A Motivational Participation Points System

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This article introduces the Participation Points System (PPS), which is a simple yet effective means of helping especially novice-level students gain the confidence they need to communicate in the classroom. The PPS is a method of giving students something tangible while activities, especially communicative activities, are underway to represent their participation scores. The primary intention is to encourage students to speak English without fear of making mistakes, and convince them that learning English is enjoyable. This then gives students a positive attitude towards English for life.

　この論文は学生の授業参加を促すためのパーティシペーションポイント・システムParticipation Points System（PPS）についての説明をするものである。PPSは簡素なシステムでありながら、学生に授業内でコミュニケーションを計るための自信や意欲を身に付けことを助け、初級レベルの学生などに対して特に効果的である。この採点システムとは授業中、自分がどれほど授業に参加をしているかを学生自身が明確に分かるよう、点数を実際に手に取って触ることのできる物で表す方法である。PPSの最大の目的は、学生を英語の表現法や文法を「間違えてしまうかもしれない」という不安や心配から開放し、さらに英語を覚えて使うことが、楽しいという意識を植え付けることである。これにより学生は生涯、ポジティブな姿勢で英語に取り組むことができる。

This article discusses a motivational Participation Points System (PPS) as a means of helping students gain the confidence they need to communicate in the classroom. It explains what the PPS is, and why it is an effective way of motivating students. Also, the results of a survey on the students' perceptions of the PPS are presented.

The Importance of Motivating Students to Overcome Passivity

It is important to motivate students to overcome their passivity, but this is no easy task for teachers, especially those of novice-level students. Student attitude is an important factor since it affects their motivation towards learning. Attitude is defined by Finchpark (2002) as, "…sets of beliefs about language learning, the target culture, their culture, the teacher, the learning task, etc." (p.2). Thus, if students believe that they can ultimately succeed in English, it would assist in overcoming their passivity, and not be afraid of making mistakes in front of the teacher. Attitude is in turn closely associated with motivation and Norris-Holt (2001) defines motivation as, "…the learner's orientation with regard to the goal of learning a second language." (p.1). Motivation can also be described as the impetus to create and sustain intentions and goal seeking acts (Ames & Ames, 1989). With attitude and motivation being so

closely associated, both have an influence on learning and acquisition. Thus, a healthy attitude and motivation is a prerequisite for overcoming passivity.

Gardner and Lambert (1972, p.132) highlight "integrative motivation" which stresses "a sincere and personal interest in the people and culture represented by the other group" and "instrumental motivation" which stresses "the practical value and advantages of learning a new language". Integrative motivation is the desire on the part of the student to feel an affinity with the people, the society and the culture of the language that is learned, and is usually referred to in the context of living in the target language community (Falk 1978, and Finegan, 1999). Instrumental motivation, on the other hand, concerns the practical and concrete rewards that a student would desire (Hudson, 2000). This relates to practical achievement purposes such as passing an exam, getting a degree or a getting a good job in the future. Whilst integrative motivation may play an important role it would seem that a student's opinion of learning a language is significantly shaped by its perceived usefulness and relevance to future career goals (Chambers, 1999).

Norris-Holt (2001, p.2) though observes difficulties in using the expression "integrative" in Japanese society that is principally based on monoculture. Also, Benson (1991) had difficulty applying "integrative" and "instrumental" among Japanese students. He therefore established a third grouping and called it "personal", for example "pleasure at being able to read English, and enjoyment of entertainment in English" (Benson, 1991, p.36 cited in Norris-Holt, 2001, p.2). While Benson was able to find integrative and personal reasons for studying English in a limited sense, he could not find instrumental motivation to any significant degree.

Norris-Holt (2001) said,

> Benson suggests that the student's rejection of instrumental motivation illustrates the view that students do not perceive English as having a vital role to play in their lives. He also makes the point that the rejection of instrumental reasons for the study of English may indicate that the Japanese language is considered adequate for normal daily verbal exchange. (p.4)

In addition, Gray (1999) says,

> The bald fact is that most students are only taking English classes because they are required to, many have no real interest in really learning it …and they are acutely aware that they will never use English outside the classroom. (p.45)

Teachers therefore shoulder much responsibility, as they are required to play a very important role in motivation. Teachers need to convey enthusiasm to minimize the potential psychological distance and the propensity for students to create mental barriers between themselves and the target language as well as its culture.

The PPS

The PPS is a method of motivating classroom participation, especially communicative participation, by giving students something tangible (such as discs, marbles, poker chips, etc.) while activities are underway to represent their participation scores.

The communicative approach however emphasizes meaning above structure, fluency above accuracy, and meaningful social interaction above grammatical accuracy (Gray, 1990). Students therefore have to make quite a challenging adjustment when they are faced with the communicative approach and most Japanese students experience a communicative classroom for the first time when they enter a university.

In addition to Gardner and Lambert's (1972) intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, Fisher (1990) noted a combination of satisfaction and reward (success in the task) as an important component of motivation.

In a classroom situation where intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is generally lacking, and passivity prevails, it becomes necessary to combine satisfaction and reward, to give motivation a chance to develop. Thus, without a simple and effective task-based system of creating satisfaction there would be no foundation upon which to build intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Therefore, the intention of the PPS is to reward students in a simple yet tangible way. The best form of praise is rewarding them immediately with participation points that they can actually see and touch, and making these participation points an important part of the grading process.

I had tried unsuccessfully to find a practical way of implementing a tangible means of motivating participation through giving the students an immediate sense of reward. Some approaches had a slight impact but nothing really worked well by way of sustaining motivation until I read the following by Hadley (1997),

> What I have done is to turn my participation points into a form of classroom hard currency, which the students cash in at the end of each class for participation points. This year I use poker chips (before I used cardboard coupons). It really does not matter what one chooses to represent the actual participation points. (p.1)

Hadley is the inventor of the PPS, and I had the honor of working with him at the Communicative English Program of the Niigata University of International and Information Studies in Japan. He encouraged me to try the PPS in my classes. After applying the PPS the difference was very obvious. I immediately noticed more hands going up and communicative activities becoming lively. Since then I have used the PPS over the years and continue to use it at the Center for English Language Education at Asia University (with my lower proficiency-level freshman students).

In my classes, a glass disc is worth one point while a marble is worth two points. Students are always encouraged and rewarded for going the extra mile. I give the discs, worth one point each, to students for fulfilling what could be considered "standard" for participation, in line of what is expected of them at their level such as speaking in English, answering questions (one-word or short answers), and asking me if they do not understand. However, if they speak more "in depth" and volunteer to answer more difficult questions and elaborate in any way, they receive marbles worth two points each.

Then just before the end of class, I have the students count their participation points, and call out their scores to me as I read their names on the roster. I record each score (which is up to a maximum of 5), and then collect the discs and marbles.

Students' Perspectives of the PPS

I administered a survey to all my freshman English students (in the faculties of Business, Law and Economics) on October 23, 2003 and received 47 responses. All freshman English students at Asia University have to do one year of compulsory English study, and although they are from these faculties, our approach is not content-based but instead uses the communicative approach. There are 22 proficiency English levels at the Center for English Language Education at Asia University and I teach the second-lowest proficiency level. My classes range from about 15 to 20 students in size.

The questionnaires were handed out and briefly explained to the students who were encouraged to ask questions about anything they did not understand. After that they were given 15 minutes to complete the questionnaires, which included the open-ended question: "Please write anything you want to about the Participation Points System". All students appeared to have no trouble in completing the questionnaire in the required time, and all but two wrote comments for the open-ended question. The results of the survey are shown in the Table 1.

Table 1. Survey results

Survey Results (n = 47 with Business = 15, Law = 14 and Economics = 18)

Questions	"YES" Percentage by Class		Total "Yes" Percentage
Participation Points is a good idea	Business	100 %	100 %
	Law	100 %	
	Economics	100 %	
Participation Points are not stressful	Business	67 %	68 %
	Law	64 %	
	Economics	72 %	
Participation points are fun, like a game	Business	100 %	91 %
	Law	79 %	
	Economics	94 %	
Participation points make me speak English more in the classroom	Business	93 %	81 %
	Law	79 %	
	Economics	72 %	
Participation points make me try harder in all classroom activities	Business	87 %	80 %
	Law	71 %	
	Economics	83 %	
Participation points make me more interested in English	Business	73 %	79 %
	Law	86 %	
	Economics	78 %	
Participation points make me a better speaker of English	Business	73 %	71 %
	Law	79 %	
	Economics	61 %	

The results strongly suggest that the PPS makes studying English meaningful and thereby motivational for them. Also, most found the PPS to be fun, followed by other sizable proportions who felt the PPS had helped them use more English in the classroom, try harder, and had made them more interested in English.

At the lower end of the scale, but still well within the majority, there was agreement that the PPS had made them better speakers of English and there was also general agreement that the PPS was not stressful. These results showed that the PPS was thought to be a good idea by the students, and is well liked and regarded as beneficial by most students.

There were no negative comments for the open-ended question, and their answers can be classified into broad categories as follows:

- I like the PPS (the majority said this)

- The PPS makes me try harder

- The PPS is interesting

It is interesting to note that these positive results are like Hadley's (1997). They were a result of a similar survey he carried out among his students on their perceptions of his use of the PPS:

> What I find significant is that 83% surveyed believe in constant reinforcement for participation. Not only that, 78% felt they had more chances to speak English, and 75% of the those surveyed were making more effort to speak English. More than half felt less stressful and wanted to speak more English as a result! (p.2)

Comments on the PPS

It seems the main reason why the PPS works is because it combines motivation and participation by giving positive and instantaneous feedback to students. It is a very straightforward, even simple approach, but its real strength lies in its tangibility, with which the students can identify.

They raise their hands to answer questions, and they reach out to receive the discs and marbles. They thank me with a bow of the head when they receive them, and look at them with a sense of achievement. It makes what could often be called boring classroom activities more of a game, and the students take these points really seriously. They also engage less in avoidance strategies, such as sitting at the back of the class and trying not to be noticed. Some even come to check that I have recorded their scores correctly in my roster after the lesson.

These are the same students who, without the PPS would, by their passive nature, rarely solicit feedback on their performance. Even if I were to elaborate verbally on their performances (without the PPS) it is doubtful if they would comprehend it fully or be convinced of the sincerity. However, the points speak for themselves, and students know they are performing well without even telling them so. Through the PPS students realize that talking freely and making comprehensible communication is more important, and more meaningful, than worrying about making mistakes. They put in more effort, and they generally get better at what they are doing, which in turn sustains their motivation.

Despite the effectiveness of the PPS, it does take a lot of physical exertion to maneuver around the classroom distributing discs and marbles, especially if there are four

45-minute classes in succession. I am lucky to have fairly small numbers of students in my classes (usually less than twenty). I often have them place their bags and umbrellas well out of the way as this makes it fairly easy to walk around unhindered.

Also, walking around the class constantly can detract somewhat from focusing on specifics and teaching higher quality lessons. However, and depending on how it is administered, it can be used to place the teacher more in the role of facilitator, making students feel more in control, which encourages them towards taking an active role. In this way it helps teachers show rather than tell and lets the students do the talking.

It could be tempting to use the PPS in a disciplinary way by taking away points once they have been given (for example if a student returns to passivity once having accumulated a certain number of points, or disrupts the class). This can be effective, given that even undisciplined students generally take the PPS seriously, and given that they know that they will have to call back their points at the end of class. However, it is not advised to take points away, and if it must be done it should be done sparingly, as it can impact negatively not only on the student in question, but on the class as a whole. The PPS should rather be used to persuade passive students to participate and encourage weaker students by rewarding them for what they can do rather than penalizing them for what they cannot do.

It is therefore important to note that, even if students get answers wrong, they will still be rewarded points, and points should also not be withheld or removed for wrong answers. Points are essentially given to reward participation, and

make students understand that there is no shame in making mistakes. In this way it helps them understand that making mistakes is an important part of learning, and thereby helps them overcome their passivity.

Another possible criticism of the PPS is that it looks bizarre giving young adults discs and marbles. This may be seen as behaviorist in nature. However, after using the PPS for a number of years I know that it works, and the survey shows that the students like it and feel they benefit from it. It would probably be best to use the PPS only with students doing compulsory freshman courses, and also only with the lower-level and exceptionally passive students where motivation is generally low. This is because it helps students make the transition between their generally unpleasant grammar-drilling orientated experiences of English at high school and the communicative approach. Once they have overcome their passivity the PPS can be removed, perhaps after they have had a year of experience with the communicative approach. At this time they can go solo as they would have a better idea of what to do and what is expected of them in a communicative classroom.

Conclusion

It seems clear that the PPS holds certain benefits, and that it works effectively as a motivational tool in the classroom. It is simple and effective as well as tangible. It also seems from the research that students identify with it and that it does help them overcome their passivity. There have been other teachers in my teaching program who have tried the PPS and have also found that it is effective in helping make their classes more lively, and talkative. The main possible

drawback is that it is teacher-centered and possibly a behaviorist approach towards teaching that some teachers and students may object to.

Some possible variations, or areas of further study could be having students record their own scores (rather than having them call out their scores to the teacher at the end of the lesson). Also, another student, rather than the teacher, could be appointed to hand out the points and this could be done on a rotating basis. Finally, the difficulty of getting around the classroom to hand out the points could be overcome by having a way of throwing the points to the students and having them catch them. I know that this could offend some students, so if it is done I would suggest using something soft like little balls (such as ping-pong balls). These are options that I have not tried yet but would like to experiment with in the coming semester. I suggest trying the PPS in your classrooms, as I am sure that this simple yet effectual approach will help your students overcome their passivity.

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