Towards an Interactive EFL Class: Using Active Learning Strategies

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Abstract
Throughout the history of second language acquisition, many methods and approaches have come to vogue. By the advent of communicative approaches to SLA, an increasing attention was directed toward the interactive nature of language and the role of interaction in EFL classes. This article reports on active learning strategies which are helpful in creating an interactive learning situation. After the review of related literature, active learning strategies were recognized and then the influence of these strategies on learners' interactions was investigated. This article helps teachers to create a more interactive teacher-learner environment.
Keywords: active learning strategies, interaction, language learning, EFL

1. Introduction

"Learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn much just by sitting in class listening to teachers, memorizing repackaged assignments, and spitting out answers. They must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences, and apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves". (Chickering & Gamson, 1987, p. 3)

Teachers encourage students to participate actively in the classroom (Pajares, 1996). However, many of the learners are still reluctant to speak up and interact. Learners have the opportunity to follow up and be exposed to new words and structures by verbal interaction during the teaching processes. With the advent of communicative language teaching in the 1970s, students' oral participation in English classes was emphasized as a significant issue.

To promote students' involvement in classroom activities, active learning strategies have been suggested by many researchers (Tedesco-Schneck, 2013; Keyser, 2000). Also active learning was introduced as a path to critical thinking (Tedesco-Schneck, 2013) and to promote students to think critically (Walker, 2003). Research findings have advocated that a suitable learning environment is an active one, not passive. A discovery learning in which the student is the main agent is supported (Adler, 1982). A review by McKeachie et al. (1987, p. 70) concluded that "In those experiments involving measures of retention of information after the end of a course, measures of problem solving, thinking, attitude change, or motivation for further learning, the results tend to show differences favoring discussion methods over lecture".

2. Review of the Literature: Importance of Active Learning

Swain (1985) avowed that language learning is more effective when the target language is used interactively, particularly in regard to understanding the language in general, and improving their reading or listening skills in particular. According to Ellis (1993), interaction within the classroom leads to many advantages for language learning such as comprehension checks, language practice and so on. Long and Porter (1985) found that when second language learners worked in groups, they were more motivated, took more initiative, and were less anxious concerning their learning. On the other hand, there may be a relationship between student oral participation and teachers' questioning techniques and types of classroom activities (Wei, 2008). Wei (2008) also found that students oral participation is increased if application and presentation activities are used; appropriate vocabulary is offered when students need it to continue; questions related to students' prior experiences are asked; and an informal and friendly classroom atmosphere is present.

Khamwan (2007) found that after training the students to use interactional strategies as tools for initiating their interaction, their responses to the teacher's questions were longer and more meaningful. Further, the average number of interaction turns was about two turns per three minutes. It was found that the students could comprehend the lesson better. They could ask their teacher when they could not understand something. Moreover, more students could respond to the teacher's questions.

All above mentioned studies have supported the significance of learner's participation and interaction. Many research studies discuss the advantages of active learning techniques that can help students to initiate an interaction with their teachers and ultimately clarify unclear points to enhance their understanding of the lessons and improve creativities.

On the other hand many educators today agree that students learn more in an active learning environment than they do in a passive learning environment. With active learning, we can make students creative (Bakır, 2011) and promote critical thinking (Walker, 2003; Tedesco-Schneck, 2013). The use of active learning to promote critical thinking dates back to the time of Socrates who encouraged reflective thinking through provocative questioning. Socratic questioning is one of the strategies to engage students in active learning and cultivate critical thinking. Chan (2013) also explored how critical thinking is defined and realized in previous studies of nursing education, and then analyzed the impediments and strategies in teaching and learning critical thinking.

3. Statement of problem

EFL teachers may have witnessed occasions when they face a passive class where students are unresponsive and avoid interaction with the teacher. Sometimes, students do not answer even if they understand the question, know the answer, and are able to produce the answer. The next section helps teachers to deal with this situation.

4. Active learning

There are many different definitions of active learning. For example, Brown (2007) defines active learning as a form of learning in which the learners use opportunities to decide about aspects of the learning process. He also defines it as a mental activity that refers to the extent to which the learner is required to use his or her mental capabilities in the process of learning. Still another definition was found on the Lexicon of Online and Distance Learning which reads, student who are active learners, process, discover, and apply learned information to new areas and try to solve new problems by previous information (Tomei, 2009).

Active learning deals with engaging students in an activity or task that will make the learner think and analyze the information being taught. It may occur at every stage or level of a lesson, from getting the students engaged in the topic, through actively and consciously taking part in discovering language and rules, to free, active production. In addition, Bell and Kahrhoff (2006, p. 1) believe that "active learning is a process wherein students are actively engaged in building understanding of facts, ideas, and skills through the completion of instructor directed tasks and activities. It is any type of activity that gets students involved in the learning process." Active learning techniques affect students' creative thinking level and this demonstrates that creative thinking can be changed via education (Bakır, 2011). The taxonomy of significant learning is adopted from Bell and Kahrhoff (2006, p. 6) and it is shown in Figure 1.
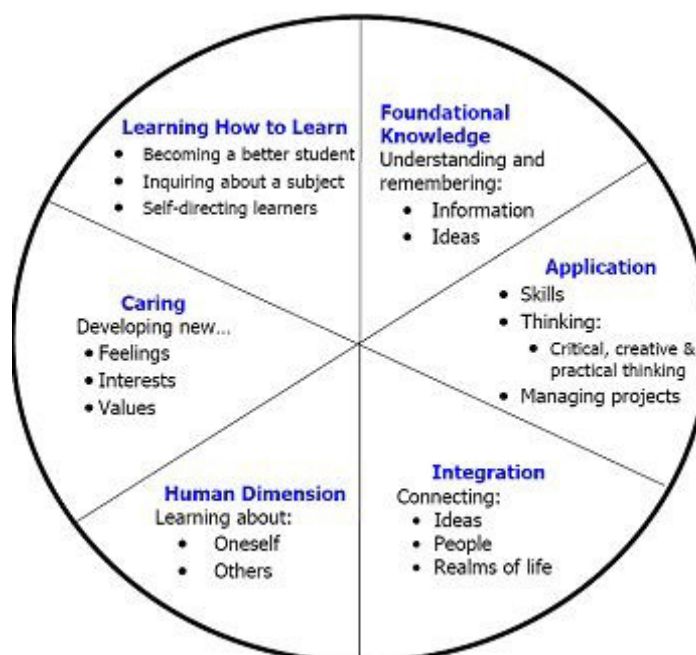

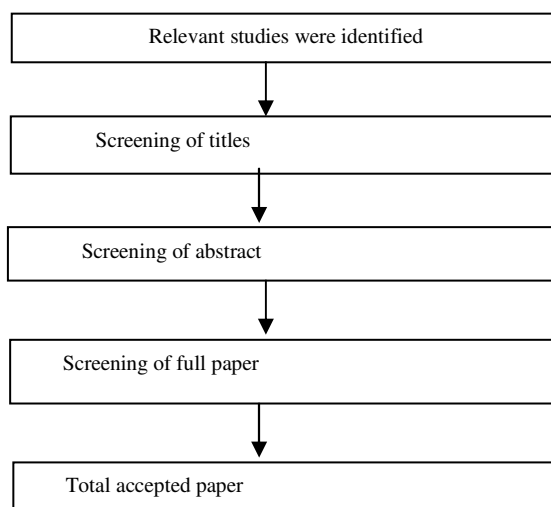*Figure 1*- The Taxonomy of Significant Learning

5. Method

Figure 2. Flow diagram of the review process

Six studies relevant to the topic were chosen. Data source was Science Direct. Papers were indexed and some web sites were reviewed to identify techniques applied in EFL classes (see fig.1).

6. Findings

Table 1 shows active learning strategies found by the review of related literature (Adler, 1982; Bell & Kahrhoff, 2006; Keyser, 2000; Tedesco-Schneck, 2013; Vrasidas, 2000; Walker, 2003).

Table 1

Active learning strategies

Active learning strategy	Description	Purpose
Academic Portfolio	Portfolios give students ownership of their work which improves their level of interest in what they are doing.	Track student development, Reveals learning progress, Highlights best work, Connects students to work, Involves students in assessment process
Assigning Roles, drama	Provides students with the opportunity to bring language alive in a fun and entertaining way.	Allows students to look for certain aspects within a film or lecture and yet get information regarding other aspects from classmates.
Debate	To discover the complexity in big issues.	Requires students to acknowledge opposite viewpoints, develops listening skills, demonstrates need for supporting evidence, encourages research and investigation, discourages simplistic approach to complex issues.
The Fish Bowl	Students write down one question concerning the course material and deposit. Their questions in a fish bowl. The instructor then draws several questions out of the bowl and answers them for the class or asks the class to answer them.	To give the instructor feedback; gives the students the opportunity to ask questions, get clarification.
Treasure Hunt	The basic strategy here is to find web pages that hold information (text, graphic, sound, video, etc.) that you feel is essential to understanding the given topic.	The activity works well when gathering relevant factual information and providing specific background information is needed.

Think/Pair/Share or Write/Pair/Share	Students try out ideas with each other before they make them public.	Focuses student attention, encourages problem solving individually and in groups, allows shy students to gain confidence, increases the body of material for student response, provides forum for auditory and kinesthetic learning.
Fictionary	Ask each group to find an obscure word in the dictionary and then to write three definitions of this word.	Good dictionary skills will help your students become more autonomous.
Clarification pause	Throughout the lecture, especially after an important point, STOP and let the point sink in, then ask if anyone needs clarification.	It is helpful to circulate the room while you are waiting for responses, this will help students who generally feel uncomfortable asking questions.
Focused listening	Used as a brainstorming technique to generate definitions/descriptions of topics. Ask students to take 3-5 minutes and list words or phrases that describe a concept.	Can be used to generate class discussion or then have students form groups to compare lists and form the best overall description of topic.
Team trouble shooting	Have students form groups of 3-4, pose a question or problem-ask teams to troubleshoot for 5 minutes and write down their ideas. Stop and collect the papers-use to lead a discussion on an analysis of the issue.	
Discussion map	A way to get your students talking about a specific topic. Write the topic in the middle, and then get students to ask and answer questions using the prompts, and also to discuss the advantages and disadvantages.	Connecting the major topic of focus with what they consider its most important features/other ideas and concepts.
One Minute Paper	Facilitator passes out small sheets of paper to students. They are asked to spend one minute writing about an assigned topic.	One Minute Paper provides an opportunity for all students to have a voice not just those who are vocal in classroom discussions. It facilitates discussion and helps to focus attention on a point. It is a quick way to check students' understanding. It provides concise feedback to specific questions.
Mini Cases (Group Activity)	Mini cases are small, carefully selected clusters of information that invite students to analyze a set of facts or circumstances, offer interpretations, form judgments and make decisions using concepts in the discipline.	Works well either as a way of introducing a new topic or as a way of closing a unit of study and helping students consolidate learning gains.

7. Conclusion

As already discussed, active learning is one of the useful strategies for EFL teachers and an effective teaching technique. Regardless of the subject matter, when active learning is compared to traditional teaching methods (such as lecture), students learn more, retain the information longer, and enjoy the class more. Active learning allows students to learn in the classroom with the help of the instructor and other students, rather than on their own. Therefore, a process of ZPD takes place in which learners can reach their potentials by the assistance of a peer or teachers. It covers all the practical learning activities and teaching methods in which students are able to think about their learning and to use their own knowledge to solve problems.

Additionally, teachers should be aware of their course goals and learning objectives. If these goals and objectives are stated as higher-order thinking processes, then active learning strategies promote critical thinking, creative learning, and corporative learning. Finally, it is important that active learning strategies be encouraged and reinforced not only in all EFL classes by teachers, but also at every level of education. We can still plant the seed and encourage students to use their thinking abilities in all aspects of life.

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