The impact of emotional intelligence on developing speaking skills: From brain-based perspective

F. Duygu Bora a

Abstract

This current study presents the relation between Emotional Intelligence (EQ) and students’ perceptions towards speaking classes. Two questionnaires were given to the participants in order to see their EQ level and understand their views on Brain-based speaking activities. The results of the questionnaires indicated that students who have high level of EQ are more eager to attend to speaking classes and brain-based activities because they have self-esteem and manage to cooperate with others due to their social skills. On the other hand, the ones with low level of EQ do not have healthy relations with the society or confide in themselves, thus being isolated from the classroom atmosphere.

Keywords: Emotional intelligence, brain-based learning, speaking skill, foreign language learning

1. Introduction

In this study, it is aimed to find whether Emotional Intelligence (EQ) levels of the students affect their attitudes in terms of active participation to speaking classes in language learning process. In learning a language, teaching speaking has been one of the most challenging issues. Most of the teachers cannot manage to attract students’ attention and make them join the classroom activities in speaking classes. Therefore, despite the significance of the skill, it is generally preferred to ignore it. This is caused by the lack of motivation, self-confidence and self-awareness of the learners. Thus, this leads to disruption in their feelings, which means low level of EQ.

There are several definitions of EQ made by the field experts. Goleman (1998: 317) defines EQ as the capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships. Mayer and Salovey (1997) interpret it as a group of mental abilities which help you recognize and understand your feelings and others’. According to Thorndike (1920), it is the ability to act in wisely in human relations. Considering these definitions, it is clearly seen that all definitions take care about individuals’ emotional development and social interaction to which they have been exposed to.

In the light of EQ principles, it is presented in this study that if teachers plan their lessons considering Brain-based learning techniques, which view not only students’ cognitive features but also their feelings, interests, experiences and background knowledge as important, the students feel less anxious towards the class.
In terms of Brain-based learning, the students learn best naturally and cooperatively in a relaxed and motivating atmosphere. Jensen (1996) who considers the brain as “a box packed with emotions” underlines the importance of cooperation in learning. Moreover, it is essential to present the new information in patterns associating them with the existing knowledge on the learners’ interests and experiences. However, Wolfe (2006) suggests that learners cannot make connections if they have been or will be ashamed or made to feel stupid for giving a wrong answer or not responding quickly enough. Therefore, integrating their real-life experiences in a positive manner helps them to feel more motivated. Caine & Caine (2002) points out the significance of the emotions for meaningful learning and teaching by pointing out the importance of experiences, activities based on those experiences and low threat. Furthermore, in parallel with Caine & Caine (2002), Hart (1983) regards positive experiences and emotions for the students as important because negative ones lead to a sense of downshifting.

When looked into all of the suggestions made about the role of emotions in learning from Brain-based perspective, it is obvious that emotions have big impact on learning. The emotions can optimize the learning experience, prepare the learner for novel learning experiences and can contribute to the awareness of learners about their needs, goals, and others’ emotions. At this point, the techniques of Brain-based learning coincide with the factors having a high level of EQ. Therefore, this study aims to find out whether EQ level of the learners affect their attitudes towards Brain-based speaking classes and activities.

1.1. Aim of the study

This study is on EQ, a well-known factor for students’ language developments. It focuses on the effect of Brain-based learning activities on developing EQ level of the students in order to maintain positive attitudes towards speaking classes. It is aimed to show with the help of the Brain-based teaching techniques, students can develop their emotions, direct them in terms of their needs and overcome the hesitation about participating to speaking lessons. In addition, the study aims to prove that students will develop relationship with their peers, communicate more effectively and understand their feelings, which means developing EQ, thanks to Brain-based learning activities. The questions aimed to answer are:

1. Is there a relationship between the level of EQ and the perceptions of students towards speaking classes?
2. Is there a relationship between the level of EQ and the perceptions towards Brain-based speaking activities?

1.2. Significance of the study

With the help of the results reached at the end of the study, it is expected to shed light on the ways to improve students’ speaking skills and to make them actively take part in speaking activities by referring to their feelings. Therefore, as developing students’ EQ and establishing an emotionally healthy atmosphere help to use the language as well as learning it theoretically, the effectiveness of Brain-based learning activities will be emphasized.

1.3. Limitations of the study

This study is limited to 21 B-level (Intermediate) students from different departments studying at a preparatory school of a state university in the Black Sea region of Turkey.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The study was applied to 21 participants who were learning English as a foreign language at a preparatory school of a state university in the Black Sea region of Turkey.

2.2. Materials
A quasi experimental method was used in this study. One of the materials was a questionnaire including twenty statements developed in order to find out the EQ levels of the students. On a three-point-scale ranging as “Agree, Not sure, Disagree”, participants circled the response which best indicates their agreement on the situation. The statements were relevant to the data obtained from the literature review. The other material was a questionnaire designed to understand the views of the students towards Brain-based activities in speaking classes. It included 16 statements about Brain-based learning activities. On a two-point-scale ranged as “Agree” or “Disagree”, participants circled the response which shows their agreement on the use of Brain-based activities in speaking classes.

After the data was collected, the results and tables were evaluated with the help of SPSS version 15 and Microsoft Excel Program. These tables were illustrated with all the findings acquired in the process of data collection. The EQ levels of the students were also compared with their views in terms of certain questions.

3. Findings

Before deciding on the perceptions of the students, their EQ was calculated. As seen in Table 1, the best score was found as 50 while the lowest one as 38 out of 60.

| Students | EQ Levels |
|----------|-----------|
| Student 1 | 44        |
| Student 2 | 50        |
| Student 3 | 47        |
| Student 4 | 49        |
| Student 5 | 47        |
| Student 6 | 49        |
| Student 7 | 48        |
| Student 8 | 46        |
| Student 9 | 43        |
| Student 10 | 45        |
| Student 11 | 53        |
| Student 12 | 50        |
| Student 13 | 54        |
| Student 14 | 42        |
| Student 15 | 51        |
| Student 16 | 38        |
| Student 17 | 40        |
| Student 18 | 46        |
| Student 19 | 47        |
| Student 20 | 46        |
| Student 21 | 49        |

The finding of the first research question came out that the students who had high level of EQ are more eager to join speaking classes. This finding can be illustrated with certain items from the questionnaire in Table 2.

| Students | Emotional Intelligence | Perceptions |
|----------|------------------------|-------------|
| Student 2 | 50/60                  | I can develop myself when I practice, |
| Student 11 | 53/60                | It is an enjoyable class. |
| Student 12 | 50/60                | I like making dialogues. |
| Student 15 | 51/60                | I feel that I really learn English in speaking classes. |

On the other hand, the students with lower EQ scores had more hesitant attitudes towards speaking classes. This finding can be illustrated with certain statements of the students from the questionnaire in Table 3.

| Students | Emotional Intelligence | Perceptions |
|----------|------------------------|-------------|
| Student 10 | 45/60                | Speaking should be practiced only in main course lessons. |
| Student 16 | 38/60                | I don’t want to join in the activities. |
| Student 17 | 40/60                | I am afraid of making mistakes |
As for the other research question, it was concluded Brain-based learning activities were mostly supported by students having higher EQ scores. In addition, those students felt more relaxed and were more likely to take part in speaking class activities. The findings are indicated in Table 4.

Table 4. Attitudes towards brain-based speaking activities

| Groups | Pre-Test | Post-Test | Pre-Test Mean |
|--------|----------|-----------|---------------|
| 2. Activities that appeal to all of my senses help me feel more relaxed. | Student 3 | 54/60 | Agree |
| | Student 12 | 50/60 | Agree |
| | Student 3 | 47/60 | Disagree |
| | Student 16 | 38/60 | Disagree |
| 11. Learning daily life expressions make me feel more relaxed in speaking classes. | Student 19 | 46/60 | Disagree |
| 13. I feel less stress when I work in group cooperatively. | Student 13 | 54/60 | Agree |
| | Student 10 | 45/60 | Disagree |
| | Student 20 | 46/60 | Disagree |
| 14. I feel anxious about making mistake in role-play activities. | Student 16 | 38/60 | Agree |
| | Student 17 | 40/60 | Agree |
| | Student 1 | 44/60 | Agree |
| | Student 8 | 46/60 | Agree |
| 15. I feel more relaxed if the activities include musical, rhythmic or kinesthetic aspect. | Student 5 | 47/60 | Disagree |
| | Student 13 | 54/60 | Agree |

An interesting finding was pointed in some statements on Brain-based learning activities in speaking classes on which all of the students agree. These statements were:

Statement 4: Integrating my experiences and real-life situations help me to become more effective in speaking classes.

Statement 9: Using authentic materials such as magazines or brochures to practice the language are more attractive than binding to coursebook.

This may be because of the importance of the experiences in learning process. No matter what EQ level a student may have, they all believe in the effectiveness of real-life situations in language learning process and become more motivated. In terms of Brain-based learning, Lombardi (2004) suggests that deeply ingrained learning comes later, when students digest what they have learned, connected it to life experience, or apply the knowledge to life events. Their experiences, real-life situation-based activities, authentic materials based on daily life are all indicators of this view. In addition, Melvin and Stout (1987) find an overall increased motivation to learn in students, as well as a renewed interest in the subject matter, when students use authentic materials in language classroom.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

In the light of the results of this research, it can be concluded that Emotional Intelligence plays an active role for students to be active participants of speaking classes. The students who have low level of EQ are less eager to attend to speaking classes and activities, which causes interruptions in language teaching. However, the students who have high level of EQ do not feel any hesitation about joining in the activities because they have self-esteem, know what they need and want, manage their feelings, and are able to study cooperatively.

First of all, each student has a different way of learning; this means activating different hemispheres of the brain. Thus, as the teachers cannot be sure which students learn best with which hemisphere, they need to design activities appealing to both of them. When students find something interesting and helpful in terms of their experiences and goals, they become more eager to take part in the lesson, manage to work cooperatively, develop self-esteem, and reach high level of EQ.

Motivation is the key factor in students’ achievement in language classes due to its positive effect on assuring self-esteem. Especially, learning and practicing speaking requires little anxiety and high motivation, so students
should be made to feel in good mood. What creates the most anxiety among learners is grading. When the learner feels that he is regarded as successful or unsuccessful in terms of his marks, he fails in answering or asking any questions. Therefore, teachers should focus on what learners can do rather than what they cannot.

Another way of establishing motivation to develop EQ is to be encouraging towards the students. According to Goleman (1995), the critique may show the way to possibilities and alternative that the person did not realize, or simply show the points that need attention. Thus, it is important to focus on the alternative true ways instead of directing the attention to the mistakes.

Apart from motivation, student needs are another key factor in helping them to gain their confidence, which is also essential to develop EQ. If learners follow a complex path without being aware of their needs or goals, they may get lost, which results in confusion and lack of motivation. On the contrary, if learners are aware of what they need, they take more concrete steps towards their aim and are more likely to succeed. While determining the needs in terms of Brain-based learning, the teachers need to consider their interests and experiences to which the learners link their knowledge. According to Caine and Caine (1995), in Brain-based learning the way we form patterns is deeply motivated by what we are interested in. The learners should be helped to find what they need in accordance with their interests in order to help them gain self-confidence, thus, develop their EQ.

Lastly, cooperation is the common point of Brain-based learning and developing EQ. It should be fostered among students. In terms of Brain-based learning, every brain is unique and everyone has something to share and teach to one another. Caine and Caine (2002) support contemporary teaching methods in which learners cooperate instead of traditional ways of teaching leads students to compete. As for its relation with EQ, cooperation in the classroom helps students to develop social skills to understand others’ ideas. Goleman (1995) states a key social ability as empathy, understanding others’ feelings and taking their perspective, and respecting differences in how people feel about things.

On analyzed in detail, it can clearly be realized that key factors of EQ which are motivation, knowing needs, managing feelings and self-awareness are all integrated with one another (See Figure 1). One of them leads a path to the other and an interaction appears among them, which results in self-confidence and high level of EQ.

What is essential for the language teachers is that they need to help learners to develop their EQ as much as possible. This can be achieved by using Brain-based teaching techniques and activities in the classroom. Because Brain-based learning mainly emphasizes the importance of students’ needs, motivation, feelings, confidence and cooperation, it shows parallelism with factors affecting EQ. Therefore, language teachers need to focus on using Brain-based teaching techniques in their classrooms, especially in speaking classes, in order to help students in their EQ levels.

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