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Challenging Assumptions
Looking In, Looking Out

Turning passive students into active learners

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Featured Speaker

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There are many definitions of active learning, an umbrella term that refers to several models of instruction that focus the responsibility of learning on learners. However, you don't need to be versed in all aspects of active learning theory to see examples of passive students in action—or not in action. Passive students, basically students who are the recipient of a delivery education system, look bored, and are often millions of miles away from the classroom in some fantasy world of their own. Often they are just asleep.

I became aware of this uncomfortable truth about teaching and learning whilst watching lessons where the teacher provided so much input that the students hardly had to do any thinking for themselves. And so they didn't. The teachers were working hard and they meant well. But they were not connecting with a generation of students who are too active in their out-of-school life. They need to be engaged.

In my talk, I aimed to do the following:

- to look at some basic classroom procedures and suggest ways that students can be more actively involved in them
- to encourage teachers to see the classroom experience as a dialogue, not a monologue
- to extract the maximum amount of fun out of typical textbook contents

There is no doubt that a lot of learning is and has to be passive, in the sense that students have to spend time listening to the teacher or reading a text. Exercise material is particularly passive. There is nothing wrong with some passive learning—in fact a percentage of our students probably prefer studying this way. However, when a lesson becomes too passive, by which I really mean too teacher or book-led, the ability of students to actually benefit diminishes rapidly.

In my talk, I looked at some common aspects of a passive lesson—teacher presentation of new language, reading passages and exercise material—and suggested ways to get students more involved. My main thesis was that learners retain more of what they are taught when they are actively involved in their own learning.

My main message was very simple—there are some English classes where the teacher's or the textbook's roles are too dominant, and the students' roles are too passive.

I started by reminding teachers that teaching a passive lesson is hard work, which is one of the main reasons for trying to change the way we do things. If the teacher takes responsibility for everything that happens in the classroom, it can be exhausting. It is my belief that you can reduce the stress and tiredness of teaching by giving more responsibility for what happens in the classroom to the students themselves.

Students learn more if they are actively involved in all parts of the learning and teaching processes. As we all know, these processes aren't always the same thing.

What is a passive lesson?

I outlined what I think are the most common features of what I would call a passive lesson. They are as follows:

1. Students listen while the teacher explains a new structure item.

This is a particularly strange part of the class for me. In a different talk, called "Active Grammar," I show how to make students responsible for the procedures during which new structure items and lexical sets are taught. I have added some of those ideas below. It's a different talk and maybe I will do it at JALT 2008.

2. Students listen to a tape of a conversation illustrating the new structure.

A necessary part of the learning process, but potentially another time when students will feel uninvolved.

3. Students practise the conversation in pairs.

Pairwork—good! Just repeating what they heard—bad! See below for an idea how to make this more active.

4. Students read a text and answer comprehension questions.

Reading is essential. Some teachers try to make it more *active* by asking students to read the text aloud a sentence at a time. Bad, bad idea. It is not active—it is just hard and pointless graft for the students, which none of their classmates listen to.

5. Students do an exercise from the workbook.

The most passive activity of all. Below there is an idea to spice up workbook activities.

6. Teacher gives students some written homework.

Active lessons

Overall, the students aren't very active in the above lesson plan. Let's look at some of the aspects of this passive lesson and see if we can find ways to get the students more involved.

Explaining new structure items

There are many ways to present new language—for example, through a story which leads to a marker sentence (a sentence which contains an example of the new structure), through mime, or by explaining. Some teachers like to explain a new grammar item in the students' own language, others prefer to do it in English.

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with any of these ways but I have noticed that many teachers give *all* the information that is needed in the build-up to a new item, when they could easily ask the students themselves for details, for example, to add information to the story in a story presentation.

Let me explain what I mean with the following example, from a genuine lesson that I observed.

I once saw the following story-presentation of the present perfect tense, introducing the use with *since* and *for*. The sentence that the teacher was aiming to teach was: *She's been in New York since 2000*.

The teacher had a series of flashcards, a picture of a woman, a picture of a man, a picture of London, another one of New York, and even a picture of the CBS TV studio in New York.

This was the exchange between the teacher and the students, who answered in chorus:

Teacher: *This is Jane. What's her name?*

Students: *Jane!*

Teacher: *She comes from London. Where does she come from?*

Students: *London!*

Teacher: *Now she lives in New York. Where does she live?*

Students: *New York!*

etc etc etc

This rather behaviourist teaching method may seem quite old-fashioned to you, but it is still common. The classroom was very noisy, the students spoke every 20 seconds or so, but they were not involved.

So how can we change this and make the students more active and actively involved? First of all, why not let them give the details of the story presentation where it is possible for them to do so?

For example, the students can choose not only the names of the characters, but also where they come from and where they live now. In fact, the teacher can elicit information to complete details all the way through the presentation. The only thing that the teacher needs to give is the marker sentence, the first example of the new language: *She's been in X since X*. The rest can be supplied by the students.

Using dialogues

The first dialogues appeared in English teaching materials more than 300 years ago, in a book which was written to help French dressers—French people who came to England to help aristocrats who didn't know how to put on their own clothes! Dialogues or other examples of spoken English then disappeared from course material until the middle of the 20th century. My French and German course books in the 1960s, for example, had no dialogues.

However, in about 1950, the Berlitz School published a book which contained a series of dialogues designed to present new language. Almost all of the dialogues were between two people called John and Mary Brown. We presume that they were man and wife, but you couldn't tell, as they started most conversations by introducing themselves to each other. Thereafter, some of the exchanges were frankly surreal. Here's an example:

John Brown: *Hello, I'm John Brown.*

Mary Brown: *Hello, I'm Mary Brown.*

John Brown: *Have we a house?*

Mary Brown: *Yes, we have a house.*

I wonder who they thought they were writing for—amnesiacs?

Dialogues are much more realistic now, but they are also predictable and often quite dull. The worst are the ones that try to be amusing. But the real problem is not the dialogues, but the teachers who slavishly accept them

as the one possible way of expressing a certain idea. We sometimes forget that they were not, with the greatest respect to coursebook writers, written by great literary writers, and are not set in stone. In other words, they are just one example of how people speak to each other. Teachers should offer students the chance to adapt, change, re-write ... even conversations between the central characters in a book.

Activity 1 - The Alex-Jane dialogue

In my talk, I used the following dialogue, which I told the group I was going to reveal to them line by line. I asked them to imagine that they were in my elementary class. Before letting them see the dialogue, I said that it was designed to illustrate past tense *wh-* questions. I told them that I had already taught them the form of past tense questions, and that they already knew a number of past tense verbs. I then explained that because the dialogue was so predictable, I was going to reveal it one line at a time to see how much they could guess. I did this on Powerpoint, but explained that in class, you would do it on an overhead projector.

Jane: *Hi, Alex!*

Alex: *Hi, Jane!*

Jane: *How are you?*

Alex: *I'm fine. And you?*

Jane: *I'm fine, too!*

Alex: *What did you do last night?*

Jane: *I went to the movies.*

Alex: *Really? What did you see?*

Jane: *The new Harry Potter movie.*

Alex: *Did you enjoy it?*

Jane: *Yes! It was great!*

As each line was revealed, the group had fun trying to guess the next line. I then asked them to practice the conversation in pairs, much more fun because they had worked hard predicting it. I wanted them to be creative—to be active—but I was also aware that they were elementary level, and that the creativity had to be something manageable. So I told them that they should start reading the dialogue again, but when they got to the question: *What did you do last night?*, they had to change the answer, and they couldn't use *went* and they couldn't use *movies*.

The group did as I asked. For a follow-up, I probably wouldn't ask them to act out their conversation for the rest of the class, but I would ask them to write it down for homework.

Reading texts

Despite the huge number of authentic reading text types—reports, emails, signposts etc etc—most reading texts in coursebooks are either informative or narrative. I suggested an activity to do with each of these text types.

Activity 2 - Informative reading text

The way to maximise the active possibilities of an informative reading text—delete some of the information,

and give the class the text with gaps. I ask them to try to imagine what the missing words are. Nothing new so far. The words in bold italics are the ones I would delete or mask.

- 1 The oldest written language is ***Egyptian***. The earliest hieroglyphics are dated 3,100 BC, more than 5,000 years ago.
- 2 The oldest words in English may be ***apple, bad, gold and tin***.
- 3 There are about 7,000 languages and dialects spoken in the world. About ***845*** of them are spoken in India.
- 4 ***Mandarin Chinese (putonhua)*** is spoken as a first language by more people than any other language in the world. It is spoken by nearly 70 per cent of a population of 1.3 billion people.
- 5 The commonest sound in language is the /a:/ sound, ***as in father***.
- 6 There is an African language which has only three numbers. The numbers are ***one, two and more than two***.

What makes this activity interesting, is that when I ask them for the answers, I don't tell them if they are right or wrong. I just say thank you and keep collecting answers. Not telling them if they are right or wrong has three distinct advantages:

1. No one feels bad if they get it wrong.
2. There is an opportunity to listen to lots of different answers. (If the first answer is right, and you say 'Yes', you have effectively blocked off possible contributions from other students.)
3. By the end, the class is dying to know what the right answers are.

You show the right answers. The students who were right are triumphant. No one remembers who gave wrong answers, so there is no embarrassment.

Activity 3 - Narrative reading text

With a narrative reading text, you can enliven the lesson by allowing students to contribute extra details and information. Take this rather ordinary text, for example.

At the hospital near where I live, all the doctors are women and all the nurses are men. When new patients arrive at the hospital, they always call the doctors nurses, which makes the doctors feel quite annoyed. And they also call the nurses doctors, which makes the nurses feel quite pleased.

One day at the hospital, a patient, a man, approached a doctor. "Excuse me, nurse," said the patient. "When can I see the doctor?"

"Listen," said the doctor. "I'm a doctor, and the man over there that you think is a doctor is actually a student nurse."

"Oh, sorry," said the patient. "The last time I came to this hospital, that doctor, sorry—that nurse—that nurse said that you were a nurse."

"Well, I'm not," said the doctor. "I'm a doctor, not a nurse."

"Well, once again, sorry about that," said the patient. "By the way, what's your name?"

"Nurse," said the doctor. "Doctor Nurse."

With a reading text like this, I always ask students for extra information. They cannot answer my questions just by reading the text itself. For example, I ask *Where's the hospital?* If the students answer *Near where I live*, or *Near where you live*, I reply that it is actually near where the writer lives. Where's that?

At first, students are confused about this. I say that none of us know, so let's invent. By the end of the sentence, we know that the hospital is in Chicago, it has seven floors, two hundred beds, 60 doctors, and 150 nurses. All this information has come from the students. It is now their story. They are actively involved.

When you do this the first time, the students are confused and a little suspicious. Once they realise that you are not looking for one correct answer, and they can offer any ideas they want, they enjoy it. The only problem is that they want to do it with EVERY reading text.

Exercises

Exercises make students feel either bored or stressed. And this is the result of the conspiracy between publishers and teachers. Publishers know that teachers like exercises because they can take a mental break for a few minutes. The trouble is that the students take a mental break, too!

The problem is in the perception of exercise material as some kind of simple mathematical equation, when in fact good exercise material provides you with conversation starters. My feeling is that you should always put students in pairs and ask them to turn the examples into mini-dialogues. As with reading texts, sometimes the students are a little uncertain how this works, but as soon as they get the idea, they enjoy it. More importantly, the exercise material starts to feel like real English, not just de-contextualised sentences.

Activity 4 - Exercise material

Here's an example. Imagine that you are doing this exercise with your class.

Choose an appropriate future tense.

- 1 We.....(VISIT) my grandparents this weekend and I'm really looking forward to it.
- 2 What time the next train (LEAVE) for Osaka?
- 3 I(LET) you know as soon as Toshio arrives.

Put the students in pairs and tell them to think of sentence 1 as the first line of a conversation. At this point, don't worry about the *right* answer. Just help the students think of it as a real piece of discourse. Ask them to think of possible responses to this stimulus. Examples here are: *Why? Where do they live? How old are they?* It is *really* important to make the students realise that there isn't just one right answer.

Again, when you first do this, the students will be a little surprised, but you will be amazed how quickly they get the idea.

Final thoughts

1. A lot of learning is passive. Students have to spend a lot of time listening to the teacher and/or reading a text. Exercise material is particularly passive—stimulus sentences are usually written so that reasonable aware students can do them in their sleep.
2. A lot of students enjoy passive learning. They are the ones who smile when you start talking, or look really pleased when you tell them to open the book and read something. But the reality is that these students represent *at most* 25 per cent of the class. The other 75 per cent do not benefit from a diet of mainly passive learning.
3. Learners retain more of what they are taught when they are actively involved in the learning process and statistics suggest that, if students do not feel involved, an incredible amount of *learnt* material is forgotten very quickly.

4. Active learning can be fun—there is a definite relationship between laughter and learning. Of course *too much* laughter can also be a problem. Head teachers, colleagues, and parents may complain that students are having *too much* fun.
5. An astonishing number of teachers think that knowledge is power and that this means they are more powerful and more valuable if they have *all* the knowledge. This is a dangerous attitude! Allowing students to be more involved in their own learning may mean that teachers have to give up some of the power and authority that they have in the classroom.