

Factors Influencing Female Students' Classroom Participation: A Case Study of Mauritanian Tertiary Students

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Abstract: Mauritanian classroom has been regarded as male public space. This has affected the academic achievement of female students, which in turn is likely to influence negatively their social, economic and political visibilities. As such, females' participation in the classroom activities becomes an inviting topic to be explored. The current study, thereby, aims to unveil the reasons of highly inhibited and highly exuberant female students in the classroom. In so doing, observations and interviews were carried out on 8 students studying at the Modern University of Nouakchott. The findings revealed that inhibition, depreciation of participation, devaluation of speech in mixed environment, peers' negative comments, and distant and/or female professors, were the main factors hindering female students' participation. Factors that have been rated as strong promoters of participation, however, were: positive perception of participation, "modern thinking," well-rounded knowledge about the topic, the type of topic studied, accessible professors, and learner-centered approach.

Keywords: Mauritania, classroom participation, female students, Nouakchott Modern University.

INTRODUCTION

It is a truism to say that learning is classroom-based in any formal education. As such, the students have to move from their own houses and come together in one setting in order to get their education.

That is, student should be active since learning is seen as a quest for knowledge. Indeed, one of the manifestations and proves that learning is taking place is the student's engagement in the classroom participation. Participation in the classroom is regarded as exchanges between teacher and students and/or between students and their peers [1]. Rocca [2] contended that such exchanges take three different forms: questions, answers and comments (p. 199). According to Tatar [3], active classroom participation contributes quintessentially in the success of education and students' personal development in the future. Furthermore, Astin [4] found that students, who are actively engaged in the classroom participation, reported higher satisfaction and higher persistence rates.

Despite such importance, the majority of female students are reported to be less active than their male counterparts. Several researchers proposed different factors which influence female student participation in the classroom. For instance, while some studies divided these factors into two main categories: class-related variables such as class-size, and gender distribution and student traits such as social, and religious background [5], others stated that beside

personal and class traits, professor traits such as gender and course policies can influence female student's participation in the classroom [6]. These disparate arrays of sources and categorizations give the premise that factors which influence female students are not stable traits but are determined by the social, cultural and religious background and context of the subjects. As such, the current paper seeks to ferret out the factors which exert a crucial influence on Mauritanian female students' participation in the classroom activities.

The rationale of selecting the topic of the study is neither an arbitrary effort nor an intellectual luxury. Rather, it is a response to several interrelated factors. To start with, it raises awareness amongst the stakeholders, professors and peers about the importance of the creation of an educative environment which encourages female student's participation in the classroom not only in Mauritania but also in the Maghreb. This is because anyone with a passing knowledge of the Maghreb past and present knows that it is painted with almost the same ethnic diversity, Arab and Amazigh. Furthermore, to the best of this researcher's knowledge, there is not even one single piece of work that has addressed the issue of female

students' participation in the Mauritania classroom. As such, the importance of the study stems from the fact that it is not only a thorough introduction to unfamiliar territory, Mauritania, but also a complementary contribution to knowledge about the Arab Maghreb in the Anglo-American academia. In so doing, the current study outlines the methodology through which the study is conducted. It provides also the analytical interpretation of the results obtained.

Research questions

The study is an attempt to unearth the Mauritanian students' perception of classroom participation and factors influencing their participation. In so doing, the following research questions guided the study.

- What are the factors that hinder your classroom participation?
- What are the factors that motivate your classroom participation?

METHODOLOGY

Data collection for the study was carried out in the Modern University of Nouakchott, the only public university in Mauritania. The study opted for qualitative case study research design. The two qualitative instruments used in the study were observation and unstructured interview. Observation was done on second year students of Geology and third year students of English. The purpose also of carrying out observation, along a period of two weeks, was to identify the active and passive students. As such, 8 students were selected, 4 active and 4 passive participants. The interviews are two, and each one lasted for about half an hour. Each one was made with 4 students.

Data analysis

The interviews were transcribed. After completing the transcription, the researcher processes the data by means of qualitative content analysis. The process involves breaking the data into smaller and meaningful units (codes). The codes are pieced together to form less numerous categories. Based on generic properties, the categories are classified into several themes. The themes are presented and interpreted based on "the context of the content in order to expose the ideological, the latent meaning behind the surface of the texts" [7].

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATIONS

Factors hindering female classroom participation

To unveil the possible factors that thwart female students' participation in the classroom, the participants who passively participate in the classroom discussion were asked to list out the reasons behind their disengagement from exchanges in the classroom. They cited the following five main factors, personal, socio-cultural and classroom traits.

Personal traits

Inhibition and perception of classroom participation are the main factors highlighted by the participants. To start with, 3 out of the 4 students made self-reflection describing themselves as shy (inhibited or lacking in confidence) or withdrawn (uncommunicative or daydreaming). For example, one of the students said: "I am reluctant to open up and get involved in discussions with professors. In fact, I am shy by character and habit. I do not like speaking too much.... You know, I feel nervous when people stare at me." "It is fear of saying wrong answers which prevented me from participation," said another participant. Clearly, the participants did not leave space for speculation about their shyness, for taciturnity, fear, and short turns in conversation as opposed to talkativeness, self-confidence, and long turns, which they stressed and revealed in their answer to our question, are characteristics of shyness. Another characteristic was their discomfort when they speak with their superiors (professors).

In fact, the participants' facial expressions and body language in general showed higher degree of nervousness even though we tried to make them feel at ease before and during the interview. Their answers were also short utterances. It should be stressed that a degree of shyness might normal if the person is exposed to a new audience. However, as Brophy [8] argued, shyness becomes a problem if it is not merely "situational but dispositional," so the person is labeled as shy. In other words, when the person is self-conscious about his or her shyness and internalizes the label, it is likely that a set of characteristics namely, inhibition, fear, lack of confidence in the presence of others, exaggerated self-concern, and increasingly negative social self-concepts, might become established and fossilized [9, 10].

In addition to inhibition, the attitudes of all members of the passive group toward class participation were decisive factors in hindering their engagement in classroom exchanges. For instance, three participants opined:

I do not see the object of class participation.... We come to the classroom in order to get information from the professors. If we know, why would we attend the courses? We would come only in the exam day.

People who participate wanted to show off or get the professors' attentions in order to get marks because sometimes they raise their hands and respond though they know their answers are wrong [laugh]. I sometimes know the answer but I do not speak. Talking in the classroom is not important. Those who always participate they do not know much. Some people do not participate, yet they get good grades even better than some of the "noisy" people.

If everyone is participating, the class is in chaos, and it becomes hard for us to follow the course. We cannot know which answer is the best since everyone may give an answer and the professor says it is correct. I find it irritating when I try to follow the course. Sometimes, the professor gets out of the subject because of one of the students gives an answer related to another topic such as politics.

It seems that the students were passive because they do not perceive classroom participation as a necessity or beneficial to them. For instance, the first student seems to define student's participation as a teaching or more specifically informing the classroom about a topic. As such, she distanced herself from getting involved in the activity since she perceived the teaching process as the professor's only responsibility. The third student's views are, to some extent, similar to the first one. She considered students' collaboration as a cause of noise, fallacies, scrapping and replacing the topic under discussion. Clearly, the students perceived education in general as a teacher-centered approach. This is because, according to Leone [11], in teacher-centered education, students consider the teachers as the only source of information. They also see quite classes as the adequate ones for obtaining information. As such, they expected them to talk, and they exclusively listen. Class participation is discouraged (p. 102).

Similar to her cohorts, the second student devalued classroom participation assigning it negative connotations. The student is aware that classroom participation is included in the assessment process, but she devalued such action. In fact, she considered such grades as unmerited because they were awarded as a result of showing interest in the course and thus developing close relation with the professor. She articulated that classroom participation is a strategy used by students who are not smart or good. In her terms: "those who always participate they do not know much. Some people do not participate, yet they get good grades even better than some of the "noisy" people." In the end, it can be argued that the student favored teacher-centered approach, for she depreciated formative assessment (e.g. interactive activities [12] and peer-assessment [13] which is a feature of student-centered approach, and appreciated summative assessment (e.g. mid-term exam [14, 15] and final exam [16] which is associated with teacher-centered approach.

Socio-cultural factors

Socio-cultural background surfaced during the interview as a hindrance to classroom participation. Surprisingly, only one student mentioned that her culture devalues women's engagement in speeches with men. In her own words, Frequent interaction with teachers and peers might be understood as openness to making friendship which we do not appreciate. You

know, men pass negative comments about outspoken women. Speaking on frequent bases also might give negative impression about my family.... You know, conservative families do not encourage... a lot of openness for precautions.

Seemingly, the student is preoccupied with the cultural norms of the Mauritanian patriarchal society. It conceived engagement and speaking with her male counterparts as a possible disgrace and threat to her own security and the social status of her family. Unlike the other students who sat still without commenting on her statements, the student confined herself within the old and sickening cultural scripts of the society, for Mauritanian girls are taught to preserve their femininity by speak less frequently particularly in the presence of men. They are socialized to denounce feminist ideology which stresses gender equality and calls for debauching femininity in the pursuit of power.

Indeed, throughout her speech, she stressed another religious factor which prevented her from getting involved regularly in the classroom activities. She raised the following question: why would I speak all the time in the classroom? "I wanted only to get a certificate." Then, she said: "the truth is that modesty (Haya in Arabic) prevented any Muslim woman from speaking a lot in the presence of men. I cannot imagine myself horning in on men's conversations. Neither Study nor excellence or anything else deserved sacrificing my modesty." She equated modesty with less speech in the presence of men. Invoking religion is a strategy of showing a strong belief in the notion of modesty. This is because in Mauritania, as in other Muslim countries, religious texts' interpretations are sacred and applied even if they are out of the context. Moreover, the fact that she belittled academic excellence, and seemed preoccupied with getting only a certificate reflected a traditional role that has been given to Mauritanian women. The traditional role was that the future job for women was to a great extent limited to that of motherhood. The husband is the only breadwinner. Even though if the woman works, she should not spend her money on the basic needs of the house. Otherwise, the community believes the husband is unable to meet the family's needs, an act which is culturally scorned. Instead, she spends her money on her clothes and/or gives it to her family and/or relatives.

Classroom traits

As the name suggests, classroom traits refer to factors that are related to the environment where the learning process takes place. Fearing students' judgments and character and gender of professors were mentioned as the main environmental factors which induced reticence among the female students. To begin with, one student said that when she gives her opinion she looked at her peers' reactions. This is because "male students always laugh at us when our responses

are not correct.” She went on explaining, “they [male students] consider our mistakes as an indication of stupidity”.

Elaborating on this point, another student interrupted

do not put all the blame on male students though they are to be blamed because female students pass negative comments about each other. They perceive a woman who usually interacts and gets engaged in the classroom activities as a man-like. She lacks factors of femininity. They scorned her and always play jokes on her. She becomes under their daily scrutiny, her movements, her walk, her clothes...etc. Even when you raise your hand, they say so and so is developing, or they might think you are interested in getting the attention of the professor if he is male. People have filthy and dirty minds.

The predominantly masculine nature of the Mauritanian society is felt in the above stated answers of the students. In public spaces, women are deprived from behaving the way men do. It seems that the Mauritanian society sets private space for women and public one for men. Additionally, active participation is a man’s behavior, and answers are man’s logic. Attempts to transgress such rules might lead to social misfortune such as accusation of being westernized; a term which is most of the time connotes unislamization and treason. Studies carried out by Fassinger [17] and Gomez, Arai and Lowe [18] came up with similar findings. Fear of appearing unintelligent to their peers, and feeling intimidated lead female students to become less inclined to engage in the classroom activities.

Furthermore, one of the respondents mentioned that professor’s traits deter their participation. One student argued that some professors are arrogant, and others are offensive because they are afraid to lose control over the classroom. She added that this characteristic is common among female professors. Surprisingly, all the other respondents agreed with her statement. They claimed that female professors favor male students. They are sensitive toward women. “Female professors judge the female students based on their appearance. They do not like women who take care of their clothes and makeup.” The overall image provided by female students in the current study about professor traits contrasts significantly with that generated in previous research. Williams’ account [19], for instance, documented that female teachers are more approachable, accessible, and flexible than their male counterparts. Students get engaged in classrooms led by female teachers. Similarly, Carson [20] found out that female teachers are more approachable and therefore more admired than their male counterparts. The level of participation increased when the teacher is female because she is more conscientious and better

communicators (pp. 344-345). The argument made by our participants about the sensitivity and unfriendliness of female teachers toward female students was different from other findings reported by other researchers. For example, Carrell, Page and West [21] reported that female students tend to perform better in classes led by females, and they take more courses in scientific courses when they had female teachers in introductory courses in college.

Factors encouraging female classroom participation

Personal traits and classroom factors appear to influence the female students’ participative behaviors. Observably, there was no diversity of answers among the respondents. Rather, all of them shuttled between the same points of view.

Personal traits

The respondents reported positive perception of classroom participation, “modern thinking,” and knowledge about the topic as the engines which drive them to engage in the classroom activities. They recognized the importance of classroom participation in enhancing their learning. For instance, one respondent vocalized, “participation is essential... we would not understand if we do not raise questions... and even answering the questions posed by the professors help us in testing our own knowledge.” Another respondent added, “true, participation helps in clearing up some misconceptions.... It is also a way of memorization. Ideas you discussed in classrooms remain with you, you know.” The citations make comprehension and memorization which are quintessential to any learning activity to take place a result of participation. These findings are consistent with that of Yusof Abdullah, Abu Bakar and Haizan Mahbob [22] who found out that students become active actors in the classroom when they held positive views of classroom participation and consider it part and partial of learning activity (p. 519). Worth of mentioning is that passive students reported negative views of classroom participation and did not consider it as a helping factor to their learning.

Besides, the respondents referred to a moderate view of the world as one of the reasons behind their participation. We define “moderate view” or “modern thinking” as a centrist view which is neither attached to traditional thinking of the society nor advocating the right wing feminist ideologies. For example, one of the respondents said “I do not see the reason why would not we participate. Women should prove their existence... we should challenge culture and dismantle the idea that man is the intellectual.” The lines indicate that she does not subscribe to the traditional view of the society which treasure women’s silence in public spaces or mixed groups. She seems even an advocator and champion of women’s right. This is clear in her questioning of the absence of women’s engagement in the classroom and use of the plurals women and we.

Her views were not only applauded but also they were reiterated by her cohorts. They played down and dismissed the value place on women silence by the society, yet they were cautious to elevate the values of held by some right-wing feminists. They said it is culture which is corrupt not religion, for the latter gives the women the freedom to study, speak and work. They even mocked the idea that women should be quite in classroom or any other mixed group setting. "Our attendance is to work and study, and we are obliged to do what it takes to succeed. I cannot see the purpose of highlighting gender in every situation," said one respondent.

Well-rounded knowledge about the topic was a recurrent factor in the respondents' answers. They pointed out that they prepare for the courses because background knowledge helps in developing a good understanding of the topic and gives the students the ability to ask many questions and thus check faulty knowledge. As one student put it: "well, maybe if I was low knowledgeable, I would be reluctant to participate at the same rate or in the same way when I am versed in the topic at hand... I do not want to make superficial observation or give irrelevant information which may lead students to dumb me." They wanted also to contribute to the discussion through sharing their ideas with their peers.

Classroom traits

The respondents listed several traits almost all of which fall in the sphere of Professors as the main factors which keep them active and outspoken in class. They said that approachable professors are influential to their participative behavior. As one of them verbalized, "some professors are pleasant.... They appreciate your speech....They make you feel you are welcome." Another student articulated "those who have positive attitudes toward the other should be also counted.... They respect the students. Even if the answers are wrong, they do not assault the students by giving negative feedback or making unfriendly gestures. Pedagogy was also cited as an influential factor. One student contended "there are some professors make you feel asleep even if you are motivated because they just come, sit on the chairs, throw handouts and ask the students to read them." She continued "I feel motivated and energetic when I see the professor standing and feel that they believed in what they are doing." Such statements suggested that the student favor student-centered approach. They feel energetic, engaged and ready to learn if the professors' approach of teaching is not monologic but rather dialogic. This argument is supported by Keengwe and Onchwari [23], among many other researchers, who stated that whereas the teacher-centered approach discourages or reduces students' engagement in the classroom activities, learner-centered approach "enforces cardinal

communication amongst teacher and students as well as students and students" (p. 134).

Age was mentioned as a crucial factor in enhancing the students' classroom engagement. In one of the student's words, "old teachers are just like your grandparents, you know. It is awkward or inappropriate when you disagree with their opinions.... I, myself, cannot afford seeing myself engaging in debate and discussion with old people." Furthermore, one student of the participants said that the type of the subjects and topics being studied exert a strong influence on classroom participation. "Some subjects are useless... you may like them [subjects], but the topics brought by the professors are boring and irrelevant. I think its psychological issue, I do not know why but I do not like some topics.... I... participate when I like the topic."

CONCLUSION

The current study unveiled a number of factors that can significantly either enhance or detract female students from participation. One of the personal traits, namely, perception of classroom participation, was thought of as a strong influence on the students' classroom engagement. Students who recognized its importance in the learning activity were active while the others who played it down were passive. The other personal trait, inhibition, was viewed as a hindrance to participation. Classroom factors, the professor and the student, played a paramount role in the students' participation. Female students tended to participate less when the professor is female, inflexible or accessible. Such fact entailed that they become dynamic and compassionate when the class is led by friendly male professors. It was also discovered that fear of peers' negative attitudes and social constrains were sufficient to decrease the level of participation of the female students. The findings suggested, however, that moderate views of the world, high knowledge about the topic, professor traits and the type of the subject being studied play pivotal roles in creating a classroom climate for female students to participate. Professor traits include approachability and pedagogy. Having pleasant character and adopting learner-centered approach stimulate the female students to actively engage in the classroom discussion.

In the light of the findings, it surfaces that the nexus between gender and higher education classroom participation does not reflect just a pedagogically based problematic but also culturally based one. Otherwise stated, inequity of gendered participation in the classroom was a product of socialization factors and teachers' approach of teaching. To find that factors precluding female students' engagement in high education classroom activities are deeply-seated in cultural norms is very disturbing. This is because universities are expected to be liberating not limiting. They should adopt critical thinking. Students in

universities are expected to be mature and independent individuals who question conventional norms. In order to fill this gap, the following recommendations are worth considering. Professors should enlighten the students about the importance of the classroom participation. They should also tell the students that they are treated equally regardless of their gender, color and all the distinguishing axes, and zero tolerance approach is adopted toward those who make fun or belittle their peers based on their speech or deed. Professors should dismantle the idea that female speech in mixed environment is religiously undesired. In fact, training on gender equality should be promoted in both university and professor-training institutes. Moreover, learner-centered approach should be encouraged since its features (e.g. formative assessment and discussion) promote classroom participation. Structure of classroom should be diversified to include not only competitive modes of learning but also to place importance on collaborative ones. Furthermore, the stakeholders should give extra seats in every branch to female students. As a result, they will not feel the pressure exerted on them due to their small distribution in comparison with their male counterparts.

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