

Investigating Classroom Talk and Participation in the English Language Classroom: outline of an evaluation

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Rationale

Lack of proficiency in English has been a drawback in the pursuit of academic excellence for many Fiji students. Strategies need to be adopted by teachers that assist students to become more proficient in English. In order to identify effective strategies that best suit the needs of our students and substitute them for those that are ineffective, it is necessary to carry out an evaluation.

Objectives

The evaluation carried out at a high school in Fiji last year had four objectives:

- to analyse student attitudes that promote learning of English
- to identify some factors that contribute to good and poor performance in English
- to investigate the balance in communication between the teacher and students
- to investigate the appropriateness and relevance of questions in relation to the lesson objectives.

Data collection

Data were collected from existing sources: HOD language monthly reports, workbooks, lesson plans and internal and external assessment results. New data were collected from students' journals and questionnaires filled in by teachers and students. Some of the questions in the questionnaire given to ten Form 6 students (3 male, 3 female, all Fijian) are given here as examples:

- ❖ What do you suggest the teacher should do to make the English class more interesting?

- ❖ What do you think should be eliminated from the English course content and why?
- ❖ Do you think the teacher's attitude/relationship with the students is a major contributing factor to performance in English?
- ❖ What type of teacher attitude do you think arouses enthusiasm for learning English in students?

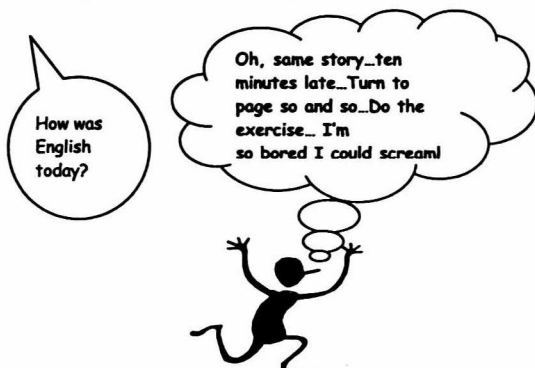
Examples of questions in the questionnaire given to teachers of English are:

- ❖ What do you think contributes to an unsatisfactory student/teacher interaction?
- ❖ How do you rate student/teacher interaction in your classroom?
- ❖ If it is unsatisfactory, what are some strategies you could adopt to improve this interaction?
- ❖ What are some contributing factors to under-achievement in English?

During lesson observation, the following were observed:

- ❖ What percentage of talk is teacher talk?
- ❖ How often are females questioned compared to males?
- ❖ Does the teacher allow time for weaker students to think of an answer?
- ❖ Do questions/interactions elicit critical thinking?

Examination records were used to find out to what extent lesson objectives were being achieved.



Main Findings

It was evident that the students' attitudes were determined by how they perceived the lesson content. If it was relevant and meaningful to their lives, they were interested. Secondly, if the students understood the content, they showed enthusiasm when doing the related activities. Further, it seems that the teacher's role is of utmost importance; students develop positive attitudes if they see an innovative teacher who is punctual to class, has a good rapport with the students, is well-prepared, and uses different methodologies.

Responses to the teachers' questionnaire revealed that they thought under-achievement could be attributed to difficulties in speaking English, poor teacher personality, poor lesson preparation, the difficulty level of the lesson, the teacher not varying his/her approach and methods, the level of the students and the time of day.

Lesson observations revealed that there was no gender bias, that questions were fairly distributed but slow students were not given sufficient time to answer, and that questions did not stimulate critical thinking. Lesson objectives were often not achieved because teachers digressed.

It appeared that most teachers followed the prescription without deviation, regardless of whether it suited the students' abilities. Tasks given lacked challenge, and students were sometimes asked to tackle work that was inappropriate.

Data from internal and external assessment revealed that approximately 60 - 70% of students at this level fail English. This is another indication that lesson objectives are not being achieved.

Action Plan

The findings were discussed in the English Department and teachers were requested to improve by:

- ✓ Preparing lessons in advance and being innovative, using a variety of strategies which allow students to practise their language skills.
- ✓ Being punctual to class.
- ✓ Developing good rapport with students.
- ✓ Being sensitive to any prejudices in the classroom, especially not discriminating between the fast and slow students.
- ✓ Trying to stimulate higher order thinking skills when questioning.
- ✓ Keeping the lesson focussed on the objectives and being sure to evaluate each lesson in terms of achievement of objectives.

The HOD then evaluated two lessons of each teacher over a two week period and noted dramatic improvements in all areas listed above. As a result, students began to look forward to their classes and practise their language skills much more. They showed that they had plenty of initiative when given the opportunity to use it. Interaction improved greatly as teachers became more sensitive to their students' needs and abilities, were punctual, well-prepared and innovative.

