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Title	Encouraging reluctant students to participate
Publication date	2019
Download date	2026-02-08 10:57:33
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14069/786

BRITISH COUNCIL

5 Encouraging reluctant students to participate

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I am very concerned about why some students are not participating in class, and many of my students are falling behind in the lessons.

Teaching Context

Elizabeth works at a public primary school called Centro Escolar Huatulco. It is located in Santa Cruz, Huatulco, which is situated on the Pacific coast of Mexico in the state of Oaxaca. She teaches Grade 6, which consists of 27 students (10 girls and 17 boys), aged 12-13, and they have English twice a week for one hour.

Unfortunately, the group has had a number of English teachers since Grade 1 – each of them stayed for a month at most, and then left for various reasons. In addition, the majority of the learners had never had formal English lessons before. A few had had some private lessons, but they had only learnt a few phrases.

Some concerns

At the outset, Elizabeth was very concerned that some students were not participating fully in class. Although lots of students raised their hands to answer questions, it was always the same few who never did so. Another reason for looking into this was that these students were also falling behind. They had been studying English for more than a month, but many couldn't remember the basic language they had learned earlier on in the course. And finally, their reaction towards working with others was quite negative – their participation in teamwork was not what Elizabeth expected, and time when they should have been using the language was wasted because of their negative attitudes.

Elizabeth's puzzle, then, was to investigate why that was happening – why wasn't that small group of students actively participating in class?

Exploratory questions

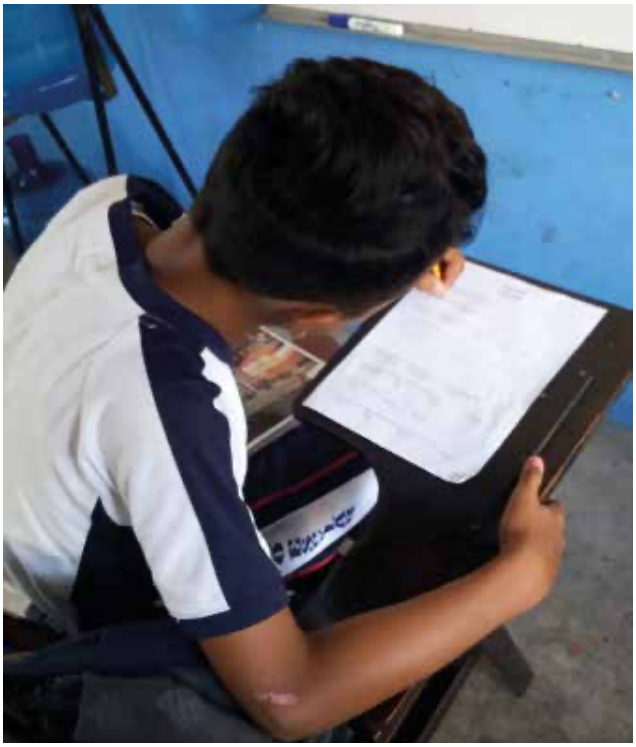
Elizabeth came up with three exploratory questions:

1. What kind of activities does this small group participate in?
2. What does this small group of students think about participating in class?
3. What do I expect from this group of students in terms of participation in my class?

Data Collection

In order to collect the relevant information, Elizabeth decided to use the following methods over the course of six lessons:

- a journal so she could keep a better record of what she had observed. After every lesson she reflected and made notes.
- a student questionnaire since her students' opinions were crucial to her research. She decided to make this anonymous, and to give it to all her students to answer.
- peer observation: although she was noting her own observations, she felt she needed an extra pair of eyes to inform her about what was really happening in the classroom, and point out what she couldn't see, so she asked a colleague to observe two of her lessons.



Rethinking the focus of the study

Although Elizabeth set out to focus on just a small group of students, after seeing all the responses from the questionnaire, she thought about it and decided that it would be worthwhile to explore the whole group's opinions and to test her assumptions, so she adjusted her exploratory questions to include 'the whole group'.

Interesting results from the exploration phase

Elizabeth gained some interesting results from the data collection.

From the student questionnaire responses, she learnt that all her students liked to participate, but only 7 out of 28 reported that they *always* participate. The reason given for non-participation was, 'I don't know the answer'.

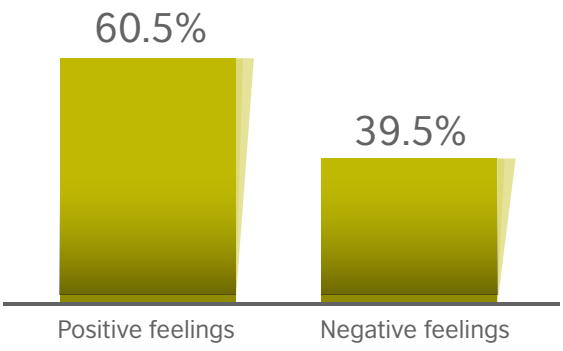
She also discovered that the activities they participated in the most were games, group competitions, movies, Pictionary, puzzles and songs – not reading, role plays, oral exercises or spelling.

In relation to how they felt about participating, 11 students responded 'nervous' or 'insecure', and the reasons they gave were a lack of confidence when using new language and being afraid of being laughed at.

How do I feel when I participate?

Excited (9)
Good (8) → **17**

Nervous (8)
Insecure (3) → **11**



Most students (15) also said that they worked better in teams, and this was backed up by the peer observation comments. However, her colleague noted that teamwork was only effective when students were not in the same team as their friends, and as long as the teams weren't too big – in large teams, not all members contributed to the task.

> Most students participated actively. Only 2 or 3 students don't get involved when being in teams. Students sat at the bottom were silence even when working in teams; because the team had a big number of members (6 students and not all of them work).

Suggestions:

Form groups with less members ~~~~ and arrange the seats in a better way.

Elizabeth noted this too in her journal:

Journal entry

Teams of five aren't working well.

And finally, for students, participation meant 'asking questions', 'helping in their teams' and 'doing the classroom activities'. For Elizabeth, however, it also meant all students staying on task and contributing equally, and students encouraging each other and working to solve problems together.

Conclusions

Elizabeth drew some conclusions from her findings:

- A lot of students, almost half, feel nervous about participating and being laughed at.
- Students don't participate because they don't know the answer.
- Students feel they work better in teams.
- Not all students contribute when teams are too big.

Action

After analysing all the information, Elizabeth went online and started looking into classroom management more, and especially for strategies that would help her to get all her students participating. She came across lots of ideas but finally decided on a particular cooperative learning strategy – *'Numbered Heads Together'*[1].

'Numbered Heads Together'

With this strategy, learners are divided into teams of equal numbers, and each assigned a number, e.g. 1-4. Elizabeth then asks a question and the students have time to think individually about the answer. When the bell rings, all the team members stand up, share and discuss their answers, and when they reach an agreement they sit down. The teacher then calls out a number and on the count of three, all those students answer in unison.

Rationale

Elizabeth chose this activity because it:

- ensured that all team members knew the answer to the problem or question, making it possible for her to nominate any student to answer.
- encouraged each student to take greater responsibility for their own learning, and peer learning.
- encouraged them to participate more freely.

Her research had also revealed that students felt nervous or insecure about answering questions because they didn't know the answer – she felt that using this strategy would lessen their anxiety.

Students working during the action phase

Students forming teams and being assigned roles

1. *www.teachervision.com/numbered-heads-together-cooperative-learning-strategy*

Extra measure

To maximise participation, Elizabeth also assigned roles, so that each member of the team would and could participate equally. Since almost half of the students had expressed a lack of confidence, assigning an important role to every student would give them an opportunity to participate more fully, and become more confident. Elizabeth had learnt from her internet search that assigning group roles provides all students with a clear opportunity for participation, and they are less likely to feel left out or unengaged when they have a particular duty that they are responsible for completing within their team.

The roles she chose to use with 'Numbered Heads Together' were:

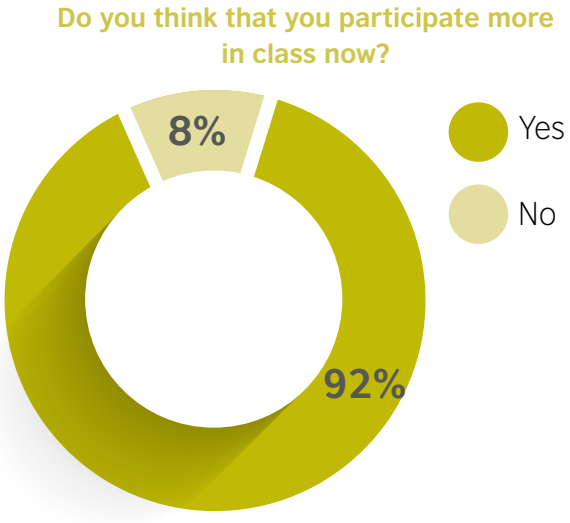
Help Seekers	those responsible for communicating any queries or questions the team had
Quiet Captains	those responsible for making sure team members weren't talking too loudly
Coordinators	those responsible for making sure all team members were involved in the activity
Energisers	those responsible for cheering the team on during a task and making sure everyone had a positive attitude

Time to evaluate

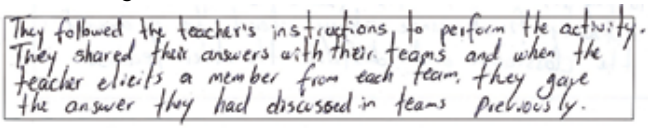
Elizabeth implemented these actions over the course of six lessons. Then she used the same methods as she had during her exploration – a student questionnaire, journal notes, and peer observation – to evaluate the impact. This time, she also invited her colleague to observe her classes twice as she also wanted feedback at the end of the implementation period, when students had become used to the new way of team working. The second student questionnaire differed too, focusing on how learners felt about the new strategies and whether their feelings about participating had changed as a result (see Appendix 1).

What did the students think about the action plan?

To Elizabeth's amazement, after implementing the action plan, 26 out of 27 said they participated more now as a result of the new activities – participation increased!



Her colleague also confirmed this after his observations.


They followed the teacher's instructions to perform the activity. They shared their answers with their teams and when the teacher elicits a member from each team, they gave the answer they had discussed in teams previously.

Students didn't refuse to form teams and work with their classmates. When they worked in teams, each member did it quite well.

Working collaboratively in small teams had helped the students to feel less nervous or shy, and as a result just three students now expressed negative feelings about participating in class compared to 11 at the beginning of the programme. The other 23 reported feeling 'excited' or 'good'.

Similarly, 24 students felt good about having a team role. Generally, students liked their roles and Elizabeth will continue to use them when needed. However, she acknowledges that she will need to be a bit clearer about what the responsibilities of each role are in order

to get better results, as well as making sure that each student has the opportunity to experience all of them. She would probably also introduce other, different roles for different kinds of activities in the future.

Peer observation feedback and reflection notes showed that overall, the negative attitudes towards working with others had decreased, and that there were only one or two students who were still reluctant to work with particular individuals.

Her colleague also observed that the pupils who took their roles seriously, and worked collaboratively with their team outperformed the others.

What Elizabeth has learnt

"There is always room for improvement; I consider that I have become a better professional because of this whole new experience. I am not the same educator as I was at the beginning of this journey. I feel empowered and motivated. And although doing EAR adds more time to our already busy

schedule, it also brings plenty of practical benefits. I can see clearly how this has had such a great impact not only on me, but also on my students and classroom.

I will continue to get my students working in groups, because it improved participation and their attitudes towards working with their classmates. I also noticed that although sometimes a few students couldn't remember some information, they were able to review it and improve within their teams. With time, rapport between students improved, and I want that to continue. Hopefully, 100% of students will feel completely comfortable, and 0% will feel nervous when taking part in class; that is one of my next objectives."

Reflections about EAR

"This experience helped me to reflect, analyse and learn more – not only about my classroom situation, but also about my students – and it enabled me to make informed decisions about their welfare and performance.

Having developed research skills in my own classroom with my own students, and having made my own decisions based on their needs, I was able to reflect on my teaching and be more aware of what was really happening in my classroom. Now, I feel that I can help my students learn in a better way based on what they tell me, and make better decisions to expand their learning in different areas. Moreover, my students feel that they are being taken into consideration; and as a consequence, they are more involved.

I will continue doing EAR in my future lessons and with other groups as well. I cannot picture myself not doing so; it has brought so much knowledge to my teaching life that I cannot help but continue to learn and research! And I never imagined that I could do research in such a short time; my ideas of what research entails were so different to what they are now, having completed this programme.

Often research is done by individuals who have no experience in that particular context and have not lived it first-hand. But now, we as teachers, can be both teachers and researchers in our own teaching environments. So, this is just the beginning of a new journey since professional development never ends, and there is always something we can improve. I know that with my newly acquired skills and tools, I will continue to implement actions in my classroom that will have a positive impact on my students and hopefully, on my school and society as well."

Reflection questions

1. To find out more about why students weren't fully participating, Elizabeth created a questionnaire to find out how they felt about participating and why they didn't always take part. She also kept a reflection journal. Which of these do you think gave Elizabeth the most useful information? Which of these do you think would be most useful to you if you were to investigate student behaviour in your classroom? Why?
2. Elizabeth implemented two strategies to encourage greater student participation with her learners – Numbered Heads Together and assigning roles. What strategies have you tried to get your students to take a more active part in activities? Were they successful? Do you think the two strategies Elizabeth tried could prove useful with your learners? Why?

Appendix 1

ENCUESTA DE INGLÉS
(English survey)

TEMA: Participación
(Subject: Participation)

No necesitas escribir tu nombre. (You don't have to write your name)
Contesta las siguientes preguntas. (Answer the following questions)

1. ¿Te gusta trabajar en equipos ahora con las nuevas actividades desarrolladas por la maestra? (Do you like working in teams now with the new activities developed by the teacher?)
   A) Si (Yes) B) No (No) C) A veces (Sometimes)

2. ¿Piensas que todos tus compañeros participan cuando trabajan en equipo ahora más que antes? (Do you think all your classmates participate when working in teams now than before?)
   A) Siempre (Always) B) Usualmente (Usually) C) A veces (Sometimes) D) Rara vez (Hardly ever) E) Nunca (Never)

3. Desempeñas los roles que te tocaron de forma: (You carry out the roles you are given:)
   A) Excelente (Excellently) B) Bien (Well) C) Más o menos (more or less) D) Mal (Badly).

4. ¿Cómo te sentiste cuándo tienes un rol en tu grupo? (How do you feel when you had a role in your group?)
   A) Emocionado (Excited) B) Bien (Good) C) Nervioso (nervous) D) Inseguro (insecure).

5. ¿Qué roles te han tocado en clases? (Which roles have you taken in the classes?)

   _____

   _____

   _____

6. ¿Cuál role te gusta más y cuál te gusta menos? (Which role do you like the most and which one the least?)

   _____

7. ¿Cómo te sientes ahora cuando participas en clase? (How do you feel now when you participate in class)
   A) Emocionado (Excited) B) Bien (Good) C) Nervioso (nervous) D) Inseguro (insecure).

8. ¿Sientes que participas más en clase ahora? (Do you think that you participate more in class now?
   A) Sí (Yes) B) No (No)