

CLASSROOM STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGING NON-ENGLISH MAJORS
IN A PRIVATE UNIVERSITY

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CLASSROOM STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGING NON-ENGLISH MAJORS
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Abstract

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Chapter I Introduction

In recent years, the quality of teaching and learning in China projected by institutions in higher education has sparked heated discussion. (Liu 2014; Yin, Lu, and Wang 2014; Zhang et al.2011). It is known that the higher education system in China has gone through a sharp growth since the middle of 1990s. In 1993, the gross student population was 5% of the relevant age cohort while it increased to 15% in the year of 2002. And over 34 million students were enrolled in higher education. The rapid expansion, however, has put the resources of institutions under great strain and led to lots of problems, such as the declined educational expense for every student, worsening teaching conditions and wide variations in higher education quality among the universities (Yin, Lu and Wang 2014), let alone the private universities. As a result, a decline in overall quality of higher education has been obvious, and various stakeholders have voiced their concerns about the teaching quality in recent years (Liu 2014).

Student learning is to be the core goal in higher education without question. The quality of student learning then must be placed as the core objective under arrangements at the institutional and system level (Jones 2013). Higher education in China must place the priority and much more importance upon the quality enhancement. The five years undergraduate teaching evaluation program was launched as a method in 2003 to monitor the teaching quality in higher education (Yin and Wang 2016). But, there has been criticism that the macro factors such as equipment, facilities and regulations of the teaching administration have been collected rather than the micro elements like the teaching strategies of the instructor or the performance of students learning among universities in China (Yin and Wang 2014).

Actually, nowadays in China, more and more high school graduates who fail or get a low mark in the college entrance examination are apt to swarm into private universities since the

standard of scores in these schools seems to be not that strict. Most of these students are non-English majors, lack of self-discipline and have a poor foundation in English. They lack motivation and enthusiasm for studying college English and are not active in learning English in class. There have been so many classes that the teacher is hammering out ideas and points passionately on the stage, while the students below just show little interest. Then it's common to see that some students are spending most of their time on the smart phone, being absorbed in the games or even videos, instead of focusing on the content of the class, and some learners are sprawling all legs and arms akimbo across their seats or speaking quietly in small knots. Some students are even reading magazines or novels or just dozing off. Although there has been an increasing number of international studies on teaching and learning in higher education of China (Liu 2014; Yin, Lu, and Wang 2014; Zhang et al.2011; Yin and Wang 2014; Yin and Wang 2016), they mostly have not placed the focus on the students' engagement and the class strategies in the process but attached their focus upon the instructional practices and students' perception. Engaging the students, especially the non-English majors, in English class is a common problem faced by the instructors.

This study aims to investigate the factors that affect the classroom engagement of non-English majors, and tries to explore some possible strategies to get the students effectively involved in their English classes. It is hoped that this study may help people learn about more strategies used to engage non-English majors in English learning and help these college students to improve their English.

Statement of the Problem

Nowadays in China, more and more high school graduates who fail or get a low mark in the college entrance examination are apt to swarm into private universities since the standard of scores in these schools seems to be not that strict. Most of these students are non-English majors

who lack self-discipline and have a poor foundation in English. They lack motivation and enthusiasm for studying college English and are not active in learning English in class. Working as a tutor in a private university, I have seen so many classes that the teacher is hammering out ideas and points passionately on the stage, while the students below just show little interest. Then it's common to see that some students are spending most of their time on the smart phone, being absorbed in games or videos, instead of focusing on the content of the class, and some learners sprawl all legs and arms akimbo across their seats or speak quietly in small knots. Some students are even reading magazines or novels or just dozing off. As a result, these students achieve nothing in the class and also disturb the other learners who try to follow the teacher. Meanwhile, such classroom phenomena can also affect the teaching quality and efficiency. Once such a vicious circle works, there will be a situation that students do not want to learn and teachers do not want to teach. Then, how do we get non-English majors involved effectively in the English class within a private university? What classroom strategies can be conducted to engage the non-English majors?

Definition of Terms

Student Engagement: the active commitment and purposeful effort expended by students towards all aspects of their learning (Boulton & Hughes & Kent & Smith & Williams, 2019).

Language Learning Strategies: the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn or retain new information (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990).

Language Teaching Strategies: the approaches that can be used across curricular areas to support the learning of students (Herrell and Jordan, 2004).

Purpose of the Study

My study is going to discuss the phenomenon that the English teacher is hammering out ideas and points passionately on the stage in the class, while the students below who are not English majors just show little interest and emotion and try to analyze the reasons behind that.

The study aims to investigate the factors that influence the classroom engagement of the non-English majors and tries to explore some possible strategies to get the students effectively involved in English class.

Significance of the Study

It is hoped that this study may help people inform teachers of more strategies used to engage non-English majors in English learning and help these college students to improve their English. It is expected that the study will provide a unique case of cause analysis, informing strategies to enhance the quality of English teaching and learning, and promote college English teaching and learning.

Methodology

This library research seminar paper aims to investigate the factors that influence the classroom engagement of non-English majors and tries to explore some possible strategies to get students effectively involved in their English class. I am wondering how to get the non-English majors involved effectively in English classes within a private university and what class strategies can be conducted to engage non-English majors. In my research, I searched the article databases that are available through the UW Platteville library and the CNKI in China. Meanwhile, I accessed relevant information by trying a combination of search terms such as “student engagement” and “teaching/learning strategies” and “English” or “China” and so on. I specifically turned to articles such as "Undergraduate students’ motivation and engagement in China: an exploratory study", "The discussion on how to arouse students’ activeness in college comprehensive English

classroom", "Break the Silence in Class: Study on teaching strategies to stimulate enthusiasm of non-English majors in private colleges and universities" and "College English teaching from the perspective of students' learning needs" and so on.

Chapter II Review of Literature

This paper aims to investigate the factors that affect the classroom engagement of the non-English majors and tries to explore some possible strategies to get the students effectively involved in English class. Five parts will make up this chapter: first, the current situation of student engagement in China is going to be looked at, and a picture of how the students' performance in the class and what is the engagement degree will be shown in this section ; second, the performance of student engagement is to be talked about, and the previous studies about the definition of student engagement will be discussed so as to get the idea that what is the real statement of effective student engagement; third, the discussion of the problems is conducted to see more clearly towards the student engagement; fourth, there will be an analysis of the causes and the possible reasons will be explored; last, the strategies for student engagement are going to be under discussion and then the strategies to get the students highly involved and engaged in the class will be achieved after discussing.

1.1 Current situation of student engagement in China

Student engagement is currently a hot term, which has been increasingly researched and discussed in the field of higher education. Growing evidence has indicated the significant effects upon both personal development and learning achievements of the students (Gunuc and Kuzu 2014). Actually, in China, nowadays more and more high school graduates who fail or get a low mark in the college entrance examination tend to crowd into private universities since the standard of scores in these schools seems to be not that strict. These students are mostly non-English majors and lack self-discipline and have a poor English foundation. They lack motivation and enthusiasm for studying college English and are not active in learning English in class. Then it's common to see that the teacher is hammering out ideas and points passionately on the stage in many classes,

however, the students below just show little interest. There have been many classes that some students are spending most of their time on the smart phone, being absorbed in the games or even videos, instead of focusing on the content of the class, and some learners are sprawling all legs and arms akimbo across their seats or speaking quietly in small knots, even some students are reading magazines or novels or just dozing off. Although there have been an increasing number of international studies on teaching and learning in higher education of China (Liu 2014; Yin, Lu, and Wang 2014; Zhang et al.2011; Yin and Wang 2014; Yin and Wang 2016), they mostly have not placed the focus on the students' engagement and the class strategies in the process but attached their focus upon the instructional practices and students' perception. Engaging the students, especially the non-English majors, in English class is a common problem facing by the instructors.

1.2 The performance of student engagement

From the behavioral perspective, student engagement is defined as students devote time and energy to school activities for educational purposes (Kuh et al. 2008; Radloff and Coates 2010). Students must be involved in beneficial and productive activities determined and directed by educators that conform to government policies or social expectations (Hagel, Carr, and Devlin 2012). Surveys from a behavioral perspective typically focus on a range of institutional practices and student behavior related to learning and development, such as time spent on learning and tasks, teaching practices, teacher-student interactions, and institutional requirements or services. However, maybe they help to explain the relationship between student behavior and institutional practice, as to what student engagement really is, the comprehension is too narrow from a behavioral perspective. Kahu (2013) observed that the focus on factors that can be controlled by the institution excludes a wide range of other explanatory variables, including students' motivation, emotions and expectations. More importantly, there may be some differences between students,

behavioral participation, and their psychological state of engagement (Wefald and Downey, 2009). According to Newmann (1992), student engagement should be defined as "students' psychological investment and efforts in learning, understanding and mastering knowledge, skills or artistic works." Engagement is a complex, multifaceted structure that encompasses three dimensions: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive (Hagel, Car and Devlin 2012). Behavioral engagement focuses on students' participation in academic, social and extracurricular activities, while emotional engagement refers to students' emotional responses to teachers, classmates, scholars and educational institutions. Cognitive engagement indicates a student's intellectual engagement, which involves the willingness to think and master difficult skills, and the striving to understand complex ideas. In this sense, engagement can be seen as an all-encompassing meta-structure that all different research directions that help explain student success are integrated into it (Kahu, 2013).

Boulton & Hughes & Kent & Smith & Williams (2019) define student engagement as "the active commitment and purposeful effort expended by students towards all aspects of their learning." That is to say when the students are involved in the class and engaged in the course, it is obvious to see that they will performance actively and show their interest to the content or the activities and make their efforts to participate in all the class learning activities.

1.3 Discussion of the problems

Student engagement is important for both the quality of teaching and learning. Nowadays in China, since the standard of scores in private universities seems to be not that strict, more and more high school graduates who fail or get a low mark in the college entrance examination tend to swarm into these schools. With a poor English foundation and a lack of self-discipline, most of these students turn to non-English majors. They lack motivation and enthusiasm for studying

college English and are not involved in learning English in class. Working as a tutor in a private university, I have seen so many classes that the teacher is hammering out ideas and points passionately on the stage, while the students below just show little interest. Then it's common to see that some students are spending most of their time on the smart phone, being absorbed in the games or even videos, instead of focusing on the content of the class, and some learners are sprawling all legs and arms akimbo across their seats or speaking quietly in small knots, even some students are reading magazines or novels or just dozing off. As a result, these students achieve nothing in the class and also disturb the other learners who try to follow the teacher. Meanwhile, such classroom phenomena can also affect the teaching quality and efficiency. Once such a vicious circle works, there will be a situation that students do not want to learn and teachers do not want to teach (Peng Jun,2016).Then I have been wondering: how to get the students involved effectively in the English class within a private university? Are there any strategies which can be applied to get the students involved and engage them in interactive, enjoyable, and effective English learning, or engage the students to explore, discover, and solve practical problems by using the English knowledge achieved in the class? Perhaps the first thing to do is to dig out the causes of low or ineffective student engagement.

1.4 Analysis of the causes

There have been studies examining the grade-level and discipline differences in association with student engagement. Shi et al. (2011) found in Chinese universities, that the first-year students scored highest as far as their interest in and expectations of learning was concerned, as well as the significance they placed on learning. Students in third grade were the most motivated to learn in the class, and the seniors scored highest as to happiness achieved from leaning process, but scored lowest with regard to the significance they placed on learning. Yin and Wang (2016) also did a

study and found that the students in the second grade seemed to be less engaged in learning than the students at other grade levels. It was possible due to the specialized courses for sophomores were more profound and difficult and the sophomores felt more challenging. This might affect their motivation and engagement negatively.

According to psychology, the relationship of student engagement and motivation is tightly interwoven. The motivation includes private, psychological, and unobservable factors, while the engagement includes publicly visible behavior (Reeve 2012). According to Martin (2012), there seems to be a broad consensus that motivation is the basis for subsequent engagement, although opinions may differ on which factors are considered as incentives and which factors are considered as participation factors.

From a sociocultural perspective on student engagement, the sociocultural contexts play a crucial role in student experience (Kahu 2013). Student engagement comes from the goals and norms presented in their broader social contexts. Zhao, Kuh, and Carini (2005) found that Asian students tended to spend more time socializing with those from similar cultural backgrounds, and less time participating in diversity-related college activities than their counterparts from other countries. Martin (2010) found that non-native English speakers in Australian universities exhibited more adaptive behavior than native English speakers. Moreover, engagement may be functions of practices in different educational contexts, even for students who share an ethnicity. Although some studies have considered the individual differences in student engagement, little consensus has been achieved.

1.5 The strategies for student engagement

Firstly, according to the studies mentioned above, different grade levels turn out engagement to different degrees and the instructors should take this into consideration and decide

proper learning materials and appropriate teaching methods. Meanwhile, compared with students in other grades, sophomores are less motivated to learn and engage in learning. Chinese university teachers and student affairs professionals should pay more attention to the differences among different grades. The learning and adjustment difficulties faced by students and second-year students are particularly prominent. As Zepke and Leach (2010) suggest that in order to increase student engagement, teachers must offer a variety of support services that enable students to develop social and cultural capital, create challenging and enrich their educational experiences so as to expand students' academic capabilities. At the same time, student affairs professionals must work with others to regularly collect and review data on the effectiveness of these policies and practices to enhance student participation. If these policies and practices work well, the students must be more effectively engaged in class, but if it turns out not so positive, then the policies and practices need to be adjusted according to the specific circumstance.

Secondly, it's important to arouse and stimulate students' interest and emotion in English learning. Students' showing little interest in the class is going to affect negatively their engagement in the course. Zhao Qinghong once pointed out that students did not actively participate in the class activities, not only because of psychological factors, but also because the class design and practice of these activities failed to meet the needs of the learners (Zhao Qinghong,2009).Actually, the teaching mode is very single in the traditional English teaching class. The teachers are adopting the teaching methods like generally-teaching method, practice method and question-answer method (Liu Xiao,2013). In fact, teachers can adopt different teaching modes flexibly. In the Lead-in process, teachers can introduce some interesting background information or vivid examples to arouse the students' interest and then arrange some activities which are interesting but also target-oriented for all the learners to join in. To achieve this, the teachers should get a nice understanding

of what their students are interested in. Young students nowadays are more curious about new or special things. They are inclined to think in different ways and focus on things that they have no clear idea but curious about. Teachers can also adopt more interactive teaching mode. With interactive teaching mode, the activeness and initiative can be effectively aroused for students learning English. More interaction can make the students to get the courage to explore and aggressive and promote the communication between teachers and students, so as to improve the quality of teaching and learning (Liu Xiao, 2013). They will be more brave and courageous to engage the class and become more self-confident which will in return encourage them to get more involved in the class and achieve much more.

Thirdly, arranging and conducting in-class or out-class activities is a good idea. Take group tasks for example, students make discussions in small groups. In the process of group discussion, students can fully discuss what they have learned in class, exchange information and share their ideas. At the same time, teachers can achieve more communication with students and guide them to develop their independent thinking ability and get the students involved. Another is roles-playing, teachers can create different situations for student to play different roles. Students will be ready to participate in and then they can voice what they have learned and experienced. By doing this, they can achieve a sense of participation and improve their communication ability under a joyful class atmosphere. And also, when conducting courses, teachers can also combine theory with practice. The universities can cooperate with companies and then some courses can be conducted in the workshops, factories and foreign companies and so on. The practice will deep the impression on the minds of the students and satisfy their curiosity.

Lastly, over the last decade, the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) has been rapidly spread across all segments of education, becoming a priority for all educational

institutions. The integration of ICT into the teaching and learning process is a challenge for both teachers and students at all levels of education. Under the influence of ICT, new learning models are being developed in order to improve the quality of teaching approach and learning outcomes (Zupanec, Miljanovi, & Pribicevic, 2013). Instructors should learn to update and learn and apply the new technology to assist the teaching and learning in the class to engage the students.

For example, “Seewo courseware” “Flash courseware” “Web courseware” and “Storyline courseware” are applying the new technology. They can assist the instructors to make the class more interesting and bring more interaction between the teachers and the students or enhance the interactions between the students themselves.

Summary

From the above we can get a clear picture of the current situation of student engagement in our country and obtain the idea that the situation is not positive and most of the students are ineffectively or low engaged in the English classes. Then after discussion on the engagement performance, we get a clear idea about the real statement of student engagement. Next it goes to the discussion of the problems, and the analysis of the possible causes, the available strategies are then to be achieved. In terms of student engagement, taking the grades differences, emotion degrees and also the class context into account, the instructors in the schools must apply all the teaching methods and approaches flexibly according to the materials and the students level, arouse the students interest and emotion to learn and enrich themselves to update the big environment to encourage the students to engage in the class. Only by getting positive student engagement can the effective teaching and learning be achieved.

Chapter III Conclusions and Recommendations

This study shows that non-English majors are ineffectively or lowly engaged in the English class. After investigating the factors that lay effects upon the student engagement from the previous studies, the grade level and discipline and emotions of the students are the causes that matter. Lastly some possible strategies are accordingly be explored to get the students effectively involved in English class. From one perspective, the school should pay attention to the prominent difficulties the different grades faced with and supply adequate support service. From another aspect, the instructors should enrich themselves and keep updated and arouse the interest and emotion of the students and get them highly engaged in the class. It is hoped that this study may help people inform of more strategies used to engage non-English majors in English learning and help these college students to improve their English and the research later may turn to help strengthen the strategies and enhance the student engagement.

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