

A review of foreign researches on influential factors affecting students' engagement in English classroom

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Abstract: Students' active engagement constitutes the core of the process of learning and teaching in the student-oriented classroom. The paper centers on a review of foreign researches on influential factors affecting students' engagement in English classroom. It is expected to figure out the relevant factors in order to promote students' active engagement.

Key words: students' engagement; influential factors; active engagement

1. Introduction

Nowadays, enthusiasm for English language learning has been growing enormously in that China becomes more closely connected with other countries. It is generally agreed that classroom is an important learning setting for second language learners (Chaudron, 1988). The present pedagogical trends in language classroom call for a shift away from an emphasis upon teaching towards a stress on learning. It has been increasingly realized that learning is an active process in which students will initiatively construct their own knowledge. There is no doubt that students' engagement is generally considered to be very important for learning and achievement in learner-centered class. Quantities of researches have evidently shown that engaged students are more active and devoted, thus, facilitating the improvement of English.

However, it is awfully common that many a student does not actively engage in classroom learning. Therefore, it is urgent to figure out the related influential factors so as to enhance their English learning.

2. Definitions of students' engagement

Since the 1960s, the researches into students' engagement have been a major concern abroad in language teaching and learning. Foreign researches differ in the definition of students' engagement due to their different perspectives and focuses.

The earliest most influential researcher studying students' engagement is Jackson, a famous American curriculum scholar. Regarding students' involvement as one of his main research notions, Jackson (1968) systematically studied curriculum experience entailing both students' involvement and non-involvement. As one of the representatives studying students' experience, Erickson (1992) referred to curriculum experience as the experience students undergo under the guidelines of the school. From the viewpoint of classroom interaction, Erickson expounded curriculum experience and put forward the notion "curriculum engagement". In his opinion, students' engagement is a kind of active and individual classroom experience. Additionally, Newmman (1992)

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indicated that students' engagement is their psychological investment in and effort directed toward learning. Moreover, Astin (1984) proposed a theory about students' engagement—the involvement theory. He argued that student involvement refers to the amount of physical and psychological energy the student devotes to the academic experience.

3. Relevant variables affecting students' engagement

The correlation between students' engagement and relevant variables is an issue emphasized substantially. The related factors, greatly affecting students' engagement, are multiple and various.

3.1 Learning outcome

The relationship between students' engagement and learning outcome has been much studied. There are 2 different research findings concerning this problem.

Newmann (1992) found in the research that there is no strong statistical linkage between students' engagement and learning outcome. He explained that it might be possible that students with low score have a higher level of engagement because they find the problem challenging, while those with high score have a lower level of involvement because they find the problem too easy.

On the other hand, Ainley (1993) found that styles of engagement are strongly related to learning outcome after carrying out a survey among 137 subjects in years. Moreover, with the integration of multiple measures as RAND (Research and Development) scores, the new essay prompted on the Graduate Record Examination and college Grade Point Average (GPA), Carini, Kuh and Kleint (2006) also found a number of small but statistically significant positive correlations between students' engagement and scores.

3.2 Linguistic factors

3.2.1 Proficiency

The relationship between proficiency and engagement is difficult to predict. On the one side, Ellis (1994) held that proficiency causes participation. That is, he believed that the more proficient the learners are, the more they get ready to participate. On the other side, Selinger (1977) thought that it is engagement that promotes proficiency on the basis of his observation of 6 adults learning English.

3.2.2 Linguistic inhibition

What is stressed here is language production, that is, speaking and writing, which is a process of meaning construction and expression. Garrett (1991) believed that producing speech is a rather complex matter. He elaborated the process of producing a single sentence in his five-level speech model, which consists of the message-level representation, the functional-level representation and the articulatory-level representation. Therefore, if students have difficulty in language production, verbal engagement will not realize.

3.3 Character

Students' engagement is partly determined by their characters. It is generally assumed that extrovert students tend to behave actively. Extrovert students who are more likely to be risk-takers participate in classroom activities more actively and willingly. The level of verbal engagement by the extrovert and emotionally subtle students is higher than that by introvert and neurotic students.

3.4 Gender

Whether females and males are different in classroom engagement is also a controversial issue. Findings from some researchers showed that there does exist gender difference in classroom engagement. Gass and Varonis

(1986) came to the conclusion that men use the opportunities to interact to produce more output, whereas women use it to obtain more input. However, some other researchers proposed that there is no difference between genders in classroom engagement. Pica (1991) failed to confirm gender difference in interactions in the research involving both female and male Japanese English learners.

3.5 Self-concept

Self-concept generally refers to the core of self-consciousness, including one's beliefs, attitudes and opinions about oneself. The relationship between engagement and self-concept is mutual. Daniel's (2000) research proved that students' self-concept has a great impact on students' engagement as well as interaction between teachers and students. On the other hand, Kohonen and Toatinen (2001) proposed that classroom engagement also affects the development of self-concept. They conducted an experiment by increasing classroom engagement of those students of low self-esteem and found that they could get more self-confidence.

3.6 Affective factors

Affective factors generally refer to those emotionally relevant characteristics, including mainly learners' attitude, interest, motivation, anxiety, and so on.

Attitude refers to the person's beliefs, response and intention to the target concern. Attitude has an effect on the learners' feelings about the language that they learn. Positive attitude encourages learners to engage willingly and actively in the classroom activities to improve their learning.

Once students' interest and natural curiosity are stimulated, students are eager to know something and then "real learning" takes place (TANG, 1985). Moreover, students' engagement in the classroom depends more on whether the actual learning experiences seem relevant to the students' interest and needs (Littlewood, 1992). Therefore, students' interest is also closely related to their engagement.

According to Brown (2001), motivation is generally thought of as an inner drive, impulse, emotion or desire that moves one into a particular action. It is commonly believed that motivation is in proportion to students' engagement. Glikzman, Gardner and Smythe (1982) proved in their research that the stronger the motivation is, the more actively the students engage in the classroom activities.

According to Gardner and MacIntyre (1993), language anxiety is fear or apprehension occurring when a learner is expected to perform in a second or foreign language. It is generally accepted that language anxiety exerts negative effects on students' engagement and learning. Anxious students tend to sit passively in the classroom and withdraw from or even avoid entirely activities (Horwitz & Cope, 1986). Likewise, Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) found that language anxiety is negatively and significantly correlated with second language performance.

3.7 Culture factors

Culture factors have a fundamental impact on students' engagement. It is known that students' engagement is bound by social norms based on culture. Cortazzi and Jin (1999) pointed out that from an early age students are socialized into expectations about what kinds of interaction are appropriate in class, how texts should be used and how they should engage in teaching and learning process. Moreover, they indicated that the Chinese students give the western teachers the impression that they seem unwilling to speak, they are passive and rather resistant to pair or group work.

For one thing, Chinese students tend to be passive in the classroom activities and silent in classroom interaction for fear of losing face or being mistaken as showing off. Sato (1982) found that Asian learners take fewer turns in the study of students' turn-getting behavior. She expounded that Asian learners have more constraints on their classroom engagement. For another, Chinese students are accustomed to concentrating on

listening and taking notes instead of discussing or asking questions since they believe that the teacher is an authority and provider of knowledge. Ladd and Ruby (1999) conducted a study about Asian students' silence in classroom interaction and found that it is held by the Asian students that asking a teacher questions might be regarded as challenging his authority.

3.8 Classroom environment

Classroom environment is composed of physical setting and psychological setting, including class size, arrangement of seats and interpersonal relation. The effect of classroom environment on students' engagement is rather noticeable, worthy of great concern.

Research has shown that class size has an effect on students' engagement in classroom interaction. Persaud (1999) pointed out that it has been found that classes with less than 40 students have higher levels of class engagement than classes with more than 40 students. In a small class, students are paid more attention to and will engage in classroom activities more actively and effectively.

Arrangement of seats also facilitates or constrains students' engagement. According to Wright (1991), students can be grouped and seats can be arranged in different ways in a classroom, which will have an important influence on roles and relationships. Additionally, it is accepted by many researchers that students sitting in the front and middle in a classroom tend to engage more actively.

Interpersonal relationship is also one of the important factors affecting students' engagement. Littlewood (1992) indicated that a relaxed situation and a network of supportive personal relationship encourage learners to engage wholly in the learning experience. Sheils (1988) pointed out that in a supportive socio-emotional climate learners will become actively and personally involved.

3.9 Teachers' role

Both teachers and students contribute necessarily and indispensably to the promotion of learning in the total classroom process. Teachers' role will inevitably affect students' engagement in classroom activities.

On the one hand, teachers' instructional or pedagogical strategies have an impact on students' engagement in classroom activities. Wright (1991) believed it necessary for teachers to instruct less in class and for learners to take some leadership and management decisions on the conduct of activities. Taylor (1987) saw a need for the teachers to maintain a non-authoritarian presence so that students can feel secure and non-defensive to learn. Besides, Kramarae and Treichler (1990) held that women are more at ease with professors who use a facilitative approach to teaching. Some studies show that female students prefer small group discussions to whole-class discussions.

On the other hand, to some extent teachers' feedback influences students' engagement a lot. According to Ellis (1994), teachers' feedback is a rather general cover term for the information provided by teachers on the reception and comprehension of messages from students in classroom teaching. Nunan (1991) held that positive feedback is more effective in improving students' learning behavior in that it may increase their motivation so as to engage more in classroom activities. In addition, error treatment, a controversial question, has been another focus. Van Lier (1988) proposed that error treatment should be conducted in a proper manner to facilitate Second Language Acquisition.

4. Conclusion

It has been revealed that the influential factors affecting students' engagement are varied and complicated. Additionally, it is remarkable that there exists the inconsistency in the outcome of previous studies in the field.

Hence, reliable instruments as well as the combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches are indispensable to study students' engagement comprehensively and scientifically. Furthermore, in view of relevant influential factors, it is necessary and vital to work out countermeasures so as to activate students' engagement in English classroom and to promote their improvement of English.

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