

# **Using Group Activities to Improve Class Participation for Non-native English Speakers in Higher Education**

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## **1. Introduction**

The best classroom setting is one where communication flows both ways between teachers and students. This classroom setting, according to Wade (1994) results in effective learning because it is characterised by peer to peer learning through the sharing of ideas. Yet, my experience is that even when students are required to participate, they shied away from communicating their ideas. They barely spoke possibly because of an apathy towards communicating in English for fear of grammatical errors since the class was made up of predominantly non-native English speakers. This limited immediate learning as students were unable to answer questions I asked in class. In the quest to make the class more engaging and improve students' learning experience, I designed an innovation to help students become more active in class by using group activities to overcome student passivity that characterised the previous classes modelled on the traditional lecturing style of teaching. In this paper, I describe and assess the impact of this innovation. I find that not only does group activity increase students' participation, it also makes the class lively and improves learning outcomes as well as communication in a second language

The innovation took place in the Bachelor level course, *"Introduction to Theory and Management"* in the 2017 Autumn Semester, for which I served as a teaching assistant. The purpose of the course was to equip students with an understanding of the processes and dynamics in organisations. The course had a total of 13 weekly sessions, however, the innovation was applied in only three of these sessions. The limitation to three sessions was

because except for these three sessions taught in English, all other sessions were taught in a native language which is Czech. The course had 32 registered students who were mainly in their first and second year of study. Except for this course, all the students have Czech as their language of instruction. The course is compulsory for students majoring in Social Policy but it is also open to students of other study fields. Since the commencement of the course in 2009, it has traditionally been presented as lectures by a professor responsible for the course and two assistants who are either Ph.D. students or new Ph.D., graduates. Assistants are selected based on experience in the similar course or relatedness of the Ph.D. thesis to course content.

## **2. Aims and Theoretical Underpinning of the Innovation**

The focus of the innovation was to improve class participation using group activities to better immediate learning experience of students. Throughout the paper, I use active learning and participation interchangeably. Participation includes volunteered and unsolicited responses as well as comments given, or questions asked by students in class (Burchfield & Sappington, 1999; Fassinger, 2000)

While the traditional mode of teaching has been characterised by a teacher with a predominant role as a knowledge “transmission” agent in a class of passive students there has been growing consensus that there is a better approach where the teacher plays the role of “transformative agent” who allows students to actively participate in class, through interaction and knowledge sharing. The involvement of students in class has been found to ensure they focus on meaning and understanding contrary to knowledge reproduction students associated with passive learning (Trigwell, Prosser, & Waterhouse, 1999; Exley & Dennick, 2004). Furthermore, since it has been proven students’ attention span deteriorates over time in a lecture-based class ( Nilson, 2014), group activity is also expected to improve the attentiveness of student.

However, even when encouraged or required to contribute to the class actively, students face challenges. For instance, Mustapha, Rahman & Yunus, (2010) have identified self-limitations as an obstacle to class participation. Students may stay passive in class for fear of peer intimidation or not showing intelligence in class (Karp & Yoels, 1976). Indeed, Wade (1994) alludes that students will only engage in class if they feel that what they have to say is important and interesting. Moreover, Majid, Yeow, Ying, and Shyong (2010) assert class size does influence student participation. Most students are more comfortable speaking in smaller groups with their peers and, therefore, may stay passive in larger classes where they find it more intimidating having to contribute in front of a larger crowd which could result in a larger amount of disapproval from peers. Furthermore, students who are not native English speakers are less likely to participate in classes with English as the language of instruction, hence, lowering the level of participation in the classroom (Kao & Gansneder, 1995; Tatar, 2005).

Thus, I have decided to introduced group activities to help students overcome the above challenges. Group activities are expected to serve as a preparatory ground for them to master English expressions with their mates before speaking up in class. According to Neer and Kircher (1989), this makes the students more comfortable participating in class since they become familiar with their peers. Also, they get used to talking which can positively affect their willingness to talk in front of the classroom since they only need to repeat what they have already discussed with the colleagues in small groups in front of the entire class. In addition, it was expected the innovation will help overcome this challenge because having students participate in group activities will provide an opportunity for peer to peer learning while also allowing students to make an input to discussions and interact with peers who are also non-native English speakers.

From the preceding paragraphs in this section, it is expected the innovation will improve class participation and improve students' learning while making the class lively and increasing students' participation. Consequently, the hypotheses for the innovation are

$H_{j0}: \mu_x - \mu_y = 0$  (No difference exists in participation frequency in lecture style and activity-based classes)

$H_{k0}: \mu_x - \mu_y = 0$  (No difference exists in assessment scores in lecture style and activity-based classes)

where  $\mu_x$  is the mean score of the pre-innovation group and  $\mu_y$  is the mean score of the post-innovation group

### 3. The Innovation

The innovation took the form of one group activity per each class with a 20 minutes duration of actual group work and presentation. The group dynamics included randomly-formed three or four groups<sup>1</sup> of three to four students. This was followed by a 10 minutes session for peer feedback or questions. A member of the group then presented the group's work in turns over a five minutes duration while the other members responded to peer feedback and questions.

The group sessions utilised topic maps to ensure students participation. Topic maps are visual representations of the relationship between ideas, concepts and things (Exley & Dennick, 2004)

The core of topic maps consists of a collection of topics/concepts showing a relationship to each other by associations. While traditionally this teaching innovation has been widely utilised to help resolve instances of writers' block, topic maps have been well adapted for use to solve problems. Therefore, considering the interrelated nature of concepts in the course, the topic map technique was modified such that student groups mapped out the relationship between a scrambled list of organisational concepts projected. Their output was then presented on a board as an instant poster feedback and explained in their presentations. To verify if each member

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<sup>1</sup> Number of groups differed across class sessions due to fluctuations in student attendance.

of the group participated in the activity I spent two to four minutes monitoring each group's discussions.

#### **4. Methodology**

A triangulation approach using direct observations and quasi-experimental techniques was adopted for the evaluation of the innovation. The innovation was applied to three class sessions. The second and third sessions of the class were used as treatment classes while the first was the control in which the traditional teaching approach was used. A tally was marked by the instructor to see how many students will participate in class by way of contribution to discussions, answering or asking questions. To prevent instances of missing out on the tally, the class was audio recorded which was later used to check and improve the original in-class tally. Each student was addressed by name during their contribution to avoid double counting, especially, in instances where voices were similar.

A strong correlation has been found between student engagement in class and their achievement of learning outcome. Therefore, though the focus of the innovation is to promote student engagement, students were required to take a five minutes assessment after each class to have a score just for the evaluation. The assessment comprised short explanations (maximum 250 words) of threshold concepts in each class. The concepts included Public Policy, Organisational Culture, and Management. Questions asked were practical and were expected to make student apply learnt concepts to reality instead of just reproducing knowledge. The net scores for both classes were utilised to see the impact of the innovation. The scores were derived from a marking scheme scored over five points for each of the assessments.

Data were analysed using cross tabulation and paired sample T-test. The choice of the T-test was based on the class size of 27 and the need to compare results of the teaching innovation in both the pre-innovation and post-innovation classes. T-test, in general, is suitable for samples between 10 and 30 and for comparing means among groups.

#### 4. Presentation and Discussion of Findings

Findings of the innovation as presented in Table 1 shows average test score in the control class to be 2.31 while that in the treatment class was 3.38 out of a total score of 5. Similarly, participation frequency increased from 0.54 to 3 before and after the intervention respectively. These values were significant at the 95% confidence level from the t-test for test scores for pre-innovation group (M = 2.308, SD = 1.233) and post-innovation group (M = 3.826, SD = 0.844) classes  $t(12) = 3.590$ ,  $p = .004$ . Similarly there was a significant difference at the 95% confidence level for participation frequency in the control (M = 0.54, SD = 1.198) and treatment (M = 3, SD = 0.841) class  $t(12) = 6.752$ ,  $p = .000$ . Based on these findings I reject all the two null hypotheses, i.e.,  $H_{j0}: \mu_x - \mu_y = 0$  and  $H_{k0}: \mu_x - \mu_y = 0$

**Table 1: Differences in Participation and Test Score before and After the Innovation**

	Average Score		Average Participation Frequency	
	Mean	Percentage	Mean	Percentage
Control	2.31	37.6%	.54	15.2%
Treatment	3.83	62.4%	3.00	84.8%
Difference	1.52	24.8%	2.46	69.6%

The findings are indicative, the innovation significantly improved class participation by a net difference of about 70%. The group activity also impacted positively on the learning outcome, improving test score by a net difference of approximately 2.5%. This indeed showed that involvement of students in class ensure they focus on meaning and understanding contrary to

knowledge reproduction students associated with passive learning (Trigwell, Prosser, & Waterhouse, 1999; Exley & Dennick, 2004).

From the direct observation of the class, students during the group sessions were seen busily discussing and sharing ideas and laughing over the choice of English words to use. Thus, apart from improving participation and learning, the innovation was seen to have had a rippling effect on the class making it more fun for students. Since according to Nilson (2014) attention span deteriorates over time in class the lively class certainly does help maintain students' attention and curtail deterioration of attention span that often characterises lecture-based classes.

Also, all the various groups were seen at one point translating words from Czech to English on the internet when they were not sure of a word English. This served as a preparatory ground for students to improve on their English expressions in their 'comfort zone' with their colleagues before addressing the class. Thus, the fear of disapproval or intimidation from colleagues expressed by Maziha, Suryani, and Melor, (2010) and Karp and Yoels (1976) is overcome by group activities. It was therefore not surprising every student in the class even those who never spoke in the control class either asked a question or contributed during the group session or presentation of the group work. This means that though according to Cheng, Audrey & Lim (2010) class size influence student participation, group activity help overcome this by building students' confidence in a small group through group activities student

## **5. Conclusion**

The study sought to improve participation in a rather passive class of students studying in a second language using group activities. The result shows that group activities do improve class participation while improving learning outcome. It was also effective in resolving challenges

to classroom participation, especially fear of communicating in a non-native language. This is important as more universities become international with students studying in their non-native languages.

Group Activities were also found to have a rippling effect of improving attention span of students by making classes livelier and fun. It also serves as preparatory grounds for students to build their confidence before sharing their ideas with the whole class.

A major limitation was absenteeism which considerably reduced the sample size by about 50%. The reduced sample size was a result of my decision to limit data to only students who were present in the control class and at least one of the treatment classes. Having more class sessions for both the control and treatment classes will have increased the reliability of the results. This was however not possible because of the limited number of English sessions.

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