Research Article

Linguistics

Methods of promoting "Active Learning" of English at Cihan University

Mushtaq Nayif Hasso Al-Rashidany

**Assistant Lecturer of English
Cihan University, Erbil, Kurdistan region.**

Abstract

Teaching English to non-native speakers needs to incorporate up-to-date techniques and strategies that are frequently updated to match the ever-changing needs of modern society. In order for students to start acquiring English skills effectively inside the classroom, they need to be more active in their learning and be ready to take the initiative. For this to happen, lecturers need to adopt techniques that facilitate "active learning" with the suitable environment for students to make better use of their innate abilities and become active learners. In a classroom environment where active learning is prominent, students take responsibility of their learning of English as a second language with the lecturer acting as facilitator whose role is limited to providing instructions and supervising the process. Students will have more self-confidence to express their opinions and actively participate in topic discussions. This paper discusses methods of active learning that can be applied in teaching English at Cihan University.

Introduction

Cihan University in Erbil, Kurdistan Region, is a private university in which the medium of teaching is mainly English. Basically all students attending this university need to master the English language skills from the beginning in order to be able to pass their classes and graduate.

All non-English department students attending Cihan University have to take a general, two-semester English course in their first year of study, and most of those students also take a specialized English class, related to their field of study, in their second year. However, many of Cihan students still face difficulties in their other classes for reasons related to their lack of English skills. Such difficulties stay with many of them until their graduation.

One of the main reasons for this problem might be the lack of exposure to English over a period of time. Students rarely, if ever, practice English language outside the classroom. Even when they are asked to do pair work inside the classroom, most of them usually try to use their native language in their interactions with their peers.

One of the most problems students face in English is the difficulty in understanding spoken language used by their lecturers[146] inside the classroom. This underscores the idea that listening and speaking skills are very important for students to master so that communication with the lecturer inside the classroom become easier. When students have difficulty in understanding their lecturer's spoken English, they tend to become bored quickly and lose interest in the topic. Some of them often resort to spending the class time chatting with their classmates about non-class related topics. Lack of listening and speaking skills of students in English are to blame here.

English language teaching approaches might have to be customized based on students' interests, skills, their native language and other factors related to their culture and community.

It might be a good idea to have students at Cihan University spend a year only taking English classes prior to the four-year period required for their bachelor's degree. However, this is financially infeasible for most of them, besides adding another year to their study time at the university.

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[146] The term "lecturer" is used in this paper to refer to "university teacher".

This paper highlights some of Cihan University students' difficulties in learning English and discusses some innovative techniques lecturers can employ to help students overcome some of their difficulties and become active learners.

Active Learning

"Students can't be 'taught' – they can only be helped to learn" (Jones, 2007). The term "active learning" in this paper is used to describe the case in which students take responsibility of their learning instead of being mere recipients of the knowledge provided by the teacher. It is used here to refer to a style of teaching English in which students are motivated to take the lead in their learning through thinking, discussing ideas and speaking. Student-centered approach in teaching English, regardless of the kinds of activities it employs, can be a good way to achieve active learning.

Learning English needs considerable efforts made by both the lecturer and students in order to achieve the desired results. When students expect their lecturers to do all the job while they only sit and listen, the learning process suffers. No progress can be made here unless students are motivated to start participating effectively in the learning process while the lecturer acts as facilitator. In order for that to happen, new techniques and methodologies in teaching need to be frequentlyadopted by lecturers in which opportunities for active learning are created. In order for a successful learning environment to be created, lecturers need to have good knowledge of their students' skills and interests in learning so that suitable techniques can be adopted. Successful lecturers of English do their best to help their students become successful learners.

The following are some of the innovative techniques and methodologies in helping students become active learners of English at Cihan University:

1. Using formulaic chunks in teaching speaking

"Some learners, consciously or unconsciously, have an analytic style and learn best by formulating and testing hypotheses or 'rules'. Other learners have a holistic style and learn best by experiencing, gathering, and restructuring relevant data but doing little or no apparent analysis" (Celce-Murcia, 1991). Cihan University students in general seem to be from the type with the holistic style. Teaching students English through asking them to memorize "ready sentences" might be one of the most effective ways in helping these students develop a kind of mastery of English. Ellis (2008) states that "there is now widespread acceptance of theimportance played by formulaic expressions in the acquisition of a second language." Formulaic chunks or formulaic expressionscan serve as an excellent start for many students to speak English in a confident way especially if their limited knowledge of English, which mostly comes from grammar-based instruction at school, is not enough for them to initiate their skills in speaking.

Since most students at Cihan University tend to be better at memorizing than analyzing, teaching them English through formulaic chunks seems to be a very realistic option as it fits their skills and interests. At least it is a good start for them to learn to speak English as it will most likely give them the much-needed confidence and motivation.

Formulaic chunks can be best used to urge students to use English in their basic communication with the lecturer inside the classroom. These formulaic chunks are "ready sentences" and so all students need to do is spend time memorizing them and then using them directly in meaningful communication. For this reason, the kind of formulaic chunks students need to be taught should be from their daily life at university and have to meet their basic needs of communication.

One of the useful ways of encouraging students to memorize English formulaic chunks is by explaining to them that using English, by memorizing chunks, can help them compensate for their mistakes in the classroom, such as tardiness. Students will be more likely to do such kind of homework when they know there is a "good advantage" for it. For example, the lecturer can explain to his/her students that no students are allowed to come late to class, but those who come late will have the chance to get in only if they manage to explain the reason for their tardiness in English! In this case, at the beginning of the semester the lecturer can provide students with lists of formulaic chunks that can be used as potential reasons for failing to come on time to class, for example. Once such instructions are explained to students from the beginning of the semester, they will know that whenever they come late, they should have some reason in mind, in English, as an excuse for their tardiness. Over time, such method can be very effective in somehow "forcing students" in a good way to master a variety of English sentences or formulaic chunks, which can be an excellent start for more development in their learning of the language, as Ellis (2008) puts it: "Formulaic expressions may also serve as a basis for the later development of a rule-based competence."

"In the eyes of many theorists, only when learners are engaged in decoding and encoding messages in the context of actual acts of communication are the conditions created for acquisition to take place" (Ellis, 2008). English can be more likely to be acquired if it is viewed as a way to achieve meaningful communication rather than as an object to be studied and analyzed. "People learn a language more successfully when they use the language as a means of acquiring information, rather than as an end in itself" (Richards, 2006). One of the most reasons that make students afraid of English and reluctant to learn it is the way it is presented to them through some grammar-based curriculums, as a boring subject with many rules and details that are hard to digest. Perhaps, it will be crucial for lecturers to explain to their students some facts about English language learning from the very beginning of the semester. Students need to understand that it is equally important for them to try speaking the language as much as it is important to read it and write it.

Using formulaic chunks in teaching students speaking encourages them to start speaking English without much fear of making mistakes, and thus they are encouraged to use the language more freely and actively. Speaking English using formulaic chunks helps students interact with the lecturer more frequently and helps them discuss their ideas and participate actively.

2. Cihan University students need to achieve fluency before accuracy in learning English

"Fluency is natural language use occurring when a speaker engages in meaningful interaction and maintains comprehensible and ongoing communication despite limitations in his or her communicative competence" (Richards, 2006). Learners would usually achieve fluency in their second language learning when they focus on communication with others without paying much attention to form. Such kind of second language learning usually happens in a non-classroom environment. I would call it "casual learning". The main focus in this type is to develop communication skills rather than mastering the details of the language used as long as ideas are communicated without much difficulty.

"Fluency practice can be contrasted with accuracy practice, which focuses on creating correct examples of language use" (Richards, 2006). Accuracy in second language, English, learning is achieved through paying a great deal of attention to the structure of the second language used. Focus on accuracy usually occurs in the classroom where students are taught to produce well-formed second language output.

Focusing on fluency alone or focusing on accuracy alone in learning each has its own downsides. While fluency can be sufficient in developing learners' skills in communication, it usually involves making form-related mistakes by learners that usually stay with them if left unchecked. On the other hand, focusing on form in

learning the second language, English, can considerably slow down the process as learners, or students, become very careful not to make mistakes when speaking, and this can hinder their progress.

As a result, a combination of both might be perfect to pursue in learning English.

Cihan University students need to focus on fluency first in learning English as a second language as this can boost their confidence in speaking and communicating with their lecturers. Focus on form should come later. Since Cihan University students are generally better at memorizing than analyzing, as mentioned earlier in this paper, for them focus on fluency seems a more realistic option to start with. After students begin making progress in using formulaic expressions in learning English, lecturers need to maintain to draw students' attention to form as it is necessary for academic purposes, and also for mastering the language in the long term.

Seeking fluency in learning English and achieving it can help to give students more confidence in speaking the language and can help them to make headway in learning. Once such progress is made, students will be in a better position to take responsibility of their learning of English. Achieving fluency in speaking English can ignites students' enthusiasm and can lead to further stages of learning when language form becomes the topic of focus.

3. Lecturers need to follow the method of having their students give presentations about their class subjects on a regular basis so that students can be more involved in the learning process

As mentioned above, in order for an effective and active learning of English to take place, student-centered approach needs to be applied in teaching in which students take the main role in classroom activities while the lecturer acts as a facilitator. In a student-centered approach, students take responsibility for their learning and are encouraged to take the initiative and be creative. In a student-centered approach, students have the chance to assess each other's English abilities and to get to know their strengths and weaknesses in learning the language.

However, applying this approach in teaching English at Cihan University may not be as easy as it seems, especially if the students are used to the idea of sitting back and listening to the lecturer explaining everything to them. With some classes where students are so dependent on their lecturer in learning, this approach might seem like a revolutionary one!

First, lecturers need to fully explain the purpose of such approach to their students and the "stages" of following it so that students know from the beginning what their responsibilities will be. They need to know the results expected from such approach at the end of the semester and that their participation will be graded on a regular basis. The activities organized within the student-centered approach need to be carefully designed to match students' abilities and interests.

One of the most common activities of student-centered approach in teaching English is having students "work in pairs" to practice a certain structure. Pair work is a very good activity for students in learning to speak English inside the classroom if it is followed carefully. The main problem lecturers need to deal with in pair work in monolingual classes, such as the case at Cihan University, is the fact that many students, especially the incompetent ones, tend to neglect English and use their native language instead in communicating with each other. When this happens, the activity will be a waste of time and there will not be much learning, if any.

Another activity to get students speak English inside the classroom, which might well be very effective for CihanUniversity students, is asking them to give presentations about one of the class topics in English in front of the whole class. There are several benefits for this activity and, if applied correctly and regularly, it can be a major turn in teaching English at Cihan University. In this activity, students will have the chance to read in

advance about a certain topic in detail, prepare a presentation about it and discuss their ideas with the whole class when presenting. It will be a great opportunity for them to practice speaking English with little to no help from the lecturer. Furthermore, as this activity requires a lot of courage, it will help them build self-confidence which will be beneficial for them in the long term. For students, giving a presentation in the classroom is like assuming the lead in the learning process of English. When they are asked to give a presentation, they certainly realize the transformation in their role inside the classroom from mere ''inactive listeners'' to active participants in the learning process. Once in action, they will realize that this activity provides opportunities for them to showcase any abilities and talents they have in the topic. It will also serve to help individual students discover their mistakes by watching the performance of their peers when they present.

When students are required to present in front their peers and the lecturer about a topic, they start taking the class more seriously and spend a considerable amount of time preparing theirpresentation and practicing speaking English.Presenting in front of the whole class puts students in "live" action and makes them realize how much effort they need to exert in order to come out with the best performance, especially with regard to speaking English. It is an excellent way of making students start relying more on themselves and less on their lecturer in learning English language.

Having students give presentations in front of the whole class can have profound positive effects on their self-confidence. Such risk-taking activity can promote self-learning for students and can help them to overcome their fears as well as it can give them a great opportunity to use English in a live manner inside the classroom. It will help them take the role of lecturer and enhance their public speaking skills.

4. Lecturers need to follow the "inductive approach" in teaching English grammar

There are generally two main approaches of teaching English grammar. Richards (2006) states that in a *deductive* approach, students are presented with grammar rules and then given opportunities to practice using them, while in an *inductive* approach students are given examples of sentences containing a grammar rule and asked to work out the rule for themselves.

The deductive approach, or "explicit presentation of grammar" as described by Savage *et al* (2010), is the one that has been adopted by English teachers at secondary schools in Iraq and Kurdistan for many years. In this approach, explicit grammatical rules are presented to learners by the teacher before giving them examples to see the rule in question in practice. This approach seems to be outdated right now as it does not encourage students to think for themselves regarding the grammatical rules discussed inside the classroom. This approach does not encourage "active learning" as it provides all the details to students in advance and it may be one of the reasons behind the lack of English language practice among students in Iraq and Kurdistan.

The deductive approach might be suitable to adopt when teaching grammar to beginners who have not studied English before. Such learners who are in the early stage of their learning mostly need explicit presentation of grammar since their knowledge and exposure to English is limited. For university students who have normally studied English skills for more than six years, I think deductive approach may no longer be effective in their learning.

The inductive approach of teaching English grammar, or "implicit presentation" as described by Savage *et al* (2010), seems to be a more realistic option for lecturers to follow when teaching university students, such as Cihan University students. The inductive approach offers students the chance to act as creative and active thinkers when a new grammatical rule is introduced by the lecturer. With this approach, students are highly encouraged to think for themselves as they are given examples of a certain rule and asked to rely on themselves to figure out the rule in question from the examples. The inductive approach of teaching English grammar can

help students be more independent in learning and rely more on themselves. When students are given examples about a grammatical rule and asked to work out the rule with limited help from their lecturer, they get automatically motivated to try to analyze the examples to figure out the rule by thinking and working with each other. Whatever the result of their thinking and trying here is, the benefits will be great as students become practically engaged in learning and taking their role as "active learners".

Following the inductive approach in teaching English can highly motivate students to participate in problem-solving activities. It can also help them to work together in a spontaneous way discussing ideas and coming up with solutions. It is one of the most effective ways of promoting active learning. Such approach can draw students' attention to detail and help improve their analytical thinking skills. Once this happens, we can expect to see more competitive scientific environment inside the classroom in which students are active players.

5. Copying texts as a way to improve English writing skills for students

One of the successful methods of teaching writing skills to students in the long term is giving them texts of English and asking them to copy these texts on their notebook as weekly homework. Many students don't have good writing skills as they tend to rely on making copies of the class handouts in order not to have to write in the classroom. They also tend to rely on technology, like cellphones, in getting written texts of the class material.

Cihan University students' writing skills are not going to improve unless they practice writing in English on a regular basis. Writing inside the classroom can be distracting for many students as it keeps them busy from listening to everything discussed by the lecturer and following what he/she says. It seems very hard for many students to write and listen at the same time as this kind of multitasking can be draining to their energy and enthusiasm to stay focused during the class time. This is evident in the fact that a lot of students who tend to write down the class material discussed in the classroom find it difficult to understand the material. On the other hand, those who choose not to write and just listen to the teacher instead usually develop poor writing skills.

The best course of action for lecturers here is to try to focus their students' attention in the classroom on listening to the material explanation in order to try to understand as much as they can. Students need to be very attentive to their lecturer during discussion of the material and this requires them to avoid getting busy with anything else, including writing down the material. This is crucial for all students and in particular those who are not very good at multitasking.

In this case, in order to improve students' writing skills, one of the best methods for the lecturer to follow is to have students copy written texts on a daily basis just for the sake of writing. He or she can prepare a list of written texts with the type of English that suits students' curriculum and assigns for students to copy by writing as homework. This method, if followed in the long term, can highly improve students' writing skills unconsciously. Furthermore, it is an easy task for students to do and they only need to set some time of their day or week to do it based on how often the lecturer assigns the homework.

Copying English written material can make students aware of spelling details of English words and increase their knowledge of spelling in general in English. It is known that English is one of the languages in which spelling and pronunciation of words don't often match. This usually poses a challenge to learners as they struggle to learn to pronounce written English or figure out the spelling of listening material. For students, practicing writing English texts intensively and on a regular basis can help them make a lot of progress in improving their writing and spelling skills.

Asking students to copy English written material as regular homework can highly improve their spelling skills through relying on themselves. When students' spelling skills improve, they will normally stop wasting a great portion of the class time copying notes and thus using their precious time for listening to the lecturer and participating in the class activities. This will eventually lead to a classroom environment with more active learning.

6. Lecturers need to help students spot their own mistakes in learning

Direct error correction might not be suitable to follow in teaching students at Cihan University as it discourages students and causes them to lose enthusiasm in learning the language. Lecturers need to help students build self-confidence in mastering English language different skills without curbing their enthusiasm through error correction.

To deal with the mistakes made by students during learning, lecturers need to detect the common mistakes in students' performance and set some time aside the following class to discuss them. This needs to be done without referring to who have made the mistakes so that students do not lose face and then lose interest in learning English. Discussing common mistakes in front of the whole class will certainly help individual students recognize their mistakes and avoid them in the future. It seems often possible to find some sort of systematicityin the way students make mistakes in learning especially if students are monolingual and belong to the same community, as is the case with Cihan University students. Systematic mistakes have the benefit of drawing lecturers' attention to trouble areas in their students' performance and their common weaknesses so that they can put more emphasis on those areas to deal with the problem.

Detecting common mistakes in students' performance can also be done when grading their answer sheets of a written examination and other examination types. Lecturers should pay a great deal of attention to such mistakes as they tell a lot about students' shortcomings in the class material and their way of thinking. This will help Lecturers plan their curriculum in the next semester and make the necessary adjustments in their teaching accordingly.

Lecturers can also have their students correct the mistakes their peers make in learning. After detecting the common mistakes made by students in an activity, the lecturer can list those common mistakes on the board and open a discussion about how to correct them. "The ability to self-correct leads to self-sufficiency" (Savage et al, 2010).

Teaching students techniques of correcting their own mistakes can make them more independent in their learning without heavily relying on their lecturer. When students gain the ability to self-correct their mistakes and those of their peers, their self-confidence gets a boost and they become more active in their learning. When students correct their own mistakes, they pay attention to their weaknesses and then work on making improvements.

Conclusion

The methods and activities mentioned above can be sufficient in creating the methodology of "active learning" in which students are active participants in their learning of English. Through a variety of methodologies and techniques, students need to be encouraged to take the initiative in their learning and to rely more and more on themselves. Helping them take responsibility of their learning can contribute to making a lot of progress in the process. All students from all levels have various innate abilities in learning and study, and these abilities will stay inactive if no suitable circumstances for them to appear and become active are created. It is sometimes easy for English lecturers to blame their students for their lack of achievement, but if those lecturers examine the problem more closely, they will realize that a big portion of responsibility lies on them in

this regard. English lecturers need to make sure that they don't stick to old patterns of teaching for fear of becoming "fossilized"; if they become fossilized in their teaching techniques, their students will become fossilized in their learning as well. Innovative techniques and methods are always of good benefit, and they are worth trying regardless of the results. Following new techniques that facilitate "active learning" and creating the suitable circumstances for students to start learning actively is a good example of innovative techniques.

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