



## Taking students' opinions into account in the learning process

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### Summary

The current article presents the results of an action research project carried out with students from the School of Foreign Languages at the University of Colima in Mexico. First, the authors explain some of the reasons why students' opinions should be taken into account when decisions are made in the classroom according to existing literature. They then explain the reasons that made them implement such practice in their classrooms. After that, they describe the participants and the context where this action research project was done. Following, they describe the actions they carried out to allow student participation in the decisions made in regards to their learning process. Next, they report the benefits as well as the problems that resulted from such actions. Finally, they discuss some conclusions they reached from the project they carried out.

### Introduction

Current English language teaching methodologies, approaches, trends and techniques make an emphasis on active student participation. They suggest that if students participate in the construction of knowledge, learning is more meaningful. They also state that students should not be restricted only to actively participating in the learning activities carried out in the classroom. Student-centered approaches indicate that if students are to truly become active participants, they should be allowed to make decisions regarding their language learning process. This is already happening in many classrooms to some extent. Students often decide the classroom rules they want to have, who they want to work with, the way they are



going to present a special project they may have been asked to do, among other things. Nevertheless, student freedom to make decisions should go beyond that. Allowing students to have a say in the decisions that are made regarding their learning process can result in many benefits not only for the learners, but for the teacher and the learning process as well.

### **Literature Review**

Allowing students to have a say in the decisions that are made in the classroom is a feature of student centered learning (SCL). Hirumi (2002) mentions that in SCL teachers and students negotiate the selection of the learning objectives, the grading criteria, how the class is going to be taught, as well as how they are going to be evaluated. Student participation is included in selecting not only the activities that are going to be carried out in class but also the grading criteria and the types of testing instruments to be used. In student centered learning learners suggest how they want to be assessed and are given testing instruments to choose from when they are going to be tested (Moore, K. 1999). Including student participation in all areas of the learning process is a practice common of SCL that can produce many positive outcomes.

Having students participate in the decisions that are taken in the classroom can result in several benefits. Students are likely to spend more time and energy on the tasks they have to complete. Littlejohn (2001) states that students become more committed to doing something if they have a say in deciding what to do. When students are allowed to decide which tasks they are going to do and how to do them, they are willing to work harder on them. They spend more time and energy working on an assignment because they do it in the way they like it. When students are more committed to complete a task the final product is very likely to be of good quality.

Giving students freedom to make their own decisions regarding their learning process can increase students' motivation as well. Taylor (2002) states that if students are allowed to choose the activities they do in class, they will be more motivated to work. When students are carrying out activities they like to do or



they are assessed using the testing instruments they suggested, they will be willing to work harder because they are more likely to enjoy the task they are doing. Taking students' opinions into account can result in doing activities students like to do; such practice can increase students' intrinsic motivation.

Another important benefit is developing learner autonomy. Lee (1988) argues that in order to foster learning autonomy learners have to make their own decisions about their learning efforts. He also suggests that learner autonomy requires students to make their own decisions about how and when they want to work as well as what is best for their learning process. By having students participate in the decisions that are made in the classroom students can learn to make informed decisions. Making good informed decisions can contribute to developing learner autonomy among students.

### **Rationale**

The researchers' participation in a student-centered learning course (SCL) was the main reason why they decided to allow more student participation in the decisions that were made in the classroom. As part of the continuing education program the School of Languages has for their staff, the researchers were requested to take a SCL course. During this course they learned what this teaching approach was, how it worked, what benefits it could bring among other things. The final assignment was an action project that described how they were going to introduce SCL in their teaching practices. Taking students' opinions into account to decide how they wanted to learn and how they wanted to be evaluated was a teaching practice that was gradually introduced in their classes.

### **Subjects**

The participants of this action research project were students from two different classes. The classes involved were the Teaching Methods and the Teaching Young Learners classes which are required courses in the Language Teaching Major at the School of Foreign Languages from the University of Colima in Mexico. The researchers were also the teachers of these two required courses.



There were about 25 students in each class; about 70 percent of them are females and 30 percent are males. Students' ages range from 19 to 30 years old. Most of them are at an intermediate English language level. The Teaching Methods class is rather theoretical since in this class students study topics such as the learning theories, teaching methods, approaches and techniques, language learning strategies, lesson planning, classroom management, among other topics. The Teaching Young Learners class is more hands-on due to the fact that students learn lots of language learning games they can play with kids, songs, TPR activities, as well as how to create materials to effectively teach kids.

### **Treatment**

In addition to the most common practices that involve student participation such as deciding the rules for the class, who students were going to work with etc., there were several significant actions researchers carried out in order to allow students to actively participate in the decisions that were made in the classroom. One of the practices was to present students the content of the syllabus and then decide together, teacher and students, which topics were going to be studied, as well as the order in which they were going to be learnt. This was done because some of the topics had already been learnt in classes participants had taken in previous semesters, so there was no point in going over them again if they had already learnt those topics. In a way, students were deciding what they were going to learn and the order in which they were going to learn the content of the syllabus.

Once the content and the order of the topics had been decided, students were asked what type of activities they wanted to carry out in class, for homework, to assess them as well as how they wanted to be taught. The activities, tasks, and testing instruments students suggested were included in the course outline and carried out in class at some point during the school year. Students' suggestions were not that different from the activities the teacher had in mind so it was easy to include them in the lesson plans. The purpose of this action was to allow students to have a say in the decisions that were made in regards to how the class was going to be taught.



Another important practice was allowing each student to decide the value of each graded assignment and the mid term exam. Based on the information the teacher collected from students, the teachers designed the graded assignments students were going to submit throughout the semester. After presenting the course outline, the teacher explained what each graded assignments was going to be about, when they were due, and whether it was to be done individually, in pairs or small groups. If for some reason classes were cancelled or something unexpected happened, the deadlines were negotiated and set by teachers and students. Once the instructions for each task were given, students were asked to individually decide the value of each assignment. Students were given 4 or 5 graded assignments and an exam in each mid term. They were told that each assignment, including the test, should be worth at least 10% of their final mark. In addition, students were explained that a greater value meant better quality was expected. By allowing students to select the value of each graded assignment and the exam, students were selecting the grading criteria that was going to be used to evaluate them. They were deciding how their work was going to be graded.

The last significant action introduced to promote student involvement in the decisions made regarding their learning process was to provide students with options when they were going to be assessed. This refers to the fact that whenever students had to take a mid term exam, they were presented three testing instruments. One of them was always a traditional exam; the other two options were either: a research project, a reflections paper, a survey, an oral presentation, a report, among other tasks. At least three school days before the mid term exam date, students were explained the requirements of each instrument, when it was due, and the grading criteria for each one of them. Once questions about any of the options were answered, students were told they had to select one of the options and either take the exam or submit whatever option they had selected on the due date. Students decided how they were going to be assessed because they selected the testing instrument.



## Results

Several benefits resulted from allowing students to make decisions regarding their own learning process. One of these benefits was a decrease in subjects' anxiety and stress when taking a mid term and final exam. Participants reported this happened because they knew they were going to have options to select from when being tested. They were also aware of the fact that one of those options was very likely to match their learning styles and abilities. In addition, students knew they were going to be presented and explained the three choices they were going to have to be assessed with plenty of time for them to decide which one to take. Having options and plenty of time (at least three school days) to decide which option could best help them to demonstrate their mastery of the information learnt in class helped to decrease participants' stress and anxiety during the test taking process.

Allowing students to decide which testing instrument was best for them with plenty of time made them feel more confident before taking a test. Participants' confidence during the test taking process increased due to the fact that if they were going to take the traditional exam, they had plenty of time to go over their notes, discuss them and ask questions to their classmates or the teacher. Those who decided to take any of the other options; a research project or a reflections paper for instance, had plenty of time to look or review information, organize it, write a draft, submit their draft to the teacher for feedback, corrected and improve it. As a result, when students submitted their final drafts or took the mid term exam, they were confident that their papers or responses were very close to what the teacher was expecting.

Another benefit of the teaching practice that was implemented was the fact that participants spent more time and effort on their assignments or tests. Whether it was an assignment or a test, students had plenty of time to work on it or review the information and clear up any doubts they had. For most assignments, students submitted at least one draft for correction and feedback before handing in their final drafts. Correcting and improving their first draft required often times doing more research, reviewing their notes, reflecting on their responses more, doing a more



complete analysis, elaborating on their comments, organizing their ideas better, among other things; any of these required spending more time and effort. Regarding tests, most participants approached the teacher to make sure they knew which topics and what type of testing items were going to be included in the test. Often times, once they had reviewed their notes, learners met with the teacher to have some questions that emerged during the studying process answered or explained. These actions resulted not only on students spending more time and effort on their assignments or test, but also they produced learning outcomes with better quality.

In addition, there was a significant improvement on the quality of the work students did and their overall performance. Having students select the value of each graded assignment and the test made students request more feedback. Students submitted from one to three drafts before handing in their final one or showed the teacher progress of the work they were doing to make sure they were doing it right. Whether it was an oral presentation, poster, project or class activity, student request for feedback increased significantly. Being told what needed to be corrected and correcting it, resulted on products that met the requirements the teacher had set, as a consequence, there was improvement on the quality of the work students produced as well as their performance overall.

Having students select their own grading criteria also produced higher scores. Because students knew how many points each assignment or test was worth, they knew how much work they needed to do in order to get the most points possible. They knew that if they had decided that an assignment was going to be worth 30% of their final mark, they had to spend more time and effort on that assignment in order to get a good grade. It was in those tasks that they requested the most feedback because they knew that if it was poorly done it was going to affect them negatively, but if it was well done, it was going to help them get a good mark. Giving students the freedom to decide the value of each graded assignment made students produce works with better quality and good work resulted in getting higher scores.



Students became more responsible of their own learning. Because it was them who decided which topics they wanted to learn, when and how they were going to learn them as well as how they were going to be assessed, students realized that no one but them controlled their learning. The students decided to produce a very bad or very good outcome, whichever it was, they were responsible for it. They were given plenty of time to do it, they knew the requirements of each assignment, they were given freedom to decide how to do it, they selected the value of each task and they negotiated the deadline to submit their work. Having students make these and other decisions made students more responsible of their actions and learning.

Another benefit was that participants learnt to make informed decisions. At first, the decisions students made were not the best because they selected options that seemed to require less work and effort. Once they realized that they had to really understand what each assignment or testing instrument required them to do, what work it implied doing, how good they were at doing that kind of work and what were the pros and cons, they learnt to make decisions that were going to help them. Students learnt to select something not because it required less work, but because it somehow matched their learning abilities and it would allow them to do a better job.

The last benefit that resulted from the actions that were implemented in the class was participants learning to work collaboratively. Two elements contributed to this aim. One was the fact that students were often times required to work in collaborative groups. Students often times work in teams and were given different pieces of information which needed from them to exchange information and work together in order to complete a task. The second was the nature of some of the learning activities. In some cases, because some tasks were too long and required a lot of work, students were suggested to work collaboratively. Participants were reluctant about this at first; however, they later realized that working together helped them to be more efficient learners. These were the most important benefits that resulted from allowing students to make decisions in the classroom. Nevertheless, this practice also produced some problems.



## Problems

There were some problems that teachers came across when they started to take students' opinions into account and asked learners to make decisions about their learning process. One of the problems was rejection. In the early stage of this process, students refused to make their own decisions and wanted the teacher to decide everything for them. This probably happened because in their previous schooling teachers made all the decisions in the classroom. This was a new way of learning for them and as most things that are done for the first time there was some rejection. Towards the middle of the semester attitudes changed and students actually welcomed the fact that they made decisions about their own learning process.

Another problem researchers encountered was stress that resulted from having students make decisions about their learning process. The first time students were asked to suggest how they wanted to learn and make their own decisions, most students were stressed because they did not know what they wanted, what to select or how they wanted to be evaluated. The first times students were asked to select their grading criteria or a testing instrument, participants did not know what to select or which option was the best for them. This caused some stress among students. However, as they got used to and learnt to make decisions they did not get stressed anymore.

Furthermore, frustration affected students during the first part of the action research project. Students often times procrastinated or selected an option that did not necessarily help them to demonstrate how much they have learnt. This caused students to run out of time or to realize that the approach or option they had selected was not the best one. As a consequence, they became frustrated because they either had no time to use a different approach, to do another option, or they realized that the option they had selected was not as easy as they thought and ended up doing poorly in their assignment or test. This happened mainly during the first mid term. Towards the end of the second and during the third mid



term student were making better decisions so the level of frustration decreased significantly.

Deception was another problem that emerged from the practices that were introduced in the classroom. After being explained the assignments or the testing options, some participants did not request feedback or did not approach the teacher to have whatever questions they had answered. However because they did not request feedback, some of these students failed to meet the requirements they had been asked to include in their assignments. They submitted their tasks or did their activities thinking they had done them correctly and expected to have a good grade. When they got their assignments back they realized they had done it incorrectly. Participants were disappointed because they had spent quite some time and effort working on the assignment only to find out that it did not include the elements the teacher expected; which resulted in a getting a low score. This happened only during the first mid term. During the second and third mid term participants often times requested feedback to make sure they were doing their work correctly. Deception was present in the early stage of this project, however, once students were familiar with the working process students did not get disappointed anymore.

The last significant problem that resulted from having students make their own decisions about their learning process was getting reliable scores from peer evaluation. The first time participants did peer-evaluation the scores were not reliable because students scored their classmates based rather on how good the relationship with the person they were evaluating was. However, in order to get more reliable scores from peer evaluation the teacher had students use a rubric when they had to assess their classmates' work, this included a section where they had to clearly explain why they had given them such score. The use of rubrics helped to solve the problem on peer evaluation.

## **Conclusions**

One of the conclusions teachers reached from taking students' opinions into account and allowing them to make decisions regarding their learning process was



that implementing such practices resulted in more benefits than drawbacks for the students. It was also concluded that the problems that emerged from these practices were present mainly during the first mid term and that such problems disappeared once students learnt how to make decisions. In addition, teachers realized that the implementation of these practices should be done gradually because if it is too alien to the students it may cause them problems especially at the beginning. Another conclusion teachers reached is that teachers should help students to learn how to make good informed decisions in order to prevent problems that may emerge. All in all, allowing students to have a say in deciding what and how they want to learn as well as how they want to be evaluated resulted in positive outcomes. Some of them may be temporary such as improving their performance and getting good grades; however, others may last longer and have a positive effect in their learning in general such as being more responsible of their own learning and developing learner autonomy. Students do not have to make all the decisions, but if they are allowed to make some decisions, many positive outcomes can result from such practice.



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