Analysing the Effectiveness of Engagement-Promoting Techniques in the EFL Classroom

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Abstract. One of the priorities of language teachers is to ensure classes are interesting and engaging. Learners' different backgrounds and individual preferences, however, make each class unique. Choice of materials and topics work differently in different classes, and the same is true with teacher behaviour. Through a series of classroom observations, which were conducted through an observation instrument in different settings and with different teachers and students, this research attempted to investigate and list a number of teacher techniques and their effectiveness in promoting and maintaining learner engagement. These techniques were evaluated according to students' responses and perceived levels of engagement. The observation instrument was then evaluated. Analysis of findings resulted in a list of categorised techniques and behaviours that were deemed engaging or otherwise beneficial and desirable in class.

Keywords: classroom observation, learner engagement, teacher behaviour, teaching techniques, motivation

1. Rationale

1.1. Background

As teachers, we all hope to keep our lessons interesting and our learners engaged. We also know that no two classes are alike. This is mostly due to learners' individual backgrounds, which teachers commonly keep in mind when they plan and deliver their lessons. For instance, in a class with a high number of South American learners, teachers are more likely to engage students with more communicative/group activities than they would in a class where learners are predominantly South-Eastern Asians. However, the opposite may also be true – for example, if the teacher is aiming at using/developing other abilities and learning strategies and/or preferences other than the ones preferred by learners.

In my setting, for instance, even though most teachers would claim they consistently consider learners' backgrounds when choosing materials and activities and making decisions when planning an engaging lesson, this behaviour is often limited. A great many teachers are in situations where careful

consideration of students' backgrounds is not an option, usually due to time constraints but often also due to lack of awareness.

1.2. Summary of literature

Knowledge of what works best to engage a particular group of learners can enable teachers to tailor lessons that focus on their learners' most prominent characteristics while placing less focus on aspects that are not strongly preferred among the class. However, this could also deny the positive impact that challenges have on learner motivation and avoid the development of learner confidence. According to Bandura (1977), positive experiences enhance learner beliefs in their own ability, and these beliefs are necessary for dealing with challenging situations. Corno (1983) highlights this by saying that the effort needed in challenging tasks derives primarily from a learner's belief in their own ability, and the effect of such beliefs override learner actual ability. It is important to note that tasks that aim to enhance learner beliefs in their own ability should be kept achievable (Dornyei, 1994).

One of the most popular models of categorising learners' characteristics is the Theory of Multiple Intelligences [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theory_of_multiple_intelligences], proposed by Howard Gardner. There have been attempts that take theories and put them to practical use (such as the Project Zero [pz.gse.harvard.edu/mi_schools.php], created by Gardner to research ways to develop multiple intelligences schools based on his theory). Gardner himself, however, warns that 'intelligences' are not the same as 'styles', and that the "MI theory is in no way an educational prescription", and that has been developed without specific educational goals (Gardner, 1995). As an example, the author describes the fact that the *interpersonal* intelligence "has to do with understanding other people", but it is often used as a rationale for learning programmes for introverted students – which, according to Gardner, is not at all derived from his theory. Gardner also warns that, while most topics can be approached in a variety of ways, it is flawed to assume all topics can be taught using all intelligences.

Nevertheless, his studies are helpful for teachers in establishing ways to make their repertoire of techniques broader, and looking for activities that will add variety to the classroom, especially when the teacher is flexible to select key topics and approach them "in a variety of ways", which allows the teacher to reach more learners, and learners to understand concepts in more than one way (Gardner, 1995).

It should also be noted that teachers must be flexible even when being constrained to a narrow syllabus. According to Ehrman et al (2003b), these teachers should be able to systematically cater for the individual differences of their learners. The authors explain that teachers should understand that their desire to help, by choosing what they believe to be the most efficient way, "can become interference for a learner whose approach to learning differs from the teacher's preference." Different kinds of teacher behaviour also affect the class; for instance, according to Clunies-Ross et al (2008), proactive behaviours such as

active listening result in better outcomes than lecturing or disapproving students.

1.3. Reflective teaching and shaping the observation instrument

1.3.1. From a personal perspective: in my current teaching situation, it is especially important that the teacher possesses an ability to be spontaneous and improvise; being able to make informed decisions throughout the lesson plays an important role in the choice and implementation of appropriate stimuli. One way for teachers to learn these skills is through discussion with and observation of their peers, but one major problem is that opportunities for these to occur are rare in my current teaching scenario. Moreover, teachers often do not engage in these activities due to the lack of clear guidance or instructions on how to proceed.

To address these two particularities of my environment (i.e. the lack of formal guidance for peer-based development, and the importance of informed decision-making to generate stimuli in class) I chose to design a method that will allow teachers to conduct observations and collect data on a variety of teacher-generated stimuli in the language classroom. It also should allow the observer to analyse the different stimuli and to enable both teacher and observer to reflect on these stimuli and analyses, and ideally, this new information will help teachers to raise their awareness about different ways to stimulate learning, as well as expand their repertoire of techniques that work in their particular settings.

1.3.2. From the literature perspective: the various points described in the literature review above defend the idea that employing a variety of achievable activities and techniques in classroom is beneficial for learners. Variety, however, implies an escape from routine, from tradition, which are sometimes difficult to change. Dewey (1933, in Farrell, 2007), states that teachers who cannot reflect on their work are unable to make informed decisions. According to Ferrell, one type of reflection is the one that focuses on classroom actions. Cruickshank and Applegate (1981, in Ferrell, 2007) defined this as a process that "help[s] teachers to think about what happened, why it happened, and *what else could have been done* to reach their goals" (my italics).

Through considering this suggestion of 'what else could have been done', the idea of a peer observation scheme that analyses the activity of the teacher in the classroom comes to mind. One major benefit of peer observation is that not only does it enable less experienced teachers to learn from their more experienced colleagues, but also the experienced teachers can reflect on their own teaching (as noted by Richards and Farrell, 2005). The peer observation scheme, therefore, aims to promote reflective teaching through the observance of teaching techniques in practice, which comprise varied activities and behaviours such as classroom management, correction techniques, choice of materials and exercises/activities, among others.

The observation will be done through a classroom observation instrument. This instrument aims to provide teachers with an opportunity to assess their use of

techniques in classroom, by allowing observers (through the instrument) and teachers (through feedback and discussion with observers) to reflect on their practice and raise their awareness about variety of techniques, i.e. different ways to achieve the same goals, and how they can use this knowledge in their practice for the benefit of their learners.

The present instrument has a scaffolding approach. It will chart the different forms of teacher-generated stimuli observed, together with the learner response to each stimulus, followed by a description and analysis of the perceived strengths and weaknesses of each stimulus. This data will allow the observer to suggest variations or alternative ways to counter the limitation as well as to promote variety within the classroom while maintaining the same goals. It is important to note that, in this research, the term 'stimulus' is used in the sense of both what the teacher does to engage students interest and which resources and aids are employed.

Through the use of this observation instrument to collect data on teaching techniques employed in the language classroom, this research aims to:

   a. build a list of findings drawn from these teaching techniques;
   b. analyse these findings with focus on learner engagement levels, reaction and response to the stimuli;
   c. use this analysis to evaluate the instrument.

2. The observation instrument

The version of the instrument used in this research contains two sections, A and B. A was built to collect key information about the class, namely the number of students and their linguistic background (in this case, L1), age range, the type of class, and class level, as well as summary information about the lesson (i.e. teaching aims, topic).

Section B – the lesson – is comprised of a table. For each **lesson stage**, the observer made notes of the **resources used for language input, teacher stimulus** and **learners' response(s) to the stimulus,** a scale with levels of **perceived learner engagement, strengths** and **limitations of** (i.e. shortcomings of the activity/exercise or the choice of materials/resources), and **suggested alternatives**, to counter the limitations observed. The result is a table with six columns, one for each of the categories here described.

Observation instrument: Engagement-promoting techniques

Venue	Date/time	Teacher

A. The class

Students' backgrounds (L1):	Type of class:
• _____ • _____ • _____ • _____ • _____ • _____ • _____ Total: _____ students Age range: _____ to _____ Level: _____	• ❑ General English • ❑ Business English • ❑ Academic English • ❑ ESP • ❑ Exam (IELTS/TOEIC/CAE/etc) • ❑ Other – specify: _____ Topic: _____ __ Teaching aims:

B. The lesson (instructions on how to fill in this section)

Lesson stage (write lesson stage here, e.g. 'Presentation'/'Lead-in')	Activity/ Exercise (briefly describe the activity/activities in this stage, e.g. 'teacher eliciting items of the presentation and writing them on the board')

Resources used for language input (check those that apply, add to the list where necessary)	Teacher stimulus (e.g. teacher activity or techniques)	Learner response (e.g. learners' activity or behaviour)	Learner Engagement (mark the level that applies)	Strengths of stimulus (how the stimulus was beneficial)	Limitations of stimulus (where the stimulus fell short)	Suggested Alternatives (to counter the limitation and account for variety)
Non-linguistic: Flashcards Worksheets Projector/display Video CD player Computer Internet Realia Pictures/posters Audio Board ☑ Other(s): A hand-drawn face ☑ **Linguistic:** Audio Video Written text ☑ Body language ☑ Oral language ☑ Other(s):	Teacher drew the face of the prime minister to use in the next step	Learners laughed and most immediately recognised the face	High ☑ Medium Low	Engaging, visual (in contrast with other things on the WB which were written)	Some learners were not familiar with it (possibly due to differences in their culture)	-Print a picture beforehand -Ask a learner to draw, or for a volunteer to draw
	Teacher elicited facts about the prime minister through questions	Some students gave answers to the questions and used the target language	High Medium ☑ Low	-Colour coded words, highlighting the parts of speech -Asking 'Are you sure?' made students think beyond 'yes' or 'no'	-Teacher-centred -Only oral/written language, without variety -whole class, not all students could engage, some parallel conversation	-do it in smaller groups instead of whole class -make it more student-centred
	…		High Medium Low	…	…	…

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B. The lesson

Lesson stage	Activity/ Exercise

Resources used for language input	Teacher stimulus	Learner response	Learner Engagement	Strengths of stimulus	Limitations of stimulus	Suggested Alternatives
Non-linguistic: Flashcards Worksheets Projector/display Video CD player Computer Internet Realia Pictures/posters Audio Board Other(s):			High Medium Low			
			High Medium Low			
Linguistic: Audio Video Written text Body language Oral language Other(s):			High Medium Low			

3. Further refinement of the instrument layout

Strengths	■ Weaknesses ▶ Proposed remedies
'Learner response' is an efficient and meaningful way to collect information about the ways learners respond to each stimulus. This is more accurate and detailed than simply a gauge with learners' engagement levels The changes in terminology ('technique' becoming 'stimulus' and 'enthusiasm' becoming 'engagement') also provoked a shift in focus, from actual techniques to different ways teachers behave in class. Likewise, 'engagement' represents better what the instrument is trying to achieve (analyzing different stimuli and their effects in the language classroom, beyond making learners enthused) The instruction sheet is an important addition to this instrument, mostly due to its open-ended nature	■ 'Textbook' and 'Dictionary' are missing in the 'Resources' column, in spite of being items commonly found in the language classroom ▶ Add these terms to the column, under 'linguistic (input)' ■ The items in 'Resources used for language input', while important to be made note of, do not enable the user to make a direct, explicit connection between resources and teacher stimulus (there are several stimuli in one lesson stage, but the 'resources…' field collects data about an entire lesson stage instead of per stimulus). Establishing what resources were used in what moment in the lesson is left up to the user, and otherwise resources will be ticked per lesson stage instead of teacher stimulus ▶ Offer a list of resources for user guidance only, and users of the instrument are still required to write down what resources were used and in what moment in the lesson, and who used them (i.e. teacher or student(s)). This should be explained in the instructions sheet ■ Learner engagement places little emphasis on changes in levels of engagement, perceived or not ▶ A system with arrows is to be included in the 'learner engagement' column, where an 'up' arrow would indicate a rise in learner engagement, and a 'down' arrow would be used to mark reduced levels of learner engagement compared with the previous stimulus ■ Filling in the 'suggested alternatives' column often involves thinking outside the lesson, and the user has to come up with suggestions while the lesson is taking place. This creates a compromise between the attention the user is paying to their thoughts and the attention to the actual lesson ▶ This is not a limitation of the instrument per se; the suggested alternatives should be discussed as soon as possible after the lesson is finished, and the respective column should preferably be filled out then, unless said discussion is not possible, then the suggestions can be included during the lesson or after the lesson is finished

4. Analysis of Findings and Evaluation of the Effectiveness of Instrument

Findings

The instruments collected data in three main, interrelated categories: teacher **technique** (also referred to as *stimulus*), student **response**, and an **analysis** of strengths and weaknesses of each stimulus. The data gathered from the instrument helped me to extract findings, which were then analysed. This analysis allowed me to draw some conclusions about the instrument's success in achieving the aims of the research.

> **Finding 1 – Physicality:** *Keeping learners physically engaged encourages more extensive use of language.*

Clear techniques that keep learners physically engaged, such as adapting an existing game for language-learning purposes, or having them sing along, seemed to promote positively-perceived behaviours, such as body language and extensive use of language. This leads me to believe that more physical activities can promote student engagement as well as minimise opportunities for off-topic talk and other kinds of behaviour unrelated to the lesson, by increasing focus, concentration and involvement.

> **Finding 2 – Generating and sustaining flow:** *Introducing new elements or adapting elements already present in the lesson, without breaking the pace, prevents learners from losing or shifting their focus.*

Techniques that allow teachers to transition between different stages in the lesson in a seamless manner, without interrupting the lesson flow (for instance, not stopping everything to erase the board or dispense handouts) seem to have a significant effect on keeping learners' attention levels high.

> **Finding 3 – Use of surprise elements**: *Using the element of surprise holds the learners' focus on the topic, especially in lengthy lessons.*

By timing the delivery of information to learners and gradually revealing previously-concealed information, the teacher is able to maintain the element of surprise, thus keeping learners focused and engaged; while it is not clear whether these particular uses of the surprise element were employed consciously, it had a seemingly positive effect and it appeared to help learners stay focused and interested.

> **Finding 4 – Capitalising on awareness-raising**: *Using new language in a controlled manner in a main activity, without drawing attention to it, is a potentially powerful way to motivate learners when addressing the same point in the future.*

In this technique, the teacher introduces new content (such as new grammar, or a pronunciation-related point) in tandem with a primary, main activity during the lesson, in an attempt to make students notice and raise their awareness of it. The teacher does not make any explicit reference to this new language at this

time. The premise is that, when this content is addressed in a future lesson, learners will recognise the new and benefit from the feeling of being familiar with it, which is a potentially strong means of raising their curiosity and eagerness to learn.

Finding 5 –Pronunciation work: *Embedding a pronunciation-related exercise into another exercise adds variety to the lesson and potentially sustains the attention of learners.*

There are a number of ways in which pronunciation practice can be approached (for example, through song lyrics, the use of homophones in jokes or puns, making poems, or dictations). Pronunciation work employs different types of drilling and activities, including physical activities (which, as seen in Finding 1 above, can be highly motivating); with a rich repertoire, the possibilities are many for a teacher to turn a more controlled exercise into something more engaging.

Finding 6 – Recycling language: *Recycling of language through personalisation activities increases confidence and therefore engagement.*

Aided by the teacher, learners use their experience and individual interests to create opportunities for authentic and meaningful interactions (for instance, interviewing the observer or a member of the school's staff, or for getting to know their peers better), which can shift their focus from the limited language being practised to the use of a wider linguistic range. This has a positive impact on their use of language, the communicative aspects of the lesson, and especially on their engagement levels. However, some students were seen struggling with this freer use of language, which could have been because of language limitation, or simply lack of interest in the activity.

Finding 7 – Drawing on the board: *Drawing on the board has a strong visual impact, and it is a relevant, meaningful and engaging form of teacher-generated stimulus.*

Drawing can be used in a variety of ways – such eliciting vocabulary as well as short narratives from learners. Sketching has seemingly more benefits than choosing a picture and sticking it on the board: it motivates students to watch what is happening, especially since they do not know what is being drawn. Another benefit is that it is dynamic and responsive – the lesson flow can determine the teacher's next drawing. Moreover, even a bad drawing is potentially engaging, i.e. students laugh at the teacher's lack of skill.

Finding 8 – Colour-coding boardwork: *Colour-coding information on the board results in a neat-looking board, with information easier to process if compared with a single-colour board.*

While it is more challenging to determine the actual impact of the technique on learners through observation (their reactions are subtler and more passive than in other cases), it is clear to the observer that colour-coded information on the whiteboard is a more effective way to display information, especially for students with visual learning preferences. Information is easy to retrieve,

including for the teacher, and copying information is also made easier (students can look from their notes and refocus on the board faster).

Instrument

One major shortcoming of working with teacher techniques and their effect on learner motivation is that analysing techniques and assessing learners' level of engagement is sometimes a very challenging undertaking, especially for novice teachers who are unable to evaluate the technique effectively from their own standpoints.

There were instances in which the instrument clearly allowed the observer to chart teacher techniques that were clearly observable, with a clear purpose, and whose benefits and limitations were evident based on the observed response from learners to the stimulus and their levels of engagement. In other cases, the technique's effects on learners were not evident, and establishing benefits, strengths or limitations was done in a more subjective way, almost solely from the observer's point of view. In these instances, the use of the instrument as a base for post-lesson reflection should be considered.

To counter these limitations, one suggestion is that the instrument should employ clearer, more specific fields to record (and perhaps analyse) students' responses: eye contact, facial expressions, checking a dictionary or a mobile phone, interactions with the teacher and their peers (and their tone when they speak: are they chatting, complaining, or asking for clarification… ?), body language, etc. These insights would be useful not only in aiding the observer with establishing the effect of a stimulus, but also if used during a post-lesson discussion with the teacher observed.

It is important to note, however, that positive and negative reactions and learner engagement levels that were observed (as well as the teacher's skill in delivering and managing the stimulus) are highly connected to this particular situation. In other words, while the quality of this qualitative data is satisfactory in this context, the difficulty in generalising from this data makes the usefulness of findings like the one described here, highly limited to the setting in which the observation takes place.

Furthermore, it is important to note that the instrument does not, in itself, offer a direct way to make comparisons between different techniques according to their effectiveness; instead, it enables the user to compile a list of observed techniques with comments regarding their strong and weak points in that particular setting, and allows users to consider alternatives for the use of stimuli in their particular setting. In other words, one benefit of the use of this instrument is that users build a collection of ideas that will enhance their own repertoire. These ideas come from the teachers' experience, their own reading, or other observations.

Another characteristic of this qualitative type of research is that there are a number of variables that could change the findings analysed here: teacher skill, or learner background/age/level. For example, pronunciation drilling well

conducted is likely to bring hilarity and memorability to learning, whereas the same undertaken arhytmically and half-heartedly can actually reduce motivation. Physical activities are likely to be used several times in a Young Learners' class but might be unproductive in a group of learners taking the IELTS exam the next day. Likewise, making meaningful observations and drawing conclusions from them depend on the skills of the observer.

5. Conclusion

This analysis of findings serves to show that the evaluated instrument worked in these particular settings, and therefore I believe this instrument is potentially useful in different situations.

This research can be useful in developing ways to research or assess other, unmentioned forms of stimuli/resources, such as mobile-learning, blended-learning classrooms, bring-your-own-device (BYOD-)- learning, and the impact of these forms of learning on a particular group of learners.

The inductive-learning nature of the instrument (i.e. the users are guided to draw new information from their own findings) enables teachers to build knowledge from their own experience. This is especially useful and helpful in my current setting, where teachers often lack the skills or time to find out where to look for to discover new, meaningful information on their own.

I especially believe the level of reflection found through the use of this instrument not only makes one's repertoire richer, but also serves as a springboard for the formation of new beliefs. These new beliefs, in turn, work as a base for informed decision-making. In addition, it is more meaningful to experience a teaching technique than to read or hear about it.

Finally, in my particular setting, this research proved to be useful in addressing

  a. a problem (the lack of formal training by a great many teachers);
  b. a necessity (the need for informed decision-making in conducting a lesson); while considering
  c. one major limitation (the limited time/skills/resources teachers have available to do research).

In summary, I consider direct research of this kind to be an invaluable way for individuals to take responsibility for their development as language teachers.

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