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**Abstract:** The purpose of this paper is to give suggestions for motivating, engaging and creating interest in learning English among college students in order to encourage them to interact and participate in classroom practices. Motivating and involving students to participate in classroom practices or activities is a Herculean task for English teachers in Tamilnadu colleges because students do not give due attention to English as a subject nor see the importance of the English language. They are unresponsive and reluctant in learning English either because they think they already have mastery over it or they are tongue-tied as they have not learnt it properly. As a result, they are unenthusiastic and unwilling to participate in classroom activities and ineffective in communicating in English. In this situation, reflecting on Thorndike's laws of learning (year?) enabled me to think of alternative pedagogies and different ways of motivating students and making them communicate effectively in English at the college level. Hence, this paper is an attempt to explore the issue of active participation in the second language classroom through promoting communication skills and developing interest among students in learning English. Furthermore, it seeks to discuss how interaction takes place in formal instructional settings by incorporating the views of researchers, my own teaching experiences and classroom observations.

**Key Words:** classroom interaction, practice, prelude, motivation, active participation

The main objectives of teaching English as a second language at the college level in India, especially in Tamilnadu, are:

- to develop skills for oral presentations, group discussions and debates
- to solve problems
- to improve negotiation skills
- to provide opportunities for exercising initiative
- to develop leadership skills and participation in group activities

Despite the fact that some students who have learnt the English language for more than ten years, they are unable to use the language fluently and effectively and reach the above objectives of learning English. It can be observed that some students have no experience in exercising initiative and participating imaginatively in activities and purposeful learning because of past rigid formal training in language learning. Most of these English language learners, particularly in Tamilnadu, are passive and shy in using English in real communication

due to various factors like

- students' motivation in learning
- attitude and interest
- the competence of English teachers
- learning facilities, methods and effective use of techniques
- approaches

These factors influence students in developing knowledge of the language, and it is observed that English language learners at college level suffer from a lack of motivation and actual practice in using the language. This is due to various perceptions that: (1) they have reached a 'plateau'; (2) they are no longer learning so much that is essentially new; (3) they will commit many mistakes when they communicate in English; and (4) consequently, they are reluctant to participate, involve themselves, interact and improve their knowledge of the target language.

This situation also indicates that the teachers of

English may not have provided enough opportunities to students for improving their communication skills. Besides, the teachers may not have properly used the concepts of classroom techniques or strategies in developing English for communication. They are very particular about exposing learners to a large amount of linguistic input by explaining grammar rules, elaborating ideas, giving instructions and emphasizing accurate reproduction of the language. Thus, the second language learners are not trained to take initiative and participate in classroom practices. Though the massive teacher talk has its pedagogic value, it indirectly limits the opportunities for second language learners to produce output, learn how to negotiate meaning and communicate spontaneously and use authentic language in the language classroom. Therefore, for many students, language learning becomes irrelevant, boring and sometimes a burden too.

Classrooms are considered the important sites of intellectual and individual development because many classroom activities created through classroom oral interaction that occurs between teachers and students and among students will ultimately shape individual learners' development. This is best achieved when the learners are properly motivated by adopting interactive activities. The importance of motivation as a factor in learning language is crucial for the learner. As Hutchinson and Waters (1987) have pointed out, it is essential foundation for the initiation of the cognitive process. The higher the motivation of the teacher and learner, the better will be the achievement in language learning.

These observations made me reflect on my own teaching practice, think of alternative pedagogies and different ways of motivating students, and implement different interactive activities to make them communicate fluently and effectively in English. In the light of this, an attempt has been made to implement some interactive activities to find out their effectiveness in enhancing the fluency level of language learners. Hence, this paper aims to highlight the importance of interactive activities, discuss the related concepts and aspects, and their practical implementation in the classroom.

### **What is interaction in the language classroom?**

Interaction is an elicitation of willing student participation and initiative which requires a high degree of interpersonal communication skills (Rivers, 1987, p. 10). It refers to the exchange of information between the teacher and the students or among the students. It has long been considered important in language learning. "It may be quiet; it may be noisy; it may be alert and dynamic; it may take place in large groups, small groups or pairs" (Kramsch, 1987, p. 18). It will make students deeply involved in activities that draw on their

creativity. Teachers should demonstrate these qualities to students to help them overcome their inhibitions and fear of embarrassment. According to Swain (1985), "interaction allows the learner to practice the target language, thus enhancing fluency; to notice or trigger a particular structural form that needs modifying; to test hypotheses about structural points and to reflect metalinguistically" (p. 223). Similar to Swain, Brown (1991) and McLaughlin (1987) point out that interaction provides opportunity for the non-native speaker (NNS) to practice structural components, increasing the likelihood of automaticity of such components.

### **Interaction and its importance in language teaching situations**

Brown (1994) indicates that interactive classes have the following beneficial features:

- there is a large amount of pair and group work
- students engage themselves in spontaneous and authentic conversations
- students work for actual audiences and purposes, not artificial ones
- the task-based activities prepare students for the real world outside of the classroom

Through interactions, students can increase their language repertoire as they listen to or read authentic linguistic material, or even the output of their fellow students in discussions, skits, problem-solving tasks or conversations. At the time of interaction, students can use all they have learnt of the language or have casually absorbed in real life exchanges where expressing their real meaning is important to them. Thus, they will have experience in creating messages from what they hear or read, since comprehension is a process of creation (Rivers, 1981, pp. 160-2). It is also underscored by Richards (2001) that second language learning is facilitated when learners are engaged in interaction and meaningful communication.

### **Reasons for using group work**

I have found group work to be highly effective with second language learners as it provides increased interaction and develops the oral language proficiency of students. Further, Nunan (1991) advocates that learning to speak in a foreign language will be facilitated when learners are actively engaged in attempting to communicate in groups. Similarly, Brown (1994) says that group work creates a favorable climate for communication by relieving students of the anxiety of having to talk in front of the whole class. Moreover, it is an effective technique for producing active learning and for providing simultaneous opportunities for all class members. It also helps learners carrying out their task without direct and immediate supervision of a teacher. Also, Cohen (1994) identifies group work as a strategy

for solving two common classroom problems:

- keeping students involved with their work
- managing instruction for students with a wide range of academic skills

In addition, group work has the following advantages:

1. Collaboration -- it provides a social aspect when students work together
2. Peer teaching -- group work provides us with a natural context for peer teaching and it has many advantages such as:
  - a) It is not threatening
  - b) Sometimes pupils find it difficult to grasp a specific point from the teacher but among themselves they can help and understand one another
  - c) It develops social skills -- students learn to speak with conviction; they also learn to receive help because asking for help is a good skill to learn
3. Effectiveness in mixed ability classes
4. Prevention of discipline problems -- order is maintained in the class while the teacher monitors the students working in groups
5. Opportunities for learners to use both comprehensible output and input in an authentic manner because when learners are thinking or writing, they are doing this for the sake of completing a task
6. Less teacher dominance

### Different patterns of interaction

On reading various works and studies of researchers, I learn that there are different patterns of interaction which can be employed as circumstances demand in the language classroom. Specifically, in this study, patterns of student-student interaction and student-text interaction are exploited for appropriate use of the pedagogy. Allowing various patterns of interactions in the classroom means that a teacher helps students achieve three types of competence, namely (1) participative competence -- the ability to respond appropriately to reading tasks; (2) interactional competence -- the ability to interact appropriately with peers while sharing information about what they read; and (3) academic competence -- the ability to acquire reading skills. The two patterns of student-student interaction and student-text interaction employed in this study are discussed briefly in the following paragraphs.

#### *Student-student interaction:*

This pattern of interaction in the second language classroom is used so that it can create opportunities for students to participate in less structured and more spontaneous language use: to negotiate meaning, self-select when to participate, control the topic of discussion and, most importantly, draw on their own prior knowledge and interactional competencies to actively communicate with others.

#### *Student-text interaction:*

In the pattern of student-text interaction, reading experiences enable the students to develop control over the language. It would help them develop confidence in themselves. They may read around words that they do not know and make use of the available information to comprehend the unfamiliar words and identify their grammatical function.

### Role of interactive activities (IA)

Interactive activities provide opportunities for learners to use the target language in a communicative way for meaningful activities (giving importance to messages being created or activities being completed) rather than form (correctness of language and language structure). It will lead students to acquire what they need and what they want actually to be used in real life situations. Thus, interactive activities include any activity in which a participant addresses an audience orally.

The two types of interactive activities employed in the classroom and focused on in this paper are:

- Group Discussion and Presentation
- Mock Association Meeting

Both are interactive activities because they require learners' participation and involvement and provide opportunities to produce the target language to become effective communicators. Swain (1985) highlights the observation that interaction also makes learners really use the language.

### Ways of promoting Interactive Activities

Lee (2004) says that promoting interactive activities seems to be an alternative means to help the second language learners to acquire the target language in a meaningful way. It is believed that by means of interaction, second language learners can stretch their linguistic competence and use appropriate strategies to modify and negotiate meaning in spite of their inaccurate and incomplete utterances.

In promoting interactive activities, comprehension and production retrieve their natural relationship as an interactive duo. To achieve this:

- Teachers must promote the desirable ambience and good relations among students for them to

know one another

- Individuals must appreciate the uniqueness of others by encouraging and educating one another
- Both students and teachers must build up their confidence and enjoyment in what they are doing
- Classrooms should not be teacher-directed and dominated
- Classrooms should be interactive by nature and never one-way

### Role of teachers and students in the interactive classroom

Real interaction in the classroom requires a teacher (1) to facilitate students and be in the background; (2) to monitor students closely; (3) to provide complete authority to students in developing and carrying out activities; and (4) to accept all kinds of opinions and be tolerant of errors made by students while they are attempting to communicate. At the same time, teachers should not be afraid and reluctant to carry out interactive activities that could be chaotic and impractical. Brown (1994) points out that teachers must organize, provide security, motivate, instruct, be a model, be a guide, inform, give feedback, encourage and evaluate the language learners.

From the literature, research findings and my own experience, I perceive that teachers are considered to be the experts in their classrooms. Using interactive activities, teachers shape the learners' developmental paths in the following ways:

- They show ways to go about conducting those activities as they do
- They provide opportunities for students to participate in and learn from the activities. In doing so, they express their own attitudes toward the activities and towards the students' involvement in them. This in turn shapes the degree of individual learning
- They make apparent the standards against which students' performances are measured

Similarly, students also must have strong personal motivation to learn the target language, confidence, a positive attitude, the willingness to express themselves even when they do not know how to express it correctly and the willingness to take the risk of making mistakes and learning from the mistakes. It is in their interactions with one another that both teachers and students work together to create the intellectual and practical activities that shape and advance their knowledge in the target language as well as the processes and outcomes of individual development.

### Implementation of Interactive Activities

Consistent with the principles and notions presented in the theoretical background section in this paper, I will briefly illustrate in the following section how the interactive activities were implemented empirically.

#### *Interactive Activity 1 – Group Discussion and Presentation*

Time taken	: nearly 2 hours
No. of class hours	: 3 classes
No. of days conducted	: 3 consecutive days
Material used	: articles from Opportunity Column in <i>The Hindu Newspaper</i>

### Pedagogical features considered while employing interactive activities

The pedagogical features that were taken into consideration are as follows:

- Authentic material (newspaper articles) as given in Appendix A was used as the texts for the activity
- Selected topics should match students' level of understanding, knowledge of the world, and interests while enabling more fruitful interaction
- The requirement for students to talk about rather than to read their presentation
- Ample opportunities for the students to improve their proficiency in English language by interacting either with the teacher or among group members.
- Comprehension of ideas and fluency was viewed as more important than accuracy among students in order to increase their level of involvement and interaction. However, the importance of accuracy was also gradually stressed to enhance their proficiency.
- Teacher as facilitators monitoring the process of the activity by providing students with the necessary scaffolding. This concept was based on the principles and assumptions of Communicative Language Teaching.
- Seating arrangement where each group of students was asked to sit in the form of a circle.
- Students treated with due respect which made them express their expectations and opinions on how they had coped with certain difficulties. Their views and feedback are given in Appendix B.

In short, the class was tailored for facilitating second language speaking skills among students using interactive activities.

### **Day 1 Procedure**

- The whole class was divided into groups based on the students' strengths in the class
- Different text articles were distributed to each group
- Time limit was fixed (20 minutes in total for reading, interpretation, expansion, discussing alternative possibilities, comprehension, clarification and preparation for presentation)
- Each member in each group should decide what points he/she was going to highlight
- All members in every group should come to the front, face the members of the other groups and deliver their points
- At the time of discussion and preparation, the teacher moved around the classroom and facilitated each group in turns, and asked each member to give some points from the text. Thus, there was discussion between the teacher and individual students on the text

#### **Instructions followed in the activity are:**

- Students should not take notes and read out points
- Students should listen to the presentation while a student from each group gave a short summary about the topic
- All discussion should be carried out only in English
- Everyone in groups should be involved, interact and work together
- No one should reproduce any sentences verbatim except for some technical words
- All members of a group should be ready to tell and discuss any points in the text

In this way, Day 1's activity was completed. In fact, I could not carry out the presentation session due to lack of time as the class hour was over before it could take place.

### **Day 2 Procedure**

In order to promote equal participation, to make the activity interesting, to motivate and involve students in interaction, the articles used on Day 1 were interchanged among the groups. The same procedure and instructions were followed. At the end of 20 minutes, Group 1 was asked to present the points on that day's article whereas the other group which discussed the same article the previous day observed the presentation along with other groups. At the end of their presentation, the latter group had to give the points omitted, if any, their views and their feedback. This method was followed for all other groups in order to keep students involved in the

activity. The teacher observed healthy competition among the groups and within each group to offer the best performance. Members in each group also encouraged one another to perform better. Thus, the meaning-based activity drove the motivated students to learn better and help others also to learn.

#### **Interactive Activity 2-Mock Association Meeting**

For this activity, first, students were made to work out how to organize a Literary Association Meeting. They were asked to fix the date, time, venue and chief guest and other speakers from among themselves, topics to be presented, comperes and other aspects of the meeting. Next, they were asked to select or assign roles and duties to be performed. The majority of the students volunteered themselves to take up different roles. Finally, chances were given to both advanced language learners and less advanced language learners equally with a view to motivating them. Some students involved themselves in preparing the invitation and agenda. A few of the students engaged themselves in preparing content for compering. Each and every task or role was executed by students with the facilitation of teacher. Students were motivated, guided and had their doubts clarified if necessary. They were also instructed to prepare and perform to their best ability since the activity would be video recorded. On the day fixed, students themselves organized and conducted the activity without any problem. The programme was held for one and a half hours. The last half an hour was allotted to the students who took up the role of the audience for a feedback session with a view of involving the 15 non-participant students. Out of 35 students, almost 20 of them participated actively in this Mock Association Meeting activity. The next few classes were allotted for students to review, re-examine and assess their performance and language skills.

#### **Classroom findings**

The classroom research was conducted in 3 class periods consecutively. During these periods, I performed different roles as facilitator, non-participant observer as well as a participant observer. Flippo (1997) specifies that the practice of observing students in class as they do their work, assignments, and other activities, in a natural, authentic manner can provide the teacher valuable information regarding students' current and developing interests, motivation, use of strategies, and work habits. So after every class period was over, I noted down what had happened and been observed in the classroom. It was found that creating a motivating and interacting classroom environment would improve teaching-learning outcomes, especially the proficiency in the English language learning among students. It could be studied from the students' feedback given in Appendix B. It was also noticed that group work, discussion and sharing with the peers, with

the teacher and with the whole class made the students active and maximized their interest and involvement in interactive activities, resulting in the enhancement of speaking skills. As students became engaged with one another in speaking skills, they paid due attention to their peers as well as the presenters. This indicated that group work placed responsibility upon each of the members in the group equally. This is in consonance with the findings of Day and Bramford (2002) that various kinds of sharing help students (1) discover what they understand and experience from reading; (2) keep track of what they read; and (3) monitor their attitudes toward reading. Indirectly, a perceptible change was found in the students' style of presentation and style of interaction. Also, students were able to appreciate their own competence to use language when they presented the topic rather than reading it, except for very few presenters who had come from mother tongue medium of instruction.

The ideas listed below summarize the benefits experienced by me while adopting interactive activities:

- Real communication occurred in the second language classroom
- Students organized their own ideas and contributed to the discussion
- The activities paved way for developing their reading comprehension and conversational skills
- They also enhanced the students' questioning and retention skills
- All students were motivated; they participated and presented
- Students' tolerance and empathy towards their peers were increased
- The activities created self-awareness and self-motivation

Providing feedback about the activities, all students expressed that these two interactive activities had made them feel more interactive and confident, become self-aware and self-motivated, enthusiastic and develop initiative in the learning. They also recommended that the teacher conduct many such activities in the forthcoming classes. "The activities enabled us to learn English with interest and enthusiasm" proclaimed the students.

## Conclusion

I have tried to demonstrate that exploring alternative ways of teaching can help a teacher to shift from the traditional way of teaching and learning English to an innovative and interactive way. Alternative pedagogies will enable teachers to create a more interesting and interactive classroom and will definitely make students more active and involved. Moreover,

by keeping abreast of new developments in ELT and by bringing a change in the way English is taught, teachers can improve their practices and their students' communicative competence that would demonstrate positive results. This view and attitude helped me to hold the attention of my students in classroom interaction which in turn increased the degree of their motivation and participation. I believe that the Laws of Learning as formulated by E.L. Thorndike (year?), one of the pioneers of Educational Psychology in the early 20th century, hold good even today and enable teachers to create more interesting and interactive classrooms. The law of exercise, the law of effect and the law of readiness are the three principles or the laws of learning, designed by Thorndike, which together are considered as a necessary precondition for learning. This theory puts more emphasis on motivation of students in the classroom. The laws of learning are universally accepted and applied to all kinds of learning. In brief, some of the implications of the theory of laws of learning which are relevant to this study are given below:

- practice leads a man towards maturity
- practice is the main feature of the trial and error method and
- practice helps in reducing the errors committed by students in learning any concept

The effect of this theory will also help teachers to improve their teaching methods and observe the effects of their teaching methods on students and to make necessary changes in them, if required. Besides, the theory may be found quite helpful for the teachers to conduct experimental research in the English classroom to achieve the goal of maximum participation on the part of the students with minimum guidance from the teachers. It will certainly provide a prelude to practice.

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