

Addressing the Factors Inhibiting Students' Participation in Classroom Interactive Teaching and Learning in Jimma University, Ethiopia

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Abstract

This action research was conducted in 2007 with these aims: to discover the stressors to active students' participation in classroom; attempt solving the identified stressors immediately; and to design some mitigating measures for both short term and long term solutions. Although Ethiopian Ministry of Education stresses the need for employing interactive teaching methods, this has been frustrated due to number of problems. The glaring ones are: unpreparedness of teachers to change their teaching methods; the reluctance of students to comply as they are used to teacher-centered methods and culturally encapsulated in male-chauvinism; students' poor English language background and absolute poverty and so on. There are also problems of policy conflicts; insufficient learning and teaching materials; noises; and so o, all combined to inform this research-design. With patience and continuous enlightenment of the students and application of more students' centered methods, there were noticeable changes toward the desired attitudes. A matrix mapping out the problems, what was done to instantly address each of the problems, assessment of the effectiveness of the measures adopted and concise suggestions for further re-enforcement of desired learning behaviour were given. The key concepts are: Action Research; Inhibitors of Learning and Teaching; Interactive Teaching Methods; Classroom Management; and Gender Issues.

Introduction

Inhibitors of learning are many and surface in all learning situations whether conducive learning atmosphere or not, whether in advanced society or developing country, whether in a city or countryside. However, they are more pronounced in poverty-stricken and culturally encapsulated societies where some of them defy solutions. Perhaps, not more than one quarter of class members in Jimma University do actively participate whenever Students' Centered Methods are employed. The attitudes of non-participation of students continue into examination whereby objective questions are given rather than essay questions and answers. This implies that students are not given the training and opportunity to participate in the discussions and to demonstrate their mental participation and expression.

Preliminary survey identified the following inhibitors: The educational policy of not teaching in English language in the pre-University levels (Grades 1 to 12) but to revert to the use of the English language in the University level, thereby leading to policy conflict and language barrier between the students and the lecturers; Culture of poverty and dependency encouraging students to wait for everything to be done for them; policy of 'mass education' admitting unqualified students and very massive beyond the capacity of the university's infrastructures and causing too high students to lecturers' ratio, and as well graduating even academically very poor students; Lack of standardization, uniformity and monitoring; Disparate assessment methods; Insufficient learning and teaching materials, classrooms and laboratory equipments; to mention the more glaring ones. To approach these problems entails an action research and problem solving on the part of the lecturers, one of which findings are given here.

Objectives

Some of the general objectives were to address the problems of non-participation of many students in classroom activities; and to raise the standard of education in the University. The specific objectives were to address the problems of non-participation of students in classroom activities, and to provide specific solutions to the observable and itemized related problems.

These two hypotheses were stipulated and measured: "Once the inhibitors of active participation are known, they can be addressed;" and "The standard

and achievement of students can be raised with action research and more interactive teaching methods.”

Methods

The population of study was the years one and two Geography and History students. Sixty (60) students were systematically sampled for application of questionnaires: 15 each of year one geography, year two geography, year one history and year two history students respectively and each class had an average of 25 and 4 males and females respectively. All females were purposively sampled since they were very few. They were given the questionnaire to fill in. Four lecturers (two from Geography and two from History) were purposively selected for In Depth Interviews (IDI).

Literature Review

The literature review is approached in sub-themes: Theories of Action Research; Managing classroom for effective interactive teaching; Use of English Language; Gender Issues; and Students-Teachers-Relations and Curriculum cum environmental situations.

Theories of Action Research

Many types of Action Researches have been conducted with the view to identifying the needs of targeted populations or problems and designing how to promote, satisfy or solve the problems immediately. Such researches also provide the information upon which important decisions are based, particularly classroom learning and teaching, marketing, administration, and so on. For instance, Marketing Research and Programs research is a pivotal part of the marketing process by referring to studies of prospective buyers' needs, wants, and tastes, providers of goods and services and tailoring their marketing programs. The results of marketing studies suggest to sellers not only what they should sell or provide but also where to offer particular goods and services, how to advertise them, and how to set prices.

There are two types of researches: qualitative and quantitative. To gain a general impression of the students, workers, market, consumers, or the product, researchers or companies generally start with qualitative research. This approach asks open-ended rather than yes or no questions in order to enable people to explain their thoughts, feelings, or beliefs in detail. One of the most common qualitative research techniques is the *focus group* in which

a moderator leads a discussion among a small group of consumers who are typical of the target market. The discussion usually involves a particular issue or product, service, or marketing situation. Focus groups can yield insights into students' or consumer perceptions and attitudes. The findings help to suggest what types of solutions to apply to resolve the problems. The insights generated by a focus group are often explored further through quantitative research, which provides reliable, hard statistics. This type of research uses closed-ended questions, enabling the researcher to determine the exact percentage of people who answered yes or no to a question or who selected answer a, b, c, or d on a questionnaire. The researchers sample the opinions of a large group of people by percentages. Once the brainstorming has produced a wide range of ideas, the teacher then evaluates the various proposals and selects the best to present to the client (**Microsoft Encarta 2007**).

There are many methods researchers use to learn about classroom situations like: Observation; face-to-face interviews; Collecting information from others' and *secondary source reports*; *Experiments* carefully designed and controlled; and *case studies* of specific individuals. Individual Case studies may involve the teacher to interview, test, observe, and investigate the backgrounds of specific individuals in detail. Such *case studies* are conducted when researchers believe that an in-depth look at one individual will reveal something important about people in general. Case studies often take a great deal of time to complete, and the results may be limited by the fact that the subject is atypical (Microsoft Encarta 2007).

Managing classroom for effective interactive teaching

Classroom management is the teacher's ability to cooperatively manage, time, space, resource and the student roles and behaviors to provide a climate that encourages learning (Albert and Troutman, 1986:404). Effective teaching must include laws of organizing a classroom for checking students' disruptive bad behaviour and controlling them, and form them in groups to participate in solving assignments in the class (Smith 1995:59; Hopkins 1981; Slavin 1987:90).

Effective teaching and assessment precludes teachers' abilities to efficiently manage classroom for interactive teaching. A lot of literature has been generated on this. Managing a classroom is more than avoiding chaos. It also

a means for establishing a routine that enables teaching and learning activities to proceed smoothly while students engage in meaningful activity in orderly situation. Effective classroom managements start with organizing the classroom. Classroom organization should be developed in line with teaching strategies that help students to meet their personal and academic needs. These include: arranging seats in a U-shape, or row or circle, so that the teacher can see and easily move close to students; establishing routines for group discussion in the classroom; moving around the room and attending to individual needs; using group competitive to stimulate discussions; using varied interactive teaching techniques; and engaging students for the upcoming activity with clear instruction; and so on. Students should be asked to arrange the classroom for their discussions and tell them that doing so will develop their academic performance, enhance group problem solving, decision making, and as well ease movement during practical activities (Aggarwal, 1996). This has additional advantage of encouraging friendship among students and preparing the minds of students to take responsibilities (George; Singh 2003). Classroom management is the teachers' ability to cooperatively manage time, space, resource and student roles and behaviors to provide a climate that encourages learning. What really makes a teacher good are the techniques and styles involved in the teaching. He looks for what should happen in an ideal classroom by identifying "good" and "bad" teaching style, carrying out self assessments and reflections, and as well employing peer and students' assessments.

Teachers should designs and focus on student-centered learning potentials by giving more control of classroom time to students (Benette 1992). Students' generating learning activities have been shown to enhance students' interests and foster intrinsic motivation and interest in life long learning. Students learn through active participation in stimulations, demonstrations, discussions, debates, problem solving, writing exercise and interactive lectures (Reimer, 1987).

While the lecture-centered method has advantages too, particularly in communicating with large number of students, research suggests that a mixing of teaching styles can be an effective device for increasing student involvement.

Teachers should provide more attention and encourage every student to participate (Bennett, 1992). The teachers also grant permissions to students to

react to various views in order to controls classroom management and make teaching interesting to students, and give them quizzes and tests as well (Weimer 1997; Slavin, 1987:90).

Use of English Language

With the rapid globalization, English language is one singular most widely used all over the world for human endeavour and teaching and learning in particular. This demands that all students must have proficiency in English language. This implies that English should be a subject right from the scratch of teaching and learning. In order to help students to know English very well, Artkinson (1996) suggested that teachers must teach and asses in English language focusing in essay writing to re-enforce grammar and vocabulary and confidence in expression of personal ideas. Indeed, essay writing is the most important skill for students' academic success, which enables them to communicate clearly and to participate in classroom activates (Byrne 1996:6).

Gender Issues

Many scholars believe that gender inequality and the negative differentiations were responsible for poor performance of female students in education generally and in history subject in particular. Others attributed this to poor home and societal backgrounds and culture. They suggested the need to give females special attention in the classroom in order to encourage them to participate and learn, as cultural and perceived biological differentiation are not scientific basis for denigrating the females (Grimkes 1958; Maslow 1954; Maccoby 1974; Jongepier 1995).

Students-Teachers-Relations and Curriculum cum Environmental situations

Many studies argued that a smooth students-teachers-relations can enhance learning and teaching, and therefore should be encouraged too. They mentioned the need for creating good learning environment (Fuhman 1987; George 1995; Cohen 1985; Bourich 1995; Dembo 1996). The suggestions in the literature will partly inform the strategies we will use to encourage Jimma students to actively participate in classroom interactive teaching and learning.

Designed Action to Address the Inhibitors of Learning

Addressing Teacher Related Problems:

- Teacher to abide by the ethics of the profession, have sense of humor and humility of mind, unbiased, interested in the progress of all his students irrespective of odds. This includes developing a solid understanding of students' learning needs; positive student-teacher relations in the classroom; using a wide range of counseling and behavioral methods that involve students in examining and correcting their inappropriate behavior; and readiness to admit mistakes and corrections. Teacher must achieve control of the class and check stubborn ones.
- Teacher to use variety of interactive teaching methods, and different ones in different lectures, so that students will not get bored, and to address the different needs of disadvantaged students.
- Teacher will ask individual questions, and encourage individuals to attempt answering the questions.
- With clear instructions, teacher will give group works; organize drama and debates and appoint Group Leaders and individual roles.
- Teacher will positively motivate/reward good response and improvement with good remarks, and indicate that he is interested in the progress of the students.
- In order to influence the students to actively participate, they will be informed that their participation will be assessed as part of Continuous Assessment.
- Teacher will use colours/graphics, and pictures when teaching in order to assist students' understanding, categorization, retention and retrieval abilities.
- Teacher will teach slowly; speaking loudly; and using GAP system.
- Teacher will from time to time ask students to say the problems they have with the subject and the ways he teaches it.
- Teacher asking those students who have understood the lectures to stand up and interpret in vernacular to the rest students.
- Teacher will reflect on his methods of teaching and how to encourage students do be more interactive.

Addressing Environmental; Curriculum and Material Problems:

- Teacher will search for large classroom that has enough chairs for

students.

- Teacher will shift lessons to more conducive periods, if practicable.
- Teacher to review the scheme and Syllabus by eliminating repetitions so that time can be saved for interactive student-centred methods.
- Teacher gives handouts. He will encourage students to take down notes as the teaching goes on.
- Teacher will give reading lists and repositories,
- Teacher will request for Teaching Materials.
- Teacher to re-organize the classroom sides such that he can efficiently manage and control the classroom and for easy movement and group activities, enable monitoring and students to be engaged in meaningful activity in an orderly manner. The seats may be re-arranging in a U-shaped, row or a circle so that the teacher can see and easily move close to students.

Addressing Students' Related Inhibitors:

- Teacher will organize routine tutorials, and encourages students to organize their own.
- Teacher will always tell the students what lecture to expect next; and also give assignments;
- There will be counseling of the students in order to assist them to overcome their worries, emotions, home and other problems.
- Students will be encouraged to enroll for extra-English language classes.
- They will also be encouraged to buy learning materials: Text books, exercise books; maps, necessary instruments; etc.
- They will be encouraged to help the weak and shy ones among them, through group discussions and reading together.
- Students will be taught the techniques of efficient utilization of time and available resources.

- Students will be encouraged not to hide their ailments and problems, but to refer them to appropriate quarters.

The Data

On **Interactive Methods**, students were requested to indicate how many times their teacher(s) used the itemized interactive teaching methods during the session, how many times they actively participated and if they did not

participate, they should state why. 60 Questionnaires were filled (Geography students 30 and History students 30). Table 1 shows the data of their responses

Students were requested to indicate the extent the under-listed inhibitors discouraged their classroom active participation. Their responses are as shown in table 2.

Data Analysis

On the **interactive methods**, the responses of the students seem to be assessment of all their teachers and not only the history/geography teachers. During the filling of the questionnaires, it was observed that about half of the class did not know what to do independently, as they intermittently asked their mates to help them. It is not surprising that few of them indicated that the teachers 'always' used Drama or Debate, which must have never been always. Those methods always used were General questions; Individual questions and Tests. The interactive methods the teachers used most often were Debate; Group work; Individual demonstration; Students reading to the class; Ice-breaker; Peer assessment; and identification of maps, pictures, etc.

Only ten students indicated why they could not participate whenever the teachers were using some interactive methods: Two of them alleged that they were shy; two students claimed that the teacher never gave them any role to play; four of them claimed that there was no sufficient time for the teacher to assign every body a role or question; one of them stated that the teaching method did not include the interactive methods; another out-rightly alleged that the teacher never used the methods, possibly a truant or false information.

Only four students mentioned 'encouragement' as another type of interactive method not mentioned in the questionnaire, probably as they do not know other various methods called **interactive cum students'-centered**, like: essay competition; news casting; story telling; brainstorming; sorting out and arrangement of factors; comparative analysis; hot-seating; balloon chasing; survey/object analysis; report wring; and so on, which they had been doing in the classroom.

Inferences from IDIs shed light on the fact that most of the students often missed classes, and therefore could not know all the interactive methods the teachers used. Some of them had preconceived notions about some teachers,

and therefore wishfully missed their lectures and their tests, since they knew that by the end of the day, the examination would be mostly objectives and they would all be crossed-over.

As can be seen in the data, almost all of them failed to indicate how many time they participated or why they did not participate whenever the teacher was using some interactive methods.

On **teacher related Inhibitors to learning**, many students alleged that the teachers were more pro-teacher centered, and did not want to give notes and handouts. The information on notes is fallacious, as all teachers give handouts and notes. Very few indicated the other teacher related problems. Every teacher in History does give hand outs and as well dictate notes to students. Those who claimed that handouts are their major problem are evidently the lazy students who do not read on their own.

The school environment and curriculum problems seem severe, as half of the respondents indicated these problems: too small classroom and laboratory spaces and sitting and materials; Noise from outside the classroom as many students do not get doing something whenever they have no lectures, but sit and chat and romance their friends; patronize the surrounding manna coffee; time table conflicts at times. These are very serious problems.

The most serious **Students'-related inhibitors** are: Poor English language background; Poverty and inability to have sufficient writing materials; Family and Emotional Problems; Problem with past academic performance; and a many do not like their subjects/disciplines as they were not their first choices, but was enforced on them by the university. From observations and interviews, the issue of poor English command is the most glaring problem. Those who can hardly read or write in English language find all the subjects difficult, feel shy, and become reserved. They may be interested in class activities, but would lack the expression abilities. Such students likely to incorrectly filled the questionnaires, or were unable to understand the various teaching methods.

These problems demanded that the teacher must attempt to address them so that his teaching could have impact on the students. Thus, the subsequent discussion elaborately focuses on the designed actions to ameliorate the problems.

Applied Actions to Address the Inhibitors of Active Participation of Students in Classroom Learning And Teaching

In attempt to address the inhibitors of active participation in the course of teaching, particular problems were note down and particular approaches were used to address them. There were 12 and 16 good lectures with geography and history students respectively and in each lecture attempts to addressing the itemized problems were made.

Conclusion and Suggestions

Action research can enable teachers to identify and systematically attempt to address the known and unforeseen classroom problems. The assessment of the attempted approaches and the degree of failure or success in the case of years ones and two geography/history students are given in the assessment table above, and is indicative that action research, patience of the teacher and the use of more interactive methods can influence students to change their reserved and un-participating learning behaviour. The learning environment has been partly impaired by government policy of mass admission with corresponding expansion in the libraries and classrooms, making classrooms congested beyond the cop of teachers. This can be addressed with more recruitment and motivation of teachers. Students and teachers should try to overcome the issue of tribal discrimination and molesting those tribes they denigrate to be inferior, which often discourage active participation of the molested. There should be external moderation of courses and examination questions and grades across the universities in order to have a uniform curriculum and scheme and standard for the whole country. The university should cancel the practice of 'mass education' and encouraging students to request for re-grading scores after Faculty and Senate submissions, since such practice makes students not to take teaching and learning seriously since they know that by the end of the day they will be passed. Since poor English expression has been a great inhibitor of active participation of students, it is strongly suggested that the Ethiopian government should emphasize the use of English language right from primary and secondary schools (grades 1 to 10) levels.

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Table 1: Responses on the frequency of the use of Interactive Methods in the Classroom:

	Interactive Methods	How Many Times Teacher Used it			How Many Time You Actively Participated	You Did Not Participate, State Why
		Always	Sometimes	Never		
1	Group Discussions/Work	$\frac{15}{60} = 25\%$	$\frac{0}{60} = 0\%$	$\frac{9}{60} = 15\%$	$\frac{15}{60} = 25\%$	- feel shy; never used; not assigned
2	Debate	$\frac{6}{60} = 0\%$	$\frac{3}{60} = 50\%$	$\frac{3}{60} = 5\%$	$\frac{30}{60} = 50\%$	no time
3	Drama	$\frac{0}{15}$	$\frac{15}{60} = 25\%$	$\frac{3}{60} = 5\%$	$\frac{3}{60} = 5\%$	Not a method
4	Group Demonstration	$\frac{3}{60} = 5\%$	$\frac{27}{60} = 45\%$	$\frac{3}{60} = 5\%$	$\frac{3}{60} = 5\%$	not assigned
5	Individual Demonstration	$\frac{3}{60} = 5\%$	$\frac{21}{60} = 35\%$	$\frac{3}{60} = 5\%$	$\frac{3}{60} = 5\%$	Not encouraged
6	General Questions	$\frac{27}{60} = 5\%$	$\frac{33}{60} = 55$	$\frac{15}{60} = 5\%$		
7	Individual Questions	$\frac{27}{60} = 5\%$	$\frac{27}{60} = 45\%$	$\frac{21}{60} = 5\%$		
8	Ice Breaker/ Puzzle/Joke	$\frac{9}{60} = 5\%$	$\frac{30}{60} = 50\%$	$\frac{20}{60} = 5\%$		
9	Students Reading Loud to the Class	$\frac{9}{60} = 15\%$	$\frac{30}{60} = 50\%$	$\frac{10}{60} = 6\%$		
10	Students' Peer Assessment	$\frac{3}{60} = 5\%$	$\frac{27}{60} = 45\%$	$\frac{20}{60} = 5\%$		Never used
11	Tests/Quiz	$\frac{18}{60} = 0\%$	$\frac{27}{60} = 45\%$	$\frac{50}{60} = 4\%$		
12	Practical	$\frac{3}{60} = 5\%$	$\frac{12}{60} = 20\%$	$\frac{3}{60} = 5\%$		not a method
13	Identification of maps, pictures, locations, etc.	$\frac{6}{60} = 0\%$	$\frac{33}{60} = 55$	$\frac{15}{60} = 25\%$		
14	Arranging chairs for group discussion	$\frac{15}{60} = 5\%$	$\frac{15}{60} = 25\%$			
15	Other interactive methods not mentioned above: Encouragement	$\frac{3}{60} = 5\%$		$\frac{3}{60} = 5\%$		

Table 2: Responses on the Inhibitors to Active Classroom Participation

	TEACHER RELATED INHIBITORS	VERY MUCH OR ALWAYS	NOT MUCH OR LITTLE	NO SUCH PROBLEM
16	Teacher not speaking loud enough	$\frac{4}{60} = 7\%$	$\frac{12}{60} = 20\%$	$\frac{32}{60} = 53\%$
17	Teacher uses difficult English	$\frac{2}{60} = 4\%$	$\frac{28}{60} = 47\%$	$\frac{20}{60} = 33\%$
18	Teacher not giving clear instructions	$\frac{5}{60} = 7\%$	$\frac{32}{60} = 53\%$	$\frac{12}{60} = 20\%$
19	Teacher not assigning me to carry out certain roles	$\frac{4}{60} = 7\%$	$\frac{24}{60} = 40\%$	$\frac{24}{60} = 40\%$
20	Teacher not asking individual questions	$\frac{8}{60} = 14\%$	$\frac{28}{60} = 47\%$	$\frac{24}{60} = 40\%$
21	Teacher not giving notes and Hand outs	$\frac{12}{60} = 20\%$	$\frac{12}{60} = 20\%$	$\frac{32}{60} = 53\%$
22	Teacher Centered Teaching	$\frac{40}{60} = 57\%$	$\frac{16}{60} = 28\%$	
SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT, AND CURRICULUM-RELATED PROBLEMS				
23	Classroom/Laboratory cannot take all of us	$\frac{28}{60} = 47\%$	$\frac{12}{60} = 20\%$	$\frac{16}{60} = 28\%$
24	Tables/Desks are not sufficient	$\frac{28}{60} = 47\%$	$\frac{12}{60} = 20\%$	$\frac{16}{60} = 28\%$
25	Insufficient materials	$\frac{24}{60} = 40\%$	$\frac{28}{60} = 47\%$	$\frac{4}{60} = 7\%$
26	Noise from outside the classroom	$\frac{28}{60} = 47\%$	$\frac{20}{60} = 33\%$	$\frac{20}{60} = 33\%$
27	The subject is very difficult	$\frac{5}{60} = 7\%$	$\frac{24}{60} = 40\%$	$\frac{16}{60} = 28\%$
28	Timetable is conflicting and inconvenient time	$\frac{20}{60} = 33\%$	$\frac{36}{60} = 60\%$	$\frac{8}{60} = 14\%$
29	Insufficient Learning and Teaching materials	$\frac{28}{60} = 47\%$	$\frac{28}{60} = 47\%$	
STUDENTS' RELATED PROBLEMS				
30	I have poor English language	$\frac{20}{60} = 33\%$	$\frac{20}{60} = 33\%$	$\frac{12}{60} = 20\%$
31	I do not have sufficient writing materials	$\frac{20}{60} = 33\%$	$\frac{28}{60} = 47\%$	$\frac{32}{60} = 53\%$
31	I am always hungry	$\frac{8}{60} = 14\%$	$\frac{16}{60} = 28\%$	$\frac{28}{60} = 47\%$
32	Ill-health, impaired eye, ear, limb, etc	$\frac{8}{60} = 14\%$	$\frac{24}{60} = 40\%$	$\frac{28}{60} = 47\%$
33	I am generally shy	$\frac{8}{60} = 14\%$	$\frac{24}{60} = 40\%$	$\frac{24}{60} = 40\%$
34	Family and Emotional Problems	$\frac{16}{60} = 28\%$	$\frac{16}{60} = 28\%$	$\frac{24}{60} = 40\%$

35	Problem with past academic performance	$\frac{16}{60} = 28\%$	$\frac{16}{60} = 28\%$	$\frac{24}{60} = 40\%$
36	I do not like this subject, It was not my first choice	$\frac{12}{60} = 20\%$	$\frac{16}{60} = 28\%$	$\frac{24}{60} = 40\%$
38	My classmates reject/despise me	$\frac{4}{60} = 7\%$	$\frac{8}{60} = 14\%$	$\frac{36}{60} = 60\%$
39	Any other problems not mentioned above. Write them down and indicate the extent they inhibit your learning.			$\frac{60}{60} = 100\%$