USING ACTIVE LEARNING ACTIVITIES TO ENHANCE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN A BUSINESS ENGLISH PROGRAM

Laura Taylor

University of Toronto Mississauga

Active learning activities are becoming more prominent in the university setting, specifically in North America. However, in some departments, large class sizes make application and engagement with these types of activities particularly challenging. In response to this challenge, departments may look to supplemental programming for students, which can both aid in the comprehension of lecture material and offer tailored support focusing on subject-specific skill development. This paper reflects on an English language professional skills development workshop series that used active learning activities to engage students within the Department of Management at a Canadian university. It suggests that students not only enjoyed the active learning approach, but also felt that the workshops contributed to relevant language skill development.

Keywords: Active learning, problem based learning, English for Specific Purposes

INTRODUCTION

Students undertaking studies in areas of business, accounting, finance, or management often experience large class sizes in their first year at university. These classes are often run in the typical lecture format and offer very little interaction between the instructor and the students. In recent years, departments, administrators, and instructors have, in some cases, determined that this lecture-type, teacher-centred format does not provide the best possible learning experience for students (Freeman et al., 2014). As a result, many Canadian universities have shifted their focus to experiential or active learning activities within the classroom, or when this is not feasible, opportunities for active learning in tutorials or other professional development settings (Roehl, Reddy & Shannon, 2013). In addition, the lecture approach can often be challenging for students who have English as an Additional Language (EAL) for a variety of reasons. In an effort to overcome some of these issues, the active learning classroom allows for students to take control of their own learning while also allowing them to work collaboratively, usually in smaller group settings, which may offer a more comfortable environment for questions and discussion (Ferreri & O'Connor, 2013).

Beginning with a brief overview of the literature and followed by a description of the context, this paper describes two examples of activities used to stimulate learning in the business classroom and the corresponding student engagement with these activities.

BRIEF LITERATURE OVERVIEW

Active learning is often seen as the contrast to more traditional teacher-centred styles of pedagogy. Active learning is reviewed in the literature extensively but generally seems to embody approaches including Problem Based Learning (PBL) (Sroufe & Ramos, 2015), group

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work/ collaborative student projects (Osgerby, 2013), and role-play/simulations/games (Akimov & Malin, 2015). Whichever approach, or combination of approaches, is employed, the general interpretation of active learning stems from constructivist pedagogy, constructivism, or social constructivism (Freeman et al., 2014), which attempt to use metacognition and awareness to construct knowledge in a new and innovative way. The consistent goal within the active learning framework is to first remove the hierarchical role of the professor as 'knowledge giver' and to then empower students to take responsibility for their own learning.

The implementation of active learning strategies in university education has consistently been deemed effective, especially in comparison to more traditional, lecture-style classes. According to Freeman et al. (2014), active learning is an effective strategy for teaching science, technology, engineer and mathematics (STEM) courses, as their study found that the failure rate of students was much lower, and assessment scores were much higher compared with the lecture-style classes. Roehl, Reddy and Shannon (2013) suggest that active learning is effective because it increases peer-to-peer interaction, creating a more enjoyable experience for students. Baepler, Walker and Driessen (2014) indicate that, in addition to better performance and interaction, the active learning classroom is effective in creating confidence among learners and enriches the learning experience. Overall, scholars seem to believe that the implementation of active learning is beneficial for students in a variety of ways.

However, several scholars have noted difficulties with the active learning structure when dealing with large class sizes (Smith & Cardaciotto, 2012) or with classrooms comprised of immovable furniture not conducive to group work (Prosser & Trigwell, 2014). Additionally, other scholars have highlighted some professors' unwillingness to change to an active learning framework for reasons such as an increase in workload, fear of technology, or general lack of interest in this type of approach (e.g. Scheyvens et al., 2008). Further research has noted that with smaller classes and enthusiastic professors willing to push the boundaries of innovation in pedagogy, active learning can provide students with a unique and positive course experience (Noteborn, Dailey-Hebert, Caronell & Gijselaers, 2014).

In addition to examining how the classroom experience is changing, it is also necessary to highlight the changing nature of the student population. At many Canadian postsecondary institutions there are increasing numbers of international students enrolling in undergraduate degrees (Choudaha & Chang, 2012); many of these international students do not have English as a first language. While these students may have met the proficiency requirement of the university, many still indicate that language challenges in and outside the classroom make the learning process considerably more difficult (Sawir, Marginson, Forbes-Mewett, Nyland, & Ramia, 2012), such as not being able to keep up with instructor's speed of speech, challenges with instructor accent; or cultural issues like not wanting to ask questions in front of a large group, lack of confidence in speaking skills, or issues around saving face. Other challenges generally link to skill development and can include things like difficulty in critical reading of scholarly articles, challenges in writing essays/assignments, and the inability to speak fluently during presentations and/or public speaking activities (Simpson, 2015).

It has been noted in previous research that international students may struggle with the idea of active learning in group work when faced with a diverse classroom population, i.e. one with both native and non-native English speakers, because of language and cultural issues (Simpson, 2015). More specifically, non-native English speakers may feel hesitant to communicate orally because they lack confidence, feel shy, do not want to be judged by their native speaking counterparts, and feel like they are being judged on their English ability (Liu,

2005). However, when put into an environment where all students are classified as EAL, the concerns initially raised may not apply, especially in a low-stakes, non-credit, professional development model. Therefore, by implementing active learning strategies in an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) workshop series, EAL students are offered opportunities to practice critical skill development without external native English speaker influence, thus allowing for an introduction to active learning pedagogies and development of both language and confidence.

CONTEXT

Over a period of three months, during the Winter 2016 university term, EAL and international students were encouraged to participate in the English language track of the Department of Management's Professional Skills Development Program. This highly successful program allows students to take part in opportunities and experiences that foster the development of skills and competencies necessary for success upon completion of university. In 2016, the English language track was introduced in response to concerns from both instructors and students surrounding aspects of both spoken and written communication. Based on specific identifiable concerns, eight workshops were offered to students. These included 1) Typical Business Grammar, 2) Parallelism in Business Writing, 3) Finance Writing, 4) Politeness, 5) Describing Trends, 6) Negotiations, 7) Group Work, and 8) Big Data Analysis. In each of these sessions, the focus was to incorporate enjoyable activities that utilized aspects of active learning theory, as previously described by Freeman et al. (2013), to engage students in lively discussions, to allow for participation in game-based activities, and to create relevant and useful written assignments on interesting topics.

Participants

The session description for each two-hour workshop stipulated that students be international or EAL to participate; however, no student was excluded from registering, and as a result, there were one or two native-speaking domestic students who attended some of the sessions. Primarily, though, the sessions contained between 8 and 12 students, who all intended to major or minor in business, finance, accounting, or management and who were generally classified as either EAL or as an international student.

Highlighting Engaging Activities

Based on participant feedback in each of the sessions, as well as through the in-class experiences, two of the activities used in the English language track of the skills program garnered high levels of engagement while also providing a stimulating learning environment. These activities were both game-based; the first was a card game called Barnga, which was used in the Politeness workshop, while the second was a board game called Chinatown, used in the Negotiations workshop. Both activities are explained below along with the description of student engagement with these games. Success of these activities was demonstrated both through student engagement and through the positive comments received from students on their learning experience in each session.

Barnga.

Barnga is a card game that was originally created by Thiagarajan and Steinwachs (1990) as an intercultural awareness-raising activity. Since development, it has been used in a wide range of contexts and settings with learners of varying levels of ability. In the case of the English language skills class, the following steps were charted. Students began by playing the card game in groups of 4 based on a set of pre-defined rules that were provided by the instructor in advance. Students were unaware that each group had a different set of rules. Students then practiced

playing the game with the rules until they were comfortable with how the game worked. Once students were comfortable, the rules were removed and students were asked to play in silence, though gestures were acceptable. Students continued to play comfortably in their groups. At the end of the game, the winner and the loser, i.e. the highest and lowest scoring players, were moved to different tables, creating different groups of four. Students were asked to play the game again, still in silence. At this point, conflicts began to occur because students at each table were all playing by different sets of rules. Here, students struggled with the game, making the assumption that other players at the table were not playing the game correctly. As the game progressed, some students were able to identify that the rules were different; others became increasingly frustrated or animated with their gestures. Upon completion of the activity, students returned to their original seats and engaged in an enthusiastic and animated discussion about the implications of this game.

Student Engagement with Barnga.

The topic associated with the game of Barnga centred on politeness in the business environment. The discussion component following this activity began with animated exclamations by the students about what had happened during the game. In this discussion, the notion of different rules for different groups was outlined in order for all students to have similar information about what occurred during this activity. The instructor was able to guide the conversation into cultural differences in the business environment and how this might relate to politeness. Students were able to share personal experiences with politeness as they related to the university context, for example, writing and responding professionally to instructor emails, as well as offer ideas about how politeness might differ in the international business context, suggesting a good level of engagement with the topic. Many of the participants were able to use information they had learned in lectures to contribute to the discussion.

At the end of the session, students were asked to provide feedback on the session in the form of a questionnaire requiring both open and closed responses. The feedback for this particular session was very positive, and students commented that the game was 'fun,' 'engaging,' and 'helpful,' in addition to being a worthwhile time commitment and a workshop that they would recommend to their peers. Our goal with these sessions was to maintain a small-group environment where students could practice their spoken communication skills using vocabulary related to business. Based on these responses and level of student engagement, the active learning activity was deemed successful.

Chinatown.

Chinatown is a board game from Z-Man Games designed for five players. The Negotiations workshop was particularly popular, so with only two copies of the board game, some students had to play in teams. The goal of the game is to acquire city blocks through a variety of strategies, all of which require some form of negotiation. Trading with other players is encouraged, as is paying out money for desirable city blocks. Students responded to the idea of playing the board game enthusiastically, as no student in the room had ever played the game before. Students worked in groups to review the rules, and the instructor facilitated this discussion by answering any questions posed. After the rules were clarified, students spent approximately 45 minutes playing the game. Following completion of the first round, it was clear that a range of personalities existed at each table; some students were particularly boisterous and pushy, while others were passive and reserved. As the game finished, at both tables it was the boisterous students who finished in top positions. These students acknowledged their pushy

personas in the group discussion, where they indicated that this could potentially be a useful skill in business, because in this case it won them the game.

Student Engagement with Chinatown.

The remainder of the class allowed for discussion to occur on the topic of negotiations. One of the more reserved students, referred to hereafter as Jane, indicated that she felt the boisterous students had unnecessarily pressured her into transactions she felt uncomfortable with. The boisterous students responded with 'well, that is business!' We then discussed, as a group, whether or not Jane would want to play the game with the boisterous students again. She indicated that she would much rather play with people who shared a similar style. This led to further discussions about the nature of international business transactions, intercultural communication, personality styles, and working relationships.

At the end of the session, feedback was positive, even from the students like Jane, who were quiet or who lost the game. Students commented that they enjoyed the session and the subsequent discussion. One student indicated that he was unsure how useful the session was going to be at the beginning, but he really saw the value in it by the end because he felt that he might be able to link it back to his coursework - and he had had fun learning. This is a particularly positive response, although the 'fun factor' is not necessarily a requirement for active learning. However, because of the enjoyment, student engagement was consistently high, as demonstrated by their active participation in the activities throughout the session, indicating the success of this workshop.

CONCLUSION

Using these activities in the Professional Skills Development Program offered the EAL students in the Department of Management the opportunity to engage with their peers on specific and relevant topics that may assist them in the completion of their degrees. Students' attitudes toward these types of activities were generally positive, especially as these were optional classes for students in addition to their normal course load. Since these activities were offered primarily to EAL students, we believe that students were more willing to communicate with each other without the fear of being judged by their native-English speaking counterparts. At this point, however, this last premise is only speculation based on the group dynamic that we observed. More research on this topic is required and could potentially offer further insight through a more detailed research project, especially with the inclusion of a larger participant group within the context of management and/or business. Overall, the active learning activities described above were both enjoyable and successful; with respect to pedagogical implications, i.e. developing the role of active learning in the EAL and Business contexts, we anticipate continued expansion and use of these materials and similar active learning activities.

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