

How does interaction activate participation in my EFL reading classes?¹

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ABSTRACT

This is action research about my teaching methodology in English as a foreign language (EFL) reading classes in a Japanese university. The theme of my research is “How Interaction Activates Participation in My EFL Reading Classes.” In this paper, I present how I modified my instruction and documented the effects of each intervention. At the end of each semester, I gave students a questionnaire, asking their preference of the activities. In the response by 278 out of 321 students, I found that interactive group activities not only motivated the students to become more involved in interpreting the readings, but also decreased their anxiety and unwillingness to engage in the speed-readings that were typical in our course. As a result, many of the students enjoyed reading and seemed to read more. Based on my findings, I present implications for helping prepare students to enjoy reading and identify positive effects on their reading practices and also the problems to overcome for the active participation.

Key Words: interaction, learning community, collaborative learning, motivation,
language acquisition

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Rationale

“How can I improve the reading practices of my students?” “How can I motivate them to enjoy reading more?” These questions formed part of my ongoing action research in EFL classes at a Japanese university. I was one of the English teachers for EFL reading classes and often found myself wondering what I can do to answer these questions before and after the classes. In my EFL reading classes, many students were not motivated enough or could not keep their concentration in the entire class period when the individual speed-readings were the main activities. The skills of the speed-readings such as skimming and scanning are very practical and useful. However, I needed to modify the instruction to activate the students’ motivation and participation.

2. Research Question

The theme of my research is “How Interaction Activates Participation in My EFL Reading

Classes.” As I mentioned in the rationale, I was wondering how to motivate my students and activate their participation in the reading classes. Haley and Austin (2004) states classroom interaction with content in a collaborative setting creates a good learning community where students can feel more comfortable and helps them to handle more complex language (p. 8). According to this theory, interaction seems to be a key factor to activate students’ participation and motivation. In my classes, I modified my instruction, adopting activities with different modes of interaction, and investigated how interaction worked to activate my students’ participation. At the end of each semester, I gave students a questionnaire, asking their preference of the activities and why they enjoyed them. The reasons for their preference gave me the idea how interaction worked in the classes. The preference helped me to assume students’ attitude toward activities. Students seem to become more positive in their learning and value it more if they like what they are doing. If students do not like what they are doing, teachers can improve the situation to shift their preference so that they will value it more. When students do not like what they are doing, the methodology would not work as effective as it is supposed to be. Therefore, it is very useful to ascertain students’ preference toward activities for the effective teaching. Based on my findings, I present implications for helping prepare students to enjoy reading and identify positive effects on their reading practices and also the problems to overcome for the active participation.

3. Background

3.1 Interaction and language acquisition

Why does interaction play an important role in language classroom? Peer interaction learning activities with content can generate a meaningful situation in the classroom. Krashen says, “We acquire language by understanding input that is a little beyond our current level of acquired competence” (Krashen & Terrell, 1983, p.32). The theory of comprehensible input (i+1) points out that language learning should be meaningful for learners. If learners carry out meaningful learning activities in an effective manner, they can get interested in the content. When learners are motivated by their own interest, they acquire language (Lems, 1995). Language input must be meaningful to foster language acquisition. For example, an activity like discussion can be very effective in creating meaningful interaction and promoting understanding for students (Ngeow, 2003).

3.2 Interaction and a learning community

Meaningful interaction plays a crucial role not only to acquire the language but also to establish a learning community. A learning community is the learning environment in the class where students learn together. Cummins (1994) suggests that students need to be accepted and trusted in their class to express themselves. The more interaction learners have, the more involvement they have into the social environment (Peirce, 1995). A Good learning community

can be very helpful in lowering the affective filter (anxiety or fear learners have). Krashen and Terrell (1983) state that it is important to lower learners' affective filter which has a negative influence on their learning. When students have less anxiety, they are more relaxed in the class and more eager to participate in activities.

Peirce (1995) also mentions that language learners are not simply learning the language, but they try to become a member of the class which has the social context. This is a common theory about second language learners. However, it may also apply to foreign language learners. When learners are in the friendly learning environment and are accepted as a member of the class, they can establish their social identity and develop self-esteem. The stronger social identity and higher self-esteem will also help to lower the affective filter and to generate active participation.

3.3 Interaction in collaborative learning

Donald Freeman (1992) defines collaborative learning is the learning style in which students interact and help each other for shared understandings. Oxford (1997) states that collaborative learning is an effective way to encourage students to become part of the culture of the learning community through interaction in the social context. In collaborative learning, it is important to establish a good social relationship in the community of learners. The study by Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (2001) notes that when students work together and interact in the collaborative settings, it brings the stronger ties in the learning community and they become more supportive each other. The supportive situation motivates students to learn more.

3.4 Cooperative learning for collaborative learning

Cooperative small group activities are an example of working collaboratively and generate meaningful interaction. Long and Porter (1985) suggest that group activities foster each learner's communicative ability and promote active participation in the class. For the successful group activities in the class, cooperative learning is very effective. Olsen and Kagan (1992) explain that cooperative learning is the learning style which promotes students' participation in peer interaction learning activities for the higher academic performance. The key elements of cooperative learning provide the structured and well-organized classroom to have students work properly in the small groups. Without these elements, the class may fall apart and students just waste their time. The followings are some of the key elements for the successful cooperative learning activities which teachers should know by Olsen and Kagan (1992) and Met (1992).

1. Creating activities to emphasize individual accountability
2. Encouraging positive interdependence
3. Providing the necessary social skills
4. Giving rewards valued by students to approve each learner's contribution and group performance
5. Playing a role as a facilitator, a supervisor, and an advisor

In the following, I set out to see how the theory of classroom interaction in collaborative/cooperative learning supports to build a good learning community and to activate my students' participation in the reading practices in EFL reading courses.

II. METHOD

1. Students

The research was done in 10 EFL reading classes for business and economics major students I taught at a Japanese university during the 2003 -2004 academic years. There were about 30 students in each class. In total, 321 students registered in the reading courses. There were 4 Chinese students among Japanese. 70 percent of them were male and 30 percent were female. There were 8 freshman classes and 2 sophomore classes. The students were divided into 4 proficiency levels according to their scores in a university-made placement test. The levels were pre-intermediate (TOEIC score: about 400 or below), intermediate (TOEIC score: about 400-500), upper-intermediate (TOEIC score: about 500-600), and advanced (TOEIC score: about 600 or above). The majority of the students were not used to a student-centered interactive class. Rather, they were more familiar with the teacher-oriented learning style before the instruction was modified. They were very shy and quiet at the beginning. However, as the semester went by, they became more active in class participation.

2. Course description & Textbooks

The reading courses were mandatory as the liberal arts in business and economics departments. The students had to take one reading course per semester until the end of their third semester before the summer break in their sophomore year. I taught two pre-intermediate, two intermediate, two upper-intermediate, and four advanced classes. They were eight freshman and two sophomore classes. We met once a week for 15 times in each semester. Each class period was 90 minutes long. The reading courses were content-based and designed to prepare students for exposure to diverse cultures and global issues as well as to teach reading skills and vocabulary. The textbooks were designed for students in English as a second language classes in the US and UK or modified for Japanese/Asian students. The books dealt with a variety of topics such as business, computers, marriage, sports athletes, tourism, poverty, environment, endangered languages, and so on. Different textbooks were assigned according to students' reading proficiency levels.

3. In-class activity procedure

Sample Lesson Structure:

Week 1 (45 min.: the second half of the 90 min. long class)

- (1) Pre-reading activity (brainstorming a topic of the text in class)
- (2) Speed-readings (skimming and scanning the text individually)

(3) Exercises (working on comprehension and vocabulary questions individually)

Homework

(4) Writing assignments (individual response to the text or on-line research about the topic)

Week 2 (45 min.: the first half of the 90 min. long class)

(5) Group discussions about writings

As a rule, one unit was supposed to be covered in each 90 minute class period. However, we spent 2 weeks, or parts of two classes, to finish one entire unit. Class activities had different levels of interaction: whole class, group, and individual. The first half of the single class was spent to discuss the issues from the previous class. I introduced new materials in the second half of the class period so that the students had time to digest and reflect on what they read after class as their homework assignment. First, the students brainstormed a topic of the text in a whole class. They also talked about the related issues on the topic briefly. Second, I kept time and assigned them to skim the text to get the main idea. They read it again, scanning to look for the important information. The skimming and scanning were done individually. Third, they worked on the exercises in the textbook individually and later checked the answers in a group and in a whole class. As homework, I gave a controversial question related to the reading topic. They were asked to write their response to the question in about 50-100 words according to their proficiency levels. Alternatively, on-line research assignments about the topic were assigned. Either assignment was for the students to have prepared in order to share their thoughts in the following class.

In the first half of the following class period, they shared their idea or information on the reading with classmates in a small group (four to five per group). Right before sharing, they had a chance to review and summarize their writing so that they could explain their idea better to the peers. When time was allowed, one student as a reporter from each group presented the summary of the group opinion in front of the whole class and the rest of the members in the group answered questions asked by their classmates. Each group took turns and presented their opinions and answered questions.

I was very careful about the key elements of cooperative learning when instructing group activities. In forming small groups, I gave each student a role of responsibility within the group: a facilitator, a note-taker, a reporter, and a question maker, etc. to emphasize positive interdependence. According to Met (1992), individual student's accountability counts on their achievement in cooperative group activities. I encouraged students to work autonomously. However, if they are not used to group activities, they cannot work effectively. I introduced some social skills so that they respected each other and worked in harmony. In the student-centered classroom, I, as a teacher, took a role of a facilitator, a supervisor, and an advisor to lead a whole class and ensure they remain on task.

4. Assessment

The assessment criteria were as follows: 40% class participation, 30% vocabulary quizzes, 30% homework. The students were asked to participate in class actively and assessed by the teacher's careful observation. It was on-going assessment through the whole semester. In addition, there were quizzes on vocabulary and reading comprehension questions after finishing each unit. Writing assignments or on-line research was assigned as homework for most of the readings.

Even though there were a lot of group activities in the classes, the students were assessed individually to promote their accountability. Each student's performance in the group was carefully observed. Also, I gave the individual evaluation on their writings for the group activities. Scores on the quizzes were gained individually too. If they wanted to get the higher scores on quizzes and describe their idea precisely in their writings, they needed to work hard by themselves rather than trying to comprehend the reading while sharing the opinions about it.

Students should be aware of getting the credit by their own effort, but not someone else's performance. Individual assessment enables them to take more responsibilities regarding their participation (Met, 1992).

5. Questionnaire

At the end of each semester, I gave the students one questionnaire, asking them to indicate which activities they enjoyed and why they enjoyed them. They did not have to write their names. There were 7 items: 1. pre-reading activity, 2. speed-readings, 3. exercises, 4. writing assignments, 5. group discussions, 6. watching videos, and 7. listening. They were able to select the activities they enjoyed as many as possible, which allowed them to give multiple answers. They also gave comments on the activities they selected.

-Questionnaire- (Multiple answers are allowed.)

Which kind of classroom or homework activities did you enjoy the most?

Please write the number of your choice and the reason briefly.

You may select as many as you want. Thank you for your cooperation.

1. Pre-reading activity (brainstorming: discussion about the topic in class)
2. Speed- readings (skimming and scanning)
3. Exercises (vocabulary, main idea, questions about the story)
4. Writing assignments (opinion writings, on-line research)
5. Group discussions about writings
6. Watching videos
7. Listening

Your choice & Reason:

A. Overall result

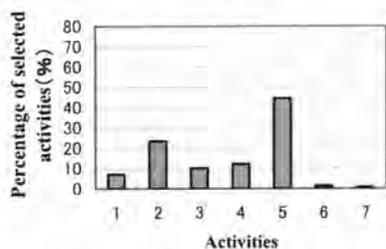


Figure 1. All students (n=278)

Activities (Interaction mode)

1. Pre-reading activity (whole class)
2. Speed-readings (individual)
3. Exercises (individual)
4. Writing assignments (individual)
5. Group discussions (group)
6. Watching video (individual)
7. Listening (individual)

B. Results by Levels

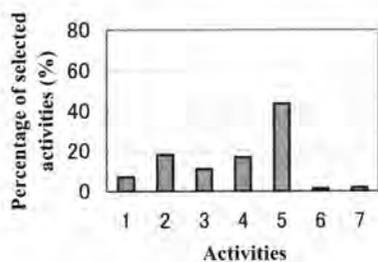


Figure 2. Advanced (n=117)

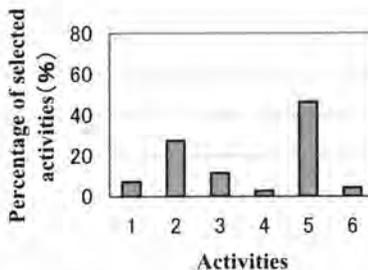


Figure 3. Upper- intermediate (n = 46)

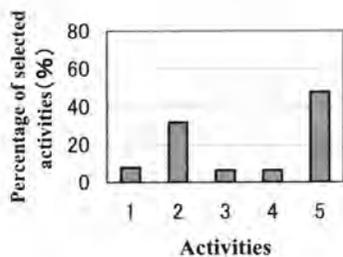


Figure 4. Intermediate (n = 58)

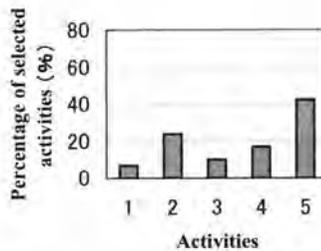


Figure 5. Pre-intermediate (n = 57)

III. RESULTS

The figures show the types of activities and percentage of selected activities by the students. The numbers, 1 through 7 stand for each activity type: 1. pre-reading activity, 2. speed-readings, 3. exercises, 4. writing assignments 5. group discussions, 6. watching videos, and 7. listening. Activities varied in content and length according to the classes because the textbooks and provided learning materials were a little different from class to class. The activities of No.1 through No. 5 were done in all the classes. However, No. 6, watching videos was done only in the advanced and the upper-intermediate classes. Actually, No. 7, listening was done only in the advanced classes.

The interaction mode is shown in parenthesis, as whole class, group, or individual. The modes specify the kinds of interaction each activity has. We can find out students' preference toward activities and interaction modes.

Of the 321 students, 278 answered the questionnaire. They were 117 students in 4 advanced classes, 46 students in 2 upper-intermediate classes, 58 students in 2 intermediate classes, and 57 students in pre-intermediate classes. Figure 1 shows the results for all students. Figures 2-5 show the results for the students at different proficiency levels.

As Figure 1 shows, in the result for all students, the most popular activity was No.5, group discussions chosen by about 45% of the students. The students responded with reasons why they chose this (multiple answers were allowed): 42 said, "It was fun" and "I got to know my classmates more and we became closer."; 34 answered, "It was a precious experience to listen to other people's opinions."; 15 students, "I was able to expand my view by listening to different opinions."; 8 commented, "It is important to be able to express my opinion to others", "We were able to help one another", and "I found homework very meaningful." Some students commented, "I was able to use English in the authentic situation", and "It was much better than passive activities." About 23% of the students chose No. 2, speed-readings. Twenty-nine commented, "I gained the reading skills." Nineteen said, "I was able to read faster." Thirteen said, "It was useful and practical." Six students answered, "I felt a sense of achievement."

As shown in Figures 2-5, the results appear very similar among the students at the different proficiency levels.

IV. DISCUSSION

How did my students like the group activities or interactive classroom? The majority of students had a positive attitude toward group activities. Among all students, nearly half of the students chose No. 5, group discussions as their preferable activity, and the main reason was because "It was very enjoyable to get to know my classmates and to become closer each other." Freeman and Freeman (1994) agree with Krashen's theory of affective filter and state that if students are not comfortable in the classroom, they would not understand what is going on; the anxiety blocks input, and they also say that the anxiety may hinder students from speaking out or

making possible production; the anxiety blocks output (p.93). According to their theory, the learning environment is very important, and building a good learning community can provide students with the comfortable classroom which promotes their language learning. Also, the students commented, "We were able to help one another." In the supportive environment, even slow learners were able to be relaxed and learn better. I can assume that the students' affective filter was lowered by the supportive environment. How can we interpret students' comments, saying, "It was the precious experience to listen to other people's opinion" and "I was able to expand my view by listening to different opinions"? The students acquired some important communication skills, listening to speakers' opinions carefully, showing respect, and accepting each other's opinions even though they were different from their own. Also, some students commented, "It is important to be able to express my own opinion to others." This is such a valuable feeling which inspires students to learn. They tried to communicate and understand each other rather than just to be passive listeners. This is indispensable in actual communication, and interaction through group activities can foster these kinds of communication skills. They can also heighten their self-esteem and lower the affective filter. This will confer great motivational power for students to be more confident in their language learning.

Language learners learn what is necessary for them in each situation. Therefore, language class should meet students' needs and be meaningful for them. Interaction through group activities expands students' view, activates their critical thinking mind, and helps to connect their learning with actual life situations as well as making language learning more meaningful to them. A positive attitude from classmates gives them confidence and motivates them to participate in class more actively.

How about speed-readings? It was the second in popularity after group activities. When individual speed-readings were the main activities of my reading classes before the instruction was modified, many students seemed bored and had a hard time to keep their concentration in the class. Did interaction among students promote their will to gain reading skills? As the theory by Haley and Austin (2004) mentioned in the rationale, classroom interaction with content in a collaborative setting created a good learning community where students were able to feel more comfortable and helped them to handle more complex language. I assume interaction through group activities fostered a good learning community. It enabled my students to challenge something they did not feel comfortable with or even to enjoy the activities themselves. Actually, I was able to observe that the classes became friendlier and more attached through group activities, and they showed more active engagement in other activities too.

Interaction seems to promote students' active participation in language learning, which develops good relationships in the language learning community. However, are there any problems to carry out interactive group activities? It is time consuming. It takes more time to finish each reading material, which in turn might hinder finishing a whole textbook. Teachers have to work hard to prepare for activities, carefully plan the structures, and promote the

necessary skills for students to keep on task. As some students who did not choose the group activities as their preferable activity, not everybody agrees with the interactive learning style. It may take some time to convince students how effective the activities are if they are not used to the student-centered classroom and do not have enough skills for the activities. However, it is still worth trying because through interactive activities, students have a chance to become more active in the class and show a positive attitude toward reading.

V. CONCLUSION

This research focused on interaction in reading classes taught me how important it is to have a student driven class. Interactive group activities seem to help to build a good learning community and activate students' participation in the class. Students enjoy working with their peers and improve their self-esteem. Learning should be effective and fun. It is clear that interactive activities made language learning more meaningful for my students, definitely motivated them to learn, and fostered a positive attitude toward their reading practices. All these enabled the students to get the reading competence for the real life situation. However, it is hard to carry out the interactive group activities all the time. Teachers need to work hard to increase students' interaction, but many of them are just too busy to finish the course. Furthermore, some activities may not fit to the interactive learning style. I would like to continue to research on this for the more effective and flexible way to include the interactive activities in the class to gauge development of students' performance.

¹ This paper is a modified version of a classroom activity report presented at KELES at Doshisha University, Imadegawa on May 29, 2005.

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