

AUGMENTING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN LEGAL ENGLISH LESSONS EMPLOYING CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

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Abstract. *Legal English seems to be extremely challenging for learners, as it not only requires a thoroughly foundational knowledge of basic English but also in-depth legal knowledge to excel in this subject. During the process of teaching English for specific purpose course in legal field, the author noticed that student participation in the classes was still limited, which demotivated both teachers and learners in making up effective and exciting lessons. In addition, this also deprives students interest in learning and their opportunity to be equipped specialized language skills for future careers. That fact urged a research to be conducted with the purpose of exploring the reasons why students do not actively participate in classroom activities, as well as which activities can enhance student participation in class sessions. The study was conducted on the class N06 – K45 consisting of 24 students enrolled in the Legal English course – the high quality bachelor's program at Hanoi Law University. After 14 weeks of direct instructions, activities aimed at encouraging student participation were implemented. The research results have identified the reasons why students limit their participation in activities, as well as the factors that help enhance student participation in activities when teachers implement them in the classroom.*

Key words: *classroom activities, student engagement, legal English, English for specific purpose*

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, teaching and learning English for specific purposes have increasingly played a crucial role in the employment opportunities of students after graduation. A good proficiency in specialized English will bring confidence to students in the process of approaching and performing their professional tasks in the future. So, to have a good command of English, learners must have a serious and positive attitude towards the subject. And the participation of learners in class plays a key role in determining their attitude, their absorption of the teaching content, and the amount of knowledge gained in each lesson. At the same time, it also acts a material position in determining the quality of the lesson, as well as assessing the learner's progress. According to Bissex (1996), we teach students by giving them the opportunity to ask questions, guide discussions, and allow students to express their desires. The focus of teaching activity is to enhance learner participation and create a learner-centered learning environment, enable learners

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to improve their critical thinking skills and present specialized knowledge in English. In an earlier study, Berquest & Phillip (1975) concluded that there are three factors hindering student participation in classroom activities including the one-way communication of the teacher, the different learning styles of each student hindering their participation, and the lack of specific guidance from the teacher. A recent study conducted by Tuner & Meyer (2004) also displays that the combination of challenging instructions with effective positive support from the teacher is necessary to improve student participation in classroom activities. Meanwhile, Turner & Patrick (2004) emphasized the connection between study habits and student participation in class. These authors have demonstrated that classroom participation is impacted by factors such as academic performance, individual achievement, goals, understanding instructions, as well as teacher support. Dallimore et al. (2004) assert that the increase in participation during lessons is influenced by questions related to emotions, topics close to everyday life, an interactive classroom environment, and transparent feedback on each learner's level of participation.

From these research results, the author aims to identify the factors hindering students' participation in classroom activities, as well as the activities that can improve learners' engagement in legal English classes at N06 – K45, the high quality bachelor's program at Hanoi Law University.

The hypothesis proposed is whether the implementation of activities aimed at eliminating negative psychological barriers can help improve student participation, and to answer the two questions;

1. Why do learners not actively participate in legal English classes?
2. How can we enhance learner participation in legal English classes?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Categorization of learners according to their degree of classroom engagement

Learning is the process of acquiring new knowledge or transforming existing knowledge, skills, and behaviors. Consequently, if learning activities are characterized as the pursuit of knowledge, skills, and behaviors, students must adopt a proactive approach in that pursuit. Students must actively pursue knowledge by acquiring information both within and beyond the classroom. The manner in which students seek and acquire information frequently manifests in their classroom behavior. Classroom behavior of students can be categorized from passive to active. Mohd (2011) & Hussein (2010) categorize learners into two groups according to their participation status in the classroom. The passive group comprises learners sitting quietly, note-taking, listening, and engaging in activities. The learners in the active group always pose inquiries, articulate perspectives, or respond to the questions raised.

The author Lin (2001) classifies learners into four categories depending on their behavior, namely; the full integration group, the participation in circumstances group, the marginal interaction group, and the silent observation group. In the initial group, students engage actively in classroom activities; they are aware of what they wish to articulate and what they ought to refrain from expressing. Zainal (2007) contends that the involvement of this cohort of students is frequently spontaneous and occurs organically. The engagement state of the second group arises when pupils are affected by diverse factors, including socio-cultural elements, cognition, emotions, linguistic proficiency, or environmental conditions. These factors frequently influence the degree of participation in classroom activities and the interactions among students, as well as between students and teachers, varying with the timing. Students

with less participation typically engage in listening more than speaking during class. In contrast to the cohort of students who actively interact in class, this group typically opts to listen and take notes rather than participate in classroom activities. Lastly, there exists a cohort of pupils who merely observe; these individuals typically refrain from verbal engagement in activities. They appear to assimilate the knowledge presented in the classes through note-taking, employing methods such as audio recording or writing.

According to the varied categorization of student actions in the classroom, the proactive group frequently engages actively in class activities as information searchers. Engaging in activities such as posing inquiries, articulating perspectives, or responding to queries from the teacher and peers exemplifies active engagement by students in the classroom. David (2009) asserts that students' eagerness and willingness to engage in verbal interactions during classroom activities foster a favorable learning environment.

2.2. Factors affecting learners' participation

Previous studies have shown that there are several factors affecting student participation in the classroom, including the following: The first factor is the personality of the students. In the studies by Pajares (1996) & Schunk (1995), it was shown that confident students with good academic performance regularly participate in classroom activities. Rahil et al. (2006) demonstrated that confident personalities exhibit curiosity and a desire to explore. This heartens students to be more dynamic and active in classroom activities. They will show great enthusiasm in seeking new knowledge by asking questions, presenting their viewpoints, as well as discussing topics in class. In their study, Siti et al. (2010) showed that students with a self-limiting personality often become passive in class activities due to their inability to concentrate throughout the lesson, fear of losing face, lack of confidence, unpreparedness, fear of others knowing their abilities, fear of their answers being criticized by the teacher, and feelings of confusion. These students often participate less in class activities. The second factor is the personality and teaching methods of the teacher. In the study by Siti et al. (2010), the personality traits of teachers can influence the level of student participation in classroom activities such as support, understanding, approachability, and friendliness through positive non-verbal behaviors like smiling and nodding while listening to students' answers. Dallimore et al. (2004) & Fassinger (2000) argue that the assertiveness and openness of the teacher also encourage students to actively participate in classroom activities. These positive personality traits encourage students to participate more and more frequently in class. Another study conducted by Siti et al. (2010) aimed to examine the influence of various factors on university students' participation in Malaysia, which only showed that teachers' personality traits play an important role in enticing students into engaging in classroom discussion activities. Besides positive traits, the teacher's methods also impact the classroom environment. In the study by Nurzatulshima et al. (2009), it was shown that student participation levels were higher when teachers divided the class into small groups of 3 to 5 members, assigned tasks, monitored the progress of the groups, and provided specific feedback. The use of diverse teaching techniques by the teacher will encourage students to be more active, preventing them from feeling bored or discouraged during the lesson. The third factor is the personality of the classmates. One of the important findings in the study by Siti et al. (2010) on classroom activities of students at a university in Malaysia shows that the personality traits of classmates acts a significant role in motivating students to participate in classroom activities. Additionally, Cayamus & Martin (2004) point out that students with an open personality often have a positive influence on other students in inspiring them to join in classroom activities. The final factor is the classroom environment. The size of the classroom also affects students'

motivation when participating in class discussions. In the study by Shaheen et al. (2010), about 90% of the surveyed students indicated that they preferred taking part in group discussions rather than in large classrooms. A classroom equipped with adequate lighting, air conditioning, and other essential devices will make students feel comfortable and may encourage them to participate in class activities. From the results of previous studies and the theoretical basis, it shows that actively participating in classroom activities will help students learn more. However, teachers and educational administrators need to further investigate the factors that promote students' active participation in class.

3. METHOD

3.1. Research design

This descriptive, empirical research was primarily designed to ascertain the factors constraining student involvement in classroom activities and to evaluate whether the introduction of specific activities by educators could enhance student engagement. The research was carried out with a cohort of students from class N06 – K45 of the high quality bachelor's program at Hanoi Law University over a duration of fourteen weeks of in-person instruction.

3.2. Participants

The subjects participating in this study are students from class N06 – High-Quality Law Program at Hanoi Law University. The class N06 – K45 comprises 24 students, including 6 males (25%) and 18 females (75%). At the time the research was conducted, the students had completed 2 English courses, including Advanced English course, Legal English course 1, and were participating in the Legal English course 2.

3.3. Research instruments

The research applied a combination of different methods. Among them, the two main methods used are quantitative and qualitative methods. In addition, the research also employs methods of analysis and synthesis of theories related to the topic, as well as synthesis and comparison to propose specific, scientific, and effective recommendations. Specifically, analytical and synthesis tools were selected to establish the theoretical foundation for research. The quantitative method was employed through a survey questionnaire consisting of 2 parts; Part 1 includes 3 questions related to the interviewee's information and part 2 includes 31 questions designed according to the 5-point Likert scale (from completely disagree/completely dissatisfied to completely agree/completely satisfied, corresponding to scores from 1 to 5). The 31 survey questions focus on four areas such as learners' personality (Questions 1 to 9); Teacher's personality and teaching methods (Questions 10 to 18); group members' personality (Questions 19 to 26); and classroom space and decoration (Questions 27 to 31). This survey questionnaire construction was based on theoretical foundations and the results of previous studies related to factors influencing student participation. The survey questionnaire was distributed to students in class N06. To ensure the authenticity of the research results. The author uses the quantitative method by conducting interviews with some students representing the groups who participated in answering the survey to gather more in-depth

opinions. The methods of analysis, synthesis, and comparison were chosen to process the collected data, and then compared to identify the barriers as well as the teachers' methods that interest students to participating in classroom activities.

3.4. Procedure

The survey questionnaire was distributed to 24 participants in the form of a Google Form. After 1 week, all 24 valid responses were fully received. The obtained results were processed using SPSS 20.0 software to calculate the average score. The significance of the specific average scores is as follows; Mean from 1.00 to 1.80 is 'Completely Disagree'; from 1.81 to 2.60 is 'Disagree'; from 2.61 to 3.40 is 'Neutral'; from 3.41 to 4.20 is 'Agree'; and from 4.21 to 5.00 is 'Completely Agree'. After that, a 3-question semi-interview was carried out with 4 students whose responses were recorded and classified according to the corresponding standards.

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Over a fourteen-week period of direct instruction, the educator performed observations, surveys, and interviews with students in the class N06 enrolling in the Legal English 2 course following the implementation of activities designed to augment student participation in class. The specific results are as follows:

4.1. Factors determining students' engagement in classroom activities

4.1.1. Learners' personality

The results in Table 1 show that personality affects students' attitudes towards participating in classroom activities. Five first statements including statement number 1 ($M=4.18$; $SD=0.578$), statement number 2 ($M=3.54$; $SD=0.415$), statement number 3 ($M=4.14$; $SD=0.482$), statement number 4 ($M=4.12$; $SD=0.456$), and statement number 5 ($M=3.59$; $SD=0.419$) indicate that students limit their participation in classroom activities due to a lack of confidence and fear of being judged by teachers or other classmates. Therefore, they often prefer a passive learning style such as listening and taking notes instead of expressing their personal opinions or asking questions when they don't understand the issue. Statement number 7 ($M=2.79$) shows that not all students in the class actively participate in the teacher's activities. Instead, statement number 6 ($M=4.21$) shows that students only participate if the teacher's activities are interesting to them. Statement number 8 ($M=3.16$) indicates that listening and taking notes do not help students understand and remember the lesson better. Meanwhile, Statement number 9 ($M=4.56$) indicates that students agree that interacting with teachers and participating in classroom activities helps them learn and acquire more knowledge. From the results in Table 1, it shows that students' personalities are the barrier limiting their participation in classroom activities. However, if teachers create activities that interest them, it will help them be more open and active in classroom interactions, thereby enabling them to learn more. Besides, standard deviation (SDs) of all 9 statements witnessed less than 1.0; namely it ran from 0.415 to 0.792, which proved that there was not much difference among all participants' answers.

Table 1 Determinants of Learners' Personality

Statement	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Description
1. You refrain from responding to the teacher's question due to apprehension of providing an inaccurate answer	24	4.18	.578	Agree
2. You refrain from participating in the activities due to a lack of comprehension regarding their structure and requirements	24	3.54	.415	Agree
3. You refrain from engaging in class conversations due to apprehension that your peers would discover your true competence in your major and language	24	4.14	.482	Agree
4. You are afraid of being laughed at by your classmates and teachers for your answer	24	4.12	.456	Agree
5. You favor auditory learning and note-taking above verbal expression of your thoughts	24	3.59	.419	Agree
6. You engage solely in activities that pique your interest	24	4.21	.432	Completely Agree
7. You are prepared to respond to the teacher's inquiries and articulate your perspectives in every lesson	24	2.79	.419	Neutral
8. Listening and note-taking enhance your comprehension and retention of the lecture	24	3.16	.792	Neutral
9. Engaging with the teacher and participating in classroom activities enhances your comprehension and facilitates your acquisition of new knowledge	24	4.56	.408	Completely Agree
Valid N (listwise)	24			

4.1.2. Teacher's personality and methodology

Table 2 contains the evaluations of students towards the teaching faculty. Statement number 10 ($M=4.18$; $SD=0.578$); number 11 ($M=3.54$; $SD=0.415$); number 15 ($M=3.44$; $SD=0.432$) indicate that students have positive feedback about the teachers' personalities. The results show that the teacher is quite enthusiastic in supporting students both during and outside of class hours. Regarding the techniques the teacher implemented during the teaching process, the results corresponding to statement number 12 ($M=3.43$; $SD=0.482$); statement number 13 ($M=4.12$; $SD=0.456$); statement number 14 ($M=3.59$; $SD=0.419$); and statement number 16 ($M=3.59$; $SD=0.419$) indicate that students have positive feedback towards the methods used by teachers in the teaching process. In fact, when receiving negative feedback in class, students often feel displeased. However, statement number 17 ($M=2.56$; $SD=0.792$) shows the opposite; the in-class feedback from the teacher is still received positively by the students. This is because the teacher's feedback makes students feel close and as if they are being helped to improve, rather than feeling embarrassed in front of their peers. Statement number 18 ($M=4.56$; $SD=0.408$), students completely agree that the teacher's feedback motivates them to participate in class activities and study better. In summary, the personality and teaching methods of the teacher have a significant impact on the learners. Learners will feel interested and actively participate in class activities if the teacher provides them with specific guidance and feedback that helps them overcome their limitations and make progress in their studies.

Table 2 Teacher's personality and methodology

Statements	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Description
1. The teacher enthusiastically supports students in class activities	24	4.18	.578	Agree
2. The teacher is always ready to explain when students do not understand the question	24	3.54	.415	Agree
3. The teacher typically employs various activities for each type of instruction	24	3.43	.482	Agree
4. The teacher partitions the pupils into small study groups of 3 to 4 individuals	24	4.12	.456	Agree
5. The teacher frequently offers collaborative homework to enable students to prepare beforehand	24	3.59	.419	Agree
6. The teacher consistently assists students in preparing group tasks and homework, either personally or via online platforms such as Zalo and MS Teams	24	3.44	.432	Agree
7. The teacher often provides specific feedback for each student	24	3.59	.419	Agree
8. You experience discomfort when the teacher critiques your response as inadequate in front of the class	24	2.56	.792	Disagree
9. You feel inspired when the teacher identifies the areas for growth	24	4.56	.408	Completely Agree
Valid N (listwise)	24			

4.1.3. Group members' personality

Table 3 Factors of group members' personality

Statements	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Description
1. You are ready to participate in class activities when they have been prepared and discussed in the group	24	4.18	.578	Agree
2. Your group members typically engage diligently when given assignments	24	3.54	.415	Agree
3. Your group members all support each other to prepare the best when assigned homework by the teacher	24	3.14	.482	Neutral
4. Your group members all always want to get good grades	24	4.12	.456	Agree
5. You feel compelled to assume responsibility for the group effort because to the others' high level of proactivity	24	3.59	.419	Agree
6. You assert that the team leader is accountable for the entirety of the job; therefore, if the team leader fails to delegate tasks, the matter is concluded	24	3.44	.432	Agree
7. You have insecurity in group settings due to the proficiency of the members, who occasionally perform tasks on your behalf	24	2.79	.496	Neutral
8. You possess confidence in collaborative environments due to the members' ability to allocate responsibilities based on individual strengths	24	3.56	.792	Agree
Valid N (listwise)	24			

From Table 3, it can be witnessed that almost all statements gained positive and similar assessments from participants with standard deviation less than 1.0. Namely, statement 19 ($M=4.18$; $SD=0.578$) shows that when prepared in a group, students feel more confident and proactive in presenting their ideas. Especially, working in teams with serious, proactive, positive members who have a high sense of responsibility towards the common task (statement 20; $M=3.54$; $SD=0.415$), (statement 23; $M=3.59$; $SD=0.419$); always supporting each other (statement 21; $M=3.14$; $SD=0.482$), knowing the strengths and weaknesses of each member to leverage and support each other (statement 26; $M=3.56$; $SD=0.792$), and striving for everyone to achieve the best results (statement 22; $M=4.12$; $SD=0.456$) will help students feel collaborative, supported, and ready to express their opinions. On the contrary, students with a dependent or passive attitude towards group work (statement 25; $M=2.79$; $SD=0.496$). In summary, the personality and attitude of group members affect the effectiveness and level of interaction of other members. If working with positive members, students will have a more proactive and positive interaction attitude. And conversely, if the members of the group are not united, lack trust, and do not support each other, the level of participation will be limited. Therefore, teachers need to research to find solutions that help form student groups that are compatible with each other and support one another to enhance student participation in class.

4.1.4. Classroom space and arrangement

Table 4 Classroom space and arrangement

Statements	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Description
1. The compact classroom is conducive to discussion and interactive activities	24	4.32	.689	Completely Agree
2. The classroom is comprehensively outfitted with projectors, air conditioning, and various instructional assistance technologies	24	3.51	.411	Agree
3. The tables and chairs are organized to promote discussion activities, facilitating interaction with the teacher and peers in the classroom	24	3.84	.552	Agree
4. The existing classroom configuration hinders participation in class activities	24	1.32	.378	Completely Disagree
5. The classroom space is too small, making you feel uncomfortable during activities in class	24	1.79	.519	Completely Disagree
Valid N (listwise)	24			

4.2. Determinant influencing students' engagement in activities

Following the observation and interviews conducted with students across several groups in the class N06, the results are as follows:

4.2.1. Evaluation methodology throughout the educational process.

Question 'Will participation in class activities be considered for attendance and midterm grades?'

Among the four surveyed students, they assert that this element enhances their proactivity in class participation. The initial student asserts that "*amassing points throughout the*

educational process will be more beneficial, alleviating excessive pressure during the final examination." The second student expresses a comparable perspective, stating, *"To attain a favorable overall score in each subject, the individual component scores must be elevated."* The third student stated, *"Seniors from prior courses informed me that active participation in class positively influences the teacher's perception and leads to favorable grades."* The other student agreed that *'the grading policies of school administrators and teachers influence students' classroom attitudes'*.

4.2.2. Execution of Educator Activities

Question *'What is your opinion on the manner in which educators execute activities during lessons?'*

Among the four pupils representing the four groups as per Lin's (2001) classification. The initial student said, *"The instructor's activities are organized variably for each skill and category of exercise."* The second student stated, *"I appreciate the individual and group assignments assigned for completion at home after each class, as they allow me time to collaborate with my peers."* The third and fourth students concur: *"Group activities in the WASP format are highly pragmatic as they allow students to familiarize themselves with the authentic professional endeavors of lawyers and legal practitioners."* The efforts of instructors exert a considerable influence.

4.2.3. Teacher's Personality and teaching Methods

Question: *"How do you assess the teacher's personality and pedagogical approaches in class?"*

A survey conducted with four students from four distinct groups revealed unanimous positive evaluations regarding the teacher's personality and instructional methods. Nonetheless, the surveyor noted that conducting interviews to elicit student feedback proved challenging in achieving objective responses, as students often hesitate to convey negative sentiments towards their instructor, particularly when the teacher is the one conducting the interview. Conversely, the results from the anonymous survey section indicate that students expressed favorable opinions regarding the teacher's personality and teaching techniques.

5. CONCLUSION

We cannot deny the reality that some students in the class are reluctant to answer questions or participate in class activities. Therefore, enhancing student participation can positively impact the classroom learning environment and help keep students engaged and focused on what they are learning. Through this research, the author has made several suggestions to encourage student participation in class.

Firstly, the teacher must assess students' prior knowledge and adjust their lectures accordingly, building on what students already know. As a result, students will feel more confident and engaged when new knowledge is connected to what they already know.

Secondly, the teacher to encourage student collaboration, creating favorable opportunities for students to work and interact with each other whenever possible.

Thirdly, the teacher should break down the discussion content and assign specific tasks to students in various working modes such as individual, pair, or group. This

activity allows students to become 'experts' in each small part of the knowledge, and then in larger and deeper content.

Last but not least, the teacher should enable students to choose their learning methods and encourage them to suggest adjustments to the teacher when they feel the method is not suitable. Choosing the learning methods and types of activities they will engage in makes students feel invested in the lessons.

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