Title of Paper: STUDENTS’ PARTNERSHIP: DOES IT YIELD A RELAXED ELT CLASSROOM PRACTICE?

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Section: Articles

Date of Publication: June, 2017

Issue: 5.2

Abstract: Although the English language teaching (ELT) literature fairly points to the students’ share in their English lessons, this paper yet calls for a further students’ full-fledged partnership in the teaching and non-teaching procedures alike. On the teaching side, the students had to find inroads for their own input as a part and parcel of their ELT package. Teaching material is widely drawn from the students’ own self-reality, knowledge and experience, and presented in a collaborative classroom setting, allowing their engagement in negotiations, using English, and preparing them for independent learning. On the non-teaching side, students had to be clearly informed of the course aims, and well aware of its progress, right from the plan through to the evaluation at the base-end, preferably having even a chance on the decision making whenever appropriate. The underlying motive of the suggested students’ partnership is for the student to feel belonging and secure in the classroom; hopefully, resulting in a better preparedness of the student, both psychologically and cognitively, for the challenge of the foreign language practice.

Keywords: collaborative learning, engagement, foreign language

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Introduction

The purpose of the paper is to call for a students’ partnership through their English language teaching (ELT) classroom practice. Admittedly, there is a fairly reasonable awareness and coverage in the literature with regards to students’ share, participation and involvement. The last three nouns are the most frequently recurring in ELT publications in this respect. The present paper, however, argues for a further full-fledged portion for the students in their ELT classroom routines. This should mainly include a three-tiered direction: a) an overall direction, whereby the students have to find inroads for their own input throughout the progress of teaching and non-teaching matters; b) teaching material is as far possible to be drawn from the student’s self-reality; and c) classroom presentation is geared and cooperatively presented in stages as an enabling factor for the student in order to shoulder responsibility of their own English education beyond the classroom and into life in due course.

The call for the suggested students’ partnership is motivated by the prominent position of the student as a stakeholder in educational circles generally, and in the learning of a foreign language (FL) in particular, English in this case, with the challenge of attempting, by and large, to succeed in doing things with that language which is not their own. Therefore, allowing an opportunity for the students’ contribution, experience and knowledge in the ELT classroom interaction warrants for a better environment of learning the foreign language. In consequence, the student is taken as the magnitude point of the argument in this study, certainly with the other elements that contribute towards the identification of what students’ partnership means, why it is needed, and how it could possibly be implemented as a part and parcel in the ELT classroom practice.

Teacher Knowledge

Teachers in educational settings around the world where ELT is taking place are presumably well aware of the aims underlying the teaching of English in general and in their own teaching situations in particular. There might even be an official document from the local educational authorities outlining these aims. Within these aims, teachers naturally know the content of the prescribed syllabus designed for each level of education, its objectives, the procedures of the course, grading, and the evaluation system at the base end. Altogether, teachers’ knowledge as such is certainly prerequisite for an effective performance of teaching; the question remains, though, on whether this type of knowledge is a monopoly of teachers, or should it, at least partially, as appropriate, be disclosed to the student. The answer to this question is not as important as the underlying intention of raising it in order to trigger thinking around what the student should be informed about through their ELT classes so that they feel they are personally represented in the process of their learning and belong to it.

The Status of the Student

In contrast, studying a FL such as English is not the choice of the student, let alone institutional education at large; it is simply a life-line that they must follow. Furthermore, students commence studying English mostly not sure what for, and the majority (if not all) start with not a single word of English at their disposal and obviously an ignorance of the English culture. Further still is that the content of English language instruction and the way it is presented, sequenced and evaluated,
are all apparently not only imposed upon the student, but that these procedures and the aims behind them are completely unknown for him or her.

Another point of tension is the way FLs are taught which is in itself problematic for the student in several respects. For one thing, the students start their English study already speaking their own first language. ELT literature is notably rich with reports on bilingualism issues, such as mother tongue versus FL or second language (SL), language acquisition/systematically learnt and the interference between the two, but these points are largely beyond the scope of this study (see, e.g., Prabhu, 1984; Ellis, 2007; Yule, 2014). The relevant point here is that the student is facing a duality of bilingualism. Another concern is that the major sign of this duality is the problem of being a speaker of two languages and the differences and the way and the context in which each is learnt and in which each is needed for communication. In addition, the way English is taught is yet different compared to other subjects in the curriculum in that the latter could be labeled and known as information subjects whereas English, and all languages, are taught as language at one level and as skills at another, suggesting the need for continual and ample practice before the language is internalised and turned into a habit. Furthermore, the ELT classroom has the dual identity of being a world in itself and, similarly, a part of the macro world outside it, and everything that runs in the classroom is a preparation for the world outside it. Finally is the question of the expectations of the students for their personal and social career from studying English.

On the Positive Side

A host of positive signs is detected in ELT circles towards putting students’ partnership into effect. The first and the main of these is seen, as earlier stated, in the literature theories. Phrases like “teacher-centred” and “frontal teacher” are now considered obsolete in ELT, and adequately replaced by offering a more positive role to the student and the learning prospect, per se (see, e.g., Hutchinson & Waters, 1987), altogether suggesting a remarkable part for the student in their English studying. The second promising sign is the rich literature work on the “mystique of learning;” that is, how people learn is still far away from what we (human beings) could perceive. For this reason, a wide range of psychological suggestions is put forward to assist in building a friendly ELT atmosphere for a better chance of learning for the students (detailed in the justification section, below). In sum, the ELT student’s part is perpetually on the rise, and the way English is taught has to prepare the student to learn how to learn independently in the target situation beyond the classroom, and post institutional studentship (see, e.g., Wong & Nunan, 2011).

Another major positive force is the availability of IT resources. Technological resources are obviously one of the blessings in all walks of life nowadays, ELT included, if it is professionally utilised. Many references, aids, and information are available at a click for the ELT student and teacher, that is, the human elements of the classroom interaction. One last point in favour is that ELT teachers in FL/SL institutional contexts are overwhelmingly bilinguals (i.e., speakers of the same mother tongue as their students), which might breed a psychological security and confidence in the classroom so long as the use of the first language L1 is (partially) permissible in the English classroom.
Introducing Students’ Partnership

In this section students’ partnership is identified, its main features are presented, followed by measures and, finally, the justification for students’ partnership.

Students’ partnership is simply defined, in my own words, as a call for as fully as possible of a student’s part throughout the process of their learning English. Features of the students’ partnership include the planting of the feeling among the students that: a) they are equally responsible in their ELT lessons towards a better chances of learning English; b) they are present and well aware of the whereabouts through the progress of the course, right from the course plan, procedures and evaluation of their work, and there is room for their input throughout; c) they can succeed in doing things with the FL, English; and d) they must be aware of their English outside and beyond the boundaries of the classroom.

The measures to ensure putting students’ partnership in effect include:

a. General (non-teaching): Students continually being informed of the aims, objectives plus the progress of the course and allowed, furthermore, a part in the decision-making, as appropriate.

b. Content (in classroom practice): Drawn as far possible from the students’ self-reality, which means in Mohammed’s (2010, p. 35) words, “a new cycle in ELT which mainly seeks to make the maximum use of the student’s own input, drawn from his dual reality of the classroom and beyond, as an asset for his language learning…” Through the student’s self-reality, for a grammar lesson on tenses (the past tense, for instance), rather than following the traditional way (title on board, prepared questions, explanations, and then drills), the teacher, instead, can start by asking the students if they remember something they did last night, with a series of questions about the incident later on, such as: what was the title of the film, how long did it last, how did it end, did you like it, why or why not? Other aspects of the language (writing, reading, vocabulary, listening and speaking) could equally lend themselves in a similar way; the rule of thumb for the teacher always remains in detecting a relation between the topic at hand and the students’ self-reality until it eventually becomes a habitual norm. It is certainly a credit if the students while exchanging their personal experience need to ask the teacher questions like, “Does the infinitive verb always change into the past by adding -ed?” Questions from the students, besides the variety, suggest that: 1) there is a real need of language for an urgent personal communicative event, in contrast to the usual display questions from the part of the teacher; 2) questions are not the monopoly of the teacher; and 3) the answer directly becomes an instant of communicative language in real use.

In the end it is obvious that grading of material to the level of the group with an element of challenge built in would make it of interest and worth the effort of thinking about it.

c. Presentation: the mode of material presentation in class must be: 1) in explicit instructions so that what is required from the student is clearly understood for them; 2) working in a collaborative and a friendly atmosphere whereby they feel at ease, engaging in negotiation with the challenge of a given task; 3) the teacher meanwhile assists and detects the strengths, weaknesses of the class and the individuals alike, altogether, creating a dynamic atmosphere for the students to deal effectively with their English learning.

The expectation for a better learning opportunity from collaborative work is evident in literature, both in theory (e.g., Ellis, 2007; Willis & Willis, 2007; Prabhu, 1984), and in
empirical work as well, such as in Bookhart (2008, p. 2), who arrived, from feedback for her students’ on collaborative work, at the conclusion that “once they feel they understand what to do and why, most students develop a feeling that they have control over their being learning—
the motivational factor” (emphasis added).

Along the same lines, and once again from an American context, linking creativity to collaborative learning, Thousand, Villa and Nevin (2002, p. xix) assert that “practice such as cooperative learning, partner and peer-mediated learning and creative thinking increase the likelihood of success for all students.”

In sum, collaborative work gains its positive effect from several respects: that it has clear beginning and ending, is challenging in the sense of sparking thinking, enriches negotiation, allows students to learn from each other and gradually prepares them to be independent learners.

There are several justifications for introducing students’ partnerships. Following the several features, measures and the identity of students’ partnership above, the purpose of this last part is to conclude by providing an answer to the “why.” The answer (justification) for the need for the students’ partnership is briefly presented below in five subheadings: cognitively, psychologically, linguistically, socially, and pedagogically. In all cases, however, the key and the foremost phrase remains language internalisation.

Cognitively, familiarity of content relieves students from the burden of materials imposed upon them (e.g., being boring, unfamiliar, difficult) and leaves the mind free for the language part on how to express their thoughts, which approximates Krashen’s (2003) term, low affective filter.

Psychologically, the feeling of belonging, both to the institution and to the English content, creates a stress-free setting that encourages the students to accept the challenge of comprehending the tasks in L2; that is, confidence is planted, particularly when they feel errors are natural, tolerable and that they have the right to make errors.

Linguistically, the student may seek assistance from the teacher, most likely on the language of communicating his/her message. This has the advantages of: 1) the students are aware of their needs of language for communication, 2) this is urgently needed for real language use, and 3) the students asking questions suggests a reverse order of the usual monopoly of questions by the teacher. Furthermore, the questions from the part of the students directly stem from the reality of a language event in use.

Socially, the setting of group/team work has its social norms, such as turn-taking in speech, language functions in use (e.g., asking, answering, clarifying, objecting) and even feelings (e.g., how far some point is applauded, corrected, changed), besides the need to abide by social demands in team work, the fitting of the student personality as an individual and that of being a member in a group.

Pedagogically, students working mostly by themselves indicates:

a. They are engaged, doing work of their own (i.e., of interest).
b. The role of the teacher is therefore modified from frontal into rounding the class in order to encourage, observe the progress of practice, help as required and detect strengths and weaknesses (individuals and whole class).

c. Familiarity of content (frequently depicts the student’s self-reality), clear instructions, together with the customary group work, results in students’ being aware of their language (needs, selection, and the sort and size of help required through the practice of language).

d. If asking for assistance, student questions are real, directly needed for use, an indication of a positive response to whatever task under study.

e. Answers to such questions arising from the students are urgently and immediately required for language use. In addition, questions generate a variety of responses that could be of use for an individual student, or else, for the class as a whole.

f. Students – even if implicitly – know that language has two levels, function (sense) and form (structure), and that language and thought are inseparable.

g. This breaks the classroom formality.

Conclusion

The aim of this study is to suggest a students’ partnership whereby the students feel they are represented and well aware of the directions along the whole cycle of their ELT operation. On the “why” side, the target of students’ partnership is to relieve the student’s mind from any type of stress so that their attention is solely diverted to the classroom practice, resulting, thus, in a better learning atmosphere.

Clarity of the whole ELT scene for the students, mainly on the teaching part, but also on non-teaching issues, as appropriate, is a credit for a better learning process in that the students applaud that they are regularly informed of the whereabouts of the course in details, right from the outset of teaching to the last stage of evaluation. It is even further advantageous if they feel there is room for their own acceptable ideas and suggestions.

On the “what” part, teaching materials must, as far possible, depict the students’ self-reality, taking into account their knowledge, experience and the duality of being a member of the classroom and of the world outside it, bringing, in effect, the feeling of belonging, familiarity and interest for the content.

Finally, on the “how” side, both the classroom presentation and the setting should run in a manner that allows a maximal portion for the students’ collaborative work, engaged in negotiations on the basis of a given task in front of them. As such, they think together, learn from each other, and, more importantly, learn how to learn.

References


