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INCREASING THE ENGAGEMENT OF SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN CLASS

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Abstract: Increasing the engagement of secondary school students is always the most significant topic for each teacher. During my practicum, I observed that students did not participate in any activities and do any tasks in class. In this article, I will share insights from my exploratory action research, gathered through data collection tools: my own written reflections, responses to the questionnaire, and observations. During the action stage, I implemented effective engagement strategies such as peer and group work activities, assigning different tasks for different level students, etc. These proved to be positively influential in increasing the engagement of secondary school students in the lesson.

Key words: student engagement, secondary education, peer work and group work activities, student-centered method, different tasks, prize, lower level and higher-level students.

Annotatsiya:O‘rta maktab o‘quvchilarining darsga faolligini oshirish har bir o‘qituvchi uchun doimo eng muhim mavzu bo‘lib kelgan. Amaliyotim davomida o‘quvchilar darsdagi hech qanday mashg’ulotlariga qatnashmaganliklari va topshiriqlarni bajarmaganliklarini kuzatdim. Ushbu maqolada men o‘zining yozma mulohazalarim, so‘rovnoma natijalari va kuzatuvlar kabi ma’lumot yig‘ish vositalari orqali to‘plangan o‘rganuvchi harakat tadqiqotim (exploratory action research) xulosalari bilan o‘rtoqlashaman. Harakat bosqichida men juftlikda va guruhda ishlash, turli darajadagi o‘quvchilar uchun turlicha topshiriqlar berish kabi samarali jalb qilish strategiyalarini qo‘lladim. Bu usullar o‘rta maktab o‘quvchilarining darsdagi faolligini oshirishda ijobiy ta’sir ko‘rsatdi.

Kalit so‘zlar: o‘quvchi faolligi, o‘rta ta’lim, juftlikda va guruhda ishlash faoliyati, o`quvchiga yo‘naltirilgan metod, turlicha topshiriqlar, sovrin, quyi va yuqori darajadagi o‘quvchilar.

Аннотация: Повышение вовлеченности учащихся средних школ всегда является одной из самых актуальных тем для каждого педагога. Во время педагогической практики я заметила, что учащиеся не принимали участия в каких-либо учебных и не выполняли задания в классе. В данной статье я делюсь результатами своего разведывательного действия (exploratory action research), полученными с помощью таких инструментов сбора данных, как личные рефлексивные заметки, анкетирование и наблюдения. На этапе реализации проекта были внедрены эффективные стратегии вовлечения, включая парную и групповую работу, а также дифференцированные задания для учащихся с разным уровнем подготовки. Данные методы оказали положительное влияние на повышение вовлеченности учащихся средних школ в учебный процесс.

Ключевые слова: вовлеченность учащихся, среднее образование, деятельность в парах и группах, студентоцентрированный метод, дифференцированные задания, приз, учащиеся низкого и высокого уровня.

Introduction

During practicum time, I had a chance to work with students at school. Last semester, l did a practicum at school 62 in Chust district, Namangan region, Uzbekistan. I studied at the institute four days a week and went to school for a practicum for two days. I worked especially with secondary school students (ages 15-16). The students' level was A2. There were 12 students in grade 9th: 6 boys, 6 girls.

While working with students, I noticed that some of them did not participate in any activities and they did not do any tasks and their homework. They did nothing during the lesson. Likewise, they chatted with each other, because they came to school just for attendance. So I decided to choose this problem for my research topic.

So this paper will deeply look through the following questions:

1). What do I think are the main challenges in keeping students engaged during lessons?
2). What do my students think help them stay interested and focused during lessons?
3). When or how often do my students show signs of active engagement in class?

Various types of data collection tools were applied in this study: (1) Own perception: my own written reflections and notes. (2) Students perception: responses to a questionnaire. (3) Students behavior or performance: observation by a school teacher or a colleague. The data shows the deep analysis and results of this research.

Methods

This exploratory action research was done using elements of qualitative and quantitative methods, which is a practical method for teachers to investigate classroom challenges (Burns, 2010). When I went to school, I took the survey from my secondary school students. There were 10 questions in this survey, it included Close- Ended Questions and Open - Ended Questions. Close- Ended Questions were from 1 to 8 questions, and Open- Ended Questions were 9 and 10 questions. In this context, it is important to note that the use of surveys in classroom research allows for a broader understanding of student attitudes and motivation (Dörnyei, 2003).

During this practicum, I collected my own written reflection and notes my every lesson from my students. Reflective teaching practice is a key component of professional development and action research (Richards & Lockhart, 1994). In addition to that the school teacher observed my lesson and the teacher gave feedback about my lesson.

In the research process, several pedagogical tools were implemented to address the lack of engagement. To ensure academic reliability, these methods were based on established ELT (English Language Teaching) frameworks:

Group Work and Peer Work: Students were organized into small groups to complete tasks collaboratively. According to Jeremy Harmer (2007), group work is essential as it increases the "Students' Talk Time" (STT) and provides a low-stress environment for practice.

Eye Contact: I maintained consistent eye contact to monitor the classroom and build rapport. As noted by Jim Scrivener (2011), eye contact is a vital tool for effective classroom management and establishing a personal connection.

Rewards and Prizes: To motivate lower-level students, a reward system (prizes and stickers) was introduced. This aligns with the concept of "positive reinforcement" discussed by Penny Ur (2012), which is particularly effective in secondary education.

Results

I went to school for practicum and observed students. During the practicum, I taught secondary school students. But I had a problem with my students. Secondary school students were irresponsible in English lessons. They did not do any tasks, they did not participate in activities, and they chatted with each other. They did not bring their own English books and notebooks, because they did not want to learn new topics and vocabulary. l felt a bit frustrated because students felt like there were not two teachers in class.

These pie charts are described of the data collection from the close-ended questions in the student questionnaire:

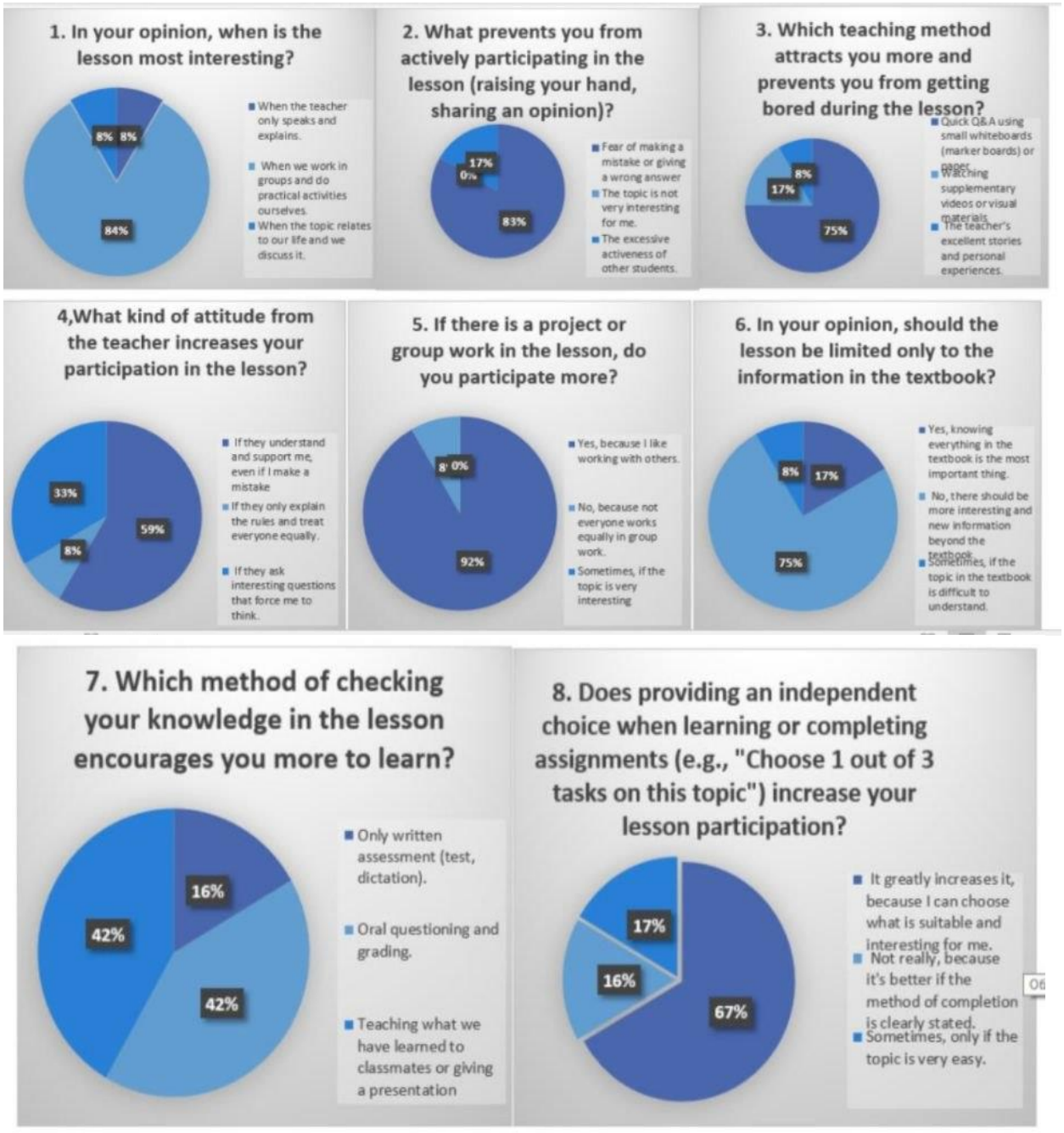


Table 1. Responses to open-ended questions:

№	**Questions**	**Students answers**
9	What other methods could the teacher use during the lesson to encourage you to share your opinion out loud, freely, and without fear?	According to students of perception, teachers should communicate with students a lot, raise students' motivation, check students understanding, and teaching through games to encourage the students to share their opinions out loud, freely, and without fear.
10	What kind of tasks or games related to physical activity inside the classroom (e.g., standing up, small movements, walking around the class) would you suggest to make the lesson more interesting and increase attention?	According to students of suggestions, most students want to play various games related to vocabulary, last topic, Q&A. and run around the classroom freely during the lessons.

The data gathered from the 12 participants reveals a clear preference for learner-centered and interactive instructional environments. A significant majority of the students (83%) identified group work and practical activities as the primary factors that make a lesson interesting, while 75% indicated that the integration of visual materials and supplementary videos is the most effective way to prevent boredom. The impact of collaborative learning is further evidenced by the fact that 92% of respondents reported higher levels of participation when involved in projects or group-based tasks.

The study also highlights critical psychological barriers to student engagement. Specifically, 83% of the students pointed to the "fear of making a mistake" as the leading cause of their silence in class. To mitigate this, 58% of the participants emphasized that a supportive teacher attitude—where mistakes are treated with understanding—is essential for increasing their classroom involvement. Furthermore, students expressed a strong desire for academic enrichment beyond the standard curriculum, with 75% advocating for the inclusion of interesting information that exceeds the boundaries of the textbook.

Regarding assessment and learner autonomy, the results show a balanced preference between oral questioning (42%) and written examinations (42%) for knowledge checks. However, the introduction of choice plays a transformative role in motivation; 67% of the students stated that being allowed to choose between different tasks significantly increases their participation. In conclusion, the results from the 12 participants suggest that student engagement in secondary education is most effectively driven by visual stimulation, a supportive emotional climate, and the provision of independent choice in learning activities.

According to the survey results, students expressed a strong preference for group work and practical, student-centered activities. In particular, they enjoy engaging in quick question-and-answer tasks using small whiteboards or paper, which allows them to participate actively. Students also value teamwork and appreciate having the opportunity to select activities that they find interesting and suitable, as this increases their engagement and participation in lessons.

Furthermore, many students indicated a preference for oral questioning and continuous assessment. They are motivated by opportunities to present their knowledge, teach their peers, and share what they have learned through presentations.

However, a significant number of students reported feeling anxious about making mistakes or giving incorrect answers when expressing their opinions in class. This suggests the need for a supportive classroom environment where errors are treated as part of the learning process.

Based on these findings, it is essential for the teacher to maintain effective communication with students, enhance their motivation, and regularly check their understanding. Incorporating educational games into lessons can further encourage students to express their ideas freely and confidently. Activities such as vocabulary games, topic-based tasks, and interactive question-and-answer sessions can create a more dynamic learning environment. Additionally, allowing students some physical movement in the classroom during activities can increase their engagement.

The observer teacher noticed there were 12 students in grade 9th class. 6 students were actively engaged and 5 students were passively engaged during the lesson, as well as, one of the students was sick, so they were absent from the class. The observation results revealed several areas for improvement in classroom management and instructional strategies. For instance, maintaining consistent eye contact can help monitor and manage student behavior more effectively. During the observed lesson, excessive noise led to misunderstandings among students, and some were unable to complete assigned tasks on time. It was also noted that lower-level students were less actively engaged, while higher-level students participated more actively. Some students appeared distracted, indicating the need for differentiated instruction tailored to varying proficiency level.

Despite these challenges, the use of interactive and collaborative activities positively influenced student engagement. Group work encouraged cooperation among students, even when they had different ability levels. Additionally, the use of rewards, such as stickers, served as an effective

motivational tool to increase participation. The observing teacher provided valuable feedback, suggesting that lesson topics should be explained more thoroughly before introducing multiple activities. While activity-based learning is beneficial, a clearer initial explanation can help ensure that all students understand the objectives. At the same time, encouraging students to take responsibility for their own learning remains important. Overall, the lesson incorporated relevant and engaging activities, but balancing explanation with interaction would further enhance its effectiveness.

Discussion

I collected all data collection tools and I made an action plan. It included: using the eye contact method, organizing peer work or group work activities, giving different tasks for different level students, giving time to each activity, and giving a prize for active students.

This is the exploratory action research findings. Based on my informal conversations with students, their reaction was very positive. Before, they were passive and came to school just for attendance. But after I started using new methods, their attitude changed completely. This confirms Schlechty's (2001) view that true engagement occurs when students are committed to the tasks and find inherent value in their work. For example, they now asked me, "What kind of task are we doing today?" every time I entered the room, and also they called me a "creative teacher" because the lessons were no longer boring, as well as they liked that the tasks are at their level. Even the lower-level students felt happy because they could finally complete their assignments on time. As part of my reflections, now I feel very proud and happy as a teacher. I realized that there are no "bad" students, only "uninspired" students. I used the "Student-Centered" Approach. This approach helped me to increase the engagement of secondary school students in class, and I saw how much a simple sticker, a sweet, or public praise could motivate my students. As noted by Dörnyei (2001), such motivational strategies are essential in creating a positive and stimulating learning environment. Even a small improvement should be celebrated. I am happy to see my students help each other and complete their tasks; it helped me to love my job even more. I knew my plan was successful because of these clear results, for example, a colleague teacher who observed my lesson again. The colleague teacher noticed a huge change in two passive students who became very active and engaged during the lesson. My colleague said that the teacher used eye contact to help distracted students refocus on the lesson immediately, without her needing to shout. Likewise, the teacher gave a specific time limit for peer work and group work. The students finished their tasks on time, and lower-level students started participating actively because the teacher gave them level-appropriate vocabulary. I also saw higher-level students helping their partners and groups to win the activity.

"One of the most effective strategies implemented during the action stage was tiered activities (different tasks for different levels). Since the class consisted of students with varying language abilities, I designed two levels of tasks for the same lesson topic. According to Penny Ur (2012), differentiation is key to inclusive education, as it allows every student to succeed at their own pace. By providing a 'Basic' task for lower-level students and a 'Challenging' task for more advanced ones, I observed that even the quietest students became more engaged, as the material was neither too easy nor too difficult for them."

Conclusion

This is my conclusion and reflection. Personally, I perceive that being a teacher is not just about teaching. It requires linguistics, methodology and literature knowledge, as well as conducting research, which is important for every teacher to improve teaching qualifications. This exploratory action research helps me to find the proper solution for my teaching problems. I realized that each teacher should not be egoistic. Teachers should understand their students' psychological situations, and they should take their students' weaknesses and strengths, as well as suggestions, into consideration. Likewise, I am really happy to learn about EAR with the help of my best teachers.

"APPENDIX A.
Free Time Activities: Word Search Tasks
" Different level materials for different level students"

For higher level students: For lower level students:



Figure 1. Vocabulary practice worksheet for secondary school students.

APPENDIX B:

Exploratory Action Research Poster Presentation



Figure 2. The poster presentation of the exploratory action research conducted at Namangan State University.

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