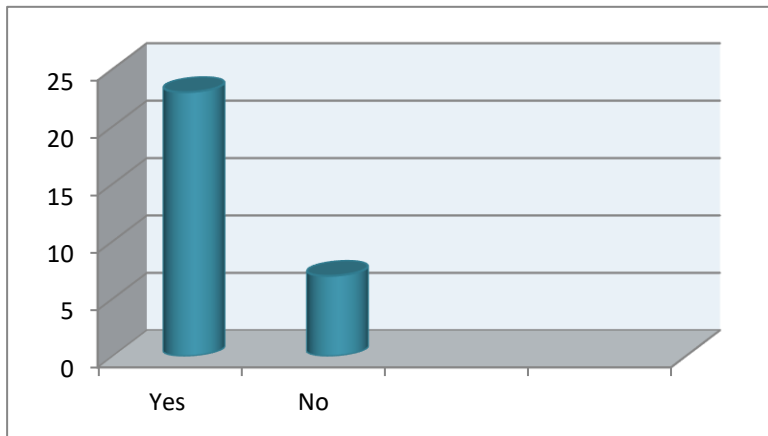Item4: Do you like to play roles (doctor, manager, teacher….) in classroom activities?

Figure 4: The learners' attitudes towards the use of Role play activities

Twenty-three (23) learners are interested in playing roles when doing classroom activities, because they consider them as major tools to practice the language through assuming different personalities in the real-world and to acquire new vocabularies about various domains in life.

Seven (07) learners disapprove of playing roles in the classroom, because they are unable to perform other personalities which may refer their anxiety, shyness or to the lack of the linguistic competence.

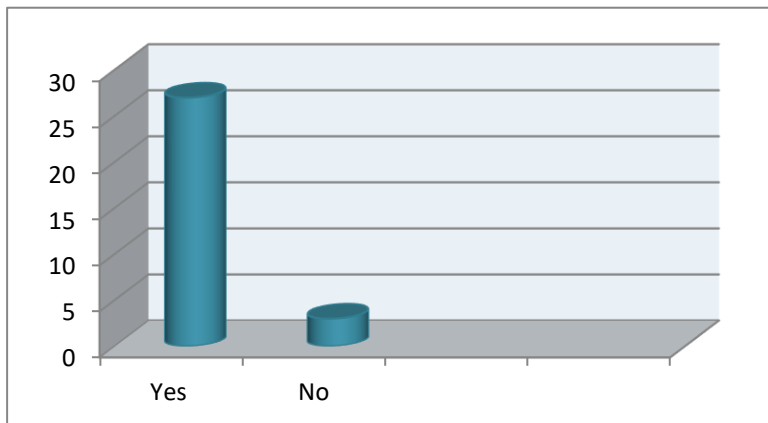Item5: Does the use of games in the classroom help you to communicate?

Figure 5: the learners' attitudes towards the use of games

Since games are considered the most exciting activities among learners, most of them opt for the answer 'yes' (27). This explains their positive attitudes towards the use of games as a communicative activity in the classroom in terms of the joyful atmosphere, the interactive learning between them. More important, games are the useful tool to exchange ideas and to learn new vocabularies. Some of them claim that 'games such puzzles and cross words help in taking by heart new words and expressions'; 'the use of games increases the enthusiasm to communicate'; and 'the use of games creates a funny atmosphere that motivates to speak freely between each other'.

Item 6: Does group discussion help to learn new vocabulary, grammar, exchange information, and negotiate meaning?
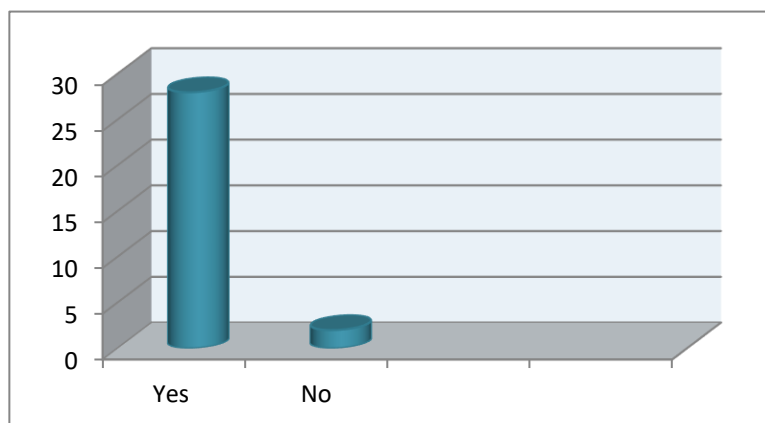

Figure 6: the learners' attitudes towards the use of group discussion

Most of learners, twenty-eight (28) have answered with 'yes' because they approve that group discussion helps them to interact with each other freely with very limited pressure. Moreover, group discussion provides more chances to practice language, exchange ideas and even learn new vocabularies from each other. Only two students (02) respond with 'no' because they see that group discussion is more likely to be dominated by advanced learners or it is not useful because it is too noisy.

Item 7: Do you think that choosing topics for discussion yourselves is better than those chosen by the teacher?
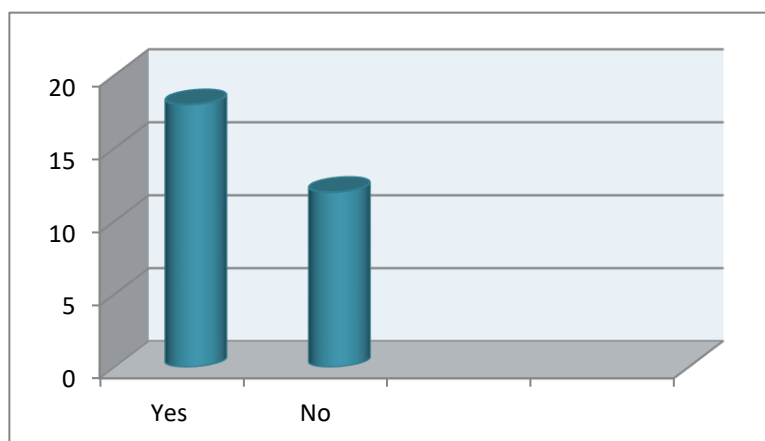

Figure 7: the learners' attitudes towards the choice of discussion topic

Eighteen (18) learners have responded with 'yes'. This means that they are more likely to enjoy discussing topics which meet their interests. They argue that choosing topics for themselves minimizes their anxiety. In this context they claim' when I chose, I will be ready able to discuss', 'because the teacher may introduce topics which we are not familiar with', 'because I have more information about my topic'. Twelve (12) have answered 'no'. They argue that teacher's choice of topics is better because the teacher knows what is suitable to them to enhance their language use in a creative way.

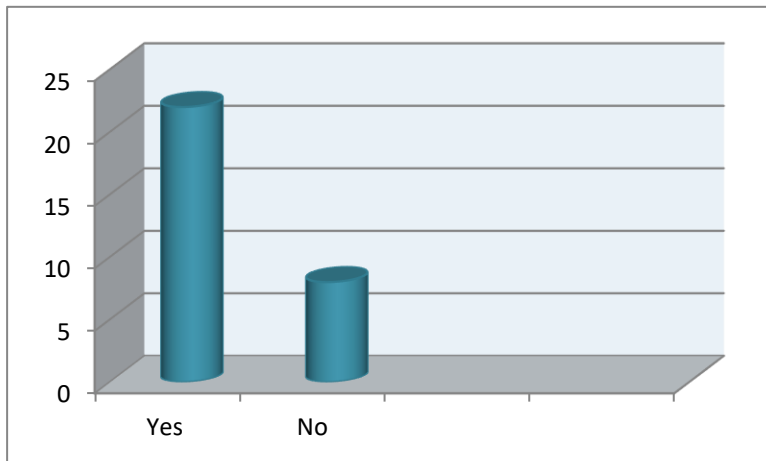Item8: Do you feel shy when you do speaking activities?

Figure 8: the learners' attitudes towards speaking activities.

As it is shown in the figure (8), twenty-two (22) learners have responded with 'yes' to the given question. Because they believe that speaking activities really put them under pressure and frustration. In this case, they refer that to some problems such as: -Being afraid of making mistakes and being corrected in front of the whole class. - Being afraid to lose their limited knowledge of vocabulary and grammar rules when speaking in front their classmates. -Being less confident-Being involved in topics which they do not have ample information and background. Concerning the negative answer (no), eight (08) learners do not feel embarrassed when speaking. They think that at this level students are supposed to face audience confidently and accept criticism either from the teacher or their peers. Some of them see that the only way to get rid of being shy is to practice language as much as possible.

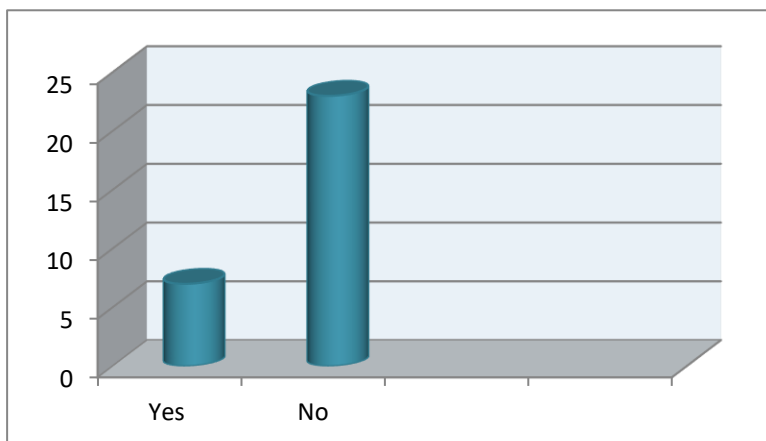Item 9: Does the teacher's correction inhibit you?

Figure 9: The learners' attitudes towards the teacher's correction

Twenty-three (23) learners opt for the answer (no), this indicates that teacher's correction does not cause frustration for them. They think that they are mature enough to create positive attitudes towards the teacher's error correction. For them it is beneficial to learn from their mistakes by avoiding them in other contexts. Seven (07) learners have answered negatively (no) because they negative attitudes towards the teacher's correction. They refer this negative attitude to the attraction of the whole class that occurs when the teacher corrects mistakes. As one learner states: "interruptions confused me".

Item 10: Does your mother tongue interfere in group discussion?

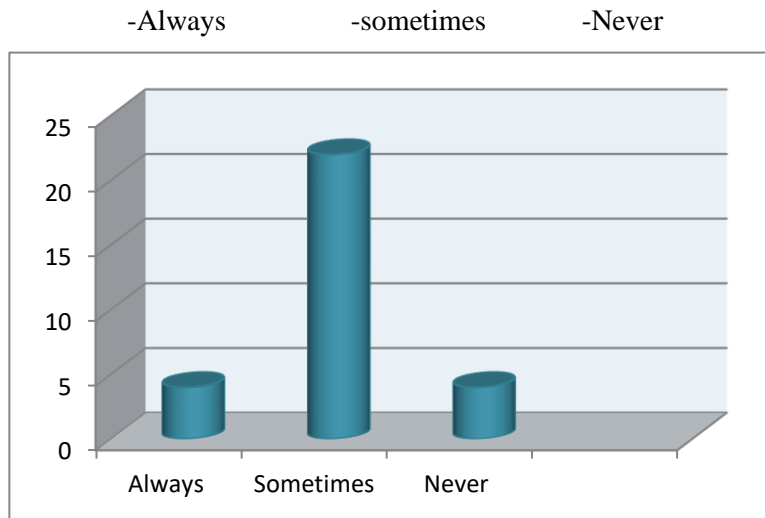-Always   -sometimes   -Never

Figure 10: the learners' attitudes towards the interference of the mother tongue

Most of learners (22) have opted for the second alternative (sometimes), they tend to switch to their mother tongue because of the following reasons: -"they do not know the appropriate word in English", -"they find it easier to convey their messages" and –"they find difficulties to express their ideas within the group". Four (04) learners have chosen the alternative (always) because they are completely influenced by their mother tongue. As a solution they must try to get rid of it as much as possible even if they make mistakes in English. Other four (04) learners answered with (never) because they think that using mother tongue while learning inevitably impede the learning process in the sense that learners will waste time using their language.

Item 11: Do speaking activities create an intimate atmosphere among you and other learners?
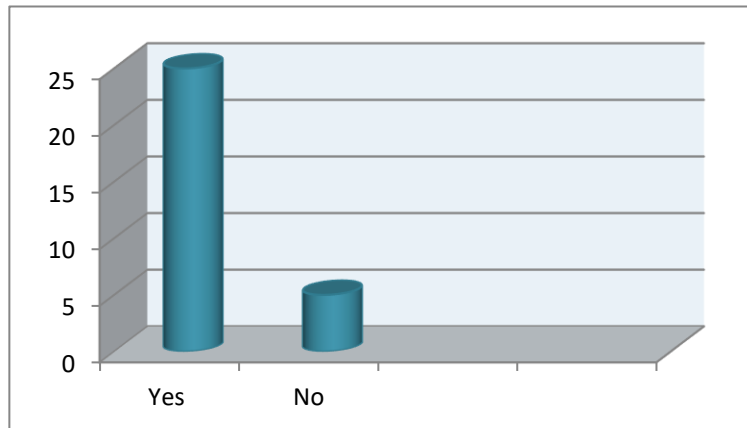

Figure 11: the learners' attitudes towards the impact of speaking activities.

It is clear from the above figure that most of learners (25) approve that speaking activities contribute a great deal to establish close relationships between learners. That is, learners are more likely to know each other especially when exchanging ideas and opinions. Only (05) learners have answered with (no). According to them speaking activities may create an aggressive atmosphere especially if there are learners who tend to dominate the activity or those who do not accept correction and criticism.

Item 12: Do you think that being orally incompetent is because of :

-Lack linguistic competence (knowledge of grammar and vocabulary)

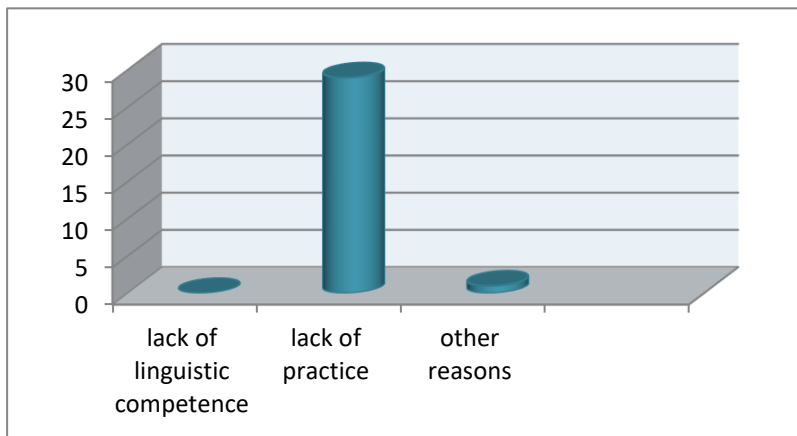-Lack of practice   -other reasons

Figure 12: the learners' attitudes towards being orally incompetent

For question 12, twenty-nine (29) learners have opted for the second alternative (lack of practices). In this context, they confirm that activities such as group discussion, role play and games are not used in oral sessions. Others think that being incompetent is because of the in willingness to speak English outside the classroom. Only one (01) learner has selected the third option (other reasons) and he states that: "because of the lack of qualified teachers of oral expression besides to the lack of sufficient oral sessions".

8. Discussion

The results obtained from the questionnaire analysis revealed that the vast majority of EFL learners are highly interested in developing their spoken capacities through the use of communicative activities. However, the flow of speaking cannot be devoid of challenges that may lead to learners' passivity (e.g., shyness, lack of motivation, lack of confidence, lack of linguistic competence and so on). As a conclusion, EFL learners can overcome their reluctances and improve their spoken communicative competence by creating group discussion outside the classroom where they feel more secure. That is to say those EFL learners should practice English language in real-life contexts and participate in real conversations. Before they experiment with producing language, they need exposure to input. In other words, the more EFL learners practice the language the more they become orally competent.

9. Conclusion

To conclude, the main objective of the present study is to investigate the learners' attitudes towards the use of communicative activities to improve their spoken communicative competence. Communicative activities such as role-plays, games and group discussion should be given a special position in language program, because they tend to meet the learners' needs. Such activities are considered as the best vehicles to motivate learners go beyond their linguistic competence in order to use language for expressing their personal ideas and opinions in real-life situations. Although, many problems and factors may confront learners trying to use the target language for them; therefore teachers should be aware to overcome such problems and minimize learners' anxiety.

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