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Towards an interactive EFL class : using active learning strategies.

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Abstract

Throughout the history of Second Language Acquisition, many methods and approaches have come to vogue. By the advent of communicative approaches to Second Language Acquisition (SLA), an increasing attention was directed toward the interactive nature of language and the role of interaction in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classes. This article reports on active learning strategies which are helpful in creating an interactive learning situation. After the review of related literature, active learning strategies were recognized and then the influence of these strategies on learners' interactions was investigated. This article helps teachers to create a more interactive teacher-learner environment.

Keywords: Active learning strategies, interaction, language learning, EFL

1. Introduction

Many researchers agree that students learn better in an active learning context and environment than they do in a passive learning environment. This paper is written in order to help teachers and faculty incorporate to have an active learning environment and integrate it into their classrooms. This article discusses guidelines and information relative to the choosing, evaluation and sequencing of active learning strategies.

Teachers encourage students to participate actively in the classroom (Pajares, 1996). However, many of the learners are still unwilling to speak up and interact. Learners have the chance to follow up and be exposed to new words and structures by verbal interaction during the teaching processes. With the advent of communicative language teaching in the 1970s, students' oral participation in English classes was emphasized as a significant step toward mastery of L2.

To promote students' involvement in classroom activities, active learning strategies have been proposes by many researchers (Tedesco-Schneck, 2013; Keyser, 2000). Also active learning was introduced as a path to critical thinking (Tedesco-Schneck, 2013) and to promote students to think critically (Walker, 2003). Research findings have advocated that a suitable learning environment is an active one, not passive. A discovery learning in which the student is the main agent is supported (Adler, 1982). A review by McKeachie et al. (1987, p. 70) concluded that in those experiments involving measures of retention of information after the finishing of a course, evaluation of problem solving, thinking, attitude variation, or motivation for more learning, the results tend to show discrepancies inclined toward discussion methods over lecture.

As it is mentioned, a brief conclusion of the seven guidelines for good practice in university is provided with resourcing to the American Association of Higher Education, the Education Commission of the States, and The Johnson Foundation.

a. Good practice encourages student-faculty relationship

Constant student-faculty relationship in and out of classes is the key important element in learner

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motivation and engagement. Faculty concern guide students come up with rough times and keep on working. Becoming acquainted with a few faculty staffs will enhance students' intellectual power and motivates them to think about their own goals and future plans.

b. Good practice creates cooperation among students

Learning is increased when it is more like a group work than an individual work. Good learning, like good work, is cooperative and social, not discrete and isolated. Working with others in groups often enhances engagement in learning. Sharing one's own opinions and ideas to others' reactions and questions increase reflecting and enhance understanding and knowledge.

c. Good practice increase active learning

Learning is not a passive activity. Students cannot learn just by attending the classes listening to teachers, memorizing ready-made assignments, and producing answers. They must talk about what they are learning (output), write about it (integration), connect it to past knowledge, and use it in their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of their lives by practice.

d. Good practice provides prompt feedback

Become alert of what you know and may not know increase learning. Students need proper feedback on performance to benefit from classes. For getting started, students need assistance in evaluating existing knowledge and experience and competence. In classes, students need continuous opportunities to perform and receive feedback for improvement and mastery. At different points during courses, students need opportunities to think about what they have acquired, what they still required to learn, and how to assess themselves in the course of their study.

e. Good practice pays attention to time on task

Time alongside energy means learning. There is no exact substitute for time on task. Learning to use one's time well is crucial for students and teachers alike. Students require help in learning influential time management. Using logical amounts of time means influential learning for students and effective teaching for learning context. How a context defines time guidelines for students, faculty, administrators, and other authorities can create the basis for high achievement.

f. Good practice creates high expectations

Expect more and you will move toward it. Rich people get richer and the poor become more devastated. High Expectations are crucial for students. Expecting students to be effective becomes a self-fulfilling inspiration when teachers and institutions have high expectations of themselves and stick to that expectation.

g. Good practice take into account different talents and ways of learning

There are many ways to learn. People have different talents and styles of learning which they bring to classes with them. Clever students in the seminar room may be weak in the lab or art studio and vice versa. Students good at hands-on experience may not do so well with theory and abstract ideas. Students need the chance to reveal their talents and learn in ways that work best for them. So, they can be directed to learning in new styles that do not come so easily.

2. Theoretical framework

It is crucial to figure out the theoretical framework that active learning styles are built upon. The two main theories that have been frequently used to define teaching and learning methods during the last half century are "Information Processing" or "Objectivism," that is often referred to as "traditional teacher-centered methodology," and "Constructivism," which is often referred to as "student-centered methodology."

Objectivists discuss learning as a variation in the learner's behavior and attitude or in the learner's cognitive processes. Objectivists believe that there is one proper reality and knowledge is defined as the learner's exact reflection about that reality (Vrasidas, 2000). The belief is that influential instruction happens when the teacher or the instructor transfer objective knowledge to the learner. For example, a classroom lecture or seminar can be an influential teaching paradigm when the instructor properly transfers the information to the students. While these sorts of traditional ways of teaching are sometimes influential, research has shown obviously that when students are actively engaged rather that passively listening to the teacher, they will learn more influentially.

Constructivism was established on cognitive psychology, social psychology, comprehensive studies on education, and neurological science. The most important effect that Constructivism has had on

education is that it moved the direction of learning from the teacher to the student (Adams & Burns, 1999). In the Constructivist paradigm, learning happens when students become involved in an activity that uses the content and skill they are learning. Any new knowledge entered during the task that is consistent with present knowledge and understanding is targeted easily. Any new knowledge which is not consistent with past experiences and information is either rejected as being insufficient or is built into new experiences. New information is constructed when students integrate new experience with existing information through the process of reflection (Adams & Burns, 1999).

2.1. Selecting strategies

Selection of the proper learning strategies is crucial for successful student learning to happen. The common method for selecting a suitable and proper strategy has been through the utilization of common sense based upon teaching experience or by choosing what has been influential for others. Some teachers use research about "Best Practices" or content resources such as the Multimedia Educational Resource for Learning and Online Teaching (MERLOT). While these methods can be helpful sometimes, a systematic method for strategy selection would be useful.

2.2. Taxonomies

A frequent way of building instruction today is through using "Blooms Taxonomy," which pays attention to the building of learning objectives and then defining instruction based on fulfilling these objectives. Although Bloom's team in fact created three taxonomies (cognitive, affective, and psychomotor), other researchers have most frequently called upon the one in the cognitive domain. The cognitive taxonomy consists of six levels of learning that are sequenced in a hierarchical order. These are, from the highest level to the lowest categories (Bloom, 1956) :

1. Evaluation
2. Synthesis
3. Analysis
4. Application
5. Comprehension
6. Knowledge

This taxonomy has been utilized both as a guideline for creating course objectives and as a basis for assessing student's learning. While this method has become to some extent effective, individuals and institutions engaged in higher education have discussed a need for various types of learning that are not revealed in Bloom taxonomy. For example, learning how to learn, adapting to variation, leadership, group-work skills, communicative skills, personality, tolerance to name a few. These kinds of learning go beyond the cognitive category of Bloom's taxonomy and prove the need for a more complicated taxonomy of significant learning (Fink, 2003).

2.3. Significant learning taxonomy

The Taxonomy of Significant Learning, created by L.D. Fink, is based upon the fact that all kinds of learning needs that the learner knowledge some kind of variation. Fink mentions that without change no learning takes place. A change occurs when there needs to be an important relationship or high level of significance to the learner's experience. The more crucial and vital the activity is to the learner, the more the change, the greater the variation, the greater amount of learning that takes place.

Based on this viewpoint, Fink established a taxonomy learning that includes six categories of significant learning values or objectives. Each of these levels includes more specific learning values that are all significant to the learner (Fink, 2003).

2.4. Significant learning value categories

a. *Basic Knowledge* : The fundamentals, what students bring to the task.
b. *Application* : Performing, can be playing an instrument, or completing a complex task.
c. *Combination* : When students are capable of seeing and comprehend the connections between different subjects, an important kind of learning takes place.
d. *Human Aspect* : Connect the learning process to the learner. This kind of learning alerts students about the human significance of what they are learning or doing.
e. *Respecting* : When students care about each other as well as other subjects, they then have the enthusiasm they need for learning more about it and making it a part of their experience. Without the enthusiasm and motivation for learning, nothing important happens.
f. *Knowing How to Learn* : This kind of learning empowers students to expand learning in the future and to do so with better effectiveness.

Individual learning styles are significant in Fink's taxonomy. Each learning style can create multiple learning styles. Fink emphasizes that these learning values do not work alone and that they are commonly synergetic with each other. When institution creates activities that incorporate multiple learning values they instead are affecting multiple learning styles. This becomes significant when it is known that classes are made up of learners with various learning styles.

While it would be cumbersome to create exercises after providing the variety of learning styles that a particular class have, it is important to try and emphasize as many different learning styles as possible. This is completed by creating learning activities that incorporate different aspects- which instead will affect multiple learning styles. The more kinds of learning the teacher can increase the greater the potential is for developing a deeper change in the learner.

2.5. Active learning continuums

One way of choosing proper activities is to define them using a series of continuums. The Active Learning Continuum guidelines were created by Sutherland and Bonwell (Bonwell & Sutherland, 1996). Bonwell and Sutherland defined the use of four levels to gauge variables connected with the process of selecting a proper activity. The continuums include (Chickering, & Gamson, 1987) :

1. Task Complexity Continuum
2. Course Objectives Continuum
3. Classroom Interaction Continuum
4. Continuum of Student Experiences

2.6. Task complexity continuum

The Task Complexity Continuum probes a definitive active learning strategy to find its complexity. The continuum ranges from easy to hard. Activities that take a limited amount of time needs minimal instructions and are granted by students as being easy would lie on the simple side of the category. Activities that contain many levels, take a great deal of time, and need complicated instructions lie on the complex side of the level.

3. Active learning

There are many different definitions of active learning. For example, Brown (2007) defines active learning as a form of learning in which the learners use opportunities to decide about aspects of the learning process. He also defines it as a mental activity that refers to the extent to which the learner is required to use his or her mental capabilities in the process of learning. Still another definition was found on the Lexicon of Online and Distance Learning which reads, student who are active learners, process, discover, and apply learned information to new areas and try to solve new problems by previous information (Tomei, 2009).

Active learning deals with engaging students in an activity or task that will make the learner think and analyze the information being taught. It may occur at every stage or level of a lesson, from getting the students engaged in the topic, through actively and consciously taking part in discovering language and rules, to free, active production. In addition, Bell and Kahrhoff (2006, p. 1) believe that "active learning is a process wherein students are actively engaged in building knowledge of facts, opinions, and skills through the completion of instructor directed tasks and activities. It is every type of activity that makes students involved in the learning process." Active learning strategies affect students' creative thinking level and this demonstrates that creative thinking can be changed via education (Bakýr, 2011). The taxonomy of significant learning is adopted from Bell and Kahrhoff (2006, p. 6) and it is shown in Figure 1.

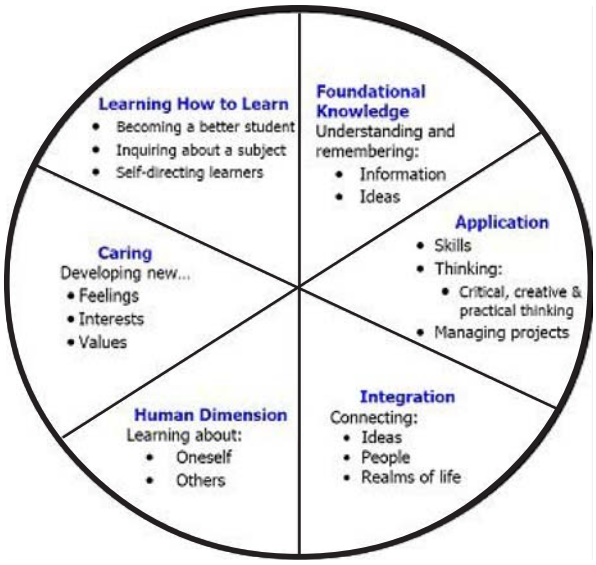

Fig. 1 : The Taxonomy of Significant Learning

4. Review of the literature: importance of active learning

Swain (1985) avowed that language learning is more influential when the target language is used

interactively, particularly with regard to understanding the language in general, and improving their reading or listening comprehension in particular. According to Ellis (1993), interaction within the classroom cause many advantages for language learning such as comprehension checks, language practice and the like. Long and Porter (1985) pointed out that when second language learners worked in groups, they were more motivated, took more initiative, and were less anxious with regard to their learning. On the other hand, there may be a relationship between student oral participation and teachers' questioning techniques and types of classroom activities (Wei, 2008). Wei (2008) also found that students' oral participation is increased if application and presentation activities are used; proper vocabulary is offered when students need it to continue; questions related to students' prior experience or knowledge are asked; and an informal and friendly classroom atmosphere is present.

Khamwan (2007) figured out that after training the students to use interactional strategies as tools for initiating their interaction, their responses to the teacher's questions were longer and more meaningful. Further, the average number of interaction turns was about two turns per three minutes. It was found that the students could comprehend the lesson better. They could ask their teacher when they could not understand something. Moreover, more students could respond to the teacher's questions.

All above mentioned studies have supported the significance of learner's participation and interaction. Many research studies discuss the advantages of active learning techniques that can help students to initiate an interaction with their teachers and ultimately clarify unclear points to enhance their understanding of the lessons and improve creativities.

Moreover, many researchers emphasized that students learn better in an active learning context than they do in a passive learning context. With conscious learning, we can make students creative (Bakýr, 2011) and promote critical thinking (Walker, 2003; Tedesco-Schneck, 2013). The utilization of active learning to promote critical thinking dates back to the time of Socrates who encouraged reflective thinking by means of provocative questioning. Socratic questioning is one of the ways to engage students in active and conscious learning and create critical thinking. Chan (2013) also examined the way critical thinking is defined and revealed in previous studies of nursing education, and then analyzed and investigated the styles and strategies in teaching and learning critical thinking.

5. Statement of problem

EFL teachers may have witnessed occasions when they encounter a passive class where students are unresponsive and silent and avoid interaction or communication with the teacher. Sometimes, students do not answer even if they understand the question, know the answer, and are able to create the answer. The next section helps teachers to deal with this situation.

6. Method

Six studies relevant to the topic were chosen. Data source was Science Direct. Papers were indexed and some web sites were reviewed to identify techniques applied in EFL classes (see fig.2).

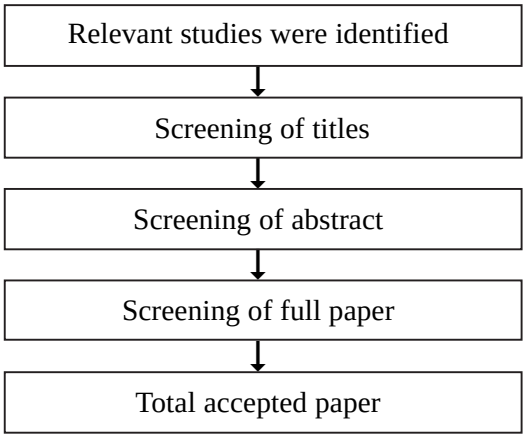

Fig. 2 : Flow diagram of the review process

7. Findings

Table 1 shows active learning strategies found by the review of related literature (Adler, 1982; Bell & Kahrhoff, 2006; Keyser, 2000; Tedesco-Schneck, 2013; Vrasidas, 2000; Walker, 2003).

Table 1 : Active learning strategies

Purpose	Description	Active learning strategy
Academic Portfolio	Portfolios give students ownership of their work which improves their level of interest in what they are doing.	Track student development, Reveals learning progress,Highlights best work, Connects students to work,Involves students in assessment process
Assigning Roles, drama	Provides students with the opportunity to bring language alive in a fun and entertaining way.	Allows students to look for certain aspects within a film or lecture and yet get information regarding other aspects from classmates.
Debate	To discover the complexity in big issues.	Requires students to acknowledge opposite viewpoints, develops listening skills, demonstrates need for supporting evidence, encourages research and examination, discourages simplistic approach to complex subjects.
The Fish Bowl	Students write down one question concerning the course material and deposit. Their questions in a fish bowl. The teacher then takes several questions out of the bowl and answers them for the class or asks the class to answer them.	To provide the teacher feedback; gives the students the chance to ask questions, get clarification.
Treasure Hunt	The basic strategy here is to find web pages that hold information (text, graphic, sound, video, etc.) that you feel is essential to understanding the given topic.	The activity works well when gathering relevant factual information and providing specific background information is needed.
Think/Pair/Share or Write/Pair/Share	Students try out ideas with each other before they make them public.	Focuses student attention, encourages problem solving individually and in groups, allows shy students to gain confidence, increases the body of material for student reaction, provides framework for auditory and kinesthetic learning.
Fictionary	Ask each group to find an obscure word in the dictionary and then to write three definitions of this word.	Good dictionary skills will help your students become more autonomous.
Clarification pause	Throughout the lecture, especially after an significant point, stop and let the issue sink in, then ask if anyone needs help with the content.	It is helpful to circulate the room while you are waiting for responses, this will aid students who frequently feel uncomfortable asking questions.

Purpose	Description	Active learning strategy
Focused listening	Used as a brainstorming technique to generate definitions/descriptions of topics. Ask students to take 3-5 minutes and list words or phrases that describe a concept.	Can be used to generate class discussion or then have students form groups to compare lists and form the best overall description of topic.
Team trouble shooting	Have students form groups of 3-4, propose a question or challenge-ask teams to troubleshoot for 5 minutes and write down their opinions. Stop and collect the papers-use to lead a discussion on an analysis of the issue.	To increase critical thinking abilities.
Discussion map	A way to get your students talking about a specific topic. Write the topic in the middle, and then get students to ask and answer questions using the prompts, and also to discuss the advantages and disadvantages.	Connecting the major topic of focus with what they consider its most important features/other ideas and concepts.
One Minute Paper	Facilitator passes out small sheets of paper to students. They are asked to spend one minute writing about an assigned topic.	One Minute Paper provides an opportunity for all students to have a voice not just those who are vocal in classroom discussions. It facilitates discussion and helps to focus attention on a point. It is a quick way to check students' understanding. It caters proper feedback to specific questions.
Mini Cases (Group Activity)	Mini cases are small, carefully chosen sequences of information that invite students to analyze a set of facts or circumstances, offer interpretations, form judgments and make decisions using concepts in the discipline.	Works well either as a way of issuing a new topic or as a way of closing a unit of study and helping students consolidate learning gains.

8. Conclusion

As already discussed, active learning is one of the useful strategies for EFL teachers and effective teaching strategies. Not considering of the subject matter, when active learning is compared with traditional teaching methods (such as lecture), students learn more, retain the information longer, and use the class more effectively. Active learning allows students to learn in the classroom with the help of the instructor and other students, rather than on their own. Therefore, a process of ZPD takes place in which learners can reach their potentials by the assistance of a peer or teachers. It covers all the practical learning activities and teaching methods in which students are able to think about their learning and to use their own knowledge to solve problems.

Additionally, teachers should be aware of their course goals and learning goals. If these objectives and aims are stated as higher-order thinking processes, then active learning strategies promote critical thinking, creative learning, and corporative learning. Finally, it is important that active learning strategies be encouraged and reinforced not only in all EFL classes by teachers, but also at every level of education. We can still plant the seed and encourage students to use their thinking abilities in all aspects of life.

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