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## **Nature and scope of learner engagement in ESL Classes: An Inquiry**

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### **Abstract**

The process of learning, with its pangs and pains, its anguish and anxiety had been left neglected for centuries in a tradition of product oriented education. The entire focus of discussions and deliberations had been on teaching—of course, how to enhance the quality of teaching. However, of late, educationists have started paying attention to learner's characteristics, potentials, and the processes of learning. Learner characteristics got noticed first in theory and research by the second half of the last century, followed by learner potentials, thanks to the intervention of humanistic philosophy in education. Learner engagement or involvement still was not seriously researched because our focus still was on reforming teaching. Learner participation, how it could be maintained and measured in tangible terms, how it could be observed in assessment, and how it could be incorporated into the body or texture of teaching especially in transactional modes like lecturing—these issues remained less discussed. This paper enquires into some of these pedagogic issues which are deep-rooted in the learner's socio-psycho-economic background. Remaining within the periphery of teaching English as a second language, this paper tries to offer some suggestions, too.

**Keywords:** learner involvement/engagement/participation, process-product distinction, internalization, cognitive challenge, problem solving tasks

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### **Introduction**

Traditional prioritizing of teaching over learning has done severe damage to the core concept of education, namely developing a child's personality and converting him or her into a whole / social person. As time passed, we started realizing our mistake, and as a result, we have been researching on those most neglected aspects, mainly learner characteristics and potentials. Consequently, research and theorization have started to place the learner on the centre stage of education, still classrooms mostly remained teacher-centred. It is in this context, this paper tries to explore the possibilities, and means of identifying the characteristics of learner engagement or participation in the classroom with special reference to English as a second language (ESL).

### **Assumptions**

The main assumption behind this paper is that the centuries old Indian perspective on English language as a language of opportunities is getting emphatically asserted day by day. Just because of being deprived of effective English teaching-learning opportunities, millions in India have not attained what they wanted to, failed where they tried to reach, and got disillusioned about their aims in life. Though most of them later excelled or managed in one field or other, they were pushed to the end of the queue some time in their life when it came to communication skills. Thousand have lost their hard-earned job, especially in the IT sector because of poor or slow performance, which had its source in poor communication skills.

### **Rationale behind learner participation**

A self-willed, whole-hearted participation in an activity leaves an indelible mark in an individual's development. Even if the result

of that activity was disappointing, the very engagement as a process does not fail; it serves as a launch pad for further activities. On the other hand, another activity which was forced on a learner may get rewarded in the end, but may not help in future because the degree of interiorization or internalization (Vygotsky, 1978) <sup>[7]</sup> was less in this case. This paper pursues the former line of self-engagement in learning.

### **Modes of learner engagement in the ESL Class**

In subject classes like social science or general science, all levels of learners get activities in a wide range of cognitive challenge for getting self-engaged. These activities include lab work, manual workshop, map reading, modelling, specimen collection and so on, apart from in-class problem solving activities. As opposed to these in-class and outdoor engagement, the language class has limited options, and mostly indoors such as individual work, pair work, small group work and large group work, and all of them are centred around linguistic competence. The one who possesses fairly good command over the target language gets more opportunities to engage in the class.

If language classes can incorporate cognitively challenging problem solving tasks, that leave more space for linguistically less equipped learners as well, more learner participation in the process can be expected, which in turn will result in better learning outcome. This point will be discussed in some detail under the sub-section on the 'how' of learner engagement.

### **A closer look at learner involvement**

Learning takes place in two ways—natural and guided. For practical purposes, the latter can again be branched into two: socio-culturally guided and classroom-instructed. The

socioculturally mediated learning falls under the category of incidental learning. This paper is an inquiry into the possibility of bridging the gap between instructed learning and incidental learning in the case of English as a second language

For many reasons, ESL learners get limited opportunities to become part of the incidental learning processes. At the same time, even sincere teachers complain about learners' lack of motivation and interest in learning English. But, sincerity alone does not suffice; a fusion of theoretical knowledge, methodological awareness and resourcefulness matters more. Such teacher is most likely to engage in introspection and reflection: "How to get my learners engaged in the English class?" This paper tries to provide clues for that concerned teacher.

### **Learner involvement: What?**

Of the different aspects of learner engagement, namely cognitive, behavioural, emotive, physical, social, cultural and linguistic, this paper has selected the cognitive and linguistic aspects and tried to fuse them so that it may suit a language class.

Learner involvement or engagement has been defined as the learner's "psychological investment in, and effort directed toward learning, understanding, or mastering the knowledge, skills, or crafts that academic work is intended to promote" (Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992:12)<sup>[4]</sup>.

Observing students at work is likely to find a valid definition of engagement. Strong, Silver and Robinson are of the opinion that "the best definition comes from the work of Phil Schlechty (1994), who says students who are engaged exhibit three characteristics: (1) they are attracted to their work, (2) they persist in their work despite challenges and obstacles, and (3) they take visible delight in accomplishing their work" (1995:8).

Debate over the advantages and limitations of lecture method has not come to an end; it still dominates the Indian classrooms. In a second language class, there is little scope for lecturing since the speaker's and listener's focus is on the content. Awareness of learner involvement may prompt the lecturer to think of activities that arrest and sustain learner attention. As a prelude to get learners engaged in a lecture, the lecturer can train the students with a matrix in two columns: the first 'Expected points' as noted down before coming to the lecture, and the second 'Delivered points' summed up by the end. Pre-, while- and post-lecture activities include note taking, paraphrasing, drawing diagrams and graphs which represent facts in more concrete terms, making correspondence between two columns—the first 'Expected points' as noted down before coming to the lecture, and the second 'Delivered points' summed up by the end, mentioned above. Two tasks for advanced level-- reorganizing the contents of the lecture, and re-orienting the same from another character's or stakeholder's perspective --demand higher order cognitive and linguistic skills, and therefore they suit college classes. Whether in a lecture class at the higher level or in an activity class at a lower level, getting learners engaged in informal small group discussions is yet another task which suits all levels of ESL. This task has a lot of potentials in it, since it can be extended from the primary class to post-graduate level in the revised form of group discussion, and even further on civil service preparatory or training programmes.

Student engagement refers to the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are

learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education. Generally speaking, the concept of "student engagement" is predicated on the belief that learning improves when students are inquisitive, interested, or inspired, and that learning tends to suffer when students are bored, dispassionate, disaffected, or otherwise "disengaged." *Stronger student engagement* or *improved student engagement* are common instructional objectives expressed by educators. (student-

engagement/https://www.edglossary.org/student)

Learner involvement gets generated in four ways: Self-inspired, peer-or adult inspired, teacher-suggested and teacher-insisted. These are sequenced in the order of the degree of volition involved in them. While the first gets triggered by one's own volition, there is little volition or initiation in the last one. As a result, when it comes to sustaining learner involvement, the last one proves to be rather transient. Here, the teacher manages to get the learner engaged for a short while, and the objective for both is likely to be the examination performance.

If the classification above has been based on the source of inspiration for engagement and participation, a similar classification was made by Harmin and Toth (2006), based on the intensity of volition. They are (i) fully active workers, (ii) responsible workers, (iii) half-hearted workers and (iv) work avoiders.

Looking from another point of view, student engagement refers to the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education. Generally speaking, the concept of "student engagement" is predicated on the belief that learning improves when students are inquisitive, interested, or inspired, and that learning tends to suffer when students are bored, dispassionate, disaffected, or otherwise "disengaged." *Stronger student engagement* or *improved student engagement* are common instructional objectives expressed by educators. (t-engagement/https://www.edglossary.org/student)

### **Learner autonomy VS Learner involvement**

The notion of learner autonomy is gaining momentum in research and theory, but it may remain a myth for the time being in the Indian classrooms when we consider the exposure-poor environment in the case of ESL learning. As a viable alternative, increased learner participation can be suggested in practice. Or while retaining autonomy as the final goal, participation can be projected as an interim objective.

### **Learner involvement: Why?**

Learner participation is sharing learning responsibility. To draw a metaphor, when the duplicate key is handed over to the young ones at home they feel the responsibility of taking care of their own home. Based on the results of numerous studies across continents, Michel Cavanagh (2011)<sup>[2]</sup> reports the added advantages of getting more learner involvement by employing various transactional strategies such as collaborative work and note taking while listening to lectures.

Some of the findings which Cavanagh quotes from studies by others follow:

- Students who contribute enthusiastically in lectures retain information for longer than if they simply see or hear it.
- Active learning has also been linked to higher student motivation, increased confidence with class materials, better student attitudes and improved critical thinking skills.
- Invited engagement helped them become self-directed learners who were better able to weigh evidence from a variety of sources, synthesize information, and communicate their ideas.
- Learner engagement in the form of collaborative problem-solving tasks can develop deep approaches to learning in which students focus on understanding concepts to relate new ideas to previous knowledge, experiences and themes rather than simply memorizing facts.
- More student participation results in experiential learning which has ‘has a quality of personal involvement – the whole person in both feeling and cognitive aspects being in the learning event’ (Cavanagh, 2011:23)<sup>[2]</sup>.

### Barriers to learner involvement in the English class

#### 1. Intimidating power structure

The power structure of a classroom does not accommodate learner views. Whether overt or hidden, forms of domination affect learners. Hierarchical relationships with inherent power structure, one-way or top-to-bottom communication practices, rigid time schedules, rigid behaviour expectations for students, and inflexible forms of assessment together drive learners to the periphery of the classroom.

#### 2. Linguistic barrier

Besides the psychological barriers triggered from socio-economic background common to learner’s little or non-participation in the class in general, English classes suffer from additional withdrawal symptoms. The most important among them is the mismatch between the learner’s cognitive potentials and the second language repertoire. It is quite disheartening to lose the opportunity to tell the world what one has to say and wants to say, but unable to say due to the lack of the language to say so. With tears hidden, such learners remain mute witnesses to see others actively responding to the teacher’s questions while their responses ever remain unvocalized in the English class. A distancing gets originated between the learner and the language of opportunities.

#### 3. Unequal opportunities provided by the teacher

A study conducted by a group of teacher–researchers, based on classroom observation at the National University of Malaysia in 2012 with three groups of active students and three groups of passive students found that “the size of a classroom, personalities of the instructor and students and the perception of peers influenced the students to speak up in class” (Abdullah *et al.* (2012:516)<sup>[1]</sup>. It is quite common that a section of the class always goes neglected by teachers. Reasons may vary: inadequate psychological perceptions, lack of pedagogic skills, poor classroom management skills, biases, pressure of time and so on. However, those who are at the receiving end will always be the disadvantaged ones.

#### 4. Slow learning

Learning is a recursive process in which the learner has to re-course the journey using the mind map. The speed of mind mapping differs from person to person. In a competitive class and

world, slowness robs the learner of their opportunities, especially when the teacher is under time pressure.

#### 5. Grabbing of opportunities by others

Quite often unconsciously, and sometimes being aware of the consequences, some teachers promote the so called ‘front benchers’ or better performers. Such teachers are most likely carried away by the performance of that ‘gifted’ group, and they may credit the feedback and performance of the above average learners to her academic account—a dangerous tendency.

The three sub-points discussed above can be seen summarized in the following quote

Ideally, the goal of increasing participation is not to have every student participate in the same way or at the same rate. Instead, it is to create an environment in which all participants have the opportunity to learn and in which the class explores issues and ideas in depth, from a variety of viewpoints. Some students will raise their voices more than others; this variation is a result of differences in learning preferences as well as differences in personalities. For example, some students who do not speak often in class are reflective learners, who typically develop ideas and questions in their minds before speaking; others are shy students who feel uncomfortable speaking in front of groups (at least initially). Many students who frequently volunteer to contribute are active learners, who typically think while they speak. (<http://teachingcenter.wustl.edu/resources/teaching-methods/participation/increasing-student-participation/>).

### Learner engagement: How?

Student participation is one form of assessment of a student's performance on a course. The components that might be evaluated in student participation are engagement in class discussions and in online discussions and student behaviour in group settings. It must be noted here that a strict one-to-one-correspondence cannot be expected between learner engagement and learning outcome since engagement is a manifestation of the process of learning, not the product. It is quite natural that learners who are overtly least engaged in classroom processes may outshine in written tests than those who actively engage in classroom communication. Their engagement is more oriented to cognition than to language; but their silence cannot be mistaken as non-participation—they differ in mode.

#### 1. Demystifying power structure

Non-engagement in the class activities by the introvert low achievers has to be tackled through counselling and other psychological measures; whereas non-participation by introvert high achievers must be treated as a loss to the whole class, and even to the teacher and teaching; therefore the teacher has to share her powers with them by assigning both administrative and academic duties to them. Introversion is quite often marked by silence; but that silence need not be mistaken as non-performance.

#### 2. Supplementing formal class interaction with informal conversation

Natural two-way communication as opposed to the “book-based monologue” can create an atmosphere of freedom and a sense of confidence in the learner so that they can take part in the activities without inhibition. While the former is formal, content-based and pre-fabricated, the latter is informal, context-dependent and extempore. Only the latter adds to the repertoire of the learner’s

communicative competence which in turn will prompt the learner come forward voluntarily to be an active participant the class.

### 3. Facilitating communication towards outside and back into classroom

Sincere teachers succeed in getting whole class participation through developing their communication skills for in-class participation, better informed teachers lead communication from classroom to outside and resourceful teachers bring communication from outside to classrooms.

### 4. Estrangement

Monotony breeds boredom. A resourceful teacher will be resorting to various strategies day by day. Even a lecture may be made a mode of bilateral negotiation in her class. Many of the age-old transactional modes such as dictation, substitution table, picture composition and guided composition can be re-presented in new forms, especially with the help of technology. Estrangement is a literary technique in which an author succeeds in presenting something familiar as interestingly strange.

### 5. Incorporating cognitively challenging linguistic tasks

This may be the most challenging task that a teacher has to undertake while addressing the kernel issue: "How to get my learners engaged in my class?" Simply put it, the answer this paper would like to offer is: "Build a strong bridge between life and classroom." As an ardent believer in the pedagogic notion of teacher intervention in the curriculum at all levels, I would rather go for setting up an enormous activity bank with problems drawn from real life as well as the various alternatives of solving them too. Numerous instances of real life problems can be drawn from the learners' life, and from their familiarity which involve cognitive engagement. Once cognition takes the lead, language inevitably follows. For instance, in real life, a learner borrows some money from a class mate for the return bus fare. In solving a problem in the ESL class, the same learner seeks the linguistic support of better performers. Since he or she has a solution to offer to the task at hand; it needs only to be explicitly articulated. Life is full of borrowing and seeking help on the one side and lending and caring others, on the other; similarly, learning too.

## Conclusion

When it comes to classroom manifestation, learner engagement may vary in degrees at all levels of development, namely kinaesthetic, cognitive, linguistic and emotive. Thus, learners in the early years will be physically more engaged in the processes of learning. When they grow, the kinaesthetic involvement may be less except in some practical activity. In its place, cognitive engagement will be more at the advanced level. Linguistic development is expected to correspond cognitive development.

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