

An Investigation of the Factors that Affect Students' Engagement in the Grammar Micro-Teaching Lesson

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Abstract: This paper explores the role of student engagement in the learning process, emphasizing its impact on academic achievement. It begins by examining individual differences among learners—such as motivation, personality, and anxiety—that influence their classroom behaviour and attitudes toward learning. Central to this study is the concept of student engagement with language, understood as active participation in classroom activities including discussion, reading, writing, and collaborative work. Drawing on both theoretical foundations and previous research, this study investigates the nature and effects of student engagement within the context of a micro-teaching lesson conducted by the researcher and colleagues. The research follows a structured approach, outlining key definitions, methodologies, findings, and implications. The results highlight the importance of fostering positive engagement to enhance language learning outcomes and inform future educational practices.

Keywords: Student engagement, Active learning, Motivation, Participation.

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1. Introduction

It is believed that learners have different backgrounds and experiences which lead to different attitudes towards learning. There are many factors that affect the learning process and the role of students inside the classroom, such as, motivation, personality, and anxiety and so on. It has been stated that these individual differences are necessary to be investigated since they contribute actively in clarifying the learners' attitudes and behaviours inside and even outside the classroom. Concentrating on these differences is much more necessary than concentrating on common features among the learners because the former provides a clear insight to what's really happens in the lesson. Some learners have positive attitudes towards the process of learning that can be translated into various kinds of behaviours including, participation in the lesson, concentration, and working actively in groups and with peers. In other words, the learners who have these positive behaviours and attitudes in the lesson are engaged with language. On other hand, there are some learners who rarely/do not make any contributions in the classroom and they almost have negative attitudes towards learning which consequently lead to their failure.

So students' engagement with language is one of the essential and most important factors that affect learners' achievement. The historical roots of students engagement goes back to Alexander Astin's work on student involvement in 1984. A decade later, students' engagement becomes the focus of attention for researchers who are aiming to enhance learning and teaching in higher education, headlining meeting agendas and conferences in campuses around the world (Towler, 2010: 1). In general, students' engagement with language refers to a set of specific classroom behaviours, such as writing, participating in tasks, reading aloud, reading silently, talking about academics, and asking and answering questions (Greenwood et al., 1984 cited in Junod et al, 2005: 89).

In this research, I will deal with students engagement because it is one of the important factors that influence learners' achievement. The context of this research is micro-teaching lesson which taught by me and some other colleagues. The research consists of five sections. The first section is the introduction which deals with some preliminary ideas about the engagement. The second section deals with the students' engagement in general, its types and definitions. It will also present some other researches which have been conducted in this area. Section three will present the methodology followed throughout the study including the context of the research, the research questions, participants, the method and the instrument. The fourth section deals with main findings arrived at throughout the research with a discussion of the findings and finally the last section summarizes the main conclusions of the research.

2. Students' engagement

2.1 The concept of Engagement

One can hear the word engagement in everyday context with different senses such as a couple's engagement (to be married), armies' engagement in a battle, students' engagement with the lesson and so on. So being engaged with something means either physically or metaphorically being close to some force that drives things forward (Svalberg, 2009: 242). The focus of this research is the students' engagement with language during their learning process.

In recent years, there has been growing awareness of the importance of students' engagement for learning and achievement (Newmann, 1992). It has been indicated that "classrooms and other language learning contexts are complex contexts". (Svalberg, 2012: 376); they are complex in the sense that different variables presented by teachers, learners and the learning settings interact together forming a very complex context. It has been mentioned before that students engagement with language is one of the most significant factors that is associated with academic achievement in the process of learning . In other words, learners who are academically engaged are better able to benefit from classroom instructions and have higher rates of time on task (Blair et al cited in Baker, 2008: 1876). Furthermore, learners with high level of engagement are more confident in participating in academic tasks and have more supportive relationship with teachers which in turn lead to a higher level of achievement (Baker, 2008: 1877). Svalberg (2009: 248) implies that the notion of engagement could provide ways of explaining why some linguistic or language-related behaviours and attitudes seem to facilitate language learning more than others. Consequently, when students are engaged during academic instructions, they experience increased opportunities to respond to academic tasks which subsequently enhance the rate with which they learn academic skills (Junod, 2006: 89). Equally, Fletcher (2005: 4) indicates that student engagement has been used to refer to students' willingness to participate in school activities including attending classes, submitting required work, following teachers' directions in class and participating in the activities offered as part of the school program (Chapman, 2003). It is worth to notify that engagement is gradable, i.e. the level of engagement is different from one student to another; some students are highly engaged while others are less engaged (Svalberg, 2009: 243). However, there are some students who do not show any positive attitude and feelings towards learning. These kinds of learners have lower academic level as a result of lack of engagement.

2.2. The definition of Student Engagement

The literature and research stated that student engagement is a difficult term to define. Its difficulty lies in

the different meaning the term implies (see 2.3). However, it has been defined by several researchers including Reeve et al (2004: 147) who state that engagement refers to “the behavioural intensity and emotional quality of a person’s active involvement during a task”. Academic engagement has also been defined as a concept that “requires psychological connections within the academic environment” (Furlong, 2008: 365). Similarly, students’ engagement is described as an active involvement in classroom tasks and activities that facilitate learning, while inhabiting behaviours from learning (Baker, 2008: 1876). Furthermore, Kuh *et al.* (2007) define engagement as “participation in educationally effective practices, both inside and outside the classroom, which leads to a range of measurable outcomes”

2.3. Types of Students’ Engagement

The notion engagement has much wider sense than only students’ participation in the lesson. Skinner & Belmont (1993: 572) emphasize that students who are engaged show sustained behavioural involvement in learning activities accompanied by a positive emotional tone. This implies the existence of other factors rather than students’ involvement. Consequently, in the context of language learning and use, ‘engagement with language’ is a cognitive, and/or affective, and/or social state and a process in which the learner is the agent and the language is the object and may be the vehicle (means of communication) (Svalberg, 2010:378). Accordingly, students’ engagement with language is divided into three main types:

a. Cognitive engagement

Cognitive engagement refers to the level of thinking skills used by students (Skinner & Belmont, 1993: 572). It has also been stated that the engaged individual is alert, pays focused attention and constructs his/her own knowledge (Svalberg, 2009:247; 2010: 378). Furthermore, Furlong and Christenson (2008:366) indicate that cognitive engagement refers to the extent to which students perceive the relevance of school to future aspiration, is expressed as interest in learning, goal setting and self-regulation of performance.

a. Affective engagement

It is believed that emotions have a significant role in shaping students engagement and academic achievement (Garcia & Pekrun, 2011: 1). Similarly, Svalberg (2009: 247) states that the affectively engaged individual has a positive, purposeful, willing, and autonomous disposition towards the object (language). This implies that the student, who is engaged emotionally with the lesson, will experience the feeling of interest and enjoyment which in turn lead to an improvement in the students’ learning process. In other words, these emotions are the main difference between ‘engagement’ and ‘involvement’ which semantically are very close to each other. Some students are participating in a certain task but they do not have any emotions towards it. This kind of participation is called ‘involvement’. On the other hand, engagement means students’ participating in a task with a feeling of enjoyment (*ibid*).

b. Social engagement

The social engagement deals with matters such as interaction and the way it occurs, i.e. verbally or otherwise. It also tackles the type of social relations a student have with teachers, peers and even his family and whether he gets sufficient support from them. Another important issue that social engagement addresses is the nature of the learners’ interactions whether it is initiating or reactive (Svalberg, 2010: 378). By initiating and reactive Svalberg means whether the student is the person who makes the first step ‘leader’ or he/she just follows what his/her colleagues do (follower).

It is very likely for a student to engage positively along one or more dimensions while engaging negatively along one or more, or to engage positively or negatively along one or more while not engaging at all with others (Trowler, 2010: 41).

2.4. Factors Affecting Student Engagement

It has been indicated that students’ engagement cannot be understood separately from the environment or the context (Hijzen et al, 2007: 684). The most important factor that affects students’ engagement is

teachers' behaviour. Teachers can create a context that supports and encourages student adaption, leading to increase in engagement as well as improvement in long- term developmental outcomes (Baker et al. 2008: 1877). Teachers' interactions with students predict students' behavioural and emotional engagement in the classroom especially when the teacher interacts with individual students which has the most powerful impact on students' engagement (Skinner & Belmont, 1993: 577). In the same way, instructional settings, which satisfy student needs for autonomy, also helps to increase students' engagement (Schroeder et al, 2011:404). van Lier (2007, p. 48) has explained autonomy as 'the feeling of being the agent of one's own actions' whereas Svalberg (2009: 246) has assumed that autonomy is an affective disposition and that a motivated or engaged person is characterised by some degree of autonomy but that this is not necessarily the case with a person who is merely involved. Likewise, the type of the task has a direct influence on the students' engagement. In other words, the teacher can increase the engagement by shortening the duration of tasks, explaining the different sequences of task, giving reinforcement to the students from time to time, trying to match the task with students' needs and skills (Baker, et al, 2008: 1877), and creating enough opportunities for students to participate and practice (Reeve et al, 2004:148). Another important factor that influence students' engagement is the group composition in which a student is working. Some students are not comfortable to work with a certain groups which leads to disengagement and then failure to complete the task (Hijzen et al, 2007: 684).

3. Methodology

3.1. The context

The context of this research is a micro-teaching lesson about a grammatical subject which is relative pronouns *who* and *whom* . This micro- teaching lesson was delivered by me and three other students. This micro lesson took place in week 6 of communicative language teaching module. The students to whom the lesson is taught are master TEFL students in the school of education. The students are from different countries, different ages and have different levels of academic skills.

3.2. The Research Question

It has been stated that one of the most important factors that affect students academic level and their achievements is engagement because it is engagement that pushes the student to participate, work with peers and becomes the initiator to make some contributions in the environment of the lesson. The research question of this research is to investigate the factors that affect students' engagement in participating in the grammar task in the second part of the grammar micro-teaching lesson.

3.3. Limitations

There are different kinds of students' engagements that can occur inside the classroom such as students affective engagement with a task without any participations, students engagement with peers as they work as a group, students cognitive engagement with the task by focusing on role and asking questions. The criterion that I depend on in measuring the engagement of the students with the task is participation and answering teacher's questions. Another limitation of the research is the concentration only on the second part of the micro-lesson instead of the whole lecture. The reason behind choosing the second part is that I have realized that many students have participated actively in the task in comparison with first part since almost all the students were silent. Consequently, I wanted to examine the change in students' attitudes and behaviours in the second task.

3.4. Participants

The participants of the current research are TEFL students who are studying master degree at the school of education. They are from different nationalities and backgrounds. These students have attended the grammar micro-teaching lesson as audience. After examining the video recording of the lecture, I have chosen three students who participated in the second part of the lesson (the part presented by Nirouzh and Thamer). I did an interview with each one of them separately asking them some questions that can reveal their reasons of participation.

3.5. Method

The method adopted in this research is a qualitative method by writing down what happened in the lesson as field notes. During writing the field notes, I have focused on every small detail took place within the lesson. After I finished writing down the field notes on the task, I have selected three key samples for my interviews. These students have participated in the lesson especially in the second task. I asked for their permission to do an interview and actually they were very helpful with me. While we were doing the interview, I have used a stimulating recall method by showing them the video recording of the micro-teaching lesson. The reason behind showing them the video record is to remind them what really happened in the class at that time. Actually the recording helped them to remember even what they really feel during the task. I have written down their interviews exactly the same as they uttered without even correcting grammatical mistakes since the idea they wanted to pass to me is very clear. After collecting the data from the interviewees, I have analysed the data depending on what they have said during the interviews and I tried to make some matches between what they said and the types and features of students' engagement.

3.6. Data Collection

After showing the interviewees the video recording, I did the following interviews. I will use 'I' to stand for the interviewer and 'S' to stand for students. The first interview is with a male student from China. The interview is the same as uttered by the interviewee and it as below:

I: what are your opinions about grammar in general? Are you interested in it?

S1: Well...I'm not very interested in grammar, mm... but I admit that it's really very important. If we hope we can master a language, learning its grammar well is necessary. So, I'm still willing to spend much time on it.

I: what do you think about the second task of the lesson?

S1: I think the activities in the second part are relatively engaging, ...especially the one asking us to imagine. It was interesting. In the last one which is about the gaps in the text, we read the same text several times. I think, by doing this, it can reinforce our memory, but actually some parts of this activity are not very related to the target teaching content who and whose, for example, the parts asking us to guess the missing verbs and nouns.

I: So you were not interested in parts related to verbs and nouns?

S1: mmm... to be honest, no

I: why?

S1: because they were not related to the subject, irrelevant.

I: Ok, now could you describe for me what did you feel when the teacher asked you to close your eyes? What goes on in your mind?

S1: well....I do not remember exactly.... the thing that I can remember is that I imagined everything in the audio recording. It was interesting.

I: Have you understood by the end of the task what is meant by relative pronouns who and whose?

S1: Of course, yes. As I said, we have learned it many years ago. It was something we know for a long time.

I: That was the last question, thanks for your time.

S2: It's ok. Always ready for help (smile)

The second interview is with a female student from Japan and the interview is as below:

I: What are your opinions in general about grammar? Are you interested in it?

S2: Yeah, it was interesting, but the time was not enough. I am personally interested in learning the present perfect progressive the present perfect/ the past perfect progressive, the past perfect since it was complicated time clauses for Japanese as we do not have the specific concept of time like English.

I: what do you think about the second part of the lesson?

S2: Although you firstly mentioned, "close your eyes and imagine" and finally asked students to share their ideas, I raised my hands but I felt embarrassed to share my imaginations with my classmates in front of theirs. It was interesting to practise who/whom.

I: Could please tell me what goes through your mind during the task when the teacher asked you to close your eyes and imagine?

S2: Oh... I imagined beautiful beach and sunshine after I got off the plane and enjoyed myself at beach.

I: Well, were you interested in that activity? if yes why? if no why?

S2: I like imaginations ... eee...since it seems to enhance my activity after this activity, however the latter of this activity I actually got absent of mind as I was not required to use this imagination after the following task. If the instruction slightly indicated students to use it or include part of the following activity, I would concentrate on this activity.

I: Have you find the task presented by Thamer a good task when he asked you to fill the blanks with the suitable relative pronoun then verbs and then nouns?

S2: Yeah, the more... the more task was difficult, the more I concentrated on memorising. I also cooperated with my group members to fill in the blanks at the last part since the task was getting difficult. Through the task, I strongly acquired how to use who and whom and found out keys to guess who or whose since fill in the blanks students completed the first part of the grammar. I think the task was designed to increase difficulties, I was not bored and could engage in the task.

I: Have you understood by the end of the first part what is meant by relative pronouns who and whose?

S2: Yeah, I understood how I should use both. This part recalled me when I taught who and whose to Japanese students.

I: Ok dear, thanks a lot for you and I really appreciate your help.

S2: You are welcomed dear.

The third interview is with a female student from China

I: How do you feel about grammar in general? Do you think it is important for language learners?

S3: Well, grammar is important for learner but I think the more important is how to use grammar in communication. Concerning me, I like grammar because I am teaching grammar to students in my country.

I: Ok, Let's talk about what we have just watched now. What are your general impressions about the task.

S3: The task was good for intermediate level not for us ... we already know this information. But I participated because I find the imagination part was interesting.

I: What did you feel when you were listening to the audio with closed eyes?

S3: I feel I am on the beach. Very nice feeling.

I: does the part which is related to imagination was only interesting for you? What about the part related to filling the gaps?

S3: Yea.... not very interesting. We repeated the same thing again and again. It may be interesting for

student in high school but it was useful. It pushes us to depend on our memory for remembering the missing words.

I: Well, have you understood by the end of the lecture what is meant by who and whose?

S3: (smiles)... as I said before, I know these things for a long time and I teach them to my student.

I: Ok dear, that 's it. Thanks for being helpful.

S3: it ok. See you soon.

3.7. Data Analysis Procedure

The data of this research are taken from a video recording. Two tasks have been explained to the students during the lesson. I have chosen the second task and then I have written down the lecture depending on the recording as field notes by writing down all the details and interactions happened between the teacher and students and among the students themselves. After that, I have done three interviews and again I have recorded their voices and then transcribed the conversations which took place between me and both students. I have analysed their speech depending on the measures proposed by Svalberg (2009) in order to find out the types of engagement they experienced at that time and the factors/ reasons behind them.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1. Findings

After interviewing three students from TEFL who attended the grammar micro-teaching lesson, a number of interesting points can be conducted from their speech. It seems that the three interviewees have similar opinions about the importance of grammar for language learning, such as, "I admit that it's really very important", "I am personally interested in learning the present..." and "grammar is important for learner". Although one of them is not interested in it and still find it useful for learning. In other words, the students were engaged with the general theme of the lecture since they think that grammar is one of the bases for learning a language.

It is interesting to note that in all three cases of this study that the first part of the task which is related to imagination is the most interesting part as in "especially the one asking us to imagine. It was interesting", ". It was interesting to practise" and "the imagination part was interesting". It is worth to notify that the three students agree with the idea that the information in the task is much easier than their level "It was something we know for a long time", and "I taught who and whose". However, two of them are not very interested with gap filling exercise related to verbs and noun since they think that they are irrelevant to the lesson and not suitable for their level, for example S1 said "related to the subject, irrelevant" but he said that he participated in the task "but I participated in them as a learner". Hence, S2 finds the exercise interesting since she thinks that when an exercise gets more difficult, it will be more interesting.

In response to Question 2, the students admits that she was willing to take part in sharing her experience with the whole class but she felt embarrassed to talk in front of her friends, such as, "I raise my hand but I felt embarrassed.... It was interesting". The same interviewee stated that she got "an absent mind" since the instruction of the exercise related gap filling was not clear for her. What I understand from her speech is that she could not concentrate on the exercise because of the absence of imagination. In other words, she likes the activities on imagination.

The third participant also finds the exercise not very interesting but very useful which is the main reason behind her participation "but it was useful so I participate". Moreover, one of the students said that the "teacher pushes us to participate" which is a good indication that the teacher has an active role in the class. What have been mentioned above are the main points which attract my attention in their speech.

4.2. Discussion

The aim of the current research is to investigate the reasons or factors that encourage students to participate in the second task of the grammar micro-teaching lesson. I am trying to find out why they

started to participate in the task actively in compared with the first task in which most of the students are silent. In the second task, the learners participated by answering the teachers question all together. If we concentrate on the interviewees' speech, several important points will be emerged.

Being engaged with a task which involves some uninteresting parts is important to be investigated. One of the interviewed students indicates that the task was not very interesting because of different reason such as, 'being irrelevant', 'old information', 'not suitable for their level' and hence they participated actively in the task. The reason behind that is the role of cognitive factors on student engagement even if the other factors are absent which supports Svalberg (2009) who insists that cognitive factors have great influences on students' engagement and sometimes it is mixed with emotions and affections as in the case of student2 who finds the task interesting since as she said the more the task becomes difficult, the more interesting and challenging it will be. In other words, she finds the task as a challenge since it gets more and more difficult and this arouse her interest in the task. Creating a challenging environment by the teacher encourages the learners to participate in a task (Egbert, 2003)

Consequently, teachers' personality and behaviours affect students' engagement. One of the students indicated that the teachers helped us to be engaged since the teacher was giving them a positive feedback on every correct answer they made which encouraged the students more. So there is a noticeable correlation between positive feedback and students' engagement. This finding is supported by Skinner et al (1993) and Price et al (2011) who suggest that there is an reciprocal relationship between teachers' behaviour and students' engagement. The relationship lies in teachers' positive interaction with students enhance their academic, behavioural and emotional engagement. Moreover, collaborative learning (Heller et al., 2003) plays a central role in increasing students engagement and especially if the members of the same group share some common features and interests as indicated by the S3 when she mentions that working within a group is interesting.

Furthermore, Social factors have also their influence on the students engagement. The learner who is more social in the class, is more possible to be engaged (Baker, Dreher, & Guthrie, 2000) and this is reflected in student2 speech who mentions that being embarrassed prevents her to share her experiences with her classmates. Finally, giving students material that is suitable for their level will be very helpful in increasing students engagement.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

5.1. Conclusions

After investigating the factors that affect students' engagement in grammar micro- teaching lesson and doing some interviews with some students, I have come up with the following points:

1. Cognitive factors have a great influence on students' engagement since findings approved that even the student is not so interested in a task, he/she will remain engaged. The reason behind this engagement is that they are in need for more information.
2. Another important finding is the teachers' positive feedback which also correlates with engagement. An increase in the feedback the students get, the more engaged he/ she will be.
3. Affective and emotional factors have their own role in increasing students engagement.
4. Social factors are also important in enhancing students engagement since being shy will prevent students to share their experiences with others.
5. Working within a group that satisfies students' personalities and needs is another factor that increases students' engagement.

5.2. Recommendations

This research has thrown up several questions in need of further investigation. Each factor mentioned previously in the discussion needs to be more investigated in different settings and contexts Moreover, it

is significant to examine students' engagement in other activities inside the classroom such as group working. Another important recommendation is investigating the reasons and factors that affect students' engagement negatively that leads to disengagement and consequently lack of participation and keeping silent inside the lecture.

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