

ACTIVE LEARNING STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING ENGLISH

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Abstract

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From the teaching experiences, the college teachers should proceed with an active classroom atmosphere, so as to raise students' interests in English learning, and thereby improve the efficiency of English classes and raise teaching quality. In China, there are a lot of problems in the traditional classroom, i.e. the students sit with expressionless faces looking at the teacher, they raise their hands to answer questions with great care, teachers and students lack communication. This situation is extremely negative for English teaching. Therefore, the college teachers must try their best to improve this situation in order to create active learning in the classroom. This paper will mainly discuss what active learning is and why is it important. How to create the excitement in the college classroom? The best way to create active learning for students is to make use of all beneficial factors to activate the classroom atmosphere and enhance the students' interests and enthusiasm in learning English.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

From the teaching experiences, “the college teacher should proceed with an active classroom atmosphere, facilitate to raise students’ interests in English learning, and thereby improve the efficiency of English classes and raise teaching quality” (Zan, K. F., & Jiang, Y. H., 2000, p. 78).

With the development of the society, the requirement on the students’ ability to study English becomes higher and higher, while more and more students, especially those in the countryside, become negative in English study with little interest in many rural areas. In China, an English teacher often has to teach five to six classes. In such case, the teacher cannot take all of the students into consideration. As a result, there are many students learning without right purpose, strong interest or proper learning methods. Generally speaking, they learn English without initiative, correct attitude, self-confidence or right method, so it is difficult for them to learn English well.

Ni da (2002) finds in his study that those who have proper learning motivation can master a foreign language well. The teacher also thinks that those students with stronger learning motivation will perform better and master the language faster. Interest is the best teacher and thus the essential factor for stimulating the students’ desire and motivation to learn. For the purpose of raising the students’ interest in English learning, the teacher should design and organize some vivid and effective classroom activities based on students’ learning habits. The best way to create active

learning for students is to make use of all beneficial factors to activate the classroom atmosphere and enhance the students' interests and enthusiasm in learning English. The active learning strategies are important in the classroom because of their powerful impact upon students' learning. So we must take measures to change the present status in which many students are lack of initiative and enthusiasm in the process of learning English, so as to improve the quality of college English teaching.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The general problem to be addressed relates to the relation between active learning and students' interests in the classroom. More specifically the questions are:

What is active learning and why is it important?

What are the strategies to create the excitement in the classroom?

What are the problems existing in the application of active learning approaches?

### **Definition of Terms**

**Active learning.** It is proposed that "strategies promoting active learning be defined as instructional activities involving students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing" (Liu Renqi, 2001).

**Learning Strategy.** Foreign or second language (L2) learning strategies are specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques students use - often consciously - to improve their progress in apprehending, internalizing, and using the L2 (Oxford, 1990).

### **Delimitations of the Research**

The research will be conducted in and through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, over ninety (90) days. Primary searches will be

conducted via the Internet through EBSCO host with ERIC, Academic Search Elite and Google/Google Scholar as the primary sources. Key search topics included “active learning,” “learning strategy,” and “student interest and acquisition.”

### **Method of Approach**

A brief review of literature on active learning will be conducted. A second review of literature relating factors, including active learning, that affect the learning strategies and student acquisition will be conducted. The findings will be summarized and recommendations made.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

#### **What is Active Learning and Why is it Important?**

“Research consistently has shown that traditional lecture methods, in which professors talk and students listen, dominate college and university classrooms in China. It is therefore important to know the nature of active learning” (Liu Renqi, 2001, p. 215). In China, there are a lot of problems in the traditional classroom, i.e. the students sit with expressionless faces looking at the teacher, they raise their hands to answer questions with great care, teachers and students have a lack of communication. This situation is extremely negative for English teaching. Therefore, teachers must try their best to improve this situation in order to create an active English classroom atmosphere. So it is important for us to know the nature of active learning.

Chickering (1999) argued that educators' use of the term "active learning" has relied more on intuitive understanding than a common definition. So that “many faculty assert that all learning is inherently active and that students are therefore actively involved while listening to formal presentations in the classroom” (p. 215).

English and Chinese language learning is different from each other. For many students, English learning is more difficult and unpractical, so it's more important for

us to develop the students' interests in learning this discipline through teaching activities. It is the main point of active learning to lead them to a sense of joy and accomplishment. Yu Qin (2008) suggested that students must do more than just listen: They must read, write, discuss, or be engaged in solving problems. Most importantly, to be actively involved, students must engage in such higher-order thinking tasks as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. These strategies are important in the classroom because of their powerful impact upon students' learning. Within Liu Renqi's (2001) context, it is proposed that "strategies promoting active learning be defined as instructional activities involving students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing" (p. 215).

### **Language Learning Strategies to Create the Excitement in the Classroom**

How to create the excitement in the classroom and how can active learning be incorporated in the classroom? In teaching, the college teachers can start from the following points:

#### **1. To Establish a Harmonious Relationship between the Teacher and Students**

A harmonious relationship between the teacher and students carry great "affinity" in education. The teaching practices have proven that if students love a teacher, they will also love the curriculum taught by the teacher, Just as Wu Mengdan (2000), a famous Chinese educationist, once pointed out that "Respect the master, follow his doctrine" (p. 122). Zhang Zida (2003) has suggested that the students' emotion to their teacher can be transferred into the motivation of learning.

How to harmonize the teacher-student relationship? Teachers should proceed based on the following aspects:

Active learning is an effective way to attract student's attention. Teachers should try their best to establish a good image in the classroom. Larkin (2005) suggested that the teachers' image in the classroom should be fully reflected by their own morality, knowledge, talent, studies, and through demonstrating noble virtues, and profound knowledge. Thus, if teachers are able to show an amiable and respectable image to stimulate students' self-confidence, interest and other positive psychological effects, this will have a good effect on their future teaching practices.

In the teaching activities, the teacher's responsibility and attitude on teaching are very important. The teacher's strong sense of responsibility, patience, and good attitude on the work can also gain respect and trust from the students. Teachers should often attempt to understand the students' emotions in order to solve their problems in learning and daily life, so that the students will understand the teacher's best wish is to allow them to grasp a better English language. Zhang Chen (2005) suggested that the mutual trust between teachers and students is very important, it is helpful for establishing a good teacher-student relationship and causing the students to co-operate with the teacher actively.

## 2. To Create a Lively Classroom Atmosphere

If the teacher's personality and decent behavior patterns are the premise to attract the students' interests in their courses, then the teacher's exquisite teaching art and skills are the key factors for the students to become enthusiastic about the course.

Keller (2001), a famous educationist, once said that “We should try hard to create a free learning environment, so that the children and teachers can breathe freely in the classroom. Without such a good teaching environment, any kind of teaching method will not work” (p. 145). As an English teacher, it’s very important for him/her to make every class lively and interesting. According to Hu Zenli (2003), the teachers should regulate the classroom atmosphere in an effective way to deepen the English teaching and improve the students’ ability of self-study. Teachers can create an active atmosphere in the class through the following ways:

The teacher plays a variety of games before a new lesson, i.e. The students can get the words classified such as category of fruits, beverages, daily necessities, stationeries, vehicles, titles, careers and so on. Every student needs to name one kind according to the specified category without repeating. This game is not only favorable for review but also helps the teacher to organize the class and draw the students’ attention quickly. In addition, teachers can play the singing game on a new lesson and read each sentence through the corresponding action, i.e. the students stand up and speak English with action. They can play this game with the participation of teachers and students, or also between desk mates – one speaks and the other acts. When the students feel tired after studying for several minutes, the teacher can play games with them. As long as they work properly, these games can effectively prevent the students’ feeling of fatigue and boredom and fully stimulate their enthusiasm for study. This can create a pleasant classroom atmosphere and improve the teaching effect.

Doing activities in class is one of the most useful strategies in promoting active

learning. “Teachers must create a supportive intellectual and emotional environment that encourages students to take risks” (Lowman, 1984, p. 172). Activities include singing, dancing, saying proverbs, tongue twisters, skit performances, English speech etc., which are known as the essence of language. In this way the teacher can create a supportive intellectual and emotional environment. They play an important role in promoting the students’ rhythm of the language and fostering their interests in literature. Teachers can select some songs and idioms involved in the teaching courses according to the contents of the course. For example, when a teacher mentions the proverb “where there is a river, there is a city.” he\she can add two additional English idioms, such as “where there is a will, there is a way.”, and “where there is smoke, there is fire.” This can greatly increase the students’ interests.

Story-telling is also a very good way. Exaggerated language and motions can stimulate students’ interest and focus their attention. They will unwittingly master many English words and phrases from those joyful activities. Generally speaking, the teacher would better tell a story in the last ten minutes in each class because the students may feel tired at that time. When they hear the teacher say “I’ll tell you a story,” they will immediately sit up straightly and quietly wait for the teacher’s stories. The teacher’s motions and exaggerated performance on the stage can fascinate the students. The students will feel excited and the atmosphere in class will become active again.

Teachers often try to create an interesting language environment in the process of teaching so as to exert the students’ imagination. For example, the teacher arranges

some students to play roles in the dialogue performance with lifelike expressions and actions, and the others in the class will be attracted by their acting. From the acting, the students can improve themselves in learning English.

### 3. To Tap the Students' Potentiality and Foster Their Self-Confidence.

Stern (1999), a well-known American educationist, suggested that a student full of emotion in study will learn more easily and quickly than those who lack passion, pleasure and interest in study, or those who are afraid of study. Active learning process is coordinated with the development of factors of both intelligence and emotion. Take the students' "intelligence quotient" and "emotion quotient" as an example; people can compare their "intelligence quotient" to simply breaking the surface of "water" and their "emotion quotient" to submerge a large portion in the "water." In view of this, teachers should try to tap the students' emotion quotient so as to unite their cognition and emotion for the purpose of enhancing the effectiveness of English teaching and truly improving their English.

Everyone is eager to get some achievements and gain recognition and attention by others, in order to exert themselves and achieve self-value. For students, they hope that their learning results can cause the attention of teachers and students, and the feeling of success can increase their confidence, which will encourage them to do better so as to accomplish a higher goal. Teachers can give different questions to students with different English levels and give encouragement to them properly so that they feel that they can learn English very well with their efforts. With this kind of psychological advantage, the students will perform more positively in class.

#### 4. Application of Audio-Visual Media

Chinese students lack a favorable English language environment, so how can they study English well? Teachers can make full use of the multimedia classrooms, play English movies and songs regularly for students. “To make use of audio-visual media in our teaching can engage students’ feeling, sight and hearing” (Li hua, 2000, p. 122). In addition, the vivid pictures and beautiful music can create a pleasant and harmonious learning environment. The students’ interests in learning English will be stimulated with the teaching content changed from abstract to concrete. As a result, the classroom atmosphere can be activated and the teaching efficiency can be increased.

#### **The Problems Existing in the Application of Active Learning Approaches**

Xiang qin (2000), a well-known Chinese educationist, suggested that the examination-oriented education mode has been existing in China for a long time. Under such a mode, teachers not only need to raise the students’ interests in learning through various means, but also need to ensure that they can get satisfactory scores in the examination. It seems so contradictory and actually it is really difficult for the teachers to take both into consideration successfully. Hismanoqul (2000) found that the main purpose of designing classroom activities is to serve for teaching, stimulate students’ interests to study, and create an active classroom atmosphere. Therefore, how well teachers organize the classroom activities will directly influence the students’ state of mind and affect their learning. In view of this, teachers should be good at recognizing the students’ problems in English learning, improve themselves

during the teaching process and also master the following strategies for organizing the classroom activities:

### 1. Harmonious Teacher-Student Relationship

It is right and necessary to establish an equal and democratic relationship between teachers and students. However, some young Chinese English teachers think that the most effective teacher-student relationship is to become the students' close friend. But due to the too close relationship, these teachers will lose their prestige and expose their own demerits to the students gradually; as a result, the students will lose their curiosity and sense of mystery of the teachers. Therefore, the teachers should not work too closely with the students in the teaching practices; they should serve as an educator with two roles, i.e. a friend as well as an instructor. They should also treat their students by getting the balance right between their "love" and "strictness" on them.

### 2. Group Activities

Research in social psychology confirms what teachers know instinctively: a cohesive group works more efficiently and productively. A positive group atmosphere can have a beneficial effect on the morale, motivation, and self-image of its members, and thus significantly affect their learning, by developing in them a positive attitude to the language being learned, to the learning process, and to themselves as learners. So group activities are a very good way to improve our English teaching. It does not lower the teacher's position in the class, but allows for students to create the active learning environment.

Besides the role a teacher plays as an active participant in the learning group, Li Rui (2002) showed that the teacher should also act as a motivator who is sensitive in using teaching artistry to encourage the students who lack confidence, as well as an organizer who, while offering effective teaching procedures, should bear an obligation of building up a positive atmosphere in the learning group (Li Rui, 2002). Teaching and learning can and should be a joyful experience for both the teacher and learner.

### 3. Develop the Students' Ability to Think in Active Learning Activities

Among the study of active learning, Braxton (2004) found that thinking is a very effective mental activity, so it is one of the very important tasks for teachers to develop students' thinking ability. However, in 2008, Braxton's study of active learning also showed that what many teachers care about more in the class is the students' performance and that the activity can be completed smoothly. As a result, the teacher attracts the students' attention to their own thoughts but give them less time and space to think. If things continue this way, it will be very difficult for the teachers to develop the students' thinking ability and personality. In fact, this problem can be solved if teachers can design various activities for students to think with their own brains. For example, the teacher can raise a question and give more time for students to think how to answer the question rightly, or lead them to memorize what they have learned from the classroom activities. With these means can the students' thinking ability be developed and the effect of the teaching method of active learning be realized.

### 4. Professional Development of College English Teachers in China?

Nash (2009) suggested that the urgent demand of language skills improvement as professional development should be recognized. Thus, for many teachers who are not able to speak English fluently and freely, it might be the patterns that they only have to do with their students in class. The English teacher should improve their quality; there is a lot to do with the teacher's personality, knowledge level, and teaching capability. It is vital to the meaningful practice of active learning approaches. For an English teacher, it is definitely important to keep learning English by practicing good pronunciation, listening to authentic listening materials, and reading English newspapers, so as to keep well informed of updating knowledge about the world and life. In addition, they also need to improve their own ability of English expression and teaching skills, and communicate with students in English in class, so as to create a favorable circumstance for students to learn English with pleasure and lay the foundation for their future development.

To summarize, it is the vital point for the college teacher to master the strategies for organizing the classroom activities effectively, so as to raise the students' interests in learning English. In order to hold the direction of English teaching and provide better service for teaching and learning, the teachers should try to recognizing the problems appearing during the teaching process actively and make use of various effective strategies to solve them.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

To summarize, active learning strategies for the second language learners, which focuses on the language development as well as the active competences of the students, is widely applied nowadays and has won a common recognition for English learning. As our textbooks have become more and more functional, conventional teaching approaches are being challenged. Successful application will not be easy to perform in English classes, it is based on English teachers' solid language competence, as well as their intensive comprehension of the roles to play in class. Some educational experts expect particular attention to be paid to the improvement of the teachers' language level and the obligation of building group dynamics for a better class atmosphere. Last but not least, all English teachers should have an honest attitude to their language skills. If teachers are still far from being satisfactory as for a qualified language teacher, they should urge themselves to learn before they make anyone else to learn, so that the teachers always are at the frontier of learning.

Teachers should make use of all beneficial factors to activate the classroom atmosphere and enhance the students' interests and enthusiasm in learning English. Teachers also need to take full advantage of the corresponding audio-teaching tools, action performance, wall charts, material objects, and establish a good language

environment according to the text. Use of these techniques in the classroom is vital because of their powerful impact upon student's learning. Thus, the students feel that they are in a world of English. This pleasant classroom atmosphere will enable the students to master every practical expression in an active atmosphere. Finally, the students' learning initiative can be motivated and they will become the subject in learning, and as a result the classroom atmosphere will be truly activated.

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