

Active Learning & Student Engagement Strategies in ELT

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Abstract

Student disengagement is a challenge many educators struggle with across the classrooms. Most English Language Teachers (ELT) are wary of lack of student attention, as well as poor reading comprehension skills. Students more often than not remain distracted when prose is handled in the class through conventional pedagogical methods.

My article is on Student Engagement strategies in teaching English prose. Through my article, I aspire to bring some strategies to EL Teachers that can enhance comprehension skills among students. I have discussed five strategies that can be employed in classrooms in the article. These strategies are most appropriate for the students of grades 6-12 with English as Foreign Language (EFL).

The article explains how to use each of the strategies as well as outlines the thinking skills involved in solving each of the engagement sheets.

I have also enclosed a sample sheet for each of the five strategies that I have suggested.

Keywords: English Language Teaching (ELT), Student Engagement, English as Foreign Language (EFL), Facilitation, Bloom's Cognitive Levels, Freytag's Pyramid, Socratic Method

Introduction

Most teachers, whether consciously or subconsciously, still practice the belief that they are the 'sage on the stage'. Despite their best intentions, they 'teach'. They, in their belief that if they do not 'teach' the students will not 'learn', as yet cannot wrap their head around 'facilitation'. Thus, we have students sitting passively in classrooms. Add to this AV and AI, and student-thinking is a big causality in our classroom practices.

Facilitation, as opposed to 'teaching', requires the teacher to let the students actively engage with the content. It is student-centered in the true sense of the word. The teacher assumes a supportive role in the students' journey of learning. In facilitation the students construct their own knowledge. There are four critical attributes for effective facilitation: genuine mutual respect; a partnership in learning; a dynamic, goal-orientated process; and critical reflection. Facilitation emphasises mutual respect, partnership in learning, and reflective practice (Burrows, 1997).

Active learning happens when students actively engage with the syllabus/ text/ content. In short, they THINK. In active learning methodology, teachers help the students in learning. Actually, active learning methodology focuses on helping in learning and facilitating in learning. Active learning positions the teacher as a facilitator rather than a transmitter of knowledge (Jagtap, 2016).

Bloom's taxonomy foregrounds cognitive processes involved in learning (Bloom et al., 1956; Krathwohl, 2002). When Benjamin Bloom talked of the Cognitive levels in his Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals 1956), all he was talking

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about was thinking processes. The six thinking levels are: Knowing, Understanding, Applying, Analysing, Evaluating, and Creating. The revised taxonomy highlights higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, evaluation, and creation (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Ironically, when a teacher ‘teaches’, she negates the very requirement for active learning, i.e. facilitating student thinking. The students may somewhat remember and understand, to some extent may also apply, but for sure there is no analysis, evaluation, or creation happening in the classroom. Even if these last three thinking processes happen, they are mostly teacher- led.

The 21st century learner, being taught through the 20th century pedagogy, does not see any merit in classroom transactions. In any case, it’s also a reductionist effort by the teacher-- the learning is reduced to rote. Moreover, the student neither gains competency nor the capacity to prepare for the future that advances in AI promises to unfold. The future no longer needs individuals who are mere perpetrators of the present order, the executors, it needs thinkers and innovators. Unless teachers encourage thinking in our classrooms, rather than passive reception of content, we cannot have thinking individuals.

I am outlining five active learning strategies that can be used in the classroom to ensure ‘facilitation’ and ‘active learning’ in the teaching of literature. These strategies have been found to enhance comprehension and ensure student engagement. These strategies are most appropriate for the students of Grades 6-12 who study English as Foreign Language (EFL).

We can use some of these as pre- reading, some as mid- reading, and others as post- reading strategies.

1. Anticipation Guide*

The Anticipation Guide is an effective pre-reading or pre-teaching strategy used to activate prior knowledge and arouse curiosity. It is appropriate for students of grades 3 to 12. It helps students engage with a topic before they even begin reading and helps them make connections between what they know and what they’re about to learn. Moreover, it also serves as a tool to evaluate learning post the lesson. For teachers, Anticipation Guide serves as a tool to check the whether learning outcomes have been achieved.

An anticipation guide consists of a list of statements related to key ideas, themes, or misconceptions about a text or topic. Students respond to each statement (Agree/Disagree or True/False) **before** the lesson — and once again **after** learning — to see how their understanding has changed. Usually, the students are required to mark whether they *agree or disagree or true or false* on each statement.

These statements are thought provoking and conceptual, instead of merely based on recall. Thus, the Anticipation Guide does not contain any statement that is merely based on recall or rote.

Using an Anticipation Guide in the Classroom:

Prepare the Anticipation Guide on the lesson/ text/ story to be started in the class. It must contain 10-15 statements on vocabulary/ idioms/ literary devices and so on that will appear in the text, about what they think when they hear the title, or the predictions they make about the text through their prior knowledge.

* a sample Anticipation Guide is enclosed.

The teacher must administer the Anticipation Guide before starting the lesson. She mustn't give any introduction of the lesson or talk anything about the lesson except the information that they are about to start with this text/ lesson. The Anticipation Guide may be printed out for each individual student to attempt, or may be displayed on the smart-board for the students to see and simply write down their answers with the statement numbers in their notebook.

Thinking Skills Involved:

Remembering, Understanding, Applying, Analysing, Evaluating

2. Text- Word Puzzle*

Text-Word Puzzle is a meaningful mid- and post-reading engagement strategy that ensures comprehension and clarity on the text. It is a crossword designed on the text/ story/ prose to be handled in the class. The students fill in the grid of empty squares with words, using given clues that are based on the text that's being read/ handled in the class. Text-Word Puzzle is most appropriate for students of grades 5-12.

The purpose of using Text-Word Puzzle is to encourage vocabulary building, strengthen memory and logical thinking, and to revise lessons creatively. If used as mid- reading sheet, it also helps in enhancing comprehension.

The teacher can use an AI tool to draft the clues for the crossword. And then she may place the words corresponding to these clues in the crossword grid. (The AI tools are still not able to generate a satisfactory crossword grid to my understanding.)

Using the Text-Word Puzzle in the Classroom:

Prepare the Text-Word crossword puzzle on the lesson/ text that you have to start in the class. Provide the 10-15 clues, *Across* and *Down*. So, students have to locate 10-15 words or phrases appearing in the lesson/ text. Try and make these clues cryptic but true to the text and vocabulary. Prepare the crossword grid with clear numbering as per the clues.

It is advised to print the Text-Word Puzzle for each student in the class for better engagement. Else, it may be displayed on the smart-board as the students do a self-reading of the text and attempt the crossword alongside.

The teacher must act as a facilitator as the students read the text. The text must not be read orally. She must move around in the class and support students as they try to comprehend the text for themselves. Text-Word Puzzle also acts as a tool for 'differentiated instruction'—each student reads and comprehends the text and then attempts the text-Word Puzzle at their own pace, the teacher supports students as per their requirements.

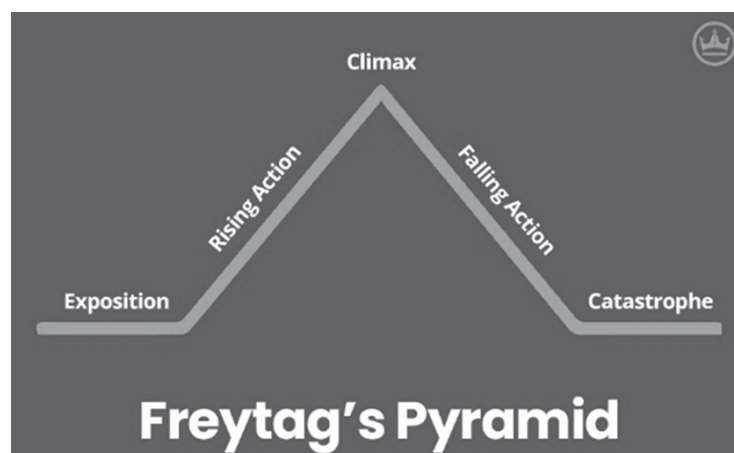
Thinking Skills Involved:

Understanding, Applying, Analysing, Evaluating. The Text- Word Puzzle also requires the students to apply their Inference and interpretation skills as well.

* a sample Text-Word Puzzle is enclosed.

3. Freytag's Pyramid (Freytag's Technique of the Drama, 1863) Sheet*

Story structure can be effectively analysed using Freytag's Pyramid (Cigerci & Yıldırım, 2024), a model that explains the structure of a narrative or dramatic plot. Developed by Gustav Freytag, a nineteenth-century German novelist and playwright, the model illustrates how narratives typically progress through rising and falling tension. An understanding of Freytag's Pyramid enables readers to identify and analyse the key structural elements of a story, thereby enhancing comprehension of narrative development and plot progression (Hamilton, J. 2023).



Jason Hamilton, Kindlepreneur, Nov. 2023

The five main stages of Freytag's Pyramid are: Exposition, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action, Resolution or Catastrophe.

According to modern-day construction of Freytag's Pyramid, the seven elements in a story are-- Exposition, Inciting Incident, Rising Action, Climax, Falling Action, Resolution or Catastrophe, Denouement (Freytag, G.1894).

Most stories follow Freytag's structure to a good extent. Thus, the engagement strategy Freytag's Pyramid sheet serves to involve students as well as to help them understand the story structure better. The students reading short stories as part of their literature syllabus often fail to grasp the nuances of the story. Freytag's Pyramid Sheet can be effectively used for students of grades 6-12.

Freytag's Pyramid Sheet can be used for most stories that students read. It is a mid- and post reading strategy. The Sheet can also be used by the teacher to discuss the elements of the story post reading.

Using the Freytag's Pyramid Sheet in the classroom:

The Freytag's Pyramid sheet is in fact a story agnostic tool. The template once prepared can be used for any and every story that the students read.

* a sample Freytag's Pyramid Sheet is enclosed.

It consists of blank boxes for the elements of the story, arranged as the Freytag's Pyramid. The students are required to fill these blanks as they progress with reading of the story. The sheet can either be printed for each student or can be displayed on the smart board and the students attempt the blanks in their notebooks.

Once again, the teacher must act as a facilitator rather than giving answers to the students. This tool is a discussion starter and the teacher must encourage students to think actively about the elements of the story. This tool also helps the students to analyse the story and to understand the progression of the story better.

Thinking skills involved:

Understanding, Inferring, Analysing.

4. Socratic Sheet*

The Socratic Method is a way of teaching and learning through questioning — named after the Greek philosopher Socrates. Instead of giving direct answers, the teacher (or questioner) asks a series of thought-provoking questions that help students to: think deeply, examine their own ideas, and arrive at conclusions through reasoning.

The main characteristic of the Socratic method is that it is not “teaching” in the conventional sense of the word. Teacher is an observer, a helper, guide but not the purveyor of knowledge. Lectures with “undeniable” facts and truths and rote memorization or, in other words, “guiding the students” are replaced with shared dialogues between students and teachers where both are responsible for pushing the dialogue forward through questioning. The Socratic method promotes reasoning through dialogic questioning (Delić & Bećirović, 2016).

The engagement strategy Socratic Sheet employs questions for guided reading and comprehension. It can be used for students of grades 6-12.

This is a mid- reading strategy that builds long- term understanding of the text and at the same time helps students polish their skills of answering the questions based on the text. Socratic Sheet can be used for stories, travelogues, articles, extracts, and many other genres of prose.

Using the Socratic Sheet in the classroom:

The teacher prepares the Socratic Sheet before starting any prose in the class. She prepares 10-12 question covering all the six Cognitive levels on the text to be read by the students. The questions must be organised progressively as per the prose, meaning that the question for which the information to answer comes earlier in the text, must be placed first.

The Socratic sheet can either be in the form of a worksheet, or a slip containing all the questions, printed for each student individually. It can also be in the form of questions displayed on the smart board. Alternately, the teacher can also write the questions on the blackboard before starting the text reading.

* a sample Socratic Sheet is enclosed.

The students read the questions twice even before they begin reading the prose. Then they start reading the prose and try to answer the questions as they progress with their reading.

Socratic Sheet is not a test. Hence, the teacher must support students, only those who want her support, to frame their answers. The teacher must observe her students and take rounds of her class as the students read the text.

Thinking skills involved:

Understanding, Inferring, Applying, Interpreting, Analysing, Evaluating, Creating.

5. See-Think-Wonder Sheet*

The See-Think-Wonder Sheet is an effective pre- and mid- reading tool to ignite creative and predictive thinking among the students. It can be used to make the students think on the topic and make predictions on what they are going to read, or it can be used to make students wonder mid- lesson about what is to follow.

See-Think-Wonder Sheet is an effective engagement tool to make students draw out the connections and think creatively. The sheet is also an effective device to spark discussion in the class mid- reading.

Using the See-Think-Wonder Sheet in the classroom:

In case the teacher wants to use the See-Think-Wonder Sheet as a pre-reading tool, she needs to focus on the Title/ topic and choose images to be included in the sheet that focus the attention of the students towards the theme of the lesson/ text/ story.

If she wants to use it as a mid- reading strategy, the teacher must decide at what point in the lesson she wants to use the See-Think-Wonder sheet and prepare it in advance. She must choose appropriate images as per the story gone by and where the story will progress as the students read further.

The See-Think-Wonder Sheet need not be printed out individually for each student; it can be displayed on the smart- board for all students to see and think. In case there is no smart- board in the class then she can print a few copies to be passed down the class for the students to see in turns.

After the students have seen the sheet for a minute, the teacher asks them to think and wonder upon the images that they have seen and draw connections between them. The most important thing is the discussion that follows after the students have seen and mulled over the images in the sheet. The teacher must accept all opinions from her students without checking the students or leading them in her desired direction. The focus must remain more on the process than the product; thereby meaning that the teacher must focus more on the insight that the student brings to the discussion, rather than whether it is right or wrong.

Thinking Skills Involved:

Knowing and Remembering, Understanding, Applying, Analysing, Evaluating, Creating. It helps students develop the skills of Inference and Interpretation as well.

* a sample See-Think- Wonder Sheet is enclosed.

Conclusion

The antidote to student disengagement lies not in teaching more, but in **teaching differently**. Research consistently demonstrates that learners are inherently curious and learn most effectively when they are given opportunities to **explore, question, and construct meaning**, rather than receive information in a finished form. Engagement deepens when learning experiences are inquiry-driven and allow students to arrive at understanding through reflection and discovery. As constructivist research has long established, knowledge that is actively constructed is retained more meaningfully than knowledge that is passively received.

Empirical evidence strongly supports this shift. A landmark meta-analysis of 225 studies across disciplines found that students exposed to **active learning approaches significantly outperformed those in traditional lecture-based classrooms**, achieving higher examination scores and showing markedly lower failure rates (Freeman et al., 2014). Specifically, failure rates dropped from approximately **34% in lecture-driven classrooms to about 22% in active learning environments**, underscoring the impact of facilitation-based pedagogy on learner success. Active learning has also been shown to improve higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, evaluation, and creation—skills that are central to language learning and literary comprehension.

For EFL classrooms in particular, where comprehension, interpretation, and language use are critical, facilitative and exploratory learning experiences are not optional but essential. If educators genuinely seek sustained engagement and deeper learning, they must move beyond content delivery and design learning environments that encourage students to **think, question, analyse, evaluate, and create**. By positioning students as active participants in their own learning journeys, teachers not only enhance engagement but also prepare learners with the cognitive agility required for an increasingly complex and AI-driven world.

Please access the 5 handouts/ engagement sheets here:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/18zbCwy621qDT3ANCmNWEc2ZnmWkN7iNW?usp=sharing>

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