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Getting Involved: Enhancing Student Engagement

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Abstract

Engagement is a significant factor in successful language learning. An engaged learner is attentive, positive, and willing to interact with others (Svalberg, 2012). Increasing a learner's engagement can lead to the development of an L2 learner (Hiver, Mercer, & Al-Hoorie, 2021). When students are actively involved in their learning, their ability to understand, learn, and remember increases. Simply put, engagement is the verb that connects the curriculum to actual learning (Skinner & Pitzer, 2012). When students are not engaged, it can hinder learning while lowering student and instructor motivation. What are the different ways to enhance engagement? What can instructors do to reach different types of learners? Based on a workshop at OkiJALT 21st Century Langauge Teaching Conference, this paper will explain ideas based on validated practices and activities that improve student engagement. While this paper is on enhancing engagement in university students, the practices and activities can be applied to students at any level.

Introduction

Benjamin Franklin is often credited with the quotation, "Tell me, and I forget. Teach me, and I remember. Involve me, and I learn." Learning a language requires much more than memorizing vocabulary, studying grammar, and reading things in a book. While there is certainly a place for those methods of studying to help establish the foundations of language, there needs to be involvement or interaction to improve fluency in a language. Simply put, there needs to be engagement.

Instructors of English language classes at the university level in Japan frequently encounter classrooms where students lack the experience of being involved in their learning.. This is often a result of the form-based approach to language instruction that can frequently be found in Japanese schools (Guest, 2000; Harumi, 2011; Ikegashira, Matsumoto, & Morita, 2009; Ozasa, 2001; Sato, 2004; Steele & Zhang, 2016). With this in mind, it can be challenging for instructors to find ways to engage their students in the classroom.

Learner engagement has been attracting considerable research over the past couple of decades, with studies focusing on various aspects of engagement (Ainley, Pratt, & Hannen, 2006; Ellis, 2010; Han & Hyland, 2015; Skinner & Pitzer, 2012; Svalberg, 2009). While engagement has

been described in numerous ways, a generally accepted definition is when learners show heightened involvement in language learning (Dörnyei & Kormos, 2002). For a more specific definition of engagement, this paper will refer to Agneta Svalberg's engagement with language (EWL), in which learners are cognitively, affectively, and socially taking part in their learning (Svalberg, 2012). The criteria for what equals EWL can be found in Table 1. An engaged learner is a positive, active, and autonomous learner, all of which are essential for language learning.

Table 1

Criteria for identifying engagement with language (EWL)

Cognitive	Affective	Social
<i>How alert is the learner?</i> (Does the learner (L) seem energetic or lethargic? Does L seem to notice language/interaction features?)	<i>How willing is the learner to engage with language?</i> (Is L withdrawn or eager to participate?)	<i>How interactive?</i> (Does L interact, verbally or otherwise, with others to learn?)
<i>How focused?</i> (Is L's attention on the language (as object or medium) or not? Does L's mind seem to wander?)	<i>How purposeful?</i> (Does L seem bored or not focused on the task, or seem to be focused?)	<i>How supportive of others?</i> (e.g. by verbal or other behaviours? Does L engage in negotiation and scaffolding?)
<i>How reflective? How critical/analytical?</i> (Is L's reasoning inductive or memory/imitation based? Does L notice and reflect, or simply react? With regard to the target language, does L compare, ask questions, infer/draw conclusions?)	<i>How autonomous?</i> (Is L's behaviour dependent or independent?)	<i>Leader or follower?</i> (Are L's interactions reactive or initiating?)

Note. Reprinted from Language awareness in language learning and teaching: A research agenda (p. 378) by Svalberg, 2012, Cambridge University Press. Copyright 2012 by Agneta M.L. Svalberg.

This paper will present different concepts and activities that can enhance student engagement in the classroom.

Group Dynamics

Psychologist Kurt Lewin coined the term “group dynamics” in the 1940s while establishing the Research Center for Group Dynamics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) to understand how people and groups react to various positive and negative situations around them (Lewin, 1945). In a study of Hungarian high school students studying English, Clément, Dörnyei, and Noels (1994) found that “a good classroom atmosphere promotes student involvement and activity while moderating anxiety and promoting self-confidence” (p. 442).

While there have been a moderate amount of studies of group dynamics about L2 learning, the role of group dynamics in Japan (Hirata & Asai, 2022; Hirata & Asai, 2023; Matsumoto, 2008; Matsumoto, 2010; Murphey, 2001) can provide some insight into the benefits of positive group dynamics in the classroom. Establishing positive group dynamics can help promote student engagement, facilitate smooth classroom management, and enhance student performance (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003).

Meeting a New Class

Establishing positive group dynamics should start immediately as the first class begins. When a new semester commences, students likely have uncertainty about language competence, anxiety about using English, and nervousness about understanding and comprehension (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). Therefore, it's important to give students enough time to get to know each other and build relationships and connections to establish positive group dynamics.

The first activity that can be done is to give each student a Venn diagram with two circles. Give the students five minutes to list things about themselves in the left circle, such as their hometown, birthdate, and any other information they choose. They should only list words and not any sentences. When five minutes are up, put the students in pairs and have them exchange their Venn diagrams. The students copy their information from the left circle of their own Venn diagram and put it in the right circle of their partner's Venn diagram. Once this is completed, the students have five to ten minutes to ask each other what the words mean. For example, if student A has written “basketball,” then student B can ask, “Why did you write basketball?” or “What does this mean?” When the students find something they have in common, such as “We both play basketball,” they should write the word down in the middle, where the two circles overlap. It is useful for students to realize that they have things in common because “when the ties linking members are strong, the group is more enduring and its influence on members is more extensive” (Forsyth, 2014, p. 5). Additionally, when students find that they share common points, they are more likely to engage in conversation as they discuss these similarities.

A second thing that helps establish positive group dynamics is for instructors to enhance their “integration into the group because you can learn about students and about their language” (Dörnyei and Malderez, 1997, p. 78). This can be done through creative teacher introductions. Rather than telling students information about themselves, teachers can get students more engaged by making the teacher introduction a bit more interactive. One way to do this is through a teacher quiz. Make between five to ten questions about the information you want to share with your students, such as “Where are you from?”, “Where is your favorite place in Japan?” and “What is your favorite Japanese food?” In pairs, give the students time to guess your answers. This provides the chance to “humanize” you as an instructor by working together to guess your answers based on their impressions of you. It can also help students remember more about you by thinking about the answers to each question instead of just listening to the instructor explain the information in a one to two- minute introduction. This can help make the instructor a part of the group, put students at ease, and increase student engagement in the class.

Warm Up Activities

For every class, it is important to have a warm-up activity before beginning the contents of the lesson. According to Lassche (2005), “A warm-up stage is a process of initial orientation to the language learning lesson” (p. 83). Warm-up activities should be interesting enough for students to be engaged and activate language skills to be ready for the class (Velandia, 2008). Concerning group dynamics, effective warm-up activities can help students get to know each other and help build connections within the class (Senior, 1997).

The activity “Choose One, Drop One” engages students at the start of a class. On a slideshow, show pictures of four things with one common theme. For example, pictures of coffee, green tea, a Monster energy drink, and a Red Bull energy drink. The students choose which one they would drink and drop the one they definitely won’t drink while giving a reason for their selections. As with the Venn diagram activity above, this gives students a chance to learn new things about each other while also finding opinions that they have in common. Other possible topics that students enjoy are the choice of streaming services (Netflix, Disney +, YouTube, Hulu), fast food (McDonald’s, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Mos Burger, Burger King), the best way to eat strawberries (strawberry shortcake, strawberry ice cream, strawberry parfait, just strawberries), and cities in Japan (Tokyo, Osaka, Fukuoka, Sapporo) among others. In addition to talking amongst themselves, students also increase their engagement by asking the instructor questions such as “Does coffee mean just canned coffee or any kind of coffee?” and “Is this about which city we want to live in or the city we want to go to?”. This activity always gets students talking and is a good way to wake them up and be ready for any class.

Another warm-up activity that gets students engaged and ready for class is a “seed sentence” activity, where an instructor gives the beginning of a sentence, and the students must complete the sentence with their answer and reason. Below are some examples:

- 1) The best thing about autumn is...
- 2) When I'm starving, I want to eat...
- 3) When I'm exhausted, I...
- 4) On the weekend, I like to...
- 5) If I couldn't use my smartphone for one week, I...

Similar to the previously mentioned activities, having these warm-ups can help build a positive group dynamic within the classroom and increase student engagement as students learn about one another.

QR Codes For Class Polls

Nowadays, QR codes are ubiquitous: it is nearly impossible to go a week without seeing a QR code that a company, organization, or website wants you to scan. Moreover, we live in a digital generation, and picking up or touching one's phone is almost habitual, with one study claiming that the average American checks his or her phone an average of 144 times a day (Payton, 2023). Therefore, why not lean into this and let students use their phones in class? Using QR codes in lessons can add an element of surprise (Cruse & Brereton, 2017) while allowing students to use their phones in a manner relevant to the class.

QR codes can be used in a variety of ways to augment a lesson and should not be used as “tech for tech’s sake,” or they can have the opposite effect of demotivating and frustrating learners if they are overused or poorly incorporated into a lesson (Rikala & Kankaanranta, 2012).

Pre-Topic Questionnaire

When starting a topic, it can be useful to create a set of questions or statements for students to give their opinion on to not only get an idea of what students know and don't know but also for students to be able to see what other students in the class think. A digital questionnaire can be made on a platform such as Google Forms, and to compile and compare results easily, the questions should use a Likert scale or have choices, such as True or False, Yes or No, or multiple items to choose from. By doing this, when looking at the responses on the Google Form, you can see the distribution of

answers, typically on a pie or bar chart. For example, with a topic such as gender equality, a statement can be, “In Japan, I think that men and women are paid equally.” Once the questionnaire has been made, find a QR code generator on the Internet and copy and paste the link of your questionnaire. Finally, on either a slideshow or in the student’s materials, have the QR code to be scanned. To increase student engagement, give students a chance to see the distribution of answers on the Google Form and talk with a partner about how they answered and why they gave their answers. By sharing the results with the class, the students can learn from each other as their knowledge of a topic may differ.

Feedback and Voting

Another way that QR codes can be used is to assess the performance of their peers in debates, presentations, and essays. The setup is similar to the pre-topic questionnaire mentioned above, using Google Forms, a QR code generator, and creating questions or statements with a Likert scale or different choices. In a debate, for example, it can be something as simple as, “Which team won the debate?” Using a QR code, the voting is anonymous and adds to the suspense as the results are revealed on the Google Form pie chart. For a presentation and essay, a QR code questionnaire can be used for students to self-assess their writing while seeing what other classmates think. Statements that can be used are, “I think I made good eye contact during my presentation,” “How nervous were you before giving your presentation?”, “I think the thesis statement for my essay is clear,” and “Through peer reading, I could get new ideas for my essay.” In addition to engaging students in their learning through reflecting on their work, it also enables the instructor to think of future lessons by gaining insight into student thinking.

VARK

The acronym VARK (Visual, Aural, Read/Write, and Kinesthetic) was first proposed by Fleming and Mills (1992) as a model of the various ways people learn. Through our own learning and teaching experiences as instructors, the concept that everyone learns and remembers things differently is important to consider when enhancing student engagement. Therefore, when preparing a lesson, it is critical to design activities that can appeal to all learners.

Visually

For learners stimulated by what they see, it is important to include things like images, graphs, and diagrams in lessons (Keen, 2024). For example, when explaining the history of something, rather than just explaining it to a class, it could be better for a visual learner to see a diagram or a timeline to understand and remember what is being taught. Furthermore, while learning a second language,

learners need to know numerous vocabulary words (Nation, 2013). Learning vocabulary, besides being challenging to learn and remember, doesn't typically promote engagement. However, some activities can make vocabulary engaging while appealing to someone who learns through seeing things. Visual learners are good at remembering details from images or illustrations (Cloke, 2024), so it can be useful for them to teach or review vocabulary with a picture in addition to the definition of the word. For example, if the vocabulary word is "elderly," an instructor can put a picture of an elderly person up and have students guess the word. To further cement that image, it's useful, after the vocabulary word has been revealed, to give the students a discussion question that includes the vocabulary word, such as, "What are some things we can learn from elderly people?" For a visual learner, this can help establish an association between the picture of an elderly person and the definition of "elderly."

Another way to get a visual learner engaged is by using or having them design infographics or diagrams (Keen, 2024). Since these activities can get students interested in learning, they can help them remember information once they are engaged in the material. For instance, with a topic such as health and nutrition, have students research how much food is required to have 100 grams of protein. Instead of just having them take notes on the information, they can create an infographic that shows a vegetarian can eat four eggs (24 grams), a half cup of rolled oats (5 grams), and two tablespoons of peanut butter (7 grams), among other foods to get 100 grams of protein (Capritto & Castro-Sloboda, 2024). By creating something visually rather than textually, a visual learner is more likely to be engaged in learning about nutrition.

Aurally

While an auditory learner can benefit from giving oral presentations, listening to podcasts, and watching videos (Keen, 2024), it can either be difficult to find the time to do these things within the time limit of a class or, with activities like oral presentations, it can be difficult to do them every week to engage someone who learns aurally. One way to keep auditory learners engaged is to use the flipped classroom approach in a curriculum. Bishop and Verleger (2013) defined a flipped classroom as "an educational technique that consists of two parts: interactive group learning activities inside the classroom and direct computer-based-individual instruction outside the classroom" (p. 5).

In a flipped classroom, rather than the content being delivered in the classroom, a student receives the content at home, and instead of the traditional assignment of reading a text to understand the information, the student learns through computer-based material, either through articles or, more commonly, online videos. This can appeal to aural learners since they remember spoken information well (Cloke, 2024). In a flipped classroom, the material studied at home is followed up in the

classroom with group learning activities, which can include discussions based on the videos, a visual review of the vocabulary as mentioned earlier, or different types of collaborative or project-based learning. Replacing a traditional reading with a video can keep auditory learners engaged while also helping them remember the information before coming to class.

Reading/Writing

Students who learn best when information is presented in text format usually have good reading comprehension and written skills, such as taking effective notes and summarizing well (Cloke, 2024). With a flipped classroom mentioned above, one potential problem is assessing the work a student does at home. One way to do this is to include a summary of the video, which can play to the strengths of someone who learns through reading and writing.

Alternatively, for an instructor who prefers the more traditional approach and assigns text-based homework, like a reading article, different activities can be done in class to engage reading and writing-type learners. In addition to reading comprehension-type questions, an instructor can point to specific line numbers and ask students their opinions. For example, asking students, “What do you think is the most interesting statistic in lines 37-42, and why do you think so?” can keep students engaged as they can go back into the text and give their opinions about what they have read. Another activity that can be done to keep these types of learners engaged is scanning activities of the text. Scanning can be defined as looking for specific information in a text as quickly as possible (Vaezi, 2006). Because speed is important when scanning, students can view this almost as a type of game, making it engaging. Additionally, this skill can be useful for students, particularly in preparing for IELTS and TOEFL reading sections (Blanc, 2023).

Kinesthetically

For kinesthetic learners, it can be challenging to maintain focus when they need to sit still for a lengthy period (Cloke, 2024). Station work can get students moving around the class while completing different activities requiring different skill sets. For example, giving students five minutes at eight different stations would allow students to move eight different times within a class period with stations such as a listening station, reading comprehension station, research station, activity station, discussion station, vocabulary station, personal experience sharing station, and a 5-minute conversation station (Hirata & Peo, 2021). Within the five minutes, each station would have a specific, topic-related task to the type of station they were at, with a listening station, for example, having either a short video or listening passage followed by a few comprehension questions. At the activity station, the five minutes can be used differently each week with activities such as doing a role play, making a cartoon strip, designing a poster, or answering trivia questions. While the preparation for station work

can take time, the variety of activities designed can be adjusted to accommodate visual, auditory, reading/writing, and kinesthetic learners.

One other activity that can be done to help engage kinesthetic learners is discussion lines. In this activity, you can put students in two lines, line A and line B. Have them stand across from each other so that everyone has a partner when there is an even number of class members, while the instructor can be a partner to a student in odd-numbered classes. In this example of sixteen students in class, each person has a different question. While standing across from each other, the students have a short three-minute discussion while trying to answer both questions. When the time is up, the students in line A move over one person while the line B students stay where they are so that each student has a different partner for the next round. Since each student has talked about their question already, the discussion time can be shortened to two minutes. For the next rotation, this time, to get people in line B moving, have the students in line B move over two people so that they, once again, have a new discussion partner. To avoid discussing the same questions, the questions can be switched so each student has a new question. This pattern can be continued as often as desired. Line discussions can help kinesthetic learners by keeping the activities short while getting students to stand up and move around.

Conclusion

Without engagement, meaningful learning is unlikely (Hiver, Mercer, & Al-Hoorie, 2021). Learning a language is a long and demanding journey with ups and downs that can be discouraging, even to the most motivated learner. When students in Japan take university English classes, they bring with them years of experience in studying English through primary and secondary schools. Past studies, experiences, and stories have been recounted about how English is taught in Japan, many not positive. However, students begin their university English courses with experience in learning English. As Sang and Hiver (2021) stated about language learners, “if they are going to spend time on it at all, language learners ought to be engaged in L2 learning” (p. 17). The responsibility of enhancing student engagement falls on language instructors to, according to Svalberg’s (2012) engagement with language, get learners cognitively, affectively, and socially participate in their learning. The benefits of learner engagement can not only benefit language classes but “it contributes to other forms of engagement in diverse settings and can position learners for positive long-term benefits in life beyond the immediate instructional settings” (Hiver, Mercer, & Al-Hoorie, 2021, p. 283.). Enhancing student engagement can be beneficial to a student’s future development as well as language development.

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