ENGAGING LANGUAGE LEARNERS

OVERVIEW by Greg Duncan

Engaging learners is critical to the success of any learning environment. We must capture students' interest and attention before meaningful learning can occur. Below you will find an overview to *Engaging Language Learners* and its role in today's language classroom.

It was a crisp fall day that I chose to visit the school. The district supervisor had repeatedly asked me to drop by for a visit to watch learning at this highly touted, high performing school. Finally, the calendar allowed for this to happen. Approaching the school, it was easy to note the sense of pride—the lawns were well maintained, shrubs neatly trimmed, no litter anywhere to be seen. Inside, all was a model of organization … office staff professional in demeanor and appearance, hallways neat and tidy, students courteous and friendly. The short visit to the world language department office revealed yet more professionalism … teachers working either quietly at their desks or collaborating with colleagues around the central table.

As the department head led me on a quick tour of the world language hallway, I began to feel that I was in some sort of time warp, returning to my own high school days many years ago. Glimpses inside each and every classroom revealed long straight rows of desks occupied with students who, for the most part, were facing forward and watching and/or listening to the teacher who was in the front of the room explaining at a document camera, an LCD projector or a dry erase board. Students seemed attentive, but they did not look engaged or particularly interested. Their faces were mostly just expressionless. Teachers were "teaching," and students were "learning" was the assumption. But was learning really happening? Well, it's hard to say, but because this was such a high performing school, it is safe to assume that students knew they needed to do well academically, so they probably paid enough attention to their teachers to learn what they needed to learn to do well on their assignments and tests.

Sadly, many of our nation's schools are populated with learners like those above. They do what they have to do and nothing more. And even more sadly, many teachers feel that to have such learners would be a step up for them! We are plagued with students who find schooling uninteresting and irrelevant.

Our schools are full of three types of learners:

- **The "who cares" learner**
- **The compliant learner**
- **The motivated learner**

Hopefully, the "who cares" learner is least found in our schools, but many teachers in some of our toughest schools would disagree with that. This learner—when and if he comes to school—is there simply to mark time and to possibly move through the system to its logical conclusion. For certain, the vast majority of American classrooms are populated by compliant learners—those described in the opening paragraphs—who come into classrooms, often unsure of what they will learn or why they need to learn it, and who do what they are told to do, when they are told to do it, and how they are told to do it. Sadly, this is learned behavior . . . our schools are organized to produce just that sort of learner. The eager, enthusiastic and joyful kindergartner gradually transforms into a 2nd or 3rd grader who knows how to line up, take out his materials, follow instructions and wait for more instructions. To access the third learner found in our schools—the motivated learner—requires us to help students not get caught up in that institutional ethos and to learn to learn for the joy of learning. Apart from just enjoying learning more, why else is it important to produce motivated learners? Simply because motivated learners learn more; they learn better; and, they have staying power. If learning is so important to the well-being of the individual, specifically, and to society, in general (Stewart, 2012; Wiliam, 1998), why would we not want to become totally dissatisfied with "who cares" and compliant learners?

In order to move toward motivated learners, it is essential to understand what motivated learners look like. Motivation theorist John Keller (1982) suggests that motivated learners possess four characteristics. First, he says the learner must be interested in what he is learning.

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That interest must be present every day, in every lesson. Second, Keller says that learning must be relevant to the learner—he must see a need for learning what he is learning. In other words, it should connect to his life. Third, the student must approach the learning with a sense of expectancy—that is, he expects that he will be able to learn the new information or skill because his teacher makes certain that the new learning is always within the scope of his ability. Finally, says Keller, the student should leave the learning experience with outcomes that he can use in his life thus looping back to the relevance aspect. Armed with that knowledge, teachers can then go about the task of organizing learning experiences that create motivated learners—learners who learn better and who learn more.

Here's the secret to converting all those compliant learners into motivated learners—get them involved in learning that matters to them (interesting, relevant, do-able, outcomes-based). In order for motivated learners to emerge, they must be actively involved in their learning. For learners to sit in rows—or pairs or quads—and listen to teachers talk for most of the class period will ensure that we continue to have the majority of our classrooms populated with compliant learners—at best—who will learn less and who may never know the joys of learning for the sake of learning and who may never become life-long learners.

Recently, I had the opportunity to observe a teacher and to provide her some feedback about her lesson. The student desks were arranged in a horseshoe configuration, which allowed the teacher to be front and center for the lesson and for her to have easy access to the students. As the lesson unfolded, it was apparent that the teacher had put a lot of thought and effort into the plan as activities seamlessly flowed from one to another and laid a foundation for succeeding ones. Once the lesson was over and the teacher sat down with me to debrief, I asked my favorite lead-in question in a feedback session: "How did you feel the lesson went?" The teacher exhaled deeply and responded, "Well, first off, I am exhausted." "It's no wonder," I said. "You were working like a Trojan." And that was the problem. The teacher did all the work. Students sat and waited for the teacher to tell them what to do, and they did what she asked and nothing more. Their involvement in the lesson was minimal while the teacher was full invested. In her zeal to put together the perfect lesson, the teacher forgot the most basic caveat: the students should be the ones working. Harry Wong (1998) reminds us "the person who is the doing the work is the ONLY one who is learning."

In the case of a teacher who is doing all the work, the students are simply observers at worst and actors at best who derive minimal benefit from the planned learning experience. Sadly, an oft-used Wong paraphrase is that school is generally a place where students go to watch teachers work.

An important corollary to an understanding of the need to move compliant learners to motivated learners is that teachers must plan lessons that put students to meaningful work for the entire class period. Students should leave the learning experience exhausted—in a good way—from their work, and teachers should be energized and ready for the next group. It is not that teachers should not be working hard—the place of their hard work shifts away from the classroom to the planning table. That is where teachers need to be laboring over important decisions that will make a difference in student learning; that is where teachers should be sweating; that is where their great thinking needs to be happening. Arrival to the classroom should signal a change in the teacher's role from "teacher" or "instructional planner" to "learning facilitator" or, as world language teacher and blogger Adam Stryker calls himself, "language learning engineer."

If the key to getting students involved in their learning is through the teacher's planning, what specifically can the teacher to do make this change in the classroom? Himmele and Himmele (2011) have contributed greatly to this conversation through their book Total Participation Techniques. They remind us "unless you intentionally plan for and require students to demonstrate active participation and cognitive engagement with the topic that you are teaching, you have no way of knowing what students are learning until it's often too late to repair misunderstandings." They provide a number of strategies that teachers can use that will simultaneously involve students actively in their learning and with the content being considered. Divided into non-verbal and verbal sections, here are some strategies that language educators can use to keep their students engaged in learning throughout the class period.

NON-VERBAL STRATEGIES FOR LEARNER ENGAGEMENT

Thumbs up/Thumbs down vote. The teacher can make a statement of any kind and ask students to determine if what was said is true or false. A thumbs-up by students indicates the statement is true; thumbs down signify the statement is false. Here are some examples:

- *This is a very large school.*
- *In our front office, we have three administrators.*
- *The person who answers the phone in the office is the principal's secretary.*
- *We have more than 2,000 students in our school.*
- *In this class, we have four students who are exchange students.*

On another topic . . .

- *Mexico is a part of Central America.*
- *The area around Mexico City is called the "Distrito del Gobierno."*
- *The Aztecs built the pyramids of Tenochtitlán.*
- *The Inca civilization mostly lived in the Yucatán Peninsula.*

Teachers can just as easily call on students to make statements that be can used in the same way.

Whiteboards. Individual student whiteboards can be used in many different ways to keep students actively engaged in learning and to also demonstrate their understanding. As teachers use the target language in class on a regular basis, they need to be assured that students understand what they are hearing. With whiteboards, teachers can know in a flash if students are tracking what is going on in class. For example, imagine that the teacher wants to see how much of the unit's vocabulary students have internalized midway through the unit. With whiteboards in their hands, students listen to the teacher say a vocabulary word, and they make a drawing that represents that word. Or, in getting students ready to interview each other, the teacher wants to make sure that students know how to ask pertinent questions. So she might say, "take your whiteboard and show me the question we would ask someone if we want to know his or her age." After students quickly write this out on their whiteboards and the teachers says "show me," the teacher can see in an instant who knows how to do it and who doesn't which gives her important information about who needs additional help and who doesn't.

Quick Draw. This device allows students to use their creativity to represent ideas and concepts. For example, students might be studying about those things that are very important to Korean families. The teacher asks the students to take a sheet of paper and to illustrate three things that they feel are the most important to a Korean family. Following creating these illustrations (maybe after 9-10 minutes), students could be grouped in triads or quads to share their thoughts with the group mates (modulating the activity to a verbal one. The teacher might then sample two or three just as a way to close out the experience.

Quick Write. Similar to Quick Draw, students get ideas out quickly but this time in writing, not through a drawing. For Novice learners, the teacher might ask students to take a look at a picture and to write down every word they can think of in the target language that is represented in the picture. For students at the Intermediate level, the teacher might show an action-packed picture and ask students to quickly create a little story about what they see. The idea is to get a lot of information out quickly.

Chalkboard Splash. The principal idea behind the Chalkboard Splash is to allow everyone to respond to a prompt and to also allow all students access to what everyone else writes. Imagine that students have just completed reading a legend in their language (this might be a simplified legend for more beginning students or the full-blown version for students with more language experience). The teacher asks students which of the characters they identify with the most and why. Students take a few minutes to think and also to jot down what they want to write to share. The teacher makes available the chalk/dry-erase board or a big section of butcher paper and invites students to come to the "board" when they are ready to post their thoughts. Once all comments are posted, students can take a gallery walk to see what their classmates have been thinking.

True/Not True Response Cards. Students have two different cards. One says "True," and the other says "Not True." Using the same strategy described above for "Thumbs up/Thumbs down," the teacher is able to check for understanding AND have all students actively involved in the learning at the same time.

VERBAL STRATEGIES FOR LEARNER ENGAGEMENT

Turn & Talk This strategy—planned or utilized on the spot—is a sure-fire way of keeping students actively involved in learning. At any time during the lesson, the teacher can say (in the unit on entertainment, for example) "turn to your neighbor [on your left, right, in front of or behind you] and tell him what movie you want to see this weekend and why." The turn and talk strategy is not designed so much as a high-leverage language expansion activity as it is a quick way to allow students to be actively involved and communicating in the target language at the same time. If teachers happen to notice that students' attention starts to wane during a lesson, employing this strategy is a way to change that dynamic. When students exert energy, their brains are more alert and more ready for learning.

Think Pair Share. The use of this strategy enables a number of things to transpire that are good for learning. For example, the teacher might give this prompt: "Who is your favorite singer, actor or athlete and why?" Following stating the prompt, the teacher asks students to say nothing and to THINK. This provides everyone an opportunity to formulate his or her thoughts as well as the language they would like to use without having to be interrupted by overly eager hand-wavers who seek to show off what they know. Then the teacher asks students to PAIR with one other student to share their thoughts. Following this, the teacher can then allow students to SHARE their responses to the question with the class. This can be done very informally just as a sampling of responses or the teacher might choose to capture the data in a chart from which a graph (or graphs) might be made for further analysis and language production.

Line ups. As the name indicates, line-ups are a way for student to physically organize themselves in an order of the teacher's direction. In a beginning level class, the teacher might ask the students to line up in order according to their birthdays. Students would have to ask each other when their birthdays are in order for this to happen, and then the teacher confirms this by going down the row with students telling their birthdays. For a class with students who have more experience in language learning a prompt might be to line up by degrees of agreement with a certain statement, for example, "How do you feel about gun control? Those in favor start the line up and then are followed by degrees of disagreement.

Inside/Outside Circles. Students form an inner circle that faces an outer circle for the purpose of sharing information with each other. The inner circle might remain stationery while the outer circle moves. The inner circle students pose a question to the outer circle members who respond to their inner circle counterpart. The teacher then gives a signal, and the outer circle moves, which provides each student with a different partner now. The questions might change or they might remain the same for a couple of rounds to allow students to have the practice of asking or answering the same question twice (or multiple times) in order to improve language or to increase the comfort level of producing it.

Four Corners. This strategy provides students four options for a question. The teacher might ask, "which is your favorite season and why?" Each corner of the room is designated for a season, and students move there and then must pair up with someone to share their reason. Teachers can provide as many questions as they want. The importance of this strategy is that it allows for physical movement (generating oxygen to the brain with the result of more attention) as well as language production.

The strategies listed above are just a few of the many that have been documented by numerous authors including Himmele and Himmele in *Total Participation Techniques* as well as Judith Dodge in *25 Quick Formative Assessments for a Differentiated Classroom*.

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No variable is more important in the learning equation than the student—how he sees himself as a learner, his past experiences in school and the degree to which he connects with the content he is learning. The primary mission of every teacher should be to create learning environments and learning experiences that cause students to want to learn and to keep learning. Teachers who understand the importance of fostering classrooms full of motivated students who are actively engaged in their own learning will change the fabric of American education and will change the futures of untold numbers of learners.

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