

Structures for Active Participation and Learning

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A Rationale for Structured Engagement and Participation

Because of the compelling pedagogical and social benefits of classroom pairing and grouping strategies (e.g., Kagan 1992; McGroarty 1992; Gersten and Baker 2000), it stands to reason that peer collaboration has become an essential tenet of contemporary Language Arts instruction. However, well-intended teachers frequently ask classmates to put their heads together to identify and solve problems or to integrate new material with prior knowledge, without first taking into consideration the conceptual, linguistic, and affective dimensions of task-based interaction. Advocating “learning with and from peers” and carrying it out effectively in a heterogeneous classroom are two separate matters. In fact, classroom experience and research clearly demonstrate that task-based collaboration is far more than a creative seating arrangement, and that things can and do go wrong when teachers incorporate partner and group work into their lessons, particularly in the mixed-ability classroom marked by linguistic and cultural diversity (e.g., Long and Porter, 1985; Fiechtner and Davis 1992; Kinsella 1996; Gersten and Baker 2000).

Discussion and activities are often far less than democratic or engaging in heterogeneous secondary classrooms. More academically prepared and confident learners can tend to dominate both unified-class discussions and small-group activities. Students who are at all insecure about their subject matter preparation or English language skills may elect to remain passive, waiting for the classmates who are always ready to respond to eventually speak up. Furthermore, English language learners and others students who are not strong auditory processors need considerable wait-time to process a question and frame an answer, but this vital instructional support is rarely factored into traditional class discussions.

Similarly, many competent yet highly analytical and reflective learners require additional processing time and tranquility to incubate after being presented with a problem or question.

If impetuous or loquacious students are regularly allowed to blurt out answers, other more reflective or reticent participants are left with little time or incentive for critical thinking and engagement. When this instructional dynamic is revisited on a routine basis, less assertive and proficient students are apt to retreat permanently to the discussions sidelines. More seriously, the students in greatest need of instructional investment are denied the constructive contexts necessary to take social and academic risks and make vibrant contributions.

Features of Classroom Participation Structures

There are a number of strategies teachers can manageably integrate in their daily English Language Arts lessons to encourage more engaged and democratic participation and learning in mixed-ability classrooms. These “participation structures” involve students in responsible interaction and construction of knowledge by drawing upon a repertoire of speaking, listening, and writing skills. Each structure, while easy to implement, builds in the conscientious scaffolding necessary for less proficient students to channel their energy and participate more productively in every lesson phase.

These structures offer efficient and effective formats for independent seatwork, partner sharing, small group brainstorming and problem solving, and unified class debriefing. Some are adaptations of cooperative structures designed by Kagan (1992) and his colleagues, with a viable research base to support their use in linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms.

These idea-generating and problem-solving strategies are referred to as interactive or participation “structures” rather than activities for several reasons. First, a structure such as an Idea Wave or Numbered Heads is a relatively generic vehicle for organizing either unified-class or student-student interactions. In other words, these engagement structures are not discipline or grade level specific, and can therefore easily and effectively be integrated in lessons across the secondary curricula. These interaction protocols are also labeled as classroom structures because of the meticulous scaffolding involved to ensure that all learners receive the instructional support necessary to thrive. Another key reason they are referred to as participation structures is because they are intended to be implemented on a regular basis, in fact so routinely that students can essentially move into “automatic pilot” once they are given the signal. As students become increasingly familiar with the procedure of a discussion structure like the Idea Wave, they require less instructional set-up time and language strategy development. A final rationale for labeling these task-based discussion strategies as structures is to distinguish them from simple ice breakers and team-building activities devoid of specific lesson content, and from idea-generating activities such as a K-W-L chart or a graphic organizer, which while intended to tap into students’ knowledge and experiences prior to reading, typically lack the prepared participation, individual accountability, explicit language development, and peer rehearsal of information more likely to animate less prepared learners to contribute in a mixed-ability classroom.

Unlike traditional brainstorming and discussion formats most of these engagement structures build in quiet time for independent reflection and recording of thoughts prior to discussion. This written “prepared participation” rewards mature reflection rather than spontaneity, and builds in a sense of accountability for all students to contribute. In addition, reticent speakers typically feel more motivated to respond if they are not bombarded with spontaneous questions or task and instead allowed a few patient minutes to collect their thoughts in writing. This participation security blanket can be provided in a variety of forms, including a focused listing, a free-writing or journal

entry, or a graphic organizer. If students know they will be held accountable for turning in their independent brainstorming after the participation structure, they are additionally motivated to give this process serious thought and effort. This written record in turn can later serve as a formative assessment, alerting the teacher to any comprehension, engagement, or literacy issues that need to be addressed in individual students or the unified class.

Another distinguishing feature of several of the participation structures is the opportunity for students to “rehearse” a response prior to reporting out to the unified class. In structures like Numbered Heads and Think-Write-Pair-Share, students are required to independently reflect in response to a question or task, prior to discussing the subject matter with a partner or small group. In so doing, less confident and prepared learners have a safe interim to convey their perspective to peers and receive feedback and additional information, before potentially being called upon to relate this content to the unified class.

An equally vital feature of these participation structures is explicit instruction in target language strategies to achieve the communicative functions required by a particular listening or speaking task. Because these structures involve students in dynamic and responsible interaction, they understandably require a range of language skills that may be unfamiliar to many if not most students. Students’ confidence and productivity in these interactive structures can be greatly enhanced by instructional “front-loading” on relevant and appropriate language strategies for affirming, seeking clarification, paraphrasing, etc. Many students, in particular English language learners, will not be familiar with these critical language functions for classroom interaction and learning, as they are used less commonly in casual social interactions in the hallway and in the cafeteria. Traditional small-group and unified -class discussions are rarely prefaced by well targeted vocabulary and language strategy instruction. As an unfortunate consequence, students lacking this requisite linguistic machinery within a mixed-ability classroom are left poorly equipped and highly reticent to hazard a response.

Conclusion

Democratic class discussions and peer collaboration certainly require more than good intentions on the part of both the teacher and the student, particularly when learners with vastly differential preparation for secondary schooling sit side by side. A teacher intent on creating a dynamic and democratic learning arena for English language and literacy development must work diligently and creatively at structuring student engagement and participation. Simply soliciting responses from less proficient learners in an encouraging tone will not go far in bolstering their motivation to enter the traditional “instructional conversation.”

Task-based classroom interaction needs to visibly increase both the efficiency and effectiveness of learning for students with differential social and academic preparation. The array of classroom participation structures outlined in this course have a number of critical features which help ensure democratic opportunities for contributing and learning in a mixed-ability classroom:

- High structure
- Individual accountability
- Individual reflection and writing (“prepared participation”)
- Relevant vocabulary and language strategy development
- Active listening development
- Task-based social interaction between diverse peers

- Rehearsal of information prior to unified-class discussion
- Unified class debriefing and synthesis of ideas
- Formative assessment: e.g., individual note-taking; learning journal entry; graphic organizer; quick write
- A vivid connection/transition to the focus lesson content

Besides creating conditions for more active, responsible learning, the cooperative and task-based nature of these structures helps to promote a safe and supportive context for reticent participants to get their ideas expressed and recognized. The more eclectic range of responses in turn raises the interest of the class, while preparing students with relevant background knowledge for a subsequent reading or writing task. Moreover, teachers tend to observe more voluntary contributions in class, even during traditional lecture and discussion periods, in great part because students who have traditionally been allowed to remain on the participation sidelines have instead been routinely prepared and held accountable for actively sharing, listening and responding.

By conscientiously factoring familiar engagement structures with rigorous language development into our daily lesson plans, we move well beyond the rhetoric of the “learner centered” or “inclusive” classroom. We make genuine strides in enabling students with differential academic preparation to enrich the learning context by voicing their unique perspectives and experiences.

References

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