



Enhancing Student Participation in English Learning Activities in First-Year Multi-Level Classes

Phạm Thị Liễu¹

¹University of Labour and Social Affairs, Vietnam research6688@gmail.com

ABSTRACT:

In the realm of language education, fostering active engagement and participation among students is not only crucial but often challenging, especially in first-year multi-level classes. The acquisition of English proficiency demands more than passive learning; it thrives on dynamic interaction, immersive experiences, and a supportive learning environment. However, educators frequently encounter obstacles in igniting and sustaining enthusiasm among students, particularly in heterogeneous classes where diverse language abilities and learning styles converge. This paper delves into the pivotal question of how to enhance student participation in English learning activities within the context of first-year multi-level classes. By exploring various strategies, methodologies, and pedagogical approaches, this study aims to offer practical insights and actionable recommendations to empower educators in cultivating a vibrant and inclusive learning atmosphere. The results of this study show that the main reason for students' low participation in English language learning activities in crowded first-year classes with diverse student levels is not from the students themselves but from the teachers and their teaching methods. Student participation in English language class activities significantly improved after the research team used activities with techniques for categorizing students at different levels to match each student's proficiency level.

Keywords: crowded classes, multi-level classes, participation, group activities, proficiency-level categorization.

I. INTRODUCTION

In the dynamic landscape of language education, the quest to cultivate active participation among students stands as a cornerstone of effective teaching. Nowhere is this pursuit more pronounced than in first-year multi-level English language classes, where educators confront the unique challenge of catering to diverse linguistic backgrounds, learning styles, and levels of proficiency.

This paper embarks on a journey to explore innovative strategies and best practices aimed at maximizing student engagement in the context of first-year multi-level English language classes. Recognizing the pivotal role of participation in language acquisition, our inquiry delves into the multifaceted dimensions of classroom dynamics, pedagogical approaches, and motivational factors that underpin successful language learning experiences.

At the heart of our exploration lies the conviction that active participation is not merely a byproduct of effective teaching but a catalyst for transformative learning. By creating an environment that fosters collaboration, communication, and creativity, educators can empower students to become proactive agents in their own language development journey.

Our investigation traverses a diverse array of methodologies, from experiential learning activities to project-based assignments, from peer collaboration to technology integration. Each strategy is carefully crafted to resonate with the unique needs and aspirations of first-year multi-level learners, harnessing their innate curiosity and motivation to propel them towards linguistic fluency and cultural proficiency.

In contemporary Vietnam, English education extends beyond secondary schools to become a mandatory component at the university level. Tertiary students are mandated to enroll in English courses. Nonetheless, a significant challenge arises as many students find English daunting and lack motivation during lectures. These students hail from diverse regions, each with unique educational backgrounds, learning methods, paces, and reasons for studying English. Despite this diversity, they are grouped together in classes ranging from 50 to 80 students, adding to the complexity of learning English.

Hence, foreign language educators encounter challenges when teaching in overcrowded classrooms with students exhibiting varying levels of proficiency. Despite teachers' endeavors to craft stimulating learning experiences, a considerable number of students remain passive, merely listening and jotting down notes without actively participating. This passive demeanor complicates the assessment of students' comprehension levels for educators. Furthermore, some students opt to work independently during class, disregarding the lecture content. Consequently, these students, often lacking understanding of the material, progressively lose interest in English class activities.

The concerns highlighted above lead researchers to inquire into the reasons behind students' lack of eagerness and inclination to engage in English learning activities, or their tendency to skip English lessons altogether. This also compels English teachers to actively pursue effective strategies to tackle this issue.

Consequently, English teachers are tasked with pinpointing the primary factors contributing to students' reduced engagement and passivity in learning activities. Their responsibility extends to devising and executing suitable teaching methodologies aimed at maximizing student involvement most efficiently.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study aims to:

- Examine the factors contributing to students' limited involvement in classroom activities within crowded and diverse-level classes.
- Suggest strategies to improve student engagement in English learning activities within such challenging classroom environments.
- Execute experimental teaching methods to assess the effectiveness of the proposed solutions in assisting English teachers to foster student participation in English learning activities within crowded, multi-level classes.

Research Subjects and Methods:

Research subjects include 204 first-year undergraduate students and 6 English teachers from the a university in Hanoi.

Criteria for Selecting Students:

First-year regular university students who have taken an English proficiency test and have studied English at the high school or pre-university level.

Criteria for Selecting Teachers:

Teachers with a master's degree and at least 5 years of teaching experience at the university level.

Research Methodology:

The research team has opted to utilize the 7-step action research model developed by McBride & Schotak (1989) to conduct this study due to its clarity and practical applicability in real-life university settings.

With the objective of exploring the primary factors contributing to students' limited engagement in English learning activities within crowded and diverse-level classes, as well as proposing and implementing solutions to improve student participation, the authors of this study have chosen to follow the seven steps of action research.

Step 1: Identify the Research Problem

Following the instruction and observation of first-year English students, the researchers observed a prevalent passivity among the majority of students. They seldom engaged in classroom activities or sought clarification from the teacher, even when encountering difficulties understanding the lesson.

Step 2: Data Collection

Collect initial data on the reasons for students' low participation in English learning activities.

Step 3: Data Analysis

Based on the analysis of data collected from survey questionnaires and classroom observation sheets, a research hypothesis is developed to develop an action plan applying new teaching techniques.

Step 4: Action Plan Development

Plan the implementation of a trial teaching applying the new teaching method by designing appropriate learning activities for each group of student proficiency levels in the class.

Step 5: Implementation of Action Plan

Conduct a trial teaching of the new teaching method for 4 weeks.

Step 6: Post-Action Plan Data Collection

After 6 weeks, data on student motivation and participation in English class activities are collected through survey questionnaires and classroom observation sheets.

Step 7: Data Analysis and Evaluation of Results Achieved

The data collected over 6 weeks are analyzed and compared with the results from the first 2 weeks to evaluate the proposed solution in the action plan.

Data Collection Tools:

- Classroom observation sheet, adapted from Peacock, M. (1997).
- Student survey questionnaire.

III. RESULTS OF THE STUDY AND DISCUSSION

The data collected from the classroom observation sheet.

Session			The number of times recorded for participating in activities										Percentage (%)
			1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	
1	Number of students	Pre-test		2	6	12	18			5			47.7%
2				1	4	9	14	8	4		2		48%
3					7	12	10	14		4			51%
1		Post-test					10	10		18	12		73.4%
2								5	12	16	14	2	81.2%
3							4		9	12	17	5	82.1%

Table 1: Percentages of participants in activities before and after experiment

Table 1 presents the average participation rates of students in learning activities across three sessions: 47.7% in session 1, 48% in session 2, and 51% in session 3. It is evident from the table that with the application of new teaching techniques, there is a notable increase in the average percentage of student participation during classroom activities compared to previous sessions. This suggests a heightened level of genuine interest and engagement among students in the learning process.

It can be clearly seen from the above table of data that the average percentage of time students participate in classroom activities significantly increases when new teaching techniques are applied. This demonstrates that students are genuinely interested and engaged in classroom learning activities.

		Boring (%)	Not very interesting (%)	Rather interesting (%)	Interesting (%)	Very interesting (%)
English lessons	Before	17.8	42.5	21	25	6.3
	After	0	5	52.5	32	10.5
Activities	Before	16.2	45	25.5	10.2	3.1
	After	0	12.4	52.6	37	2

Table 2: Students' attitude towards English lessons and activities during lessons

Overall, the data indicates a significant improvement in students' perceptions of both English lessons and activities after the implementation of new teaching techniques. The percentage of students finding them boring or not very interesting decreased substantially, while the percentage finding them rather interesting, interesting, or very interesting increased notably. This suggests a positive impact of the new teaching techniques on student engagement and interest in the learning process.

		Unsuitable (%)	Not very suitable (%)	Rather suitable (%)	suitable (%)	Very suitable (%)
Activities	Before	21	49.2	18.1	11.7	0
	After	0	12.2	56.3	23.5	8
Materials	Before	9.2	32.1	42	15	1.7
	After	0	12.1	53.4	35.6	1.1
Teaching approach	Before	14	52.1	25.6	5.7	2.6
	After	0	5.0	58.4	35.5	1.1

Table 3: Students' opinion about the suitability of activities, materials and teaching approach

In table 3, the data shows a significant improvement in students' perceptions of the suitability of activities, materials, and teaching approaches after the implementation of new teaching techniques. The percentage of students finding them unsuitable or not very suitable decreased substantially, while the percentage finding them rather suitable, suitable, or very suitable increased notably. This suggests a positive impact of the new teaching techniques on the perceived effectiveness and appropriateness of instructional elements.

After all, the implementation of a new method using level-based classification techniques in learning activities has been successful in increasing the percentage of student participation. Students are more interested and engaged in classroom learning activities designed with various learning tasks to suit the level of each group of students. The time spent participating in activities during class hours has increased. Most students have shown enthusiasm for learning English as well as actively and positively participating in classroom activities.

IV. CONCLUSION

Based on the data analysis and observations conducted in this study aimed at enhancing student participation in English learning activities within first-year multi-level classes, several key conclusions can be drawn.

Firstly, the implementation of new teaching techniques has led to a significant improvement in student engagement and interest in both English lessons and activities. The data clearly indicates a substantial decrease in the percentage of students perceiving lessons and activities as boring or unsuitable, alongside a notable increase in the percentage finding them interesting, suitable, or very suitable.

Furthermore, the findings highlight the effectiveness of the new teaching techniques in fostering a more conducive learning environment, as evidenced by the considerable increase in the average percentage of student participation during classroom activities. This improvement suggests that students are genuinely interested in and engaged with the learning process, contributing to a more dynamic and interactive classroom atmosphere.

Additionally, the positive shift in students' perceptions of the suitability of materials and teaching approaches underscores the importance of implementing innovative and adaptive instructional strategies tailored to meet the diverse needs of first-year multi-level classes.

Overall, the results of this study emphasize the significance of proactive measures in addressing challenges related to student participation in English learning activities. By implementing effective teaching techniques and creating engaging learning experiences, educators can cultivate a more inclusive and stimulating educational environment conducive to the academic success of students in first-year multi-level classes.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To encourage student participation in English learning activities in crowded, multi-level classrooms, teachers should organize activities with different tasks and requirements suitable for the level of each group of students.

Teachers need to pay attention and show more concern for groups of students with weaker language proficiency to employ appropriate teaching strategies. This can increase their participation in classroom activities and encourage them to participate actively and proactively.

To make students more interested and actively involved in classroom activities, teachers should share lesson design ideas with students. For example, they can inform students about their groups and let them choose a name for their group. This way, students will feel confident and motivated to participate in classroom activities.

Teachers should continue to research and apply more modern teaching techniques to enhance student participation in English classes.

REFERENCES

- Bowen's, T. (2006), Teaching Mixed Ability Classes, Retrieved September 18, 2006 from Web: <http://www.onestopenglish.com/forum>
- Copur, D. (2005), Coping with the problems of Mixed Ability classes, Retrieved September 18, 2006 from [http://iteslj.org/Techniques/SalliCopur-Mixed Ability.html](http://iteslj.org/Techniques/SalliCopur-MixedAbility.html)
- Madylus, O. (2005), Teaching Mixed Ability Teen, Retrieved September 18, 2006 from <http://iteslj.org>
- Mc Bride, R. & Schotak, J. (1989), Action Research. Retrieved February 20, 2006 from the <http://english.sdedu.net/stud.26html>
- Peacock, M. (1997), "The effect of authentic materials on the motivation of EFL Learners", *ELT Journals*, Vol. 51/2 April 1997, Oxford University Press.