

## Students' Participation in Classroom Activities---Challenges and Opportunities

\*<sup>1</sup>Dr. T Sunand Emmanuel

\*<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor in English, H&SS, Vasavi College of Engineering (A), Hyderabad, Telangana, India.

### Abstract

It has become so mandatory for students to speak well in classrooms and outside classrooms that communicating competently seems to be the only way to be successful in today's world. Faculty and students are informed that during campus recruitment time, the only thing that matters is good communication skills. Further, they are informed that it is communication skills that will play a defining role during selection process. So, students and faculty alike are involved in this process of demystifying the challenges involved in being competent in speaking. Participation in group discussions, debates, public speaking, team presentations has become mandatory, rule bound, unavoidable, and a matter of life and death for students. Faculty too are assessed based on the extent to which they are promoting speaking competencies among students. The true mark of a good faculty is not in his/her knowledge but how effectively students eventually are able to speak and participate well in class room activities. An attempt is made in this paper to study why students are finding it difficult to participate effectively in classroom activities, the reasons underlying their poor performance, and what steps can be taken to improve students' participation in classroom language activities. English language activities, if properly conducted, will enormously help students to improve students' communication skills, self-confidence, morale, and self-efficacy.

**Keywords:** Self-efficacy, motivation, communication competence, skills, effectiveness

### Introduction

The need to communicate well has become a ubiquitous need. The situation in today's English classrooms is so challenging that teachers have to do something, somehow to ensure that all students can speak English effectively, write effectively, read effectively, and listen effectively. Teachers are under a lot of pressure to ensure that communicative competencies of students are enhanced. There seems to be no compromise. In such an environment, how do teachers of English go about in helping students communicate effectively?

Effective communication in English singularly depends on effective participation. For example take a goldsmith or a swimmer. How does a goldsmith become a good goldsmith? And how does a swimmer become an expert swimmer? It is common knowledge that experts are those who immensely practice what they wish to excel in. They do not merely wish or dream foolishly. There is one thing they do: Practice extensively.

As far as ensuring students' communication competence is concerned, the only secret is to extensively practice every day. Sadly, we see students speaking in English in English language classes only. They are rarely seen practicing English outside the English classroom. And it is ironic that they wish to be competent communicators, and faculty too want them to be competent communicators. In the experience of this author, despite repeated reminders and requests to students to speak in English, they do not seem to understand the urgency of communicating in English.

This author can firmly state that students can communicate effectively subject to intensive and constant practice in English.

It can be confidently stated that when students practice everyday speaking in English, very soon, they will be competent communicators. So, what is the teacher's role in this regard?

According to the author, the following steps can be taken to ensure maximum participation of students in using English to an optimum extent:

#### 1. Encouraging the Students to Read a Newspaper

Newspaper is one of the best sources of information. Students must learn to read the newspaper every day. Many students wish to speak English fluently, but they do not want to read a newspaper. A newspaper has information pertaining to current events, sports events, business news, local news, international events. Is there any other way by which students can enhance their knowledge other than reading a newspaper? By reading a newspaper regularly, students develop immense confidence in themselves. Secondly, they will have lots of ideas to share during group discussions and debates. So, teachers must encourage students to read the newspaper regularly in the classroom and outside the classroom. Newspapers are useful tools in English language classrooms to improve the reading skills of students and also enhance students' knowledge of current affairs. In fact, at least 10-15 minutes should be dedicated to reading the newspaper. The activity will surely inspire and motivate the students slowly and steadily.

## 2. Watching Debates and Panel Discussions on Television

One of the best ways to present our views in a group is to be aware of the topic, and get the courage to speak. How does this courage arise? Students should have role models initially whom they can look up to be able to speak well. Students must be encouraged to watch the latest events on Television. In the leading English news TV channels, the best speakers, the best debaters participate. When students watch eminent personalities speak in English, and present their views using proper discourse markers, pauses, intonation, and vocabulary, very soon, they will imbibe some of the positive qualities of these speakers. And in no time, they too will start using the idioms, vocabulary, and sentence structures that these eminent panelists in TV programmes use. The author of this paper has learnt immensely observing quality debates and discussions in leading English news TV channels. With high motivation and dedication, we can see students inculcate the language habits and develop their own patterns in speaking. This is a strategy that will surely succeed if done on a regular basis. The teacher can, in fact, get a blue tooth speaker and play these debates using his/her mobile phone. By helping students get used to high quality debates in English, students will certainly succeed and speak well. It is because they have role models who speak well on the latest issues pertaining to local, national, and global issues. They observe how views are expressed by these intellectual speakers.

## 3. Conducting Debates in the Classroom

Debates are one of the richest platforms whereby students can efficaciously improve their communication skills. However, most students do shy away from speaking in front of the class. They are afraid of joining one or the other debating teams to argue with their oppositions. Students have told the author of this paper that they cannot speak because they do not have ideas. Because they do not have ideas, they do not know what to speak. Lack of knowledge creates a sense of insecurity. One of the things this author has done is to get information related to the debating topics and distributing to the students. When students were given sufficient time to go through the data given to them, they gained confidence to debate on that topic. The secret then is students need to be given the information to read. And students in one group read the data and share their ideas with their group mates before going onto the dais to participate in the debate. This is one of the best strategies to encourage our students to improve their speaking proficiency. The reason why most students do not venture to speak is because of low self-confidence. And low self-confidence is due to lack of reading exposure. So, one of things faculty should do is to give information in the form of hard copies. Here, the teachers have to invest a lot of time. They should not, of course, expect results overnight.

## 4. Conducting Group Discussions

Group discussions are another means of scientifically improving the skill sets of the students. The shyness exhibited by students in debates continues even in group discussions. In group discussions too, it is the knowledge of the students that matters. The problem is that students do not read. They do not have the passion to read extensively. This is the bane of the education system. Here too, faculty can generate an informal discussion in the classroom. They may propose a topic and elicit views of the students. Choice should be given to them to speak. There might be some students who may not want to even stand up and speak. Such students should be given more

time to speak. Only those who wish to speak on their own can be encouraged to speak. The faculty may ask the students what is inhibiting them from speaking and come up with some strategies. One strategy is that they can give students handouts to read at home. After reading the matter in the handouts, they could be asked to share their views in the classroom the next day. This strategy is certain to succeed. Even the most diffident students will be able to speak with a sense of confidence in themselves? Why? The reason is they were given sufficient time to prepare at home and come the next day to speak in the classroom. This author has seen many of his diffident students overcome shyness and participate well in group discussions.

## 5. Exposure to Reading Materials

One of things that prevent students from taking part effectively in public speaking or group discussions or debates is lack of reading proficiency. Students do not have any reading materials to carry home to read. All that they do is read what is given to them in the classroom. However, it must be understood that the duration of an English language class is just 50-60 minutes. What really matters is how much time they spend in reading in English outside the classroom. So, it is imperative to give students various reading materials every week. Photocopies must be made and distributed to the students. They should be asked to read and come to class the next day. This is a sure fire strategy that will motivate the students. Teachers must spend considerable amount of time. This requires a lot of dedication and commitment on the part of the faculty. It is not easy. The teachers themselves have to read extensively to be role models to students. However, it must be noted that teachers who take up this kind of reading activity themselves will develop a lot of interest, and soon, they themselves will become powerhouses of information.

## 6. Vocabulary Quizzes

Teaching vocabulary has lots of advantages. However, merely dictating words to students will not suffice. Vocabulary in context with multiple choices for students to choose will be one of the effective ways of developing vocabulary. For example, look at the following sentences:

- a) He was an amiable person and mingled with lots of people without shyness.
- b) He was an ambidextrous writer.
- c) Because of her affable nature, many people liked her.

By giving sentences in a context like the above and eliciting answers in the classroom is one of the best ways to promote vocabulary of the students. To start with, the teacher can prepare worksheets with vocabulary items, read out the sentences, and ask students what the meaning of the words could be. When students read vocabulary in context, a majority of them will easily guess the meaning of the words like amiable, ambidextrous, affable, ambivalent, altruistic, etc. This, initially, looks challenging. However, as is being argued from the beginning of this research paper, teachers themselves should be competent speakers, writers, and have extensive reading skills. Another variation of this activity is giving sentences with vocabulary. The teacher will directly ask the students to give the meanings of the words. For example,

- a) An affable is liked by all because he likes to mingle with others.
- b) My sister likes instrumental music sometimes and suddenly, one day, she hates it. She is ambivalent.

### **A Third Variation of Vocabulary Acquisition is True or False Activity. For Example:**

- a) An altruist sacrifices his interests for others.
- b) A philanthropic person donates money because he loves people.

Multiple variations of vocabulary quizzes in the form of synonyms and antonyms, one word substitutes, fill in the blanks, etc. have a humongous potential to improve students' vocabulary skills.

### **Conclusions**

What is essentially being argued in this paper is that students' communicative competencies have to be improved because corporate companies expect students to be voracious readers. And it is the teachers who have a great amount of responsibility to inculcate in students the desire to read, to participate actively in classroom activities. Teachers have an onerous task of encouraging students to develop students' communicative competencies. This is not an easy task.

Teachers have a solemn responsibility of encouraging students to improve their communication skills. For this to happen, teachers themselves have to be extensively well-read, keen, voracious for gaining vocabulary, keen on following events at the local, national, and global level. Nothing is impossible. Students we think are poor in English will also significantly improve their communication skills if they are encouraged and given sufficient opportunities to engage in reading and speaking activities. The burden, then, slightly on the teachers as they are the ones the students look up to. Teachers should not be despondent if students do not speak. Students' rate of gaining communicative competence depends a lot on a teacher's passion and commitment to teach. Teachers themselves have to read extensively, take photocopies, distribute them to students, and encourage students to read. This requires a lot of dynamism and passion on the part of the teachers. Teachers must invariably be extensively well-read, and be voracious readers themselves. Only then, a dynamic language environment can be created. Teachers who have molded the lives of students by encouraging them to extensively read and develop their communicative competencies will feel proud of themselves when they begin to see the fruits of their labour.

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