

Engaging students in EFL literature lessons with language competence development activities

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ABSTRACT

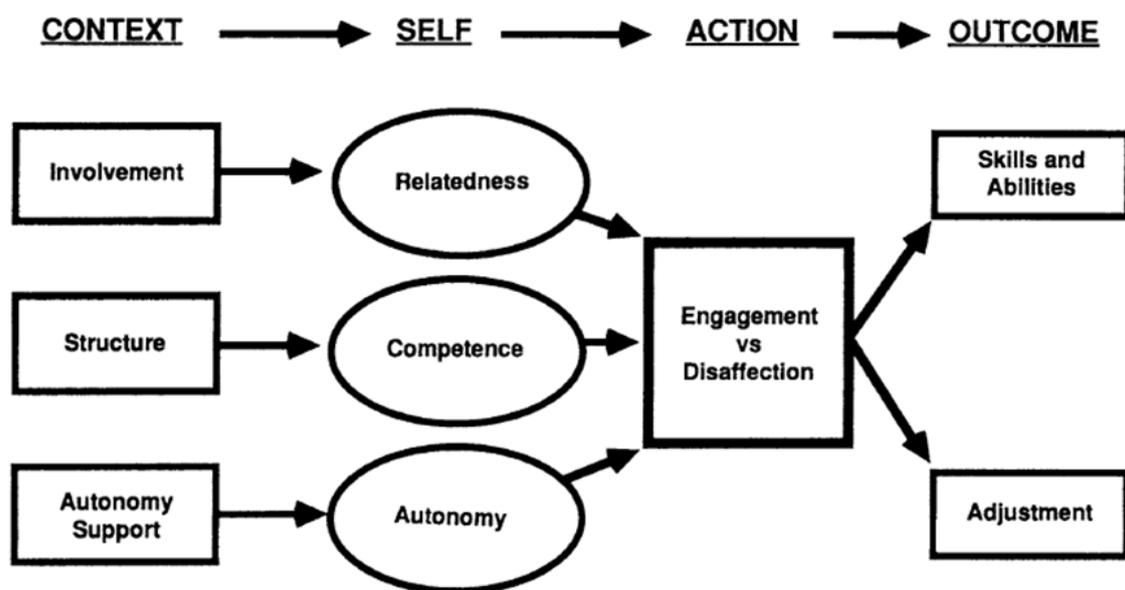
The teacher's role as a lecturer while the students' taking notes during the lesson, especially in a foreign language, is a commonly accepted norm. However, we argue that literature in a foreign language can be taught with activities that help students develop their language competence. In this presentation, we describe a lesson in which numerous activities were organized so that the students could practice to improve their language competence while studying English Literature in the English language. To put the jumbles statements in the right order, to decide whether particular statements were true or false, to answer open questions, my students carefully read the literary work again and again. Stimulated by the discussion points that were either paradoxical or mind-tricking, almost all of my students in the literature class enthusiastically expressed themselves, listened to their peers' viewpoints, and reflected on their response to the literary work of concern. Qualitative and quantitative data analysis show that reading comprehension exercises, discussions and writing practices have positive effects on both the students' studying results and the students' engagement in the learning process. The research results suggest that with language competence development exercises and activities, teachers of literature in a foreign language can effectively engage their students in the learning process for better learning results.

Key words: literature lesson, engagement, language competence, EFL

What would motivate students in general? Educationers have for long agreed that motivated learners are “enthusiastic, interested, involved, and curious, they try hard and persist”; they are also the ones who would “learn more, and feel better about themselves” (Ames & ames, 1984, 1985)

Engagement, one of the signs of student’s motivation is defined as “sustained behavioral involvement” in the learning activities accompanied by positive emotional tone”. Engaged learners would “...exert intensive effort and concentration in the implementation of the learning task”, and “show positive emotion during on going action, including enthusiasm, optimism, ...and interest” (Connell and Wellborn (1991)

What would motivate EFL learners to learn literature in a foreign language in particular? Factors that improve learners’ motivation and engagement are also the focus of a lot of research, and a teacher’s behavior as been agreed on as one of the key factors influencing learner’s engagement. Brophy (1986) listed “...guidance, modeling, enthusiasm, provision of choice, reinforcement, sincere praise, reinforcement...”. Similarly, Keller (1983) stressed on “attention focusing, relevance, confidence building, satisfaction” as the strategies that would have positive effects on students’ motivation and engagement. J.P. Connell and J.G. Wellborn (1991) proposed a model of elements that lead to engagement versus disaffection in children as follow:



In the perspective of Connell and Wellborn, *involvement* is the first factor that would motivate children. This is “the quality of the interpersonal relationship” between children and their teacher and peers. And teachers who are involved with their learners would “ take time for”, and “dedicate resources to their students”. *Structure*, according to these researchers, is

“the amount of information in the context about how to effectively achieve the desired outcome”; and teachers can create structure in the learning context by “clearly communicating their expectations”, and by “adjusting teaching strategies to the level” of the children. Finally, *autonomy* is a need of the children that can be met by the teacher’s autonomy support: providing them with “freedom” in determining their own behavior.

The goal of my study was to see if the low motivation and poor engagement in literature lessons among EFL learners in an university in Vietnam could be improved, and if the language competence improvement activities could contribute to that improvement.

My hypothesis: this poor engagement of the students the result from three factors: (1) their poor language competence that causes difficulties appreciating the literary work, as well as in expressing themselves in oral and written modes; (2) their lack of competence caused by failing to see to how deep and extensive comprehension they are expected to reach for appreciating the literary work (3) the teacher’s coercive behavior together with the traditional teacher-centred approach that fails to nourish the students’ autonomy.

I assume that (1) if the students are provided with comprehension activities to aid their reading and understanding of the text surface, they will have better command of the work content, which, in its turn, will enable them to appreciate the artistic value of the work; (2) the students can see clearly how deeply they are supposed to understand certain words, sentences, and details, they would actively find opportunities to re-read the text surface, and focus more on those words, sentences, and details. (3) if the strategies adopted by the teacher helps enhance the students’ autonomy, they would experience more positive emotions about themselves, and they would find the learning activities enjoyable, and would be enthusiastic and happy and get engaged during the lessons. With better understanding of the work’s content, more competence, more autonomy, my students might show better concentration and intensity together with more enthusiasm, more happiness, and more interest during the lessons of literature in the English language.

I did three things. (1) I designed various reading comprehension activities to make the students read the work again in the class, to understand better the key incidents, key paragraphs, key sentences, and words that have more than one meaning. (2) And after that, I

would organize discussions rather than lecturing. The discussion would centers around the points that I have splitted up from the lecture content, and my students were encouraged to express their agreement of disagreement on those points; and simultaneously find those who share the same viewpoint/ interpretation with him/her. (3) I created a safe and friendly atmosphere by refraining from right/wrong judgments, and gave students options to make rather than requiring them to do things, especially during discussion activities.

The preparation of reading-comprehension activities, and splitting lecture points up into discussion points for group and class discussion was actually time and energy consuming. To help them understand ambiguous details, I prepared true-false statements, open-ended questions. To help them master the plot of the work, I prepared jumbled statements for them to put into the right order. To provide my students with options and autonomy support, I split my lecture into statements, then I paraphrase them, adapt them into mind-twisting discussion points. Sometimes, I made several paraphrases of the same discussion points, and told my students to choose the one that interest them the most to discuss.

Apart from these interventions are the activities that I always do with all my literature classes: reading and giving marks to the students' written reflection after their first reading of the literary work at home, before class discussion; and reading, giving remarks, and marking the essays that the students hand in to me as optional post discussion activities.

So the biggest difficulties that I faced during this action research is the time and the energy that I had to invest in the completion of pre-teaching preparations and post-teaching reading and marking activities.

To test the student's involvement in the discussion activities, I video-taped the lesson. To test their concentration on interpreting the literary work, I made my students write a reflection of the lesson they have just got. So I have two sources of data beside my own observation and involvement as a teacher.

Following are the results of the interventions I have done to my literature classes.

From my own observation as a teacher, the student's shyness and fear quickly faded off after several lessons. They became more and more confident talking about their initial response.

Many of them even openly talked about things they could not understand rather than keeping silence. All the students were enthusiastically involved in the reading comprehension activities. As some of them are pair work, some of them are group work, they happily grouped themselves and re-read the work to complete the requirements. Stimulated by the discussion points that were either paradoxical or mind-tricking, being assured that neither the teacher nor their classmates would criticize their argument unconstructively, almost all of the students in the literature class enthusiastically expressed themselves and listened to their peers.

The qualitative data taken from the written reflection that my students wrote about a particular lesson is as follow.

- i. 95% of the students wrote that they themselves found their initial interpretation shallow and changed it.
- ii. 80% attached their better, new interpretation with discussion with their friends and reading the story again under the teacher's guidance.
- iii. 20% acknowledged that they could not either understand the work, or appreciate it in their first reading at home.
- iv. 5 % (02 students) wrote that they did not change their interpretation, and gave sound justifications for their viewpoint.

The video tape of the lessons showed that only one student showed little involvement in the discussions, while many volunteers to stand up and talk before the whole class. Besides, all the students got intensively involved in the reading comprehension activities.

The pre- class preparation activities were completed by almost all of the students; and a remarkably large amount of essays were written as a post-class reflection activity, which was not compulsory. Many students even re-wrote their essays once or twice after I pointed out to them their weak points and limitations.

With the above finding, it is possible to come to the following concluding points:

- i. Language competence development activities help create a lot of interest, happiness, enthusiasm during the lesson time, getting positively involved in the

learning activities. This is testified by the high rate of students who participated in the reading comprehension and discussion activities

- ii. Language competence development activities helps boost the students' intensive efforts and concentration on the learning process, which is seen in their efforts with the pre and post class activities, as well as the impressively high rate of those who adopt a new interpretation of the work.
- iii. Language competence development activities being organized with, with an open attitude and with the provision of choice to the students have positive effects in enhancing the students' autonomy. This is testified by the percentage of students who were "brave" enough to acknowledge their failure in appreciating the literature work in their initial reading, and also by the students who were confident enough to stick to their own interpretation, and found arguments to justify for that.

With the confidence that they can interpret literary works themselves if they make efforts with the activities organized during the class time, my students appeared more involved, more concentrated, more enthusiastic, and happier. As a teacher, I enjoyed seeing the happiness and confidence in their eyes, which testify their engagement in the learning activities. As a researcher, I am glad to see my hypothesis being confirmed.

The success of this small action research suggests that language competence development activities can positively contribute to the teaching and learning process in EFL literature classes.

Literature appreciation would be "easier" for the EFL students with language competence development activities. Because they provide students with opportunities to better understand the text surface of the literary work of concern. These activities help bridging the gap between the students' poor language competence and the authentic literary work, which has been identified as one of the factors that led to low motivation among students toward the subject of literature in an EFL environment.

Learners' competence would be enhanced with language competence development activities. They contribute remarkably to the setting up of the learning context structure: the content of the reading comprehension exercises help the students to focus on the words, phrases, sentences, and details that are crucial in interpreting the literary work; the students did feel

optimistic while re-reading the work and answering the questions, as they perceived that this focus would lead them to a proper interpretation of the literary work.

Learner's sense of relatedness is improved with language competence development activities. The students can see the teacher's enthusiastic involvement with their learning process through the time and efforts made to design the activities and to compile the reading comprehension activities as well as the discussion points.

Language competence development activities can boost the students' autonomy when they are organized with a student-centered approach in which the teacher adopts an open attitude, with the classroom environment contains few threats to learners' face value, and with the students (rather than the lecturer) are empowered to be the decision makers of their own learning process.

The success of my research reinforces the model raised by Connell and Wellborn (1991) and simultaneously, it suggests new nuances to this model: targeted learners that this model can apply to, and the context factors that helps improve their engagement.

Firstly, this model apply to EFL university students, not just school pupils as proposed by Connell and Wellborn.

Secondly, language competence improvement activities carried out with a student centered approach are effective in boosting engagement in EFL literature lessons.

The implication for teaching literature in a foreign language to EFL students is the effects is clear: the necessity of language competence development activities for effective literature appreciation and for student's engagement in the learning activities. However, further research is still needed to figure out the suitable amount of exercise, and the most effective activities for learners of various language competence levels. In summary, the findings of this research sensitize to us new techniques to improve learners' engagement in EFL literature lessons.

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