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## Escalating Learner Participation in a Language Classroom

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**How to cite this article:** Dr Ameena Kidwai (2024). Escalating Learner Participation in a Language Classroom, 43(2), 2237-2243

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### Abstract

In the context of India, the status of English became well defined with the proposal of the Three Language Formula proposed by the Indian Education Commission (1964–66), which recognized English as 'an associate official language of the Indian Union.' This is essential given the fact that though English enjoys a high status in the wake of globalization, its teaching and learning in the educational institutions (where the medium of instruction is not English) is rather inadequate and unproductive. Kolawole (1998) notes that English language teaching is beset with many challenges, such as lack of relevant resources, insufficient duration of teaching, and conventional styles of instruction. Usually, the learners in vernacular medium schools spend about eight years studying English as a subject before they come to secondary school. Unfortunately, during all this time, the primary emphasis is placed on rote learning and accumulation of knowledge, such as word meanings and grammar rules. In my experience as an English teacher in a secondary school, even after spending years learning the language, many learners are not able to cope with the communicative English in the real world; therefore, a reform in the English teaching approaches is the need of the hour.

### Introduction

A program called Access Micro scholarship English Language Program was introduced at the secondary level at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, in 2005. This program was funded by the Regional English Language Office, U.S. Embassy, New Delhi. This program was an endeavor to hone learners' communicative competence by changing the structured pattern of conventional classroom teaching. The learners were from non–elite backgrounds whose medium of instruction was Urdu in Middle School. The classes were held after-school three days a week for twenty months. I was trained to teach through task-based interactive approach in these classes. This initiative was successful to a great extent; therefore, its pedagogies of teaching and learning formed the crux of my research.

This report presents specific findings from my extensive research on the factors that facilitate or hamper the students' active participation in this after-school English language classroom. Active

class participation, a central element of collaborative learning, encourages learners to actively engage in the learning process instead of just memorizing facts and regurgitating them during examinations (Wilson, B. M., Pollock, P. H., & Hamann, K. 2007). It has been observed that because of limited exposure to communicative activities in their regular English language classrooms, learners are not accustomed to the 'unconventional' methods used in the language program and seem uncomfortable when the focus shifts to them instead of the teacher.

### **Objective**

To analyze the factors that facilitate or hamper active participation on the learners' part in their after-school English language classrooms.

### **Sample of the Study**

This was done through a purposive sampling technique because this study was limited to the Jamia school students and teachers who were part of the Access Micro scholarship English Language Program. There were four groups of 25 students each in the study.

### **Research Tools for Data Collection**

#### **Classroom Observation**

Classroom observation becomes an unavoidable part of any pedagogical system that aims to improve learning conditions (Nunan, 1992). For this study, I discussed the specific goals for the observed lessons with the peer teacher, who agreed to observe my four different classes of 25 students each. Each class was observed twice with a gap of four weeks. During the observation, the observer kept note of a variety of teaching and learning elements with a Classroom Observation Schedule. (Appendix 1)

After each class, the observer discussed her observations of the students' participation during the task activities. This discussion offered profound insight into the planning and delivery of the lessons and the areas in the tasks where the students were found actively engaged or not engaged. Classroom observation helped me to collect relevant research data that aided in an overall understanding of the teaching and learning situations.

#### **Focus Group Discussions**

Focus group interviews as discussion aim to create regular and candid conversations that address selected topics in depth. For the present study, I floated a variety of questions in the discussion to get the learners talking about relevant learning points. They discussed the challenges faced while attending the program, also the factors that encouraged them to participate, and what inhibited them from interacting. Students were also questioned about the teacher's scaffolding, support, and appreciation that they found encouraging to participate in classroom activities and speak in English. Focus group interactions saved time and helped gather required in-depth, insightful information to reflect on.

#### **Analysis of Data and Findings**

While the scientific reliability of such a research mode is debatable, qualitative research based on subjective responses has gained recognition as a valid research approach (Auerbach, C.,

Silverstein, L. B., & Silverstein, L. B. 2003). Qualitative analysis of the observed data and the subjective experiences of participants and the observer played a pivotal role in the interpretation of participation patterns and themes in transcribed data. These patterns and themes from the literature review helped to address the research goal of the study. It was noted that qualitative data analysis is an ongoing process that happened throughout the data collection stage of the research and carried over to the analysis stage. The analysis of this research data provided an understanding of the general processes that arise in language lessons to promote second language development and the relationship between classroom processes and language development.

### **Factors which Hindered and Aided Participation**

The classroom observation schedules from all the observed classes were used to analyze those factors that deterred and encouraged learners to participate in class activities and discussions.

In the speaking lessons, it was observed that most of the students remained passive during the lesson activities and did not contribute much on their own. It was also observed that the beginner-level learners interacted less and appeared less willing than the next level learners to speak out in class. One of the students pointed out during the focus group discussion - "*I was often not too sure about the accuracy of my words, and that discouraged me from speaking during the discussions and sometimes felt left out.*" Others thought the pace of activities was too fast for them to catch up with the lesson content, which made them lose interest at times in what was going on in the classroom. The findings revealed that since the learners came from conventional classrooms, they found the new task-based approach somewhat overwhelming and unfamiliar.

Moreover, due to the lack of sufficient English Language skills and lower levels of English language proficiency, some of the students were hesitant to participate in the communicative activities of the lesson. Another factor that affected students' participation level was the fear of making mistakes. This apprehension sometimes kept them from sharing their opinions and participating actively in class discussions.

The findings also indicated the role of the teacher and teaching methods affecting classroom participation. The learners shared that if their teachers were enthusiastic, approachable, and friendly, they would feel encouraged to participate in the class activities. It was observed- *The teacher would smile, talk in a non-threatening tone, included a group activity to build a sense of community where even the reluctant students participated.* When the teacher was supportive, students felt confident to use the language without much fear of errors. The teaching strategies, such as scaffolding of vocabulary, and structures, were found to impact learners' participation and language skills development positively.

### **Teaching Strategies for Increasing Learner Participation**

Classroom observation revealed that some of the strategies effectively used by the teacher to increase class participation were pair and group work, questioning, eliciting, and interviewing. One of the students pointed out that- "*it was encouraging and interesting to have our ideas heard by peers.*" Meaningful peer learning encouraged active participation in learning activities supplemented by teacher monitoring where required. The use of games and visual aids put learners

at ease, creating a cooperative learning environment where they focused on the tasks. The findings indicate that the class activities grounded in these strategies increased student talk time in most classes. Also, the small class size and a supportive teacher proved conducive to promote a non-intimidating classroom atmosphere.

The data analysis of the observations indicated that when students get enough opportunities to practice the language, they acquire the language in more natural, relatable, and meaningful contexts. In the present study, real-world usage was observed to be the focal point of English language teaching. One of the observed task-based lessons was on *"Swachh Bharat Abhiyan" or "Clean Indian Campaign."* *It is a national campaign by the Government of India to clean the country of litter. This campaign is a trending topic of discussion on television, social media, newspapers, and the public. The learners are observed to be enthusiastic and participating actively in the discussion when the teacher introduced the topic in class. Learners are shown video clippings of the campaign. In a task, the teacher read a related newspaper article, and learners have to work on a gap-fill exercise while listening to the article. This is followed by a poster making competition depicting learners' action plans on how they can help their community and people in the neighborhood maintain cleanliness. The teacher pre-taught words, phrases, and quotations that learners could use in their posters to complete this activity.*

The literature review on task-based teaching (Willis, D. & Willis, J. 2007) shows that students' involvement in meaningful tasks provides opportunities to practice language skills they might need in real life. Also, the learners who actively participate in class discussions are likely to learn more than those who do not. Class participation promotes the sharing and application of knowledge. It is evident in this task-based language lesson that because students want to achieve the task outcome, they interact and create meaning that they understand. Learners can present their thoughts and opinions, and in return, receive feedback from the instructor as well as peers to assess the merits of their ideas (Jones, 2008).

To sum up, as mentioned earlier, the factors encouraged learners' participation in class, and the current study affirms the powerful impact of these factors on their progress in English language learning. The observation schedule and the learners' comments are valuable insights for me to reflect on and explore ways to increase my learners' participation.

### **Recommendations**

In the context of the present study, it is recommended that the teacher is supportive and sensitive towards the hesitant students and provides them with opportunities to speak in class or after class as often, due to lack of time, they do not get a fair chance to partake in class discussions. Moreover, conventional teaching methods often contribute to low-class participation levels; therefore, learner-centric methods are required. It is important to note that when these student-centric second language acquisition teaching strategies proved efficacious in the after-school classrooms; there is no reason why they cannot be successfully practiced in the conventional English language classrooms. It is also recommended that school curricula should include authentic learning opportunities that are directly tied to students' linguistic proficiency and interests.

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## Appendix

### TOOLS FOR DATA COLLECTION

**1. Classroom Observation Schedule :** Details and the observations were noted on the given spaces for each of the observed classes, specifically, about the participation patterns of the students during the lesson ( extra sheets were used, if required).

Pre-Observation Data:	Observation Data:	Pre-Activity Tasks	During-Activity Tasks:	Post-Activity Tasks:
Date	Organization of the lesson	Related to previous lesson	<b>Teacher</b> Explains Organizes	Discussion: Whole class/teacher initiated/Individual student
Access Centre	Introduction	Instruction	individual/pair/groups work	Feedback
Number of Students	Structuring		Monitors	Error Correction
Duration of the Class	Closure of the lesson		Prompts	Home Task
Topic	Teacher's Time Management		Elicits	
Objectives	Allotment of time to different activities during the lesson		Questions	
Materials Used			Assesses Performance	

	Conduct of Activity			
			<b>Students</b> Performance on Tasks Interaction patterns: Teacher–student, student–student Engagement Responses Participation	<b>Other Factors</b> Classroom Environment Use of Authentic Materials Activity provided for real world English language practice Activity provided for different levels of learners Variety in the lesson Involvement of every student Encouragement to Hesitant student to perform Learners' autonomy is promoted

**2.Focused Group Discussion:**The following questions were used in the discussion with each class. The discussion was recorded and transcribed in a text form later.

- Do you enjoy learning in this after-school program? What has been your foremost attraction?
- What new things have you learned in this course?
- Do you feel that your English proficiency level has improved (understanding, reading, writing, and speaking)?
- What kind of changes have you observed in yourself after joining this program? (change in media habits: reading English newspaper, watching English movies, reading English storybooks/novels)
- How do you think this program is going to benefit you in the future?
- Do you feel that you can use the English language more confidently now in your day to day communication?
- What kind of challenges do you face while attending the program?
- Do the teachers of the program encourage the students to participate during the class activities?
- Do you find the materials and topics used in the program interesting?
- Do you like to participate in class discussions?
- How important is this course to you, and is it worth attending the classes after-school?
- Do the teachers encourage you to speak in English during the class?
- How do you think this program can be improved to make it more beneficial for you?

Ameena Kidwai, a teacher, trainer, and researcher, is presently teaching as an Assistant Professor at Taibah University, Madinah. KSA. In her doctoral research she has explored methodologies to make teaching and learning of English more meaningful through innovative practices. She has been associated with the Regional English Language office, U.S. Embassy and Cambridge India.