

Students' participation as found in an English Medium School

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Introduction:

Interaction refers to a situation in which people act upon each other. In educational settings, interaction involves teachers, learners and others acting upon each other and consciously or unconsciously interpreting their actions. There are three main contexts for learning in any classroom.

- First, involving interactions between the teacher and the students: Teacher interacts with students and they participate in the class.
- Second, students working on their own on a task: Individual work
- Third, students are working with each other: Group or pair work.

If we enter a traditional classroom, we will probably see quite a lot of the first and also of the second. We know from many studies of classrooms that children spend much of their time either listening to the teacher or working on their own, but it is hardly seen that they are working with each other to carry out a classroom task. In ESL classroom, students can be drawn together for learning purposes. Group work can be an effective mode of teaching to motivate students and encourage active learning in ESL classrooms. If the relationship between group size, interaction type and learning tasks in groups is planned strategically, learning will be more effective. To make an ESL class environment more interactive, discussion plays a vital role. Group work/pair work is one strategy that promotes participation and interaction.

Working together in groups also gives students the opportunity to learn from and teach each other. It seems clear that group work is successful to the extent that students are actively involved in the group. When students work together, they can come up with solutions to problems, and develop an understanding of different concepts, which would not have been possible if they had worked alone. Students can provide each other's ideas and explore those ideas together. They can learn together and can make use of their knowledge to understand on their own. This may be particularly important in case of groups of students who might not usually mix, mainly students from different ethnic groups, or girls and boys.

Group/pair work is more extensive and exciting than other theories of learning (Grammar Translation Method, Direct Method, Audio-lingual Method etc.). We need, in other words, an appreciation of group/pair work in authentic classroom contexts. Group/pair work should be a part of a teacher's general approach to classroom organization and learning.

Literature Review:

Interaction is the reciprocal exchange pattern which becomes important for learners to be exposed to and to practice at various stages of their second/foreign language learning career. (Harmer) Widdowson (1978: 58) said: "What is said is dependent on an understanding of what else has been said in the interaction." Ur (1996) suggested that in a language classroom, learners should talk a lot and participate in the class. In the analysis of the theoretical base of communicative language teaching, Richards and Rodgers (2001:161) found that the primary function of language is for interaction and communication.

Harmer (1998: 95) suggests that in an ESL classroom, speaking activity should be designed in the following order: Engage, Activate, Study. In 'engage' stage the teacher stimulates students' interest in the topic. After that they perform the task and the teacher monitors and helps them work out the problem they face. This stage is known as 'activate'. Then the students study any language issue related to the topic and solve the problems.

Sometimes teachers need to motivate students to participate in the class. It is one of the tasks of the teacher to manage the learning situation so that students have an opportunity to interact. Teachers need to be aware that motivation is a consideration in determining whether or not learners are willing to communicate. Clearly the more meaningful the materials and tasks are for the learners, the better the outcome will be. (Nunan: 1999).

Group work can be an effective mode for carrying out different tasks which motivates students and encourages them to participate in the class. Group work is one strategy that promotes participation and interaction. Group is richer in resources than any single individual and it has an effect on group members' attitudes towards learning satisfaction etc. Working together in groups also gives students the opportunity to learn from and teach each other. In a group work, discussion sections are a great opportunity to use active learning strategies to make an ESL class environment more interactive. Senior argues that language classes need to be transformed into bonded groups. In order to make a class bonded, the typical stages of group life often occur. Frank and Brownell (1989)

identify four stages of group life which are: formation, conflict, cohesion and problem-solving.

To increase students' participation through interaction in the class, 'Task Based Language instruction' is an effective post communicative approach to language learning. It refers to an approach based on the use of tasks as the core unit of planning instruction in language teaching. Task is an activity or goal that is carried out using language such as finding a solution to a puzzle, reading a map and giving directions, reading a set of instructions etc. (Richards and Rodgers:2001:224). According to Nunan, the communicative task is a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language. He also suggested that the task should also have a sense of completeness, and should be able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right. (1989:10) In task based approach, teachers' central role is selecting and adapting a task while keeping in mind learner needs, interests and language skill, level etc. In task based learning, many tasks will be done in pairs or small groups. Class room activities have to be designed in a way so that students have the opportunity to notice how language is used in communication. The activities involve real communications which are essential for language learning.

The classroom's physical environment greatly affects the interaction taking place within it. Research indicates that traditional classroom arrangement like rows of desks hinders communication. This can be comforting to students who want to have as little interaction as possible. A circular or semicircular arrangement is suitable for language class because

it helps to achieve optimal eye contact and interaction. (Patterson et al.1979; Loughlin, 1992)

Often some students do not want to participate in class. Research has shown that willingness to communicate in the target language is related to a feeling of comfort, high self-esteem, extroversion, low anxiety and perceived competence. On the other hand, unwillingness to communicate is associated with the opposites: discomfort, low self-esteem, introversion, high anxiety and perceived incompetence. (Mc Croskey, 1984). Krashen came up with the term 'Affective Filter Hypothesis' in which he talks about an imaginary barrier that prevents learners from acquiring a language from the available input. 'Affect' refers to such things as motives, needs, attitudes, and emotional states. A learner who is tense, angry, anxious or bored may 'filter out' input. Depending on the learners state of mind, the filter limits what is noticed and what is acquired. The filter will be 'up' when the learner is stressed, self-conscious and it will be 'down' when the learner is relaxed and motivated. This hypothesis has immediate implications for classroom practice. Teachers can understand why some learners are successful while others are not in spite of giving them the same opportunity to learn. (Krashen: 1982)

Tisui's (1996) research has found five main reasons why learners are unwilling to participate:

1. The students perceive themselves to be at a low proficiency level
2. They worry about making mistakes and resultant derision from peers
3. Teachers may be intolerant of silence

4. Turn-taking is even across the class and
5. Input is incomprehensible.

Findings based on my observation:

During my three months' internship in an English Medium School, I found that most of the teachers did not encourage students' participation in the class. I noticed that most of the classes were teacher centered. I observed and conducted a few classes.

I observed an English literature class of standard III. The teacher was instructing a story "Dasu" from the Radiant Reading Book. She read out the text and explained each and every line. After finishing the story, she gave them a set of vocabulary items to memorize the meaning of. She did not discuss the meaning in the class. She gave them almost 30 words from the text to learn the spelling of. Here they are compelled to learn the spellings of low frequency words which are not used in everyday English teaching.. After that she did question answers with the students based on the text. She wrote the answers on the board and the students copied the answers. There was no single scope to nurture students' potentiality. I didn't find any interaction between teacher and students in the class.

During my observation, I noticed one teacher who made her class interesting and interactive. That was an English class in K.G I. It was a large class and the teacher had a tough time to control the class. The students were small kids and they were loud and restless. The teacher had to speak in a loud voice to grab the attention of the students. In that class she was supposed to teach vocabulary to the students. She drew a picture of a

book and said “This is a book”. The students responded ‘book’. After that she drew a picture of a boat and introduced the class that it’s a boat. Like this way she drew several pictures and told the names of those pictures in English. I found the students very enthusiastic in participating in the class. I really liked the way she introduced the vocabulary items in the class. As the students were little kids, the teacher had to conduct the class in a way that stimulated the interest of the students. So the teacher created a friendly atmosphere where the students were learning without being aware that they were learning. As she was drawing the pictures and students were supposed to identify the pictures and name them in English, it turned out to be a game for the students to identify the pictures and tell the name of it in English. I appreciated the idea of drawing pictures on the board because in this way the teacher did not have to translate the words in Bengali. She did not use L1 in class. I saw that the students were enjoying it and tried to interact in L2 (English) with their teacher.

While working at West Bridge School, I conducted classes on different subjects. Though I joined there as an English Language teacher, I had to teach other subjects as well, for example Math, Science, and Bangladesh Studies. Whatever the subject was, I tried to create a friendly atmosphere and encourage students to participate in the class. I was a new teacher in Standard III. I noticed that when I was teaching the class, students were interacting with me. As a language teacher, my first aim was to make them speak in the target language. When I was able to make the students speak in the class through friendly behavior, I felt confident and found teaching interesting. To generate participation in the class, most of the time I gave them group work and pair work. The benefit of group or

pair work is that as a teacher I got an opportunity to hear from many students — including the "quiet" ones. I saw some of my shyest students coming up with wonderful answers. It also gave me an opportunity to observe all the students as they interact in pairs and understand whether they got the content or there were areas that need to be reviewed. Interaction can be of two types: student-student interaction and teacher-student interaction. In my class, I planned my lesson in a way that these two types of interaction took place.

I conducted my first class with standard III which was an English Language class. As it was my first meeting with the students, at the beginning of the class, I introduced myself. Then I asked them to introduce themselves. After the introductory part was over, I started the lesson for that class. That day I was supposed to teach them 'Abstract Noun'. To know their level of knowledge, I asked them "What is a noun?" They explained it to me with examples. As I wanted to teach them grammar inductively meaning giving examples first and then introducing the rules. On the board, I wrote the word 'Abstract' and asked them whether they knew the meaning. None of them could answer. Then I wrote a sentence on the board- "Allah is very kind to us" and underlined the word kind. I asked them what 'kind' meant and they replied that it was a quality of a person. I explained that quality, ideas etc. are abstract things- no one can touch or feel it. After that I gave some examples and explained abstract noun. Then I asked the students to come up with their own examples of abstract noun. I wanted to make the class communicative and that's why I asked them to come up with their own examples. They spontaneously responded to me. They already had an idea about proper, common and collective noun from their

previous classes. After I had finished the lesson (Abstract Noun) I gave them an exercise: to read a passage and find out common, proper, abstract, and collective noun. I allowed them 15 minutes to finish the task. I monitored their activities. When they were finished, I asked one group to present the common and proper nouns which they had found from the passage. Another group was supposed to present the abstract and collective nouns. My students were very cooperative. Their broad participation made the class interesting.

In another English Language class, I was supposed to teach “Degrees”. At the beginning of the class, I showed them two pencils and asked them which one was smaller. All of my students answered in unison. After that I took my bag and one of my students’ bag. I said Sayem’s (my student’s name) bag is heavier than mine. My students seemed to have understood comparative degree and the way it worked in my example. Then I moved on to further illustrate this item of grammar. I wrote ‘taller’, ‘heavier’ and beside this I wrote ‘tall’ and ‘heavy’. Then I explained that when they need to compare between two things they just have to add ‘er’ after the adjective. My students already had a clear idea about adjectives from their previous class. So I did not spend much time on teaching them what an adjective was. To make them understand comparative degrees, I drew a picture of an apple on the board. Beside it, I drew a watermelon. I asked them which one was bigger and all of them responded ‘watermelon’. So far I had introduced comparative degrees and now my job was to explain superlative degrees. I drew a basket of fruits beside the watermelon. I asked them among these fruits which one was biggest and my students answered watermelon. I wrote on the board bigger and biggest. I explained that whenever they compare anything with more than two things they have to add ‘est’ after the

adjective. I stated an example here- “A Watermelon is bigger than an apple” and “Watermelon is the biggest fruit in the basket”. After that, students came up with their own examples. There were some students who were willing to interact. But there was one student who did not feel like talking much in the class. But she was one of the best students in my class. What I found that unless I asked her any questions, she did not participate in the class. So I asked her to come up with her examples and then she participated and answered my questions.

Besides language classes I also taught one conversation class, in KG-1. In this class the teacher’s job was to make the students speak in English. KG-1 students were small kids and it was really difficult to grab their attention and encourage them to speak. To generate a discussion in the class, the topic had to be interesting and I took some color pens with me to the class. At first I started the class by asking them “How are you?” Then I showed them a red color pen and asked which color the pen was of. All of them replied “It’s red”. After that I asked “How many of you like red color?” Some of them raised their hands and I asked one of them “Why do you like red color?” One of them replied “My bag red, I love red”. Another student said “I love red, my dress red”. Then I showed them green, blue, black, pink colors and asked the same questions. I got different responses like the first one. Some of them were using Bengali but I insisted that they speak in English. As they are kids, I thought that I should generate interest among them and that’s the only way to make them speak. I asked them about their favorite cartoon, birthday parties, their favorite game etc. Most of them were answering my questions spontaneously but one or two students did not talk at all. I found that they can

comprehend the language but when it came to speaking, they couldn't. Some of them could communicate by conveying the meaning in one word.

Before working at this school, I had never worked at any school and it was a new experience for me to work as a teacher. I enjoyed working at West Bridge School and it was really nice to work in such an environment. The best part was small kids were very charming, loving and they loved me a lot as their teacher.

Conclusion:

Creating an interactive classroom environment is very imperative for the success of ESL students. It would be difficult to become a good piano player by listening to someone play, with no opportunity for the learners to practice. Similarly ESL students need more opportunities to practice language skills in class in order to become more successful students. When teachers create a variety of opportunities for students to interact and use English, language and content learning is accelerated. In this paper, so far I have discussed different ways for promoting interaction in an ESL class. I also mentioned the importance of interaction in an ESL class. Students of our country are not habituated to work as a group. This is a common scenario in our schools. There is no doubt that working together is not always easy for students, and they will need guidance and support. While carrying out a task they can disagree or argue. Some student can dominate, and some can let others do all the work. Students are able to understand each others point of view but might have difficulty coordinating these different points of view to produce a cooperative solution. Teachers have to keep in mind that group work needs careful preparation and reinforcement.

Language class should be interactive and learning process will be effective through interactive environment. If I am to teach, I would like to incorporate group/pair work in my class as it promotes interaction in the class.

Recommendation:

1. I found that most of the teachers emphasized on memorization of grammar rules and accuracy. Teachers of English literature and language gave students vocabulary, summary, question answers, grammar rules to memorize. An individual student had to memorize everything which ultimately discouraged their creativity. The classes were mainly teacher centered and students had nothing to do except following teacher's instructions. My suggestion is to make the class more interactive through communicative activities. Teachers' should use group/pair work in class. The advantages of using group/pair work are:
 - a. Group/pair work promotes co-operation, not competition.
 - b. Students take the responsibility of their own learning.
 - c. They can share their responsibilities among their group members.
 - d. Students have the authority to take learning decisions.
 - e. Teachers have the opportunity to work with individual student.
 - f. It emphasizes on students creativity and helps students to work at their own speed.
 - g. They can discuss in group so there is no fear of shyness.

2. The classes should not be wholly teacher centered. Communicative strategies should be used in the classroom.
3. Grammar should be taught inductively (Examples first then the grammar rules). Memorization does not help a student to learn the language at all. For a student comprehension stage is important before production stage.
4. Vocabulary should be taught through association of words not through memorization. Teacher can contextualize the word before he or she teaches it.
5. Teachers' should speak in target language so that students can learn it and interact by using the target language.

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