

Factors Affecting EFL Learners' Attention at University Level

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to identify the factors that affect learners' attention in the classroom. The study follows a quantitative approach. It was conducted by utilizing a survey questionnaire that had been distributed to a sample of EFL learners at a university level. The questionnaire consisted of a number of items that aimed at investigating the learners' attitudes toward factors affecting their attention such as their learning environment, teacher's behavior, and teaching methods used, as well as the students' personal characteristics. The population was sophomore students in the second semester of the academic year 2022-2023. The results of the study show that several factors affect learners' attention. Personal hygiene, hunger, chatting, surrounding noise, and unfinished assignments are some of the factors that can distract students from learning and cause them to lose focus. The study also revealed that there is a need for more interactive and engaging teaching methods that can capture learners' attention and improve their learning outcomes.

KEYWORDS: attention, EFL learners, internal factors, external factors

INTRODUCTION

Attention is a cognitive process that allows an individual to selectively focus their awareness and concentration on a specific stimulus or task while filtering out other distractions. It plays an essential role in many aspects of human cognition, including perception, memory, learning, decision-making, and problem-solving.

Attention has been studied in cognitive psychology focusing on explaining how people process environmental information with the assistance of sensory receptors. Various factors can affect the process of attention. These factors are divided into two types: internal and external factors. Both internal and external factors may interact with each other and have a cumulative effect on attention.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Despite the significant role of attention in English as a foreign language (EFL) learning, various factors continue to affect learners' attentional processes. It has been noticed that many EFL learners struggle to sustain their attention and focus on linguistic input, which can negatively impact their language learning outcomes. Therefore, the problem is to identify the factors that affect EFL learners' attention and to suggest strategies and interventions resulting from the data.

1.3 The Aim

The main aim of the present study is to identify the factors that affect learners' attention in the classroom.

1.4 Hypothesis

The present study hypothesizes that The most classroom distractions are related to psychological and environmental factors.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Attention is an essential cognitive process that plays a crucial role in learning process, especially in the context of EFL learning. Attentional processes in EFL learning involve the allocation of cognitive resources toward linguistic input, processing, and storage. However, EFL learners' attentional processes are influenced by various factors, both external and internal, which can either facilitate or hinder their language learning.



The following subsection explains these types of distraction factors.

2.1 Internal Factors

Internal factors refer to the personal, psychological, and physiological traits of individuals that influence their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. These factors can include a wide range of aspects related to an individual's internal state. Many types of internal factors have a direct effect on attention and attention span. The present study tackles the most notable ones.

2.1.1 Interest

Interest is the feeling of curiosity or attraction toward something or of wanting to be involved with and discover more about something (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020). Various scholars have defined interest in different ways. Some scholars explore interest in relation to a person's activity within a larger socio-cultural environment (James,1890). Others like Dewey (1913) argue that interest is embodied in the individual and the object relation. The relation with an object is represented by a topic or a subject matter that leads to interest, which then, serves as a motivator.

Two types of interest have been reported by scholars; situational interest and individual interest (Andreas, et al (1992; Sansone and Thoman, 2005; Hidi and Renninger, 2006).

Situational interest means appealing to reengage with a particular object or topic over time. It combines affective qualities, such as feelings, enjoyment, and excitement, with cognitive qualities, such as focused attention and perceived value.

Individual interest can be defined as a psychological state characterized by increased attention, effort, and effect, experienced in a particular moment. Individual interest has been found to have a positive impact on attention, recognition, recall, persistence and effort, academic motivation, and levels of learning. In addition, the positive effect associated with the levels of interest generated from both situational and individual factors has been found to contribute to cognitive performance (Hidi and Renninger, 2006).

2.1.2 Students' Physical and Personal Characteristics

Physical characteristic means the body state of any individual which is from natural physical development, birth, accident, disease, or any other event outside the control of that person including height, weight, and individual physical behaviors. These characteristics can be regarded as internal causes that affect attention. Such characteristics of individuals play an important role in the way they behave. Those who suffer from certain deficiencies in their physical movement may face difficulties to concentrate, whereas those who are active, well-being, and healthy may concentrate easily. To clarify this, if students suffer from sickness, hungriness, and tiredness, they will find it hard to keep their focus well throughout the whole lesson because their body and their mind are not well enough to enable them to absorb knowledge.

Cicekci and Sadik (2019) conduct a study on the students' attention problems. They confirm that students coming to school without sleep, hungry, and tired find it difficult to collect their attention in the classroom. This ensures that the physical condition plays an important role in the state of attention.

Another study made by US Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2010) ensures that physical condition has an effect on cognitive skills such as concentration and attention, and it also enhances classroom attitudes and behaviors, all of which are important components of improved academic performance.

At a personal level, Eisenberg et al. (2009) show that personal well-being such as interpersonal confidence, social and emotional skills, and self-esteem are related to good adjustment and learning achievement. Hence, focusing on these attributes represents a promising approach to enhancing university students' learning gains.



2.2 External Factors

Factors that affect students' attention that are outside students are called external factors. They are generally out of the students' control, in the sense that students cannot manage them. Universities face numerous issues that negatively influence student attention. Administrators and teachers try their best to solve these challenges, but it is often difficult. Regardless of the strategies schools implement, there are some factors that are difficult to be solved. However, universities have to do their best to minimize the effect these issues have while maximizing student attention. There are different types of external factors that affect attention and attention span. The following subsection tackles the most notable ones.

2.2.1 Classroom Environment

The classroom environment is an essential motivating factor that positively affects students' attention and in certain circumstances distracts them. It is a mixture of the physical, instructional, emotional, and social elements of the class. The APA (2020) dictionary defines classroom environment as the physical, social, psychological, and intellectual conditions that characterize an instructional setting.

Although the physical environment usually includes classrooms, laboratories, and lecture halls, it may also include alternative locations, such as a museum, home, exercise room, or even the outdoors. Regardless of the setting, the degree of enclosure or openness, noise, seating arrangements, density and size have all been shown to have an effect on students' attention and behavior and ultimately on the learning process.

The classroom is seen not only as a four walls building but also as a complete system in which students change their behavior constantly. Rivlin and Weinstein (1984) view a classroom as a system and it can be better understood if it is seen in such a way. There is a complex relationship between the physical structure and arrangement of the room, the teacher, the students, and the distribution of space. They view a classroom from three perspectives; as a place for learning, as a place for socialization, and as a place for psychological development. Together all those elements of the classroom can affect and distract students' attention. The classroom environment naturally affects students' outcomes. Noise, inadequate light, unsuitable temperature, overloaded classes, misplaced boards, and inappropriate classroom design all makeup factors that could be confounding variables distracting students' attention in the classroom.

2.2.2 Digital Technologies

Digital technologies are those electronic means that generate, store and process information. Well-known examples include computers, smartphones, tablets, and others. In the modern era, there is a steady growth in student use of digital technologies in the classroom.

Despite the huge benefit of using such devices, still there are some negative impacts of those devices in the classroom. Many researchers who work in this field ensure that digital technologies cause more classroom learning distractions and affect students' attention when they are used for non-class purposes (Richtel (2012); McCoy (2013); Girlando and Eduljee, 2016)

Results from studies investigating the use of educational technology in the classroom have been varied. Some studies have shown the positive side of using technology, which includes increased student-faculty interaction, increased engagement in the classroom, benefit to learning, increased academic achievement, increased student attention and participation, supported collaborative learning, and increased classroom motivation (Lam and Tong, 2012; Girlando and Eduljee, 2016).

On the other hand, some other studies have found that using technology can be a distraction in the classroom (Purcell, et al., 2012; Richtel, 2012) and could decrease student attention and motivation which can affect overall course performance. Richtel (2012) claims that teachers believe that regular use of digital technology hinders their student's attention spans and ability to persevere in the face of challenging tasks. Also, Wei and Wang (2012) state that using digital technology during class affects students' ability to self-regulate their



attention to classroom learning.

McCoy (2013) notes that college students use digital devices such as smartphones, laptops, tablets, and other information and communication technologies an average of 10.93 times in a typical school day for non-class purposes. He assures that student usage had risen to an average of 11.43 times in a typical school day and resulted in 20.9% of students' class time being distracted by a digital device.

In their turn, students have also identified learning distractions caused by digital technology. Froese et al (2012) had students participate in a mock classroom where they viewed a PowerPoint presentation followed by a 10-question quiz. The results show that half of the students engaged in active text conversations, while the others were not.

In his study, McCoy (2013) asks students to choose the three biggest advantages and three biggest disadvantages of using digital devices in class for non-classroom purposes. The biggest disadvantage of using a digital device in class for non-classroom purposes was "Don't pay attention" at 89.8%. It was followed by "Miss instruction" at 80.4%, "Distract others" at 39.4%, "Get called out by instructor" at 32.1%, "Lose grade points" at 26.6%, and "Other" at 1.7 percent.

METHODOLOGY

The present study follows a quantitative approach. It focuses on collecting and analyzing numerical data. A survey design, specifically a questionnaire is utilized to collect the data.

3.1 The Population and Sample

The population of the present research is EFL students at the University of Mosul, College of Education for Humanities, Department of English. The population is made of 300 students.

The research sample is EFL sophomore students, College of Education for Humanities, Mosul University, in the first semester of 2022-2023. The number of the sample is 100 students. This sample is chosen because they have already acclimated to university environment and have moved away from behaviors typical of secondary school.

3.2 Data Collection Instrument

The data collection instrument manipulated in the present study was a questionnaire. One of the most common methods of gathering data is using questionnaires. They are popular because they are easy to make, can be used for many different things, and can quickly collect information in a form that is easy to understand (Dornyei, 2003).

The current form of the questionnaire aimed to identify which factors mostly distract students' attention in class. The questionnaire form consists of five columns. The first column of the table lists the number of the different types of distractions, and the second column presents the corresponding factors that distract the students' attention. The last three columns of the table represent the degree of distraction measurement, which includes least distracted, distracted, and most distracted (See Table. 1). The questionnaire is adopted from Soyemi and Soyemi (2020).

NO	Types of distraction	Less distracted	distracted	Most distracted
1	low socioeconomically level			
2	Smart Phones			
3	Hunger			

Table1. (Types of Distraction Questionnaire What mostly distracts your attention?



4	Love and Emotional Issues		
5	Being Away from family		
6	Lack of Interest in the Course		
7	Sitting Position in the Class		
8	Power Outage		
9	Surrounding Noise		
10	Smart phone of Lecturers Ringing		
11	Movement on the Corridors		
12	Unfinished Assignment		
13	Poor Ventilation		
14	Chatting in the Class		
15	Noise from other Classes		
16	Personal Hygiene		
17	Lateness to Classes		

4. Data Analysis and Discussion of the Results

The current section provides the results of the questionnaire that aimed to identify which factors mostly distract students' attention in class. Table 2 presents the frequency and percentage of responses for each distraction type, the mean and standard deviation of the responses, and the rank of each distraction type.

Factor NO	Most distracted		Distracted		Less distracted		Mean	SD	Resp-	Rank
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%			level	
Y16	40	81.6	7	14.3	2	4.1	2.78	0.51	92.52	1
Y3	34	69.4	11	22.4	4	8.2	2.61	0.64	87.07	2
Y14	24	49.0	24	49.0	1	2.0	2.47	0.54	82.31	3
Y9	1	2.0	19	38.8	23	46.9	2.31	0.71	76.87	4
Y12	1	2.0	19	38.8	22	44.9	2.29	0.74	76.19	5
Y15	1	2.0	17	34.7	26	53.1	2.29	0.54	76.19	6
Y5	22	44.9	17	34.7	9	18.4	2.27	0.76	75.69	7
Y2	19	38.8	23	46.9	7	14.3	2.24	0.69	74.83	8
Y6	20	40.8	17	34.7	11	22.4	2.19	0.79	72.92	9
Y17	18	36.7	22	44.9	9	18.4	2.18	0.73	72.79	10
Y4	18	36.7	19	38.8	12	24.5	2.12	0.78	70.75	11
Y8	20	40.8	12	24.5	17	34.7	2.06	0.88	68.71	12
Y7	13	26.5	24	49.0	12	24.5	2.02	0.72	67.35	13
Y1	11	22.4	27	55.1	11	22.4	2.00	0.68	66.67	14

 Table (2). Frequency and Percentage for Types of Distraction Questionnaire What mostly distracts your attention?



Y13	17	34.7	13	26.5	19	38.8	1.96	0.87	65.31	15
Y11	11	22.4	24	49.0	14	28.6	1.94	0.72	64.63	16
Y10	13	26.5	18	36.7	18	36.7	1.90	0.80	63.27	17
		33.97		37.58		26.05	2.21	0.71	73.77	

The results show that the most distracting factor is "personal hygiene" with 81.6% of the students rating it as the most distracting and 14.3% rating it as distracting whereas 4.1% rate it as a less distracting factor.

The second factor is "hunger" with 69.4% of the students rating it as most distracting and 22.4 rating it as distracted whereas 8.2 rating it as less distracted. The third most distracting factor is "chatting in class" with 49.0% rating it as the most distracting and 49.0% rating it as distracting whereas 2.0% rating it as less distracting. The mean of this factor is 2.47. The fourth factor is "surrounding noise" with 2.0% of the students rating it as most distracting and 38.8% rating it as distracting whereas 46.9% rating it as less distracting. "Unfinished assignments" is the fifth factor with 2.0% of the students rating it as the most distracting whereas 44.9% rating it as less distracting. The mean of this factor is "noise from other classes" with 2.0% of the students rating it as most distracting whereas 53.1% of them rating it as less distracting.

These findings suggest that students should ensure they take care of their basic needs before coming to class, such as maintaining personal hygiene and having a good breakfast. The findings also indicate that students should avoid talking during class and try to find a quieter place to study or block out the noise. Additionally, students should finish their assignments before coming to class to avoid being distracted by unfinished tasks.

The least distracting factors are "the phone of lecturers ringing" (26.5%), "movement on the corridors" (22.4%), and "economically poor families" (22.4%). These findings suggest that these factors may not significantly affect students' attention in class.

The mean and standard deviation values indicate that the responses are relatively consistent and not highly dispersed. The mean value for all the distractions is 2.21 which indicates that the respondents' average level of distraction is moderate.

Based on the findings, the hypothesis that state "Most classroom distractions are related to psychological and environmental factors" is supported.

CONCLUSION

Several factors can significantly affect EFL learners' attention in the classroom at university level. Personal hygiene, hunger, chatting, surrounding noise, and unfinished assignments are some of the factors that can distract students from learning and cause them to lose focus. Poor personal hygiene and hunger can affect a student's physical and mental well-being, making it difficult for them to concentrate in class. Chatting and surrounding noise can be distracting, especially if they are loud and disruptive. Unfinished assignments can create anxiety and stress, which can also affect a student's ability to pay attention.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is essential for teachers and educators to be aware of factors that distract students and take steps to minimize their impact. This may include providing breaks for students to attend to personal hygiene or eat, establishing clear rules and consequences for disruptive behavior, creating a quiet and conducive learning environment, and providing appropriate support for students who may be struggling with unfinished assignments. By addressing these factors, educators can help students to stay engaged and focused, leading to better learning outcomes and academic success.



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