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Promoting Student Engagement in the English as a
Foreign Language Classroom in a Japanese University

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Promoting Student Engagement in the English as a Foreign Language Classroom in a Japanese University

Allyson MacKenzie

Abstract

Student participation is often an important component of university courses whereby a part of the total grade calculation includes its evaluation. Participation serves to encourage the development of a variety of skills and the acquisition of knowledge through a more active form of student-centered learning. Class participation and interaction can provide instructors with some confidence that learning is taking place during a course and that students are coming to class prepared, having read and completed homework assignments. Thus, it can be used as a means of assessing student engagement with course material since many instructors interpret student responses as evidence of active engagement. Research shows that learning is an active, not a passive process and that students learn best and retain more by actively doing. This paper outlines ways in which a language-learning classroom, organized to focus on learners, can help to promote engagement which can in turn lead to improved student reflection on their classroom roles, and ultimately in their performance and acquisition of skills.

Keywords

Participation, evaluation, student-centered learning, engagement, student reflection

Introduction

The Confucian and Socratic models can be seen as representing two ends of the learning continuum within individuals. The Socratic method of learning is characteristic of the questioning of beliefs, the evaluation of others' knowledge along with a high esteem for self-generated knowledge, and the focus on error to evoke doubt. The Confucian method, on the other hand, embodies effortful, pragmatic and respectful learning, and the acquisition of essential knowledge (Tweed & Lehman, 2002).

A teacher centered, Confucian style approach to instruction and learning has long been the norm in Japan. Students are reluctant to actively participate in class, especially in the language-learning classroom, where there has historically been a

more passive, grammar-based focus on instruction that has relied on the rote memorization of vocabulary and grammatical patterns throughout junior and senior high school. Students seem disinterested. Instructor initiated questions are mostly met by silence and there is a general lack of engagement in the material.

Through several studies and research, it has been established that desirable learning outcomes such as improved critical thinking and higher grades, along with more meaningful and lasting learning is best accomplished through an active process. Furthermore, students learn best and retain more by actively doing, such as when they are engaged in the learning process rather than through passive learning, or via transference (Petress, 2006; Carini, R.; Kuh, D. & Klein, S., 2006). When instructors assess participation in class, they encourage and reward the development of communication skills and social skills such as co-operation and collaboration.

Research has singled out the Millennial generation, generally said to be born somewhere between the mid 1970's and 2000's, as students who demand more interaction from their classroom experience (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Which is to say, the current cohort of university students we are presently engaging within our classrooms are a part of this group. With the advent of more active, student-centered classes and curriculum starting to come into the spotlight, the traditional use of the Confucian method has been undergoing change, albeit, very slowly. We find that as far back as 1989, the Japanese Government Policies in Education, Science and Culture published a White Paper, which proposed that improved communication ability in foreign languages would be made a curricular target. An emphasis, thus, was placed upon communicative competency and international understanding in the junior and senior high school system.

It seems as if those plans fell on deaf ears since again, fourteen years later, in 2003, The Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) launched a new five-year educational action plan to cultivate *Japanese with English Abilities*. The changes, which incorporated the use of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) methodology in classrooms, and included teaching English in English, had the purpose of improving communicative competency in students. The MEXT Action Plan reflects its goal: "On graduating from junior high school and senior high school, graduates can communicate in English" (MEXT, 2003).

Now, 26 years after the first initiative to improve communicative competency amongst high school students, and 12 years after the next, towards a move to a more

learner centered, active style classroom with English taught in English, the English language classroom has not significantly changed. It is still generally led in a teacher-centric manner. The wide use of the Grammar-Translation method, and English being taught mainly in Japanese is still, unfortunately, the norm. The dominance of translation and grammar-focused type questions on university entrance exams produces a washback effect, and results in a lack of willingness on the part of high school English teachers to move towards a CLT type of classroom. In return, the classroom is marked by disinterested students along with a general lack of engagement of the material.

In fact, it is not unusual for students to believe that attendance is synonymous with participation. If you inform them that simple attendance does not equate to being able to acquire participation points some students respond with surprise. Therefore, it is not difficult to imagine that the dichotomy between a student's perception of their participation and the instructor's is often a problem. What may or may not be counted as participation varies from one instructor to the next. (Dancer & Kamvounias, 2005). The measure of participation is subjective and presents a measurement challenge.

Discussion

Student Engagement

If teachers hope for engaged students, and active learning and participation so that deep interaction of the material and meaningful learning can take place, then there is the requirement that instructors modify their techniques to increase student engagement with the material and participation as part of the learning process (Grasha, 1990; Huba & Freed, 2000). Students who are engaged are involved and interested in course material and learning. They are active members of the class and are more likely to participate; both in class and outside of it which may lead to greater academic success. The current deficiencies at the junior and senior high school level expose the need for a more Socratic method of EFL instruction in Japan. Mortimer J. Adler & VanDoren (1972) explain that genuine learning is active, not passive. It is the process of discovery and action by the student. "Now there is no other way of forming a habit of operation than by operating. That is what it means to say one learns to do by doing." (p. 39). There is an urgent need for students to not only engage in the EFL classroom, but to do so in English.

Active participation in class discussion is an excellent way to involve and engage students in the learning process. Active learning puts the student at the center of the teaching and learning process. When students feel a sense of ownership over their learning they become more engaged and motivated in it. An active learner is

not overly dependent on the teacher. Many instructors consider class participation evidence of active learning or engagement that promotes learning, critical thinking, writing, speaking and listening skills, and the ability to engage actively in conversation (Howard & Henney 1998; Peterson 2001; Petress 2006; Bean & Peterson, 1998). In addition, many instructors stipulate participation as a mandatory component in the course outline. For example, Bean & Peterson (1998) found that 93 percent of core curriculum courses at Seattle University included class participation in their grading schemes.

Guidelines for Evaluation of Student Participation/Using Rubrics

However, the assessment of classroom participation can be highly subjective. The claim is that it is too difficult to identify consistent and objective criterion for evaluation of individual student participation and that instructors' own personal biases and opinions may affect how they assess student participation (Armstrong & Boud, 1983). Faculty objectivity is questioned when evaluating class participation (Lyons 1989). Furthermore, Bean & Peterson (1998) found that some professors determine participation marks impressionistically, as a "fudge factor" in calculating final course grades. As a result, a majority of assessment and measurement scholars advise against grading classroom participation at all. Grading attempts are seen as unreliable (Carter, 1977). Jacobs & Chase (1992) state that professors rarely offer feedback to students in terms of class participation, which prevents students from improving their performance in this area. They also go as far to say that it "contaminates the grade as a measurement of achievement of the course objectives" (p. 195). They provide reasons for not grading participation: students are generally not informed how to improve their participation, the interpretation of behavior is subjective, that is, by rewarding more talkative or outgoing students, shy or quiet ones are put at a disadvantage, and that record keeping is difficult, often without any specific supporting evidence for the assignment of participation grades.

Alternatives to instructor evaluation of participation have been studied. Gopinath (1999) pointed out that some research had found that students either overrate or underrate themselves in their self-scoring of participation. There are, however, methods to evaluate student participation that are directly aimed at addressing concerns of reliability and fairness in grading practices. It is vital that the instructor clearly define how participation grades will be earned according to clear criteria, outlined at the start of the semester.

In spite of a number of objections to including class participation scores, the author believes that if done in a clear and transparent way that students can benefit greatly from such a focus. By clearly explaining the reasons behind these values, instructors

can not only justify the inclusion of a class participation score but also encourage all students to become more active and engaged participants in their own learning process. Learners must clearly understand what is expected of them and just how their participation will be evaluated. Activities, pair work, and group work should be carefully planned to allow learners to have a variety of chances to participate in a variety of ways. For these reasons, the writer devised a student self-assessment system for students to use to reflect upon, assess, and record their participation after each class.

For the assessment of classroom participation to be fair and equitable, it is important that clear criteria and standards are outlined and that students understand what is expected of them. When students play an active role in their own assessment it immediately gives not only credibility to the evaluation, but also a level of transparency not available when instructors assign random participation grades. The most common solution used to reduce the ambiguity associated with student participation grades is to incorporate an assessment rubric (Table 2). The method utilizes a holistic approach to set clear standards of performance for students.

Challenges & Suggestions for Instructors and Students

A lack of active participation through student silence or inactivity in the language classroom can leave the instructor confused and frustrated. Are students silent as a result of apathy towards learning English or towards learning in general? Perhaps student do not understand the materials or simply do not know how to engage in active learning. Silent students deprive themselves and classmates from the benefit of their knowledge, their insights, and their thinking since much learning stems from the sharing of ideas. The passive student is less likely to apply, extend, or transfer what is learned than are active students. Some researchers go as far as saying that:

“Student reticence, withdrawal, or fear of interacting not only deprives that student from sharing what they know, it deprives the teacher and classmates from benefiting by what a given student has to offer...(and) that student reticence has a vital ethical dimension to it and that there is an individual, teacher, classmate, and administrative obligation to reduce or eliminate such reticence for the benefit of all involved in the education arena.”

(Petress, 2001: 104)

Some students may not be used to actively participating in the class and may feel stress for a variety of reasons, for example, as a perceived result of the need to

participate in class discussion. The size of the class, the group dynamics, cultural or gender issues, language abilities of students, or perceived lack thereof, may also be cause for stress. The instructor can modify rubrics, as well as student expectations, as he or she sees fit in order to help accommodate students who may be dealing with any of the above, or other issues, causing them anxiety.

Collaboration as a Means of Promoting Participation

Language instructors spend much time in the planning and organization of the optimal use of the curriculum, materials, and with the facilitation of student interaction. Unfortunately, it is not always the case that instructors put enough thought into how to organize the class so that students can optimally interact with and learn from one another. Interaction patterns among students impacts their learning, their feelings toward the school, the instructor and other students, and their self-esteem (Johnson & Johnson, 1994). Competition encourages students to pit themselves against each other. However, simply seating students together in a room and telling them to work as a group does not mean they will collaborate; it needs to be taught.

Students working in a collaborative setting work together to reach common goals that benefit all the members of the group. Students become engaged in discussion and are required to clarify both their own and others' ideas which can, in turn, lead to the development of critical thinking in the learning process. (Gokhale, 1995; Totten, Sills, Digby and Rush, 1991). Johnson & Johnson, (1989) explain that for a cooperative group to reach its full potential, to be healthy and be more effective than competitive or individualistic efforts, a set of conditions need to be present in the dynamic:

- Activities include an element of positive interdependence: instructors must set clear tasks and goals so that the group feels they either succeed or fail together.
- Individual and group accountability: each member must be accountable for contributing their share of the work to complete group goals.
- Activities include face-to-face interaction: students are expected to help and encourage each other and to share resources.
- Interpersonal and group skills: activities are designed to enhance students' cooperative skills. Students engage in both academic task-work and interpersonal teamwork.
- Group processing: to promote group success, group members discuss how well they are achieving their goals and maintaining effective working relationships.

This type of organization of the class by the instructor so that students can optimally

interact with and learn from one another promotes peer support and peer interaction (Grabe & Stoller, 1997).

Course Outline and Suggestions to Encourage Participation

The following section outlines how instructors can initiate a more collaborative class setting to students with a sample of the general flow of a course. From the very start of the semester, students are expected to actively engage in exchanges with their peers. On the first day of class, after going through the course outline with students, they are each given their own copy of the Active Participation Chart (Table 1) and a grading rubric (Table 2). They are given time alone to read and inspect it and to ask questions about unknown vocabulary or concepts in small groups. Finally, we discuss the chart and rubric together as a class. Students are then informed that they will be required to submit a short essay towards the end of the semester outlining their rationale for the active participation grade they have assigned themselves in the form of a petition to the instructor. (Appendices 1, 2, and 3 illustrate anonymous student samples with spelling and grammar errors left intact.) Next, an individual assignment detailing student impressions of what active participation means to them is completed. Finally, the first class ends with students completing their Active Participation Chart for Day 1. Of course, the chart and rubric can be modified to suit the class level, and the needs and wants of individual classes. In addition, students can give input into the design of a participation rubric if the instructor so desires.

At the start of the second class, students are given an alphabetically ordered class list in grid form in English. Each name has a number of boxes next to it. Students are told that from now on, before commencing any type of pair or group task, they must introduce themselves to their partners and check off the names of collaborators on the sheet prior to beginning discussion. Then, the instructor explains that students must check off the names of classmates they work with in each of the following classes and to set a goal to engage with every person in class a minimum of once over the course of the semester.

Through the semester, students progress through a series of textbook activities and engage in pair and group discussion, sharing ideas and opinions. They have opportunities to work independently but spend the vast majority of class time reviewing homework assignments, collaborating and sharing ideas, undertaking pair and group work, planning and completing group projects, and writing short essays. They revisit content throughout the semester in an attempt to help synthesize the knowledge they have accessed, make connections and build upon them in order to develop some level of expertise. These types of encounters and the

activities done in class provide ample opportunity for scaffolding where students can both assist and be assisted by their peers and become more engaged. Through these different types of activities, that is, the review of past material and the discussion of new, all students will have the opportunity to contribute at some point during each lesson.


During the third last lesson, students are reminded that they must compose a short essay outlining their participation and that they must assign themselves a grade in the final paragraph of the essay. The essays are emailed to the instructor, printed out and commented upon. If the grade they have assigned themselves seems appropriate and justly earned, they are told so in the instructor’s comments along with any other pertinent feedback. If the grade seems either over or under-inflated, they are given feedback and asked to negotiate a new grade with the instructor. The students write their comments directly onto the handout, which is returned during class and is kept by the instructor. With this type of class participation assessment in place, the onus of active participation and reflective, honest assessment lies on the shoulders of each and every student. They are aware of the assessment criteria and what they must do to achieve a desired grade. They are reminded of it after each class while filling out their chart and assigning themselves a grade and thus are required to become more reflective, responsible and active participants in their own learning process and experience.


Table 1: Active Participation Chart


Name and student number..... Class day/time.....

Class Date	1 /	2 /	3 /	4 /	5 /	6 /	7 /	8 /	9 /	10 /	11 /	12 /	13 /	14 /	15 /
Effort															
Score (see rubric)															

TODAY'S PARTICIPATION and ENGAGEMENT (Effort)

 = maximum

 =average

 = minimum

I spoke only in English today.

I sometimes used Japanese.

I often used Japanese.

I was an active learner.

I was a little active.

I was mostly passive.

I always cooperated with peers.

I co-operated with peers.

I rarely cooperated.

I came to class very prepared.

I came to class prepared.

I was not well prepared.

COURSE EVALUATION

Active Participation	/20%
Class work/quizzes	/40%
Mid-term assessment	/20%
Final assessment	/20%

Paste
your
picture
here

END OF SEMESTER REPORT

It's time to reflect on your participation both in and outside of class over the semester. First, reflect on the semester then complete the chart on the other side of this page. Write a short essay for homework (about four paragraphs) and score yourself on your Active Participation out of 20 points. In the essay, tell me what you did to earn your participation score (in and out of class) and why you feel you deserve that score. If I agree with your assessment, you will get that score. However, if I feel you are being too generous or too harsh on yourself, we will negotiate a score together. Finally, remember that this score is connected to your participation, NOT to your English ability. Submit your essay by email two days before the second last class.

	ALWAYS	SOME-TIMES	NEVER
1. I attended all or almost all of the classes. (13, 14 or 15 out of 15 times)			
2. I arrived to class on time and ready to start at the bell.			
3. I came to class prepared (with my textbook, with homework completed).			
4. I did my very best to speak only English in class.			
5. I reminded and encouraged my group members to speak in English.			
6. I actively participated in group and pair discussions.			
7. I followed instructions. I asked questions when I didn't understand.			
8. I volunteered to answer questions Ally asked to the whole class.			
9. When someone in class was talking I looked at and listened to them.			
10. I did my homework and reviewed class lessons.			
11. (other)			

Table 2 Participation Rubric

GRADE	Class participation grading rubric
0	Absent, sleeping or did not bring textbook.
1	Is mostly silent; does not add to or join in pair and group conversations. Does not ask questions. Does not make eye contact.
2	Makes basic comments; asks and answers questions in a simple way in pair and group work. Uses a mixture of English and Japanese to contribute. Makes basic eye contact with group members.
3	Speaks in English +60% of class time. Shows some preparation for and in discussion. Sometimes comments and asks opinions of class members. Usually can answer questions if called upon in class. Helps classmates and asks when things are unclear. Does most homework. Makes eye contact and uses basic gestures when speaking with group members.
4	Speaks in English +80% of class time. Shows some leadership and good preparation for and in discussion. Often comments and asks opinions of class members. Answer questions if called upon in class. Helps classmates and asks the instructor when something is unclear. Does all homework. Makes good eye contact and uses gestures when speaking with group members.
5	Speaks in English 100% of class time. Shows leadership and excellent preparation for and in discussion. Freely comments and asks opinions of class members. Volunteers to answer questions. Offers help to classmates and reminds them to speak in English. Asks the instructor when something is unclear. Does all homework and extra research into topic. Makes good eye contact, uses gestures and appropriate body language when speaking with group members.

Conclusion

In order for students to understand the importance and benefits that can be derived of actively participating in university EFL classes, it is vital that the instructor first define what he or she deems to be appropriate behaviors and actions and inform students of it. Providing students with a template for those desired behaviors and actions deemed to be of value, and then providing positive reinforcement and feedback when they occur, will hopefully serve to reinforce positive behavior. Being an active participant in ones learning experience is something that must be taught to a great number of students. Many students are used to being spoon fed information and are not used to questioning peers or the instructor, or being asked questions that require much more than a yes or no answer. Grading class participation is both time-consuming and subjective if done solely by the instructor. For those reasons, involving students in their own evaluation can be seen as not only being more equitable and transparent, but also can serve to inform students of

the value of engagement and continual reflection over the duration of a course. If students are cognizant of the fact that they are completely and solely in control of their participation grade and that it their responsibility to engage to a certain standard to achieve a particular score then they will hopefully adjust their in-class actions and study habits in order to achieve the grade they feel they warrant or desire.

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Appendix 1

K.K. Active participation report English class

There were both good and bad points in this semester. For example, bad point is increase absent and tardy. But I did my best compare with spring semester. I did effort in the class and out of the class compared with spring semester.

I feel that atmosphere in the classroom is improve day by day. I think that there is a reason for it. All members take part in the class with positive mind. And all members try talking with all English. Of course I did take part in the class and try all English. And if I formed a pair close friend, I took good communication. But if I formed a pair the person who has not talked very much, I did not get good communication.

I feel that consciousness became higher for homework. I did not do all "TREAD". But textbook's homework was certainly did. Before I did not do text book's home work sometimes. At such a point I think I grew up and this is good tendency so I think I want to continue it. And I started study of the word with smartphone. In the train or when I have free time, I did it.

As I wrote it a while ago, there are some bad points. That is increase absent and tardy. This is related I am getting used to school life. This is bad tendency. So I will tighten my mind in the new year. And I can not say I did my homework with positive mind. I must say I am made to do it. So from now, I do it with positive mind. As above compare with spring semester, there is the aspect that grew up. But in a wasteful thing, there are negative point. So I give myself 10 out of 20. From now on, get rid of tardy and do homework with positive mind to get high score.

Dear K.K.,

First of all, thank you for your effort in class. Your positive attitude and willingness to volunteer answers in class discussion and take leadership roles within the group was greatly appreciated. It was clear to me that you made efforts to speak English in class as much as possible. However, sometimes your voice level in your group discussions was so loud that it may have disturbed other groups nearby so please keep that in mind. In addition, try to work with a greater variety of peers. You mentioned that you were late and absent too many times. You reached the limit of absences allowed so mainly for that reason, I have to mostly agree with your assessment. Please comment on the other side if you have anything to add.

Appendix 2

M. N. English IB21 Writing Assignment

It have been almost a year since I started studying English in this class. This year was very new and interesting for me. So, I would like to look back and write about my participation of English studying in this semester.

First, I am going to talk about what effort I gave in the class. This class was always required me to speak only English even in a group work. What is more, speak it with more correct pronunciation and active participation. I feel it help a lot to speak and learn English more natural and in a different way that I have never try. I enjoyed studying English in the class. Especially I like to speak English and discuss in a group, I always tried to tell my opinion in a group work. I did better to explain my idea and gave an advice to a partner or group members than first semester.

In this paragraph, I am going to write about what effort I gave outside class which includes homework, assignment and reviewing. There were continual assignment called IREAD which focus on the skill of reading, writing, thinking and explaining. It was good for my skill of reading and writing. Although I could not do all IREAD assignment, I think I could have done it better or more. Second, as my activity outside the classroom , I read the English book, watch English movie and hang out with exchange student sometimes. I will keep this in the future too.

After look back my participation of studying English through writing this essay, I feel my English skill is definitely growing up. But, unfortunately, I could not attend the class every time, I will be attend more next year. So, finally, I give myself 16 point.

Dear M.N.,

I agree that you expressed yourself well in discussions, made an effort to use English and help your group members. Your English skills are strong and I think that you have a lot to offer the other students so I would have hoped that you could have taken a greater leadership role this semester. You may feel somewhat shy to express your opinions to the others but I believe that if you led the way that more students would make a greater effort to speak in English during group work. Because of the high number of times you were absent and late for class I have a difficult time agreeing to a score of 16. Review your attendance chart and let me know what you think. I look forward to your response on the back of this page.

Appendix 3

E.S. English IB21 Writing Assignment

Time is really fast that my first year of university is going to past. It's time to reflect something about studying English this semester. Here I'd like to write something about my progress, my performance and effort besides in and out of class, and my self-appraisal.

I remember I was late for class one time but I didn't absent any classes. During the class, I spoke English as much as I can though I still have trouble to express anything (sic.). When I meet the vocabulary I don't know, I try to express it in other words. I always volunteer to answer questions at first time. What's more, I participated in class work and group discussion actively. In group work, I always dare to express my opinion and listen other's opinion carefully. I also help classmates to correct their mistakes.

Outside the class, I finished the writing assignment and textbook's homework on time, but I think my performance is not as good as the last semester. I just finished 32% of the IREAD, because I divided half of my vigor to the other English class – SCAT, but I still devoted myself to English. In my iPhone, there are many applications using to study English. When I take the subway, I always use it to remember vocabularies and listen radio from podcast. I like to listen some articles and news from VOA.

These are all of my reflection of this semester. If I could appraise my efforts in class 21, I give myself 18 out of 20. I have taken the TOEIC before, but my score didn't improve greatly. I failed in the part of reading. I noticed that I have no patience to read too many articles in the test. I need to do more exercise to make more progress in the future.

Dear E.S.,

Your attendance and participation along with your attitude towards volunteering to answer questions were all excellent. I cannot remember hearing you use Japanese in class. You pointed out that you only completed 32% of the IREAD activities, however they were supplementary activities that I assigned and if I recall correctly you were one of the top achievers in the class in the extra work, congratulations! Apart from the one time that you were late, I would say that your class participation was perfect and would have absolutely no problem if you were to assign yourself a perfect score of 20/20. What do you think? Please add comments on the other side of this page.

(2015年9月4日受理)