# Attitudes of English Language Learners towards Classroom Interaction Patterns

Hala Salih Mohammed Nur<sup>1</sup>, Sulieman Abdalah Mohammed<sup>2</sup>

(Associated Professor) University of Khartoum<sup>1</sup> (Lecturer) University of Khartoum<sup>2</sup>

Abstract: The aim of this study is to investigate the attitudes of Sudanese students towards classroom interaction patterns which are essential in the learning process of English language. In Sudan most of the schools use the Grammar Translation Method to teach English language and students are not given the opportunity for authentic language communication. Thus students develop poor learning habits and become very passive and classrooms become teacher centred with little or no interaction. Students entering university are faced with different teaching method in university which require them to interact and communicate with each other in English. This research is a case study of English language students at the Faculty of Education/ University of Khartoum. A questionnaire was used to collect the data. The population of the study were first year students and the sample size was 40 students. The SPSS (Statistical Packages for Social Sciences) was used in analyzing and describing the data. The results can be generalized that the Sudanese English language students have different attitudes (negative &positive) towards the interaction patterns and they also displayed both good and weak knowledge of the patterns. Not all the patterns were used in classroom during the lessons and the majority of the students preferred whole-class interaction to the other patterns. The study concluded that the difference in the attitudes was related to some reasons such as the impossibility of using group work in complicated physical seating. Concerning gender effect, it was found that most of the students preferred to work in separated groups, i.e., males to males and females to females.

Key words: interaction patterns/pair work/ group work/ attitudes

Date of Submission: 03-10-2017	Date of acceptance: 05-12-2017

## I. INTRODUCTION

Interaction patterns are ways used by both teachers and students to interact together in the classroom. Interactions in language classrooms are important social activities for students through which they not only construct knowledge, but also build confidence and identity as competent language users (Luk & Lin, 2007). Many recent sociocultural theories view the act of language learning as a social activity in which learners build their knowledge through scaffolding and help of peers and teachers (Vygotskian qtd in Hall & Walsh 2002). Interaction patterns are affected by many factors such as physical seating (the way in which classroom is arranged); facilities, atmosphere, students' and teachers' attitudes ... etc. Using the correct interaction patterns in the language classroom is fundamental to success of any activity or assignment in class thus leading to better language acquisition.

In Sudan most of the schools use the Grammar Translation Method to teach English language and students are not given the opportunity for authentic language communication. Thus students develop poor learning habits and become very passive and classrooms become teacher centred with little or no interaction. Students bring with them the values and attitudes of their own learning cultures to new learning environments. Students entering university are faced with different teaching method in university which require them to interact and communicate with each other in English.

The study of classroom interaction has gained a lot of interest in recent years and there are many studies conducted in this field. The studies covered different aspects of interactions patterns. Some researchers made studies in the use of interactions in large, others on the organization of interaction patterns and types while others compared the different types of interaction patterns.

Backer & Westrup (2000), in their study about large classes suggested that when students work in groups in large classes, teachers can name some roles for the students in each group to play during the activity such as being the head of a group, monitor 'secretary', 'presenter'....etc. They also talked about the importance of pair and group work in the classroom as it provides much use of the language among the students, i.e. low level students get help from peers and a chance for the shy ones to train themselves in gaining confidence. In

another study by El-Shingeety (2007) he concluded that the physical constraint such as seating in large classes restricts good learner-learner interaction and the learners are demotivated in addition to the lack of facilities and English clubs. The only choice to adapt group work in this case is to let them sit on these long tables facing each other, but this may not be safe and much noise will take place. So learner-centered interaction won't be possible to practice, and as a result, the lecturing method is used although it doesn't suit when the focus is on fluency. Gill (1974) stated " when one has hundred students in a course, discussion is usually thought to be impossible" (p.158). The same idea was discussed by Scrivener (2005) who wrote "in many countries, teachers find that the main constraint on creative teaching is the sheer size of their classes" (p.331).

According to Hamer (2007) who agreed with Backer and Westrup that teachers can teach large classes if some steps are considered, such as; thinking of class organization when planning the lessons so as to prepare suitable activities; setting the rules(e.g. doing attendance, handing assignment, etc.) for the students to follow punctually; varying the activities and the way of teaching as there are weak learners; involving everyone in the class work, for example, employing them in directing and arranging such as collecting the attendance, leading their groups, etc. It has been suggested that one row out of each two has to turn back to work with the other face-to-face. Bruff (2009) suggested that the large class can be divided into small groups so as facilitate interaction. Ur (2012), spoke about teacher –talk as an important pattern which can be used for both accuracy and fluency. Also, Walsh (2006), talked about the necessity of enlarging the role of the teacher; he said it isn't enough to arrange learners into pairs or groups to work independently, he\she should teach the lesson clearly. He stated "simply handing over to learners is apparently an inadequate means of prompting second language acquisition" (p.4). Concerning IRF (initiation, response, feedback), he found that 'display and referential questions' are used more than the other types. The later type is so successful because it requires more detailed answers.

As for Choudhury (2005), group work is necessary in the language classrooms because it develops talking abilities and even the shy learners will feel free to interact with the others. He also confirmed that some students don't speak not because of shyness, but of different 'strategies' of 'learning', like focusing on listening to learn. Markee and Kasper(2004), have compared 'ordinary conversation' with its counterpart(teacher-fronted talk) that occurs in classroom and stated that in the former, there are equal turns for meaning negotiation whereas the later lacks equality because the teacher controls the distribution of turns; choosing who to answer and then decreases learners' spontaneity by commenting on their responses.

According to Chang (2003), there are three patterns of interaction inside the language classroom: 'IRE (Initiation-Response-Evaluation)'. In this pattern, a teacher asks learners a question, then they respond to it and as a result, he\she evaluates the answer. What can be criticized about this pattern is the dominance of teacher in talk time and restricted inclusion of learners. Furthermore, when the evaluation is negative, it will stop learners' trials to speak. 'IRF (Initiation-Response-Follow-up)'; here, the teacher begins the discussion by asking a question, learners answer and he gives feedback in a way that makes the discussion continue. It can be used for 'different functions'. 'IC (Instructional Conversation)'; it refers to the teachers' speech in general, this speech helps learners to exchange knowledge with their teacher so they learn and use the language at the same time. Salih (2003) stated that the majority of time in classroom is taken by the teacher and the students' interaction is weak both with the teacher and among themselves.

Swain, Brooks and others (2002), wrote about the role of learner-learner dialogue in developing the communicative competence among language students. Learners usually help each other in pair interaction as there are many students with high level of proficiency. They concluded that 'peer-peer dialogue' isn't only used in speaking but also in the other skills of language.

Similarly, Storch (2002), mentioned four patterns, but they are restricted to 'dyadic interaction', i.e. pair work. 'Collaborative': here, two learners interact during the activity with equal turns in exchanging information.

'Dominant\dominant': as it appears from the term dominant, the learners have little desire to exchange information in what they discuss because they don't agree on each other's opinions although there is an equal participation.

'Dominant\passive': in this pattern, one of the pair dominates the talk whereas the other partner becomes inactive, and as a result the discussion is limited.

'Expert\novice': in this case, one learner (expert) talks more than the other (novice), but the former 'encourages' the later to contribute. According to this division, learners in pattern one show 'high mutuality' and 'high equality' while in two there is some equality with very 'low mutuality'. Concerning pattern three, learners display 'low equality and mutuality', and finally, there is 'low equality' compared to 'high mutuality'.

Kumpulainen and Wary (2002), agreed with Chang that there can be different 'functions' for communication in IRF\E although the teacher discusses with all students. This indicates that this pattern is suitable for learning. They compared this traditional pattern with peer group in which learners have their own responsibility in taking turns and commenting on each other's opinions. It has also been noticed that group activities develop both learning and social skills of the students. When students discuss something together, the

teacher has to work as a guide and appreciator for learners' output in a way that fits different 'needs' of the learners. To develop group responsibility, the teacher has to let them choose their topics of discussion because this will make them more desired to contribute. They concluded that 'peer-group' interaction is more effective than 'teacher-centered' one. Anton(1999), compared two patterns of interaction; 'learner-centered' to 'teacher-centered' and found that the former is more effective than the later for providing much time to learner communication. He added that when pair and group interactions are well organized, they can help learners use the target language in communicative situations even outside the classroom because during such activities, they acquire the 'linguistic' structure beside the 'negotiation of meaning'. Hassan (1999) found that whole-class interaction is the most used and much of classroom time is dominated by teachers. Furthermore; she said that when learners interacted together, the target language wasn't almost used; i.e. they also used their first language.

In order to have effective interaction in language classroom, teachers need to use communicative approach which always concerns with communication. Here are some studies about it: Ur (2012), mentioned that when using the communicative approach, the interaction is focused on students rather than teacher as the aim of this approach is making learners communicate in the target language. He also used the term 'post-communicative approach' which confirms that the main purpose of language is efficient 'communication'. Accordingly, the activities should be done in a way that enables learners use the language successfully in different contexts. The same idea about communicative approach has been discussed by Hamer (2007), who found that the more time given to learners' interaction; the more able communicators they will become. When learners have high willingness to discuss a topic, a lot of different communicative activities can be performed in classroom, such as role-play, simulation, interview, etc. These activities have to be related to life situations in order to make the language more practical and purposeful.

Kumaravadivelu (2006) wrote that communicative language teaching integrates 'form and function' which enable the students to use the right form in communication in and out the classroom. As for Hinkel (2005), he confirmed that communicative language teaching doesn't ignore accuracy because there is no meaningful communication without the use of grammatical 'structure'. In addition to, this approach isn't restricted to negotiation, it also has to do with 'reading' and 'writing activities', i.e. students can work in such tasks interactively. From another perspective, Savignon & Wang (2003) concluded that many students of second or foreign language find it difficult to communicate using the language although they show high grammatical competence. This can be attributed to the absence of communicative syllabi and teachers use teaching methods other than the communicative approach.

Anton (1999) mentioned that the communicative approach makes students more active by offering much time for communication through groups and the teacher's talk time is minimized as his\her role changes to facilitating and guiding. This means that the students have to be more responsible for their learning. On the other hand, Sato and Kleinsasser (1999) investigated how teachers of second language understood the communicative approach; it focuses on communicating, restricted to 'speaking and listening skills', doesn't concern more with grammatical construction and its 'activities' use up much time. Yule (1996) came up with the result that lessons are arranged round different functions when using the communicative approach. As this approach concerns mainly with learners' interaction, it tolerates the fluency 'errors' as they can be corrected later. Rollmann (1994) found that it is crucial to focus on 'real communication' activities in classroom when the communicative approach is used as the aim is communicating in the language and not just memorizing and repeating the grammatical rules. Such activities require more time to be given to learners. He also added that these activities will make them more motivated as they express in the new language. Freeman (1987) said that learners become more active and appreciative when involved in communicative activities, and he agreed with Hamer in the importance of such activities in learners' negotiation competence. He also concluded that the 'information-gap' is dominant in use among the other activities and students have to be the focus in teaching.

Students bring with them the values and attitudes of their own cultures. In Sudan most of the schools use the Grammar Translation Method to teach English language and students are given the opportunity for authentic language communication. Many researchers (Arbab, nd.; Ali& Mahmoud, 2014; Elzubier 2014, Adam 2016) talked about the use of the Grammar Translation Method in teaching English in schools and the teacher centred approach used intensively in secondary schools. Most of university students come from Sudanese secondary schools; teaching in the secondary schools mostly uses grammar translation method and most of the time carried in Arabic. Students are not required to participate in class as the class is mostly teacher centered. Thus, they become passive learners in classroom and as a result the students face difficulty in adapting to learner-centered interaction patterns.

The aim of this study is to investigate the attitudes of tertiary level English language students towards classroom interaction patterns which are an essential component in the learning process. The researchers chose this subject for its importance, i.e., there is no good teaching process can be performed without the use of interaction patterns. Classroom interaction has been considered one of the most important pedagogical research topics in language classrooms in recent years.

## II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

To carry the research a number of questions were posted the questions were as follow:

- Do learners have good knowledge of all interaction patterns?
- What are the learners' attitudes towards interaction patterns?
- To what extend do learners like to adapt to new interaction patterns?

The population of were students at the University of Khartoum/ Faculty of Education. The sample of the study was 40 first year students. It used the quantitative approach and a questionnaire was used in data collection. The questionnaire was designed and had three main parts; personal profile, students' knowledge of terms and their attitudes towards using interaction patterns. There were twenty three questions divided into the following sections:

- Section one is about students' knowledge of interaction patterns components.
- Section two is about the students' believes when using the interaction patterns.
- Section three is

The sample included 40 students studying in the first year. For each question of the questionnaire, there were five options for the respondents to choose from based on Likert Scale. To analysis the data the SPSS (Statistical Packages for Social Sciences) program was used by the researchers. The results were displayed in percentages, means, graphs and tables.

The study used a questionnaire in collecting data. The questionnaire was chosen because of its suitability in gathering opinions. The results of the study showed that the majority of the respondents were female (60%), aging from seventeen to thirty five years old. The study concluded that the English language students have different attitudes towards classroom interaction patterns and also have both good and poor knowledge of the patterns.

## III. RESULTS

#### 3.1. Sample's Profile

The sample of the study was made of 20 students from the English Language Department at the Faculty of Education at the University of Khartoum. The students' ages ranged from 17 to 35 years old and more than half of them were females (60%).

## Figure (1): Gender of the Respondents

In the first part of the questionnaire, the researchers wanted to investigate the respondents' knowledge of terms. This part consisted of five statements about the definitions of interaction patterns, whole-class interaction, pair, group and individual work.

#### Students' knowledge of the definition of interaction pattern components

In the second part of the results showed that the students have a good knowledge of the definition of the term 'interaction patterns'. 90% percent (36 students) of the sample agreed with the definition while 10% percent (8 students) of them disagreed.

-'Whole-class interaction': The results showed that the students have also a good knowledge of this term. 80% percent (32 students) of the respondents agreed with the definition. Although of the knowledge they showed, there is some ignorance because 20% percent (8 students) didn't know it.

-'Pair work': The results showed that the students have weak knowledge of this term because only 50% percent of the respondents showed an agreement with the definition. It seems that they aren't familiar with the word '*pair*' although they understand the second part '*work*'.

-'Group work': The results showed that most of the students are familiar with this term; 85% percent (34

students) of the respondents showed their positive agreement whereas 15% percent (6 students) of them knew nothing about the definition.

-'Individual work': The results showed that the students have little knowledge of this term. Only 37.5% percent (15 students) of them agreed with the definition while a great number (25 students) of the respondents 62.5% didn't know the term.

## Students' believes about using the interaction patterns

In the third part of the questionnaire, the researcher wanted to investigate the students' believes when using the patterns. It included: Teachers' use of the patterns, whole-class interaction, pair work, group work, individual work, previous learning habits and adapting of new interaction patterns in classroom.

-'My teacher uses all the above patterns': The results showed that only 30% percent (12 students) of the respondents agreed while 67.5% percent (27 students) of them disagreed and 2.5% percent (1 student) had no idea about the point.

The effect of the previous learning habits, 'In classroom, I want to be taught in the same way as it was at school': The results showed that less than half of the respondents (15 students); representing 37.5% percent agreed with the point whereas a little more than a half (21 students); representing 52.5% percent disagreed and few respondents (4 students); representing 10% percent had no idea.

## Students' attitudes towards using new interaction patterns

-'In classroom, I think it is important to adapt new interaction patterns': The results showed that 32.5% percent of the respondents (13 students) agreed with the point while 60% percent of them (24 students) disagreed, and only 7.5% (3 students) had no idea.

#### Whole-class interaction

-'I feel included in whole-class interaction': The results showed that 70% percent (28 students) of the respondents agreed while only 2.5% percent (1 student) of them disagreed and 27.5% percent (11 students) had no idea.

-'I don't feel comfortable in whole-class interaction': The results showed that 42.5% percent (17 students) of the respondents agreed while 30% percent (12 students) disagreed, and 27.5% percent (11 students) of them had no idea.

-'For things I don't know, I want to learn them from my teacher only': The results showed that 85% percent (34 students) of the respondents agreed while 12.5% percent (5 students) of them disagreed, and 2.5% percent (1 student).

#### Pair work

-'I feel confident in pair work': The results showed that 25% percent (10 students) of the respondents agreed while 65% percent (26 students) of them disagreed, and 10% percent (4 students) had no idea.

-'I think pair work helps me to improve my English': The results showed that 55% percent (22 students) of the respondents agreed while 40% percent (16 students) of them disagreed, and 5% percent (2 students) had no idea.

#### Group work

-'For things I don't know, it is better to discuss them with my classmates': The results showed that 75% percent (30 students) of the respondents agreed while 25% percent (10 students) disagreed and no one had any idea.

-'I don't like group work because it is difficult to move in our classroom': The results showed that 92.5% percent (37 students) of the respondents agreed while 5% percent (2 students) of them disagreed and 2.5% percent (1 student) had no idea.

-'When we work in groups; some students talk most of the time': The results showed that 17.5% percent (7 students) of the respondents agreed while 82.5% percent (33 students) disagreed and nobody had any idea.

-'I don't feel comfortable in group work because it is mixed': The results showed that 95% percent (38 students) of the respondents agreed while 5% percent (2 students) of them disagreed and nobody had any idea. Individual work

-'I feel more comfortable working on my own': The results showed that 75% percent (30 students) of the respondents agreed while 17.5% percent (7 students) of them disagreed and 7.5% percent (3 students) had no idea.

-'I think individual work doesn't help me to improve my English': The results showed that 72.5% percent (29 students) of the respondents agreed while 17.5% percent (7 students) of them disagreed and 10% percent (4 students) had no idea.

## **IV. DISCUSSION**

Based on the above results, the discussion was made including the following points: Students' knowledge of terms 'interaction patterns' and the students' believes when using the patterns in classroom.

**Students' knowledge of the terms:** Concerning the definition of the first pattern 'patterns of interaction', the students have a good knowledge because the majority (90%) agreed with it. They also displayed knowledge of the second term 'whole-class interaction'; most of them (80%) got positive agreement, but there is some ignorance among few students (20%). On the other hand, the students have a weak knowledge of the third term 'pair work' because only half of them (50%) showed an agreement with the definition. It seems that they're not familiar with the word 'pair' although they know the second part 'work'.

As for group work, most of the students (85%) are familiar with the term, but still there is a little ignorance (15%). In comparison, the students have very weak understanding of the term 'individual work' because only (37.5%) percent of them agreed with the definition while many of them (62.5%) didn't know the term.

**Students' believes when using the interaction patterns:** Considering teachers' use of all patterns; few teachers use them in classroom as (30%) percent of the respondents agreed, and most of them don't use them. It can be attributed to many constraints such as the physical one.

Concerning the effect of previous learning habits; less than half of the respondents (37.5%) are affected whereas the rest aren't. Those are more flexible and like the change. As for whole-class interaction; most of the students prefer it to the other patterns. On the other hand, most of the students (90%) lack confidence in pair and group work although they are aware of their importance in improving their English. The students don't prefer pair and especially group work for one basic reason which is the difficulty of movement and arrangement caused by the physical seating. What confirms this is that the majority of the respondents (92.5%) agreed that classroom seating doesn't allow comfortable grouping. There is no dominance of talk in group work because most of the students (82.5%) are aware of turn-taking rules in classroom oral discourse. There is another reason for not preferring group work; it is the gender because the majority of the respondents (95%) agreed that they didn't feel comfortable in mixed groups. Considering the last pattern; many students (75%) like individual work although they know that it doesn't help more in improving their English (72.5%).

Based on the above results and discussion; it can be concluded that the English language students have different attitudes towards classroom interaction patterns and they have a good knowledge of some patterns of interaction; these include interaction patterns as a whole in addition to whole-class interaction and group work. On the other hand, they displayed pour knowledge of pair and individual work because they're not familiar with the terms (pair & individual). Concerning the use of patterns in classroom, most of the teachers don't use all of these patterns because of many constraints such the physical one. As for the effect of the previous learning habits, the students are partially affected by them (female students are less affected) and many of them are willing to change; male students like to adapt new interaction patterns more than the female ones.

Considering the students' believes, most of the students preferred whole-class interaction to all of the other patterns. In pair work, the students feel confident only if they are able to talk with one another in the target language. Those students are also like to work in groups and are aware of the importance of communicating together as a way of developing their language. Contrarily, the students who don't prefer group work not only because of lacking confidence but also of the fixed seating which don't allow comfortable grouping. There is great awareness of turn-taking among students in classroom discourse. Concerning gender, female students are more relaxed in mixed group work than the male ones. Being afraid of making mistakes is another challenge in group work for the majority of the students. Still there is a preference of individual work for some of them although they know the importance of pair and group work.

The findings of the study confirmed that the students have different attitudes about the issue and as a result, the constraints of using some patterns need to be solved in every classroom.

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IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) is UGC approved Journal with Sl. No. 5070, Journal no. 49323.
Hala Salih Mohammed Nur Attitudes of English Language Learners towards Classroom Interaction Patterns." IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS), vol. 22, no. 12, 2017, pp. 07-13.

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