

Incentivizing Participation in the Classroom

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University lecturers in language classrooms in Japan face the challenge of how to spur their students to participate actively in class. Over 3 years of teaching a course entitled International Communication, the author implemented a system that incentivizes such participation. The system functions by recording the number of times that each student is called upon after raising their hand during class and rewarding that student with one point each time. Essential steps in implementing the approach such as assigned seating as well as other mechanics are discussed. Analysis of the class records indicates that students do participate more frequently given this method. Moreover, analysis of testing data shows a modest correlation between more frequent participation and improved test scores. Student reaction and the pros and cons of the approach are also touched upon.

日本の大学の語学教員は、学生の積極的な授業参加を促すという課題に直面している。著者は3年間に渡り「国際コミュニケーション」というクラスにて、そのような参加を促すシステムを導入した。このシステムは、授業中の挙手後、各学生が当てられた回数を記録し、毎回その学生に1ポイントを与えるというものである。本論では、座席表の指定など、このシステムの重要なステップについて説明する。クラス記録の分析によると、この方法を用いた結果、学生のより頻繁な授業参加が見られた。さらに試験データの分析により、学生のより頻繁な授業参加と、試験の得点との間にある程度の相関が見られる。本システムに関する学生の反応や、そのアプローチへの賛否両論にも触れる。

In my early years as a lecturer teaching English to Japanese university students, I was frustrated by the students' passivity during class time. Unlike my own experience at university, students seemed reluctant to ask questions of the instructor, answer the

instructor's questions, or even comment on the material. My approach to addressing this issue is explored in this paper.

Literature Review

Nataatmadja, Sixsmith and Dyson (2007) of the University of Technology, Sydney, wrote, "Encouraging Asian students, particularly those with poor English proficiency, to participate fully in university classes has long been recognized as a major challenge." The importance of participation in class is emphasized by those same authors who call it "a valuable teaching method to encourage a more active involvement in learning." (p. 74) Another instructor, Coughlin (2007), opines that Japanese students in EFL classes are "frequently unwilling to provide feedback or ask the teacher a question." Flowerdew and Miller (1995) have labeled the reticence of East Asian students to give their opinions in class, even when asked, as a, "negative attitude to participation" which they attribute to the local and academic culture that students operate in as well as to the teacher-centered elementary and secondary education students have had. (p. 358) Unfortunately, this failure by the students to participate fully damages the learning environment.

In order to redress this, Li and Jia (2006) found that East Asian students require "a supportive classroom climate and context or space which allows them to actually speak up in class." (p. 205) Aubrey (2011) of Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University in Japan has called for "specific classroom conditions that increase EFL students' willingness to communicate in English (WTC)..." He goes on to explain how passive language acquisition fails the students in that "Having a deep linguistic knowledge is no longer a sufficient goal for EFL students; students must strive for communicative competence in English as well." (p. 237) Savignon (2007) characterized that competence as "the ability of classroom language learners to interact with other speakers" as opposed to their ability to "recite dialogues or to perform on discrete-point tests of grammatical knowledge." (p. 209) Abdullah, Bakar and Mahbob (2011) write that effective learning occurs when

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“both teachers and students interact in the learning activities,” and that a “participatory learning process” encourages the mutual exchange of information, stimulates interest, and fosters respect among students and teachers. (p. 61) Thus, classroom interaction between instructor and student as well as among students is essential.

Brown (1994) defines interaction as, “the collaborative exchange of thoughts, feelings, or ideas between two or more people resulting in a reciprocal effect on each other” (p. 159). Studies with children have shown how interaction with an instructor or “tutor” in particular is an important way that humans learn. Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) stress the importance of interaction with a tutor, which they call, “a crucial feature of infancy and childhood.” They explain that through the tutorial process, “an adult or ‘expert’ helps somebody who is less adult or expert.” Through this process, “component skills are combined into ‘higher skills’ by appropriate orchestration to meet new, complex task requirements.” (p. 89) They go on to describe how the instructor can “scaffold” the learning process by controlling “those elements of the task that are initially beyond the learner’s capacity, thus permitting him to concentrate upon and complete only those elements that are within his range of competence.” (p. 90)

Sociocultural theory also supports the necessity of more participation by students in that speaking serves two functions, primary and secondary. Appel and Lantolf (1994) explain as they summarize Vygotskian theory about human speech in this way, “human speech has dual mediational macrofunctions—a primary function, to mediate our social activity, and a secondary function, to mediate our mental activity.” (pp. 438-439) In particular, their study demonstrates that speaking is important to both L1 and L2 speakers in recalling and understanding written texts. (p. 449) Thus, participating in class by speaking can help L2 learners not only to report or recall material but also to understand it.

The purpose of this study is to explore a way of facilitating instructor-student interaction and thereby speech on the part of the students.

Method

In 2011, as an action research project, the author decided to take a very direct approach to encouraging students to participate in class. The author implemented a system whereby the number of times a student was called upon in class after volunteering by raising their hand was recorded and resulted in points for the student. The record keeping continued throughout each 90-minute class period for the entire semester. The students were instructed that 25% of their grades would depend on their participating in this manner. The other portions of the final grade were given for completion of assignments (25%) and performance on an examination (50%).

This research was conducted over a 3-year period between 2011 and 2013 at a private university in Nagoya, Japan. The course was entitled “International Communication” and taught in English. The course lasted one semester (14 weeks) out of a school year. Each year of the course involved completely different students. There were a maximum of 40 students in each class. 35 students were tracked in 2011; 37 in 2012, and 38 in 2013. The students were of mixed ability and ranged from 1st- to 4th-year students.

The first step in implementing this method was assigning seats to the students. This was necessary in order to construct a seating chart which was necessary for the record keeping involved. The author normally used the students’ university identification numbers as a basis for their seating assignment as this facilitated the recorded keeping further by mirroring student lists provided by the university used for attendance, evaluation, etc.

As far as the record keeping was concerned, a seating chart was used to record the frequency of each student’s participation and their attendance. The author normally used a traditional tally system to record each instance of participation, normally an answer to a question but also for questions or comments. Figure 1 below illustrates three columns from how a larger seating chart might look. The tally for student E indicates the number of times he/she participated during class.


Student I 150009	Student F 150006	Student C 150003
Student H 150008	Student E 150005 	Student B 150002
Student G 150007	Student D 150004	Student A 150001

Figure 1. Seating chart.

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The second necessary step was to carefully explain the system to the students at the beginning of the school term. The author normally did this orally and in writing. Students were further reminded at the group or individual level over the course of the school term. The most important element of the system for each student to understand was that 25% of their grade would depend on the frequency of their participation. Participatory acts included answering questions, asking questions and making comments. Incorrect answers to questions were rewarded in the same way as correct answers (this was also explained to the students at the beginning of the school term). The quality of each instance of participation was not considered in the awarding of points. Normally, one participation point was given for each instance of participation with a maximum of 25 points earned over the course of the school term. A second element that was explained to the students was that they would not earn any participation points unless they volunteered to participate by raising their hands and were called upon during class. In this way, students were encouraged to repeatedly raise their hand during class so that they would be called upon more often and thus earn more participation points.

Results

In the course of this research, the frequency of each student's participation in a single recurring Japanese university English language course was analyzed over a 3-year period to determine the frequency of student participation when such participation was incentivized. The frequency of participation was then subject to statistical analysis.

As can be seen in Figures 2-4 below, over a 14-class university term, incentivization resulted in at least some level of participation by all of the students. In fact, the chart vastly understates the level of participation by students because it counts only those times when each student was called upon by the teacher after raising their hand. In reality, a student may have to raise their hand any number of times in order to be called upon even once.

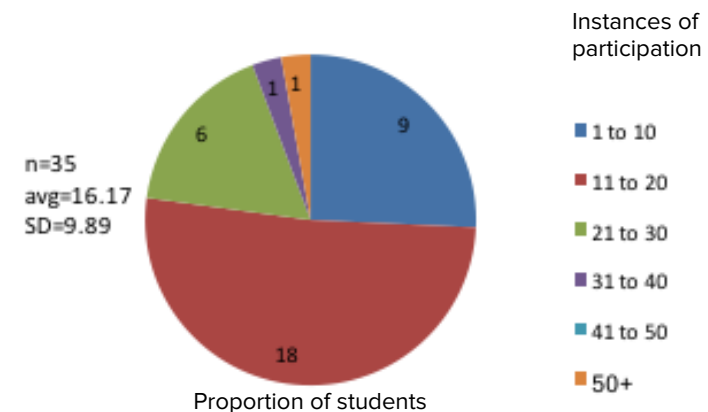


Figure 2. Student participation in 2011.

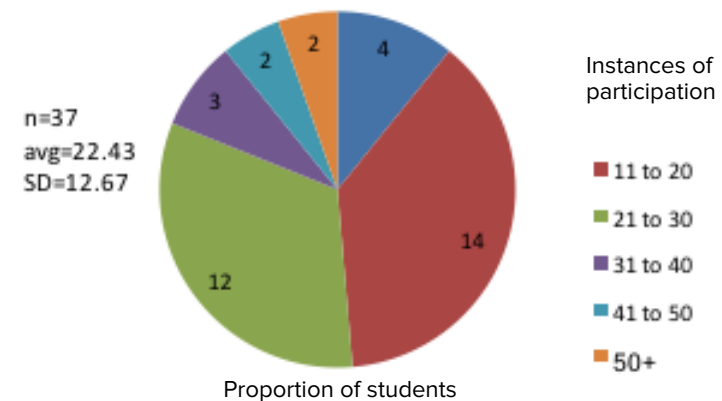


Figure 3. Student participation in 2012.

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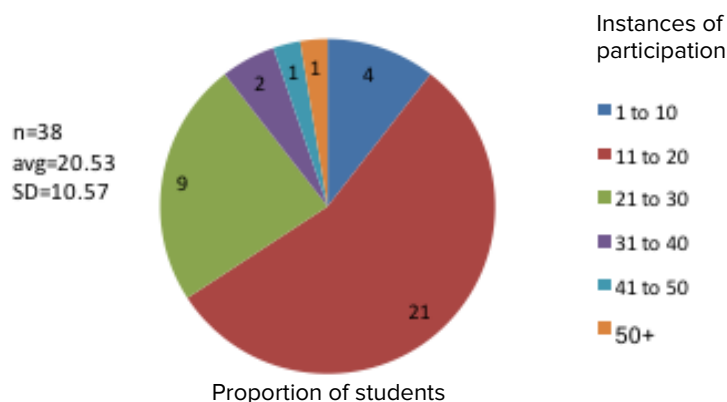


Figure 4. Student participation in 2013.

An analysis of the participation data above shows that the average number of times a student was called upon after raising their hand over the course of the term in 2011 was 16.17 (range 1 to 53). The average rose to 22.43 times in 2012 (range 7 to 60). The average declined slightly to 20.53 times in 2013 (range 8 to 66). Despite the lack of a control group, in the author's experience, this represents a vastly improved amount of participation by the students when compared to his experience in teaching the same course before implementation of the method. However, further study as to improvement within the group or comparison among groups is necessary to validate this conclusion.

In addition to increasing the frequency of in-class participation by the students, an analysis of test score data from those same students shows a modest correlation between more frequent participation and improved test scores. The correlation coefficients (r) were 0.27 for 2011, 0.38 for 2012 and 0.17 for 2013. Students were tested on their listening and reading skills as well as on course vocabulary. Figure 5 below shows a modest rise in test scores (y-axis) as the frequency of participation rises (x-axis).

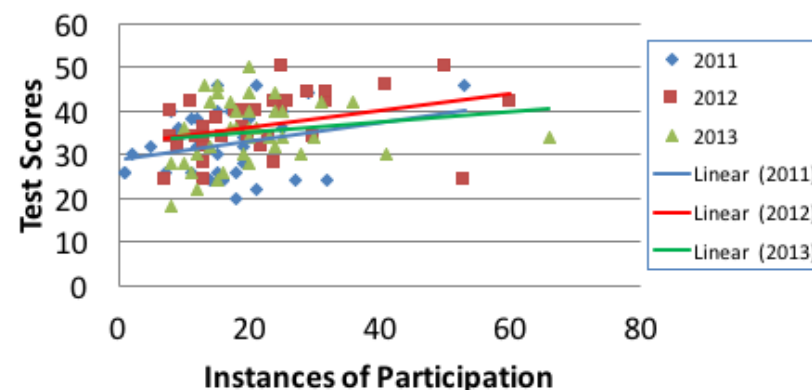


Figure 5. Participation and test scores.

Discussion

In the author's experience, the previously described method was immediately effective, and he has continued to use the system up to the present time. One unintended result of this was that discontinuing the system in order to collect control data became a very unattractive option that would also have had negative consequences for the students, and therefore, he did not do it. However, it is clear from the author's experience and perspective that the approach greatly increased the frequency of student participation. Moreover, judging from student reaction to the approach, they appreciated the pressure to participate as it became more the classroom norm to do so.

In terms of the number of students in a single class with which this method can be used, in the author's experience, 40 is about the maximum number with which this method is suitable.

Moreover, over the course of the term, it was important that students were given ample opportunity to participate and thus earn those participation points. In the author's experience with this scheme, there were many ways to incorporate student participation into a class. For example, early on during a class period, ad hoc warm-up exercises could involve student participation. After that, student responses could be used to confirm what students learned during pair or group practice. Moreover, before, during or after class exercises, student participation could also be used to confirm vocabulary comprehension. In reading exercises as well, student participation could be invoked during pre/while/post reading activities. And student participation could be

used to check the correctness of answers to mechanical drills in textbooks, handouts, etc. For listening activities as well, student participation could be used to confirm comprehension. Finally, student participation could be used to review examination/quiz problems and answers.

It was also important, however, for the instructor to regulate the participation in order to ensure opportunity for all the students in a class. The instructor could do this by giving priority to students with fewer participation points when calling upon students in class. Moreover, because of the ample opportunities to participate as well as the effort to call on as many different students as possible, it is the author's impression that the students were not overly bothered by a missed opportunity to participate when a different student was called upon.

In terms of the content of the participation, nearly all of the participation came in the form of answers to the author's questions posed in class. There were occasional questions but few or no comments.

The author also found that assigned seating had numerous advantages. First of all, it facilitated the learning of the students' names. Second, it helped to reduce private chatter among classmates during class time by separating students from those with whom they were most likely to converse. Third, it ensured that each student would have a conversation partner for pair work and other communicative activities. Fourth, it moved students toward the front of the classroom where they could hear and see better.

Pros and Cons

The major advantage to this system is the way it changes the classroom from a passive to an active one. Students are motivated to participate actively in order to score participation points in their quest for an improved or passing grade. It was noticed how even pair/group work activities are done more actively with the implementation of this system. Furthermore, because of the previously mentioned advantages to assigned seating, class management can be carried out more efficiently.

The major disadvantage to this approach is its teacher-centeredness. It involves some extra teacher talking time (TTT). The approach also lends itself well to the use of mechanical drills. In addition, it is possible that students who are shy or on the autistic spectrum are disadvantaged by their reluctance to participate. Finally, due to the rather coercive nature of the point system, there is less freedom of choice for the students about how they would like to conduct themselves in class.

Student Comments

Student reaction to the system has been overwhelmingly positive. Comments that were received on class evaluations include: "I was glad there were many opportunities to speak.", "Enjoyable classes. They were really fun!", "As there were many chances to use English, my motivation to learn English increased.", "I enjoyed the class participation.", "I was motivated by having to raise my hand in class." These comments mirror the impression that the author has of these classes, and he has been encouraged by these comments to continue using this method as well as to investigate its effectiveness. On the other hand, no negative comments were received in relation to the approach.

Conclusion

Incentivization can be implemented easily into Japanese university English language courses. The simplified record keeping introduced in this paper allows the instructor to smoothly utilize the system. In the author's experience, the effect of implementing this system was more active and productive classes. As shown in the forgoing data, students participated actively during the 3-year project (and continue to do so). It is speculated that the pressure to participate can help overcome what is perhaps a cultural reticence towards classroom participation. Active participation quickly became the new norm in these classes. Moreover, student reaction to the system has been very positive.

It is also expected that academic improvement in the form of higher test scores can be achieved. Analysis of 3 years of test data when compared to participation records suggests a modest correlation between more frequent participation and rising test scores. Further research is needed to show a causal relationship, however. In the end, it is the author's hope that other instructors may be encouraged by his experience to try this system as well.

Bio Data

John C. Westby is currently an associate professor at Meijo University in Nagoya, Japan. His research interests include techniques for motivating students as well as sociocultural theory.

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