

Engaged Learning in TEFL. An Overview

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Abstract

The challenges of teaching diverse learners in varying learning contexts underscore the crucial role of student engagement in the learning experience. Implementing effective strategies cannot only help students increase their engagement with learning activities but also foster a sense of belonging in their learning community, thereby enhancing their comprehension of the course material.

Keywords: engagement, educational objectives, engaged learning design

Introduction

Even for seasoned educators, crafting lessons that truly push students to higher levels of achievement can be a daunting task. Acknowledging that this is a common challenge, a barrier we strive to overcome in our educational journey, is crucial. Recognizing this collective struggle can help us feel less isolated and more supported in our endeavours.

Despite extensive behavioural and educational support, some students need help to reach basic standards of competence. However, as educators, our goal is not just to ensure students acquire basic skills but to inspire them to reach higher levels of learning. We aim for academic excellence, not just behavioural conformity, and student engagement is critical to achieving this.

Defining engagement

Defining engagement is a challenging thing to do due to its multiple meanings. There have been many explanations for this situation. Silver and Perini (2010) think that "even the research on engagement shows a kind of conceptual slipperiness, as terms like participation, attention, interest, and on-task behaviour all seem to float interchangeably throughout the literature". It is important to note that while participation is about being involved in an activity, engagement goes beyond that, involving a deeper connection and investment in the learning process. According to Yazzie-Mintz (2010) "engagement can best be understood as a relationship between the student and school community, the student and school adults, the student and peers, the student and instruction, and the student and curriculum". Teachers wish their students were diligent and committed to their work, but creating a sense of belonging to the community can determine their degree of engagement and anticipate their results.

According to Schlechty (2011), students are engaged when they demonstrate commitment, persistence, and focus. Over the years, researchers have delved into the concept of engagement, incorporating various definitions from three main categories: behavioural, cognitive, and emotional. Behavioural engagement refers to students' visible behaviour and involvement in learning activities. Emotional engagement refers to students' feelings, attitudes, and reactions to classroom tasks. Cognitive engagement refers to students' psychological investment in the

learning process. More recently, Reeve and Tseng (2011) introduced a new type of engagement, termed 'genetic engagement', which is defined as a 'student-initiated pathway to a more motivationally supportive learning environment', such as active contribution to the flow of learning activity, including making suggestions and offering input (Reeve, 2013).

Conner and Pope (2013) mention three categories of engagement: affective, behavioural, and cognitive. Affective engagement involves "experiencing interest and enjoyment", behavioural engagement involves "working hard and exerting mental effort", and cognitive engagement involves "valuing and caring about the work".

According to Jablon and Wilkinson (2006), there are only two types of engagement: psychological and behavioural. Psychological engagement refers to students' curiosity and enjoyment while learning, whereas behavioural engagement includes characteristics such as concentration, investment, enthusiasm, and effort (Jablon & Wilkinson, 2006).

Schlechty (2011) mentions five types of engagement in classrooms: engagement, strategic compliance, ritual compliance, retreatism, and rebellion. He expanded on this by saying that engagement must be the aim for meaningful learning because both strategic and ritual compliance result in shallow learning, while retreatism and rebellion result in little or no learning. In line with Schlechty (2011), Silver and Perini (2010) find six categories of engagement: deep engagement, engagement, active compliance, passive compliance, periodic compliance, and resistance. Teachers need to understand the dimensions of engagement to adapt their curriculum and teaching to meet students' needs.

Engaging students

Teachers often consider student engagement as hands-on activities involving students in their courses. They seldom consider the more significant aspects of the teaching-learning environment that often influence the extent to which students are willing to engage in their coursework.

Various factors can impact individual differences, including background knowledge, culture, individuality and neurology. Enthusiasm and originality may highly engage some learners, while others are disengaged, even frightened, by these aspects, preferring strict routines. Some may like to work alone, while others prefer to work with their peers. No single engagement means is optimal for all learners in all environments.

Silver and Perini (2010) identified four types of engaging activities that activate students: 1) challenge and competition, 2) cooperation and connection, 3) curiosity and controversy, and 4) choice and creativity. This list is called the 8 Cs (Silver & Perini, 2010).

Knowledge empowers some students. These students are interested in acquiring new skills, want to show what they know, and are competitive. Thus, the activities and tasks are going to engage these students.

Interpersonal work drives other students. These students want to feel valued by others (Silver & Perini, 2010). The activities and tasks focus on cooperation and interpersonal drive.

In addition to knowledge and interpersonal work, students are also driven by a need for understanding. Hence, teachers must stir their curiosity and interest and engage them in more complex thought. Students enjoy conversations around controversial issues and questions requiring them to analyze grey areas in an argument (Silver & Perini, 2010). This thinking provides novelty and variety, increasing engagement (Schlechty, 2011).

Self-expression motivates some students. These students want to be seen as unique individuals and thrive in situations where they can "express those kernels within themselves that belong to them and no one else" (Silver & Perini, 2010). Teachers should provide students with situations when they learn and prove their learning by being innovative and imaginative. The activities and tasks focus on choice and creativity.

Student engagement in learning is not just a desirable aspect but a crucial factor for academic success. It is a call to action for educators, motivating us to enhance student engagement as a necessity for effective teaching and learning.

1. Incorporating interactive and hands-on activities: Teachers engage students by incorporating activities that require active participation, such as group discussions, experiments, simulations, and projects.

2. Providing real-world relevance: Teachers connect the material taught to real-life examples and applications to show students the practical significance of their learning.

Students are engaged through information and activities that are meaningful, authentic, and rewarding for their interests, goals, and educational objectives.

Activities and sources of information should be tailored and context-specific to learners' lives. They should be culturally and socially relevant, appropriate to students' age and ability, and for different racial, cultural, ethnic and gender groups. Teachers should incorporate activities that foster the use of imagination to tackle new and relevant problems or to make sense of complex ideas in creative ways.

3. Encouraging collaboration: Teachers encourage collaboration between students, learning involving sharing ideas and learning from each other. Flexible, rather than fixed grouping, allows for better differentiation and multiple roles and provides multiple opportunities to learn how to work most successfully with others. Teachers should establish cooperative learning groups with clear goals, roles and responsibilities.

4. Offering choice and autonomy: Teachers are open to students making decisions about their learning, such as choosing topics for project presentations or different tasks.

Giving learners choices can develop self-determination and pride in achievement and increase the degree to which they feel connected to their learning. However, it is essential to be aware that individuals differ in the amount and type of choices they prefer to have.

Teachers should offer choices regarding the context or content used to practise and assess skills, the tools used to collect or produce information, and the models' colour, design or graphics.

5. Using technology: Integrating technology tools and resources into lessons is more than just a trend. They can make learning more interactive, engaging, and personalized for students, a positive step towards enhancing student engagement and preparing them for the digital age.

6. Minimizing threats and distractions: One of the most important things a teacher can do is to create a safe environment for learners. What is threatening or potentially distracting depends on the learners' needs and background. A student might find the language learning experience threatening, while other learners might find too much sensory stimulation distracting. Teachers should create a supportive and accepting classroom climate by engaging all participants in whole-class discussions, synchronizing and sequencing activities, and varying requirements for public display and assessment.

7. Increasing mastery-oriented feedback: Assessment is most productive when feedback is relevant, constructive, accessible and timely. However, the type of feedback is also crucial to help learners preserve the motivation and effort needed for learning. Mastery-oriented feedback leads learners towards becoming skilled rather than towards a fixed notion of performance or conformity. It also highlights the importance of effort and practice, rather than inherent 'intelligence' or 'ability', as an essential factor in guiding learners towards long-term successful learning habits and practices.

Teachers should provide feedback that fosters perseverance, highlights effort, improvement and achievement rather than relative performance, and is supportive and informative rather than comparative or competitive.

Engaged learning design refers to the intentional and strategic planning of educational experiences that encourage student active involvement in the learning process. This approach involves creating learning activities and environments that are interactive, relevant, and meaningful to students.

Fundamental principles of engaged learning design include:

1. Student-centered approach: Designing learning experiences that focus on the needs, interests, and abilities of individual students, allowing for personalized and differentiated instruction.
2. Authentic and real-world connections: Incorporating real-life examples, applications, and scenarios into lessons to make learning relevant and meaningful to students.
3. Active learning strategies: Implementing activities that require students to actively participate, collaborate, and apply their knowledge in practical ways, such as group projects, discussions, and hands-on experiments.

4. Technology integration: Leveraging technology tools and resources to enhance learning experiences, provide interactive learning opportunities, and facilitate student communication and collaboration.

By applying these principles and strategies in designing educational experiences, teachers can create engaging and effective learning environments that promote student motivation, curiosity, and academic success.

Meaningful, engaged learning design includes these features:

1. Instruction is flexible and interdisciplinary: Students integrate knowledge and concepts from different school subjects to create a deeper understanding.
2. Learning experiences are rigorous: Meaningful, engaged learning is built on a solid curriculum and pedagogical understanding.
3. School is structured for deeper learning: Teachers use techniques that enable students to experience challenging learning or cognitive lifting, such as explaining, making connections, and addressing questions.
4. Student progress is regularly monitored: Both students and teachers can access real-time data on student progress from formal and informal assessments. They use this information to modify instruction to ensure students are challenged and supported.
5. Students learn about themselves as learners: Students are helped to develop metacognitive skills such as positive self-concept and realistic self-appraisal. They also reflect on their academic and social-emotional learning.

Conclusion

The literature needs to recommend one clear strategy for engagement. However, teachers must observe the students in their classes to decide students' levels of engagement. They must also identify the types of engagement in their classrooms and find ways to activate other forms of engagement that may be lacking. It is up to all teachers to find the right strategies for the students sitting in their classrooms. An engaged learning environment increases students' attention and focus, promotes meaningful learning experiences, encourages higher levels of student performance, and motivates students to practice higher-level critical thinking skills. Successful, engaged students are learners and active participants in their education. They take responsibility for their learning, diligently tackle tasks, and set learning goals. Their passion for learning fuels a lifelong curiosity, leading them to become problem solvers, critical thinkers, and contributors to knowledge.

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