Active Learning Strategies in the ELT Classroom: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

Since not all students learn in the same way, a teaching-learning continuum needs to be established to effectively engage students. Expectations of good grades from students often result in academic stress. In other words, students with average academic performance often lose interest in studying when the emphasis is solely on results. Additionally, the distractions of social media divert the students' attention. Innovative teaching strategies offer a remedy to this problem, and can help salvage the situation. English teachers, in particular, can play a constructive role and engage the students in active learning. The teacher will need to select strategies that make learning enjoyable and simple for students. A teacher who understands how students learn and practices inclusive teaching methods while making learning visible will be an asset in the contemporary classroom. This article demonstrates the change brought about in the attitude of a set of science students towards learning through such participative practices.

Keywords: Inclusive teaching, visible learning, active learning, scaffolding

Introduction

Smart boards and other digital accessories enhance the learning environment in today's classrooms. Teachers do their best to improvise learning in the classrooms by equipping themselves with accessible teaching techniques (OECD, 2009). While some students are receptive to the idea of creative education, a majority of students have still not

adjusted to it. In this situation, the instructor has a higher responsibility to align the students, involve them, and get them ready for learning (Bransford et al., 2000).

Given the diversity of students' backgrounds and learning styles, teachers face the challenge of creating effective learning opportunities for a classroom. A teacher cannot possibly create individual lesson plans while dealing with a classroom comprising a variety of students. Teaching strategies that are inclusive are useful in this situation. In this way, students of different academic levels can learn while no one group of students is singled out or left unattended (Luria et al., 2006).

A teacher who guides the class along the appropriate route of learning can be seen as a master of logical inquiry. Using logical questioning to influence student learning is an art for certain teachers (Gall, 2016). When the wrong question is asked, the momentum may falter, the learning may suffer, and the goals may not be met. Questions are the tools in instructor's hands that assist in keeping students engaged, and aid in learning. Knowing what to ask students and when to ask them is crucial for getting the desired results (Dillon, 1983).

In a classroom, the teacher serves as a barometer for what the students already know and the further need to learn, and thus advance their learning. The students require direction in order to build on previously acquired knowledge, and the teacher can guide them in a constructive way (Sato & Ballinger, 2016). For learning to have a lasting impact on students, scaffolding requires mastery on the part of the teacher (Schwarzer & Grinberg, 2017).

Scaffolding in the Classroom

Vygotsky is closely associated with the term "scaffolding". According to him (Dixon-Krauss, 1996), there are two developmental levels: the actual level and the potential level. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) stands for "the difference between the level of prospective development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in partnership with more capable peers and the level of actual development as determined by independent problem-solving" (Dixon-Krauss, 1996, p. 15). An expert teacher's job is to sense students' understanding and be active in lifting students in the ZPD. Collective scaffolding can be quite effective, and students can accomplish tasks with the help of their

peers; this process has gained attention in teaching various disciplines, including second language learning. According to research, students might "scaffold each other's performance" by combining their mental resources when working in pairs (Yildiz & Celik, 2020).

Sometimes, a student cannot think in isolation or find a solution to a problem, and instead co-thinking with other students provides him/her the opportunity to arrive at better solutions (Brookfield & Preskill, 1999). This does not imply that collective thinking is always better than individual thinking. The teacher will need to assess the situation and provide scaffolding in the classroom as and when needed. The teacher could mediate and assist in scaffolding, as well as provide directions for learning (Fields, 2017).

Making Teaching Inclusive

Inclusive teaching methods can vastly benefit learners in the classroom. In the classroom, the teacher identifies and accommodates various students' learning differences and assists them in better understanding of subjects. The teacher attempts to make learning meaningful and provides equal opportunity for all students, thereby maximizing student learning (Harris et al., 2020). To make inclusive learning more effective, the teacher must be adept at reaching out to a variety of learners. The teaching design will need to accommodate variety in the questions asked, to use the board for emphasizing points, adopt easy-to-understand words and phrases, and check the progress of students at their desks. Additionally, the students could be assigned a variety of tasks, some to be undertaken as a group activity and others to be handled independently to maximize students' learning (Carr & Bertrando, 2012).

Making Learning Visible

The ELT teacher in this study worked with a group of 20 students from the science section who had varying academic backgrounds and performance levels in their core subjects. Irrespective of their grades in the core subjects, the teacher wanted to encourage the students and instill belief in their abilities to take on difficult tasks. The teacher treated the students with compassion, and encouraged their capacity for new learning and creative talent. Three sessions of one hour each were planned with the students, they were intended to increase the interest of students, especially in English. According to Hattie (2012), pedagogy

shouldn't overload students with writing assignments that are tough or make learning monotonous. To make pedagogy flexible and interesting, it is essential for the teacher to understand and map the learning process of the students.

The teacher began the session by discussing the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing, that students need to acquire irrespective of the career path they choose. He emphasized that learning English is beneficial as it is a global language and would help them in multifarious ways. The teacher assured the students that it was alright to begin with partial understanding of 'reading tasks' and then move on to better comprehension, and he assured them of his assistance along the way.

Active Learning Strategies

Making students think, participate, and discuss makes the learning environment active, thereby giving students confidence. Students with low self-interest or negative attitude can also become interested through active learning techniques (Fornari & Poznanski, 2021). Relating questions from lessons to real-life situations, giving students time to think, making them reflect, and giving them small writing tasks are effective ways of keeping them engaged in the learning mode (Meyers, Jones, & Jones, 1993).

The students actively participated in the hour-long English classes. The first session focused on the students' reading of the first three paragraphs from the short story "The Voter" by Chinua Achebe (Department of Pre-University Eduaction, 2016). The teacher asked the students to read silently, and asked them not to worry about the level of comprehension. The teacher walked around the classroom, initiated discussion, and provided the information that the story was about elections in post-colonial Nigeria. The students began to ask questions like, "Is it a real story?" and "What is special about this story?" and the teacher kept providing assistance. He could see that the students understood the basic points, and were intrigued by the story and wanted to know "Who are Roof Okekie and Marcus Ibe?" The active learning process initiated in the class had piqued the interest levels of the students, and apart from the plot outline of the story, they became interested in the socio-historical context of the text.

To help the students understand the story better, the teacher explained the election process in India. He also addressed questions like, "What is democracy?", "What is colonialism?" etc. to facilitate students' grasp of the themes of the story. The teacher walked up to individual students in the classroom, clarified their doubts, and encouraged them in this process of active learning. Over time, he knew the common difficulties being faced by students, and used the board to explain African proverbs like "fly moving a dunghill", and helped them understand how Achebe's English is infused with native language and cultural references. The teacher put in his best efforts in providing cues and encouraged the students to search for answers instead of providing them. In this process, some students could comprehend correctly, others were close to understanding, and the teacher patiently waited and provided them the necessary assistance and encouragement. Through this process of 'knowledge construction' and comprehension, the students became motivated, and were curious to know about the unfolding of the plot of "The Voter". The process of active learning increased the students' involvement, they showed greater participation in answering questions, and felt motivated about learning.

The teaching was visible to the students, and the learning was visible to the teacher (Hattie, 2012). The teacher remained a co-creator of knowledge with the students, ensuring that they took cues and used them to construct knowledge. As the understanding of the students increased, they became curious learners, and wanted to know more about elections in Nigeria. In the second session, the teacher practiced 'guided reading', and the students were introduced to 'whispering campaign' by Roof in "The Voter". Many students had read the text at home since curiosity had been generated in the previous class. The interest and understanding of the students was better than the previous session, and the teacher changed his strategy to encourage analysis of the story. Questions like, "What do you observe from the two different political parties, POP and PAP?", "Do you find any humorous instances in the story, and what are they?" and "Do you think Roof is an intelligent manipulator?" etc. were raised and debated in the class.

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to address the following research questions: Do students develop a greater interest in learning English

through active learning techniques? Does the teaching of English language through literature create an understanding of contemporary socio-economic situations? Does participative learning in the English class lead to greater motivation for learning across subjects?

Research Design

To ascertain whether the attitude of the students changed towards learning after the active learning approach, this study uses a qualitative approach. Information was gathered based on the students' performance through the four sessions, including the summative test in the last session. The teacher noticed the students' interests in the classes, observed their enthusiasm for learning, and the efforts put in by them to read before the class, and assessed their responses to the test. The study was conducted for one hour each day for three days in a row, a test was administered on the fourth day. On the last day, the students were asked to submit a feedback form (see Appendix); the results of test and feedback forms were analyzed to determine if the learning interest of students had increased.

Participants

The study participants were selected from Indian Academy, a pre-university college situated in Bengaluru, Karnataka. The participants were in their second year of the science stream and aged between 17 and 18 years. There were 20 participants, who had not displayed deep interest or good grades in core subjects. The study attempted to determine if participative learning in English classes would increase motivation for learning. The selected students had not scored good grades till then, and the study wanted to explore if active learning would bring a change in their learning behaviours.

Tools

The lesson "The Voter" by Chinua Achebe from the pre-university English textbook *Springs* (Department of Pre-University Education, 2016) was used in three classes. Subsequently, a test was conducted with 10 one-mark questions and 1 five-mark question. Feedback in the form of a Likert-scale response for 10 questions (see Appendix) was taken after that.

Results and Analysis

Feedback forms were given to all the students at the end of the fourth session. The form comprised 10 questions. In the fourth session, a summative test with 10 one-mark questions and a paragraph question worth 5 marks was given. Eighteen students secured 10 out of 10 in one-mark questions. The remaining two students secured 8 out of 10. This indicates that the students had developed reading and comprehension skills, and could answer questions based on the lesson, "The Voter" competently. The paragraph question was: "Democracy is not just about conducting elections. Describe how the story 'The Voter' by Chinua Achebe helps students think about corrupt practices in Nigeria." In the three class sessions, the teacher had observed the speaking skills of the students, and had paid close attention when they presented views and opinions in class. Now their writing skills were tested; 6 students secured 4 out of 5 marks in the paragraph answer; 7 students secured 2.5 marks out of 5; and the remaining secured 1.5 out of 5. Grammatical errors, missing coherence, and faulty sentence construction were the common mistakes in students' writing. The lowest score of 11.5 (10 in objective questions plus 1.5 in paragraph question) out of 15 was satisfactory as these students had not shown much interest in learning till then and their grades had been below par.

Findings

An analysis of the test scores proves that all 20 students have the potential to produce short responses to questions asked from the lesson. The students had been active participants in the English classroom and had developed a curiosity to learn. This clearly indicates that if the delivery of lessons is made interesting, and the teacher provides assistance, the motivation of students shows an upward curve. Since the time period of study was short, the lapses in writing skills, especially while answering paragraph question, will need more ELT classes to improve skills. The purpose of the three sessions of ELT classes was to engage the students in the learning process. When we examine the scores and feedback forms (see Appendix), it is clear that the attitude of the students towards English learning had changed a lot. The students learned with relative ease, enjoyed the process, and were not stressed about the lesson or the test. There is hope that with good lesson planning and participative

learning, the piqued interest of students will be seen in other subjects too (Bruna et al., 2007).

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

This study was conducted on a small sample of 20 students who had not scored well in their subjects. All of them showed a positive response to active learning in the English class. The students showed enthusiasm and interacted in the classroom, and scored well in the English test. The feedback also suggests that the students enjoyed the ELT classes. However, the paucity of time did not allow to study if the changed learning behaviours and performance would be reflected in core subjects as well. Further research needs to be carried with a larger group over more classes to demonstrate the long-term change that creative learning can bring in students.

Conclusion

It is important to understand that ELT classes are not just meant for learning English, they impact students' overall development. The onus is on the teacher to design lessons so as to make learning active and worthwhile, especially as proficiency in English communication skills betters employment opportunities. Additionally, lessons in English develop interest in socio-economic contexts in which the stories are set. A well-planned English class can thus increase the motivation of students towards learning in general. The participative learning techniques carried out in this study of 20 students from the science stream demonstrated a greater level of motivation in students towards learning even in the short period of time. While the study was limited to ELT classroom, one is optimistic that a shift towards active learning in core subjects will reflect in students' understanding and grades in those subjects as well.

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Appendix

The students were asked to answer the following questions on Likert scale at the end of the fourth session. Overall, the students' responses demonstrated a positive attitude toward future learning.

1. How satisfied are you with the engagement techniques in learning English?
    -   Very Satisfied
    -   Satisfied
    -   Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied
    -   Dissatisfied
    -   Very dissatisfied

2. Did the classes give you enough confidence in language learning?
    -   Yes, very much
    -   Only to some extent
    -   Just enough
    -   Not much
    -   Not at all

3. Were you curious about your learning throughout the classes?
    -   Yes. very much
    -   Only to some extent
    -   Not so much
    -   Very little
    -   Not at all

4. Do you think similar teaching techniques will motivate you in the core subjects?
    -   Yes. I will show more interest
    -   Yes. However, it depends on the teacher
    -   Hopefully, I'll try
    -   Not that positive
    -   There's no way I'll be focused

5. How good is your understanding of the lesson "The Voter" by Chinua Achebe?
    -   Excellent
    -   Very Good
    -   It is just okay
    -   Very little

- I understood nothing

6. How useful was the teacher's assistance while learning the lesson?
   - It was tremendous
   - It was useful only to some extent
   - It was just okay
   - Not very useful
   - It was useless

7. How good was your comprehension level while learning this lesson compared to your previous learning in English classes?
   - Understood fully
   - It was much better
   - It was just okay
   - All the same
   - I couldn't understand

8. What was the interest level in taking the test?
   - Very enthusiastic
   - Only somewhat interested
   - Moderately interested
   - Not very much
   - Did not want to take the test

9. Would you like to attend a similar set of sessions in future?
   - Yes, very much
   - May be
   - Likely to attend
   - Not much interested
   - Not at all

10. Would you recommend these learning sessions to your friends?
    Would highly recommend
    - May be
    - Less likely
    - Not much
    - Not at all

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