

Enhancing Student Engagement in the Remote ESL Classroom

George de Man

Montgomery College

Defining “Engagement”

“[Student involvement is] the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience.”
(Astin, 1984)

“Student engagement represents the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcome...*and* what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities.” (Kuh, 2009, original emphasis)

= Institutional, individual

Defining “Engagement” in ESL/EFL

“The automatization of L2 skills requires an extended practice period of practice that involves meaningful learner participation.”
(Dörnyei, 2019)

“To engage [L2] learners, instructors can encourage them to accept responsibility for their learning.” (Lenkaitis, 2020, citing David Little)

= Pedagogical, individual

The Literature

Aubrey, et al. (2020) conducted a 10-week study of Japanese EFL learner engagement via self-reports of desire to speak, anxiety, focus, and confidence following each weekly task; engagement shown to be determined by a balance of social cohesion and nature and purpose of individual tasks.

Lenkaitis (2020) described a pre-pandemic study of L2 Spanish learners assigned to use Zoom videoconferencing for weekly learner-to learner conversation practice; the creation of these “telecollaborative exchanges” were found to measurably facilitate learner autonomy.

The Literature

Bueno (2010) examined the effectiveness of student-to-student interactions via Skype for overcoming pronunciation-related breakdowns in communications, and found that NNS-NNS pairings led to significant self-correction of phonetic errors.

Lee (2016) explored the use of various Web 2.0 tools for task-based instruction in online language courses, specifically collaborative creation tools such as VoiceThread, Audioboo, and wikis; such computer-mediated communication “increased student engagement and motivation and promoted learner autonomy.”

Engagement as Motivation

Dörnyei (2014, 2019) presents the engaged learner as a motivated learner, and identifies six guidelines for designing engaging L2 tasks:

- Presentation: Learners can see how the task is relevant
- Goal: Discernible to all participants
- Content: Must be of interest to the students
- Ownership: Learners must feel they have some control
- Structure: Involves clear steps/procedures
- Positivity: Task is fun in a way that promotes group dynamics

“Striving to achieve super-motivator status can easily lead a teacher to burnout...It is sufficient for teachers to choose a few strategies that suit both them and their learners to create a positive motivational climate in the classroom.” (Dörnyei , 2014)

Tools of Engagement

Motivated learners

- What do students hope to achieve with the L2, and are they confident they can achieve it? What are their beliefs or assumptions about L2 learning? To what extent do they accept the “culture” of the virtual L2 classroom?

Sociocultural theory

- How much can students learn from each other by interacting with each other, virtually or F2F? As portals to social interaction, are video platforms conducive, disruptive, or neutral?

Learner autonomy

- Is it a prerequisite of effective remote learning, a goal, or both?

“Remote Engagement” and the Intermediate Learner: Four Gateways

Productive: Learners engaged in content creation

Kinesthetic: Learners engaged “physically”

Collaborative: Learners engaged in joint projects

Competitive: Learners engaged in formative assessment

Productive Engagement: Narrating Visual Prompts

Target form(s): Simple present, present continuous, simple past, simple future

Target skills: Writing; digital literacy

Time: 10 minutes

Resources: <https://educators.brainpop.com/brainpop-esl-teacher-resources/brainpop-esl-picture-prompts/>

YouTube (silent narratives 3 minutes or less;
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q-TQQE1y68c>)

Procedure: Students may work in breakout room pairs to construct a short narrative around the prompt, to be shared with the group; alternatively, students use chat to “narrate” the prompt using a specific verb tense or mix of tenses.

Kinesthetic Engagement: Pronunciation

Target forms: Consonant clusters (-s and -ed), content word stress

Target skills: Oral communication, intelligibility, vocabulary

Time: 10-12 minutes

Resources: Audio transcripts marked for stress/intonation; instructor-generated worksheets (modeled on Celce-Murcia, et al.); Bill Acton's "Rhythm Fight Club" (see Burri, et al.): <https://vimeo.com/61195605>

Procedure(s): Transcript practice and worksheets may be done in BR pairs; RFC can be an all-class activity for "felt sense" stressed syllable practice.

Collaborative Engagement: Gap-Fill Worksheets

Target forms: Interrogatives, imperatives, present continuous

Target skills: Oral communication, negotiation of meaning, pronunciation

Time: 10-15 minutes

Resources: Ventures Workbook (Communication activities); https://bogglesworldesl.com/information_gap.htm

Procedure: Each student of a BR pair receives a handout with information and missing information (e.g., maps, work schedules, class catalogues, etc.); the objective is to take turns using interrogatives or giving instructions to locate missing information

Variations: One student "reports" in present continuous a city tour, partner uses map to trace itinerary; also "Draw This" activities

Competitive Engagement: Jeopardy

Target forms; Various

Target skills: Vocabulary, grammar, error correction, pronunciation

Time: 20-25 minutes

Resources: <https://jeopardylabs.com/>

Procedure: Instructor prepares template for up to five categories and class is divided into two teams. Important to strike a balance between questions answered orally and via chat, to pare scoring as needed (e.g., simultaneity), and so on.

Engaged Remote Learning & Digital Literacy

“[O]ffering digital learning opportunities across a coordinated set of practice dimensions produces engagement such that the more students engage in one dimension, the more they engage in others as well.” (Reynolds, 2016).

MDL’s Digital Literacy Framework provides its own set of practice dimensions in the form of seven contexts:



What are some ways lessons could coordinate engagement with one context (e.g., Technical) that leads to engagement with one or more of the others (e.g., Civic, Computational)?

Example: In-Class Research (Advanced)

Topic: Extreme weather

Target skills: Reading, writing, paraphrasing oral communication

Time: 30 minutes

Resources: Internet, Google slides

Procedure: Assign BR teams of 2-3 students a well-documented but less familiar natural disaster (e.g., the Great New England Hurricane); 20 mins to locate information on human, environmental, and economic impact, and share findings in 5-minute flash presentations; notes can be used as the basis of a writing assignment (e.g., a short essay about hurricanes as a phenomenon, and the disaster as an example)

Digital literacy contexts, coordinated:



Engaged Teaching & Engaged Learners (My maxims)

- *Engagement is contagious, whatever the activity on hand. If you know it when you see it in your students, your students will know it when they see it in you.*
- *Students are most engaged where they feel they are lacking, and I've never met a second language learner who didn't prioritize improving their oral communication.*
- *Remote classrooms are Communities of Practice, for the teacher as much as the learners.*

Directions to Explore

- Is engagement synonymous with learner-centered teaching, and in that sense, not a new concept? If not, how are they different?
- In what ways, if any, has the shift to distance/Zoom teaching actually enriched our repertoire for engaging students?
- Have you considered using wikis in your ESL classroom? How effective do you think wikis would be at sustaining your students' online participation?
- “Engagement” in this presentation has been assumed to be synchronous, but many activities (e.g., homework, writing assignments) are asynchronous. How do we identify learner engagement as it manifests outside the Zoom classroom?

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THANKYOU!
QUESTIONS?