

Maximizing Classroom Engagement



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INTRODUCTION

There are many theories about how people learn, and words such as “motivation” and “personalization” are often mentioned as key elements in a successful classroom experience. These things are undoubtedly very important, but I believe the key element in a successful class is what I call “engagement.” By this I mean a set of classroom circumstances that help all students feel part of the learning experience, regardless of their ability.

I first became aware of the need to engage students of different abilities and interests when I taught a mixed nationality group. Some of the students, mainly Italians and Spanish, enjoyed speaking and doing fun activities, whereas other students, notably from Japan and Germany, were happier working on activities with a clear grammar or vocabulary aim. My main ambition in those days was to keep them all happy, whatever their personal preferences, and I did this by putting them in groups where they could engage with and learn from those with different interests. So the Japanese students helped the Italians to understand the grammar, and the Italians encouraged the Japanese to participate more in conversations.

Like all teachers, I also faced the problem of mixed ability classes. Most classes are mixed ability, and students at the higher end of the scale are often motivated by the fact that they are “good at English.” Students in the middle and lower end of the ability spectrum have no such motivation. A lesson that only aims at the strengths of top-end students will be extremely demotivating for the rest of the class. To teach in a way that only engages the best students isn’t a recipe for success. This was another reason why I wanted to engage every student in the learning experience.

So, how can we change the classroom experience to motivate—and engage—students of all abilities? Let’s first of all examine the nature of the relationship between the teacher and the students.

WHEEL OR SPIDERWEB?

In some classes, students only engage with the teacher, so their relationship resembles a wheel, with the teacher at the hub, and each student like a spoke. The spokes of the wheel connect with the hub, but not with other spokes.

Here’s an example of what happens in a “wheel” classroom. A student answers a question correctly, the teacher thanks

her and moves on to the next item. Often the correct answer is not even repeated for the benefit of students who didn't hear it, for example, those who are sitting behind the student who answered. Because most students lack the confidence to say "Sorry, I didn't hear the answer," many resign themselves to being isolated. Students like this become more and more disengaged from the learning process, and it becomes increasingly difficult to get them to participate at all.

Getting students to speak louder is a simple issue of classroom management but a longer-term solution is to encourage them to engage with each other on a personal level more naturally and in a way that will have a lasting effect on their English skills.

In addition, if the teacher routinely repeats answers, the rest of the class don't need to listen to the person who answered, so they never do. They only listen to the teacher. The result is that there is no encouragement to listen to or engage with others in the class.

A much better model for classroom interaction is the spiderweb. In the spiderweb classroom, students are encouraged to relate both to the teacher and to each other. So, for example, if a student answers a question, the teacher checks to see if everyone in the class has heard the answer directly from that student and encourages the others to ask for a repetition if they didn't hear it.

You should make this the norm from the beginning of the course. Teachers should acknowledge that there will be times when someone can't hear an answer—this is certain to happen when students sit in rows and look at the backs of other students' heads.

So, in a spiderweb class, students feel comfortable about turning round and repeating their answer for the benefit of people who are sitting behind them. And the others feel comfortable about asking for the answer to be repeated.

This is especially important when students answer questions that require them to give some factual information that other students may not know.

Here's a test to see if your classroom is a spiderweb classroom.

Let's imagine that you ask the class for a piece of factual information, for example, the name of the first man to walk on the moon. You ask the question to the class as a whole. Someone answers, quietly and a little uncertainly. "Was it Neil Armstrong?"

You congratulate the student. But what happens next? In a wheel classroom, especially if you have a large class, and even more so if some of your students are naturally shy, students who didn't hear the answer look at you the teacher and not at the student who answered. Most students are programmed this way—they think of the teacher as the fountain of all knowledge. But the fact is that the information came from one of the students, so everyone else should hear it from that student too.

Start the process of creating a spiderweb classroom by saying, "Don't ask me, ask her—she's the one who knows."

When I discovered this simple technique, the atmosphere in my classes improved immediately. Before I encouraged students to relate to each other in this way, many of them sat in an anxious silence if they missed something. Afterwards, all heads turned towards the student who had answered, who was happy to be the center of attention for a while and repeat the answer.

It can be hard for some teachers to relinquish their position as the fountain of all knowledge but it's better to allow the students to provide information that they know. They will still rely on you for information about language.

In *Smart Choice*, the distinction between the places where the teacher is in charge—principally where a new grammar item needs to be taught—and where students are given more freedom, are clearly indicated. *Smart Choice* is all about giving students carefully planned opportunities to use the information that they know, want to talk about, and can relate to, thereby empowering them. The opportunities for this exist on almost every page, and are clearly indicated by the lightbulb icon. On the second page of each unit, for example, the new structure is introduced in a gap conversation. Once the concept is clear,

students have the freedom to personalize the conversation.

PERSONALIZATION

In the last 10 years, there has been an increase in the number of personalization activities in ELT materials. In other words, there are now more opportunities for the students to say something about themselves and what they know.

I wholeheartedly agree with this trend, but I also worry about the kind of personalization activities that we ask students to do. For example, I once saw the following instruction in an ELT coursebook: *Work in pairs. Ask your partner how many CDs and cassettes he/she has.*

The problem with this personalization activity (quite apart from the fact that twenty-first century music technology has abandoned CDs and cassettes) is that it will be over quite quickly and without much interest having taken place. Personalization activities should be a little more interesting than this.

Another problem is that some of the questions that we ask the students (or which students are supposed to ask each other, according to the book) are TOO personal. There are questions which some people would prefer not to answer. Adult learners, for example, may not want to answer these questions: *How old are you? How much do you earn?* Some teenagers would prefer not to answer questions like *What do your parents do? Do you have any brothers and sisters?* or even *Do you have a TV in your room?* And other students may not wish to say something in English about their ambitions in front of the rest of the class.

My personal belief is that it is safer and more productive (and more engaging) to find out what students know rather than about their personal lives, relationships, and possessions. This is why, where possible, activities in *Smart Choice* concentrate on trying to find out what people know and can add to the knowledge of the class as a whole.

This starts on the first page of each unit, which is dedicated to presenting new words. At

the bottom of the page, there's an activity called Stretch Your Vocabulary, in which students are invited to add words that they already know but which have not been presented in the lexical set on that page.

The advantage of this approach is that it appeals to students for whom learning new language (which usually means learning new grammar) is an ordeal. Students feel very engaged with the learning process if they can offer just a single new word, which no one else in the class has thought of.

As I mentioned earlier, the personalization process continues on the second page, where students are always encouraged to try an activity again, but this time using their own ideas. Likewise on the third page, (the grammar practice page) there are form practice activities, after which students are always asked to work in pairs and look at an exercise again, making it personal to their circumstances. Again, the activity won't ask them to reveal details about themselves, but it may ask them to imagine, for example, that they are talking to a visitor to their town who needs information.

I hope that the *Smart Choice* approach will help you maximize the sense of belonging of all your students. I also hope *Smart Choice* can help you make learning (and teaching!) fun and enjoyable. Finally, I hope *Smart Choice* succeeds in embodying my belief about the importance of having a comfortable environment where students want to speak and can speak about themselves without being embarrassed, leading to groups of truly engaged students in a classroom.

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