

Importance of Students' Involvement in Learning Process

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Abstract: *The purpose of this research is to identify the reasons why some students of the English Department are not engaged in the learning process and provide suitable recommendations for the instructors of this department to persuade students to be more engaged in learning. To conduct the study, a number of 12 teachers of the English Department were interviewed to find out the main reasons for lack of students' engagement in the class. Based on the problems described in finding, some recommendations were suggested by instructors of the English Department and some scholars from other universities of the world.*

Keywords: Cooperation, Learning Style, Teaching Materials, Feedback and Attendance

1. Introduction

Engaging students in the learning process is an important aspect in teaching. When all students are involved in learning their lessons actively, they all stay in the class and teachers are excited in teaching. Meanwhile, students' active participation and attendance in the class motivate teachers to work hard and teach better. AsMcDonald (n.d) mentioned, having paper, pens, pencils, and textbooks are not engaging students to their learning. They can make students busy, but not motivating them in their learning. Reading the textbook aloud and then answering questions at the end of the section is not an engaging activity. Though it takes up the whole class period, but it is not motivating and exciting to students. While these activities deceptively look like keeping students involved and engaged, in reality they do not. In fact, you can generally meet the same goals and objectives with different activities (p.2).

2. Statement of the Problem

As I have been teaching in the English Department of Kabul University for several years, I have noticed that there are some students that are not very much engaged in the learning process. Students have different English background when they join in the English Department. There are some students who have learnt English language in some private courses before coming to university. Even some of them are teaching English in different private institutions. However, there are some students who haven't taken private courses before coming to the English Department. They know that much English they have learned from school. Some of these students are from other provinces of Afghanistan where in most schools English language is taught poorly and even in some schools it is not taught at all. Among all these students, there are some students who are not actively participating in learning their lessons. Therefore, my objective in this research is to find the reasons why some students of the English Department are not engaged in learning process. And based on the reasons I will find out the teachers of the English Department, I will provide recommendations for the teachers so that they can teach in a way that all the students can learn their lessons successfully.

3. Literature Review

When students are more engaged in the class, they are involved learning process and can improve their knowledge better. According to different authors, in order to help students to be engaged in the class and learn their lessons effectively, there are some issues that need to be considered. First of all, we have to consider their learning styles. As Watkins (2005) writes that when a teacher presents a new language to the class, s/he notices that some learners immediately want to see the language written down. Others want to say the new language several times and even mumble it to themselves. Some learners seem more interested when they have the opportunity to use the language in a role play. Some learners are not seen to enjoy role play and taking on characters and views that they do not personally hold. Instead they prefer discussion activities, where they can voice their own opinions (p. 309).

Second, students can be engaged in learning if they work with each other as well as with their teachers. According to Larsen- Freeman (2000), Cooperative and collaborative learning involves students learning from each other in groups. But it is not the group configuration that makes cooperative learning distinctive: it is the way that students and teachers work together that is important. In cooperative learning, the teachers teach students collaborative or social skills so that they can work together more effectively (p. 164).

Third, for engaging students in learning, teachers should apply student-centered approach which means students are doing something, as opposed to just sitting and listening. Hollas (2007) wrote that in this approach, the instruction in the whole group setting will be even more effective if you give more thought to the questioning that takes place- both the questions you ask and the questions the students generate. Good questioning engages students, helps them construct meaning, and develops higher-level thinking skills (p.34).

The other point that makes students engaged in learning is role of teaching materials and resources. According to Kaushik and Bajwa (2009), using proper visual aids are very effective in class. They can take many forms but the most

common are real object and pictures or photographs. Other visual form is Over Head Projector. Using overhead projector (OHP) can help students learn something better as well as the teachers to teach better. It makes the lessons more interesting, summarized and focused. The OHP is becoming increasingly popular everywhere particularly in the class. In addition, for making the lessons more interesting, teachers can use video. It persuades students, to have more participation in learning their lessons enthusiastically. (p. 75).

Gower, et al. (1995) explained that using authentic materials is effective in teaching. Anything a native speaker of English would hear or read or use can be described as authentic: theatre programs, newspapers, magazines, poems, songs, brochures, information leaflets, menus, news broadcasts, films on videos, etc. Because authentic materials are not designed for the EFL student, they are not graded for level, although some are obviously more difficult to understand than others. The teachers should select the materials carefully, with the needs and interest of the students in mind, and also decide what the students are to do with the materials (Pp.82- 83).

Another point that teachers should consider in engaging students is the way they give feedback. Mostly in all classes, teachers give some tasks or assignments, related to a specific issue that students have to do in the class or outside the class. Doing the tasks or completing the assignments is interesting for most of students and seem worthy in learning their lessons well. As they are interested in doing any tasks, they are also expecting feedbacks from their teachers or classmates. The way teachers or students give feedback or correct mistakes play an essential role in students' active class participation. According to Bartram and Walton (2002), when giving feedback, teachers should correct less so that students are not discouraged. Also, teachers should correct at specific points of the lesson as the other points can be corrected by other teachers. In addition, teachers need to use better or different techniques for giving feedback.

For engaging students in learning, motivation is essential. According to Harmer (2007), it is accepted for most fields of learning that motivation is essential to success. Without such motivation we will almost certainly fail to make the necessary effort. Motivation is some kind of internal ambition which pushes someone to do things in order to achieve something. Motivation is in two types: extrinsic and intrinsic, that is motivation which comes from 'outside' and from 'inside'. Extrinsic motivation is the result of any number of outside factors, for example, the need to pass an exam, the hope of financial reward or the possibility of future travel. Intrinsic motivation, by contrast, comes from within the individual. Thus a person might be motivated by the enjoyment of the learning process itself or by a desire to make themselves feel better (p.98).

Class attendance is another main factor for engaging students in class. Sleight and Ritzer (n.d.) mentioned that students who are in the class hear discussion and elaboration of important concepts, including the teacher's perspective on the material, and teachers often offer more current information than that found in the textbooks. In addition to learning from the teacher's explanations of class materials,

the students who are in the class hear questions and comments from others, and share their own (p.1).

In short, teachers have to consider and apply the points mentioned above in teaching their students. By applying those points, students can be more engaged in learning process and as a result the learning can be done successfully.

4. Research Design

To conduct the study, 12 instructors (four senior instructors, four junior instructor and four newly recruited instructors), of the English Department were chosen. The instructors are both male and female and they have a variety of experiences in teaching during different periods of their careers. Also, they have experience in teaching different subjects at different levels.

To elicit the data of the study, I conducted interviews with some instructors of the English Department. The interview consisted of open ended questions. Some of the questions had prompts that could help me to persuade the interviewees to talk about the main points related to the answers of the questions. The questions were mainly focusing on the reasons why some students are not engaged in learning process. In addition to that, the interview focused on different ideas and recommendations from the interviewees regarding how make students actively engaged in lessons. The results of the analysis of collected data are discussed in finding section.

5. Findings

Here the results are presented and contrasted to the objectives of the research to understand how much the Afghan example of the English Department at Kabul University is compared with the literature review and, therefore, to build up recommendations for persuading the students to be more engaged in learning process. The ideas of teachers about students' engagement in class are described in details one by one.

1) The benefits of students' engagement in learning

All participants agreed that engaging students in class has a lot of benefits for students to learn better. Some of them said that class engagement shows that students have learnt something. When students participate in learning, it shows that they learn the lessons concretely and they never forget them soon.

In addition to that, other participants stated that engaging students helps students to build self- confidence and it encourages students to learn more and more from each other, from the material and practice the language. They added that when students practice more, they feel safe during examination.

Some other participants mentioned that engaging students helps the teachers to evaluate how the lessons are going on. Only the exam result cannot help the teachers to evaluate students' improvement in learning.

In contrast, one of the interviewees said that if class engagement for some teachers means assigning students to give power point presentation, then it doesn't have any benefits. However, if the teachers ask the students to answer questions or do some activities, in this case, class engagement has a lot of benefits for the students to learn better.

One of the teachers said that when the students take part in activities, I can find out who the hard-working students are and I encourage them more and more.

Furthermore, a teacher said that engaging student has benefits if the students are physically and mentally in the class. He also added that students are actively engaged when they understand what is being taught and what are they practicing.

2) Number of students who are more engaged in learning

The numbers of students who are more engaged vary from one teacher to another teacher of the English Department. Seven of the instructors said that most of the students in their classes are engaged in class activities.

On the other hand, three of the teachers responded that 50% (half of the students) actively engaged in learning.

However, two of the teachers stated that only few students, who are bright, are engaged in learning.

As a result, this data shows that in every class of the English Department not all the students have active participation in learning.

3) Reasons that why students are not engaged actively in learning process

In order to reach one of the objectives of this study, the instructors of the English Department were asked about the reasons why some students are not engaging in the learning process.

Many of the interviewees said that the students are not engaged class activities because they are shy. They are afraid of talking or making mistakes in the class. They don't have self-confidence.

In contrast, some of the instructors stated that low English level is the reason that some students are not engaged in learning actively. They added that low level of English knowledge is specially seen in freshman students. It is because they came through matriculation examination and they haven't passed the English placement test for joining the English Department.

On the other hand, other interviewees mentioned that the reason for not being engaged in the class is that students are not prepared for the lessons or lectures before coming in the class. They are not ready for asking or answering questions as well as they are not prepared for class discussion (group/pair discussion).

Another reason for not being engaged, according to some instructors, is having some problems in family and school period. Some students are not persuaded to state or share their opinions within their family. Some of the less active students had bad experience from their school time. They were not confident in saying something or making mistakes. They were insulted when they made mistakes. Therefore, they feel insecure in taking part in learning their lessons at university as well.

However, one of the instructors mentioned that the reason for not being engaged in class activities is using inappropriate teaching method like grammar translation method that causes students to be less active.

According to another interviewee, boring materials is also the reason that students are not engaged. When the materials are not according to the need, desire, and interest of the students, they don't take part in learning something from those materials.

Thus, the result of this data indicates that the main reasons for not being actively engaged are shyness, low level of English, not being well-prepared for the lessons, family and school background, not using good methodology, and using boring materials.

4) Importance of Class Attendance in engaging students in learning

Regarding the importance of class attendance in students' engagement in learning, the instructors of the English Department had similar ideas.

Most of them said that the students' attendance is a must. The students should feel that when they attend the class, they learn something from the current lessons as well as from the previous lessons. They added that the learning process is like a chain. If the students miss one class, they miss the learning sequence.

Some other instructors mentioned that attendance is as much important as students' involvement in doing the activities in the class. They added that it is teachers' responsibility to make students attend the class and provide interesting activities that the students can take part in learning.

In addition to that, some instructors stated that attendance shows interest. They added that when the students are always present in the class, it indicates that they are interested in learning. They said that it is a good idea to dedicate some points to students' class attendance.

In conclusion, class attendance is one of the main principles that need to be considered. Students are more engaged in learning when they are present in the class.

5) Role of feedback in making students engaged in learning

All instructors that were interviewed agreed that the way teachers give feedback or correct mistakes have direct effect on students' engagement in learning. Some of the participants mentioned that feedback should not always be

given by the teachers. The students have to be involved in correcting each other like pair or group feedback.

In addition to that, some other instructors said that teachers should always give positive feedback and use persuasive words such as excellent, good job, very good, etc. These words are simple words, but they count worthy for students to have more participation. The instructors also added that the teachers should not give negative feedback. If sometimes it is needed, they can give the reason for the negative feedback so that the students can correct their mistakes. For example, they shouldn't just say, "It is wrong or you are not correct". The teachers should persuade the students to learn from their mistakes, not feel embarrassed.

Some of the participants stated that it is always good to give feedback individually not a whole. When some students have a serious problem in doing some activities or assignment, the teachers can talk to them personally.

However, some of the participants said that feedback should not be given personally. Teachers should correct students' mistakes indirectly. For example, they can write the mistakes on the board without mentioning students' name. If direct feedback is needed sometimes, then teachers should say it or write it in a positive way.

On the other hand, one of the instructors mentioned that the way teachers give feedback depends on students' level of English knowledge and their culture. When the teachers know the level of students' English knowledge and culture, they can choose an appropriate way of giving feedback. He added that there are different ways of feedback such as direct, indirect, oral, verbal, and so on.

According to one of the instructors, the teachers shouldn't give too much feedback. He also added that if feedbacks are irrelevant (not related to their subject), students won't participate in learning. For example, if it is a writing class, the teacher doesn't have to give feedback or correct mistakes when the students are speaking or reading something.

Regarding the role of feedback in making students engaged, one of the interviewees mentioned that the way the teachers give feedback has definitely role in students' involvement in learning, but the problem is that the teachers don't have time to give feedback or correct mistakes. He added that the teachers of the English Department have a lot of classes and it takes too much time to give feedback to the students of each class. He said that if some students have any problems in some parts of the lessons, the teacher can ask them to go to his/her office in connection with the problems. In short, the way the students are given feedback plays an important role in students' involvement in learning their lessons actively.

6) Importance of Teaching Materials in engaging students in learning

The English Department instructors were interviewed regarding the role of teaching materials in making students engaged in learning.

Many of the instructors mentioned that supplementary materials are always appreciated. They said that only using

the textbook is not sufficient, so it is teachers' job to provide materials for improving all skills such as songs, videos, vocabulary building activities, readings outside the class, pictures, etc.

Furthermore, some other instructors said that providing extra materials can attract students' interests and they won't get bored by referring to the textbook most of the time.

According to some other interviewees, the materials play an essential role in students' learning; however, teachers should be careful to provide such materials which are according to the curriculum, interest, need, and culture of the students.

To sum up, the materials have a positive role in students' learning. Useful and engaging materials that are related to the subject can help students to have more practice in learning a language.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The result of this data indicates that in all classes of the English department, there are some students who are not actively engaged in learning, and as a result, they are not learning the lessons effectively. There are some principles such as cooperative work among students, effective ways of giving feedback, using appropriate supplementary materials, the importance of class attendance, and research outside the class that should be considered in order to have all students (not some of them) involved in the learning process to learn their lessons effectively.

The instructors of the English Department have suggested some principles to be considered in teaching in order to make students engaged in learning.

According to some instructors, motivation is the key for success. Teachers should always motivate students and praise them by saying words like, good, excellent, well done, and so on. They added that teacher have to persuade all students, not just the hard-working ones, to take part in doing any activities. Other teachers stated that for motivating students it is not good to force them to answer the questions immediately Teachers should let students think about some questions for a while and then ask them to answer. Teachers can ask students to answer the questions voluntarily first, and then they can give role for each student to take part in learning.

For engaging students in learning, some of instructors said that teachers should know their students' behavior, need, culture, and learning styles. And then they can provide materials and activities according to their desire. As Bok (n.d.) stated, materials can help students to learn something better and to inspire and motivate them to explore further. At the same time, it often enhances both your presentation of the material and students' learning when students are able to participate in some way. When students engage actively with material, they generally understand it better and remember it longer. In addition to that, Bok adds that students learn more material than in a traditional lecture course, because they truly grasp the fundamentals and have more chances to clear up confusion (p.3).

Regarding some shy students, the instructors suggested that the teachers should put the shy students in a group of daring and active students, and also encourage them for any slight improvement. The other instructors said that the teachers can refer the shy student to a psychologist, if possible. However, some of the instructors pointed out that the teachers should use different methods and techniques in teaching such as group/ pair work, competitive activities, asking and answering activities, and giving presentations, etc. so that all students (both shy and courageous) can have chance to take part in doing the activities.

Some of the instructors believe that for making students engaged in learning, a friendly environment should be created in the classroom so that the students don't feel afraid of talking and making mistakes. It is not fair to be a strict teacher. In addition to that, teachers shouldn't scare students from the final exam. They should teach students for the purpose of reaching their future goal, not for the exam marks. Because students' mind will be busy in how to get score in the exam, not in learning something. As David and Pearse (2000) pointed out, the lesson should be dynamic, involving the learners in varied activities and interactions. Learners should be active, not just listen and repeat. They also add that to participate in activities willingly, students must feel able and confident, not threatened by failure, warning, or ridicule (p. 65).

Based on some of the teachers' ideas, for making students engaged in learning, teachers have to recommend students not to laugh at those who make mistakes and don't interrupt each other. When students feel embarrassed while making mistakes in the class, they don't want to participate in learning anymore.

Some of the instructors mentioned that to recognize the reasons why some students are inactive, the teachers can meet the best friends of those students, or can talk with him/her personally. And then the teacher can think about the solution for their problems. However, according to Harvard University, The Graduate Schools of Arts and Sciences, if a student has serious academic problems or problems that you cannot resolve on your own, ask the course head in the department for support and advice. In addition, engaging the student only on course content and assigned material is probably the greatest service you can offer him or her, and to the class. Often these students are insecure about their abilities and have trouble focusing on one subject at a time. By offering the student the attention she or he needs while limiting it to course content, you can help improve the student's class performance and boost confidence (p.5).

7. Conclusion

According to the data that were collected and analyzed in this research, the reasons that why some students are not actively engaged have been found out and different solutions were also suggested in order to help students be more involved in learning. This research has presented some encouraging results and recommendations which not only open the way for further research in this area but it may also help English language teachers persuade their students to be more engaged in learning in order to learn their lessons

effectively and reach their future goals successfully. Future research may build upon this study and seek to explore some other principles for making students active learners.

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