

Student Engagement in ESP Classes

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Abstract: Nowadays, English is no longer a competitive advantage in the workplace, but a real prerequisite. In addition to helping people improve their communication skills and advance in their careers, being able to speak English effectively and productively contributes largely to their personal growth. Engineering used to be seen as a technical field for which analytical and excellent problem-solving skills were the main requirements. Strong communication skills in engineering have become imperative since industries continue to evolve. Engineering students' and engineers' communicative skills are usually restricted to their preparedness and promptness in drafting technical documents. Yet, their ability to successfully communicate their evaluation, analysis, recommendations and to take measures through verbal and non-verbal presentation of ideas is equally important.

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1. Why are language skills critical to engineers?

Nowadays, engineers work in a globalized world. English has become the most common language spoken by engineering professionals and students. It is getting harder and harder for an engineer to have a successful career without fluency in English. Engineers can be masters in their field, but a low level of English will make them lag behind their peers. They may have the greatest ideas in the world, but these ideas won't be beneficial to their companies if they aren't able to express them clearly and persuasively. Technical expertise is as important as the ability to share complex ideas with colleagues, customers and executives. Large-scale projects cannot be carried out effectively if team members, who may be specialists in various fields, such as mechanical engineering, electrical engineering, electronics, management or marketing, cannot understand each other's requirements and perspectives. An aspect

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any engineering student should be aware of is that analytical and problem-solving skills, subject-specific knowledge and increased decision-abilities that their engineering disciplines will provide them with will be highly valuable, yet insufficient in most workplaces. Employers assume any engineer has the expertise to do their job. What they are actually looking for in a candidate is the ability to communicate effectively and productively and this often involves mastering a foreign language.

2. What is student engagement?

Student engagement is defined in various ways, being interpreted in endless ways by scholars and individuals. If teachers are unsure about what student engagement is, their ability to improve, increase, support and encourage through well-designed interventions will be severely diminished” (Buckley, 2014, p. 2). There are solid correlations between student engagement in a subset of educationally purposive activities and positive outcomes of student success, including persistence, satisfaction, academic achievement and social engagement (Astin, 1984, Berger&Milem, 1999; Chickering&Gamson, 1987).

Student engagement may be defined as students’ willingness to show interest in and pay attention to what the teacher says. Students who attend classes, listen to their teacher and complete assignments are more likely to have a better performance than those who skip classes or those who may be physically present, but not mentally. On the other hand, both students and institutions must be involved in enhancing student engagement. Students should not be chiefly responsible for engaging themselves; teachers must foster the conditions that enable students to be engaged (Harper&Quaye, 2009).

Student engagement is a broad construct. As Trowler points out, there are three major areas of student engagement. These are behavioural engagement, cognitive engagement and emotional engagement.

Behavioural engagement refers to the way students behave in class, the way they participate in school-related activities as well as to how much attention they pay to their academic tasks (Cooper, 2014; Shernoff, 2013; Fredricks et al, 2004). Students may have a positive attitude in the classroom, which shows that they are highly engaged or a negative attitude towards their teacher, their peers or their assignments, which makes it obvious that they are disengaged.

Cognitive engagement is focused on the students’ internal investment in the learning process, which incorporates their inner psychological qualities or their nonvisible characteristics that promote effort in learning, understanding and mastering the knowledge and skills that are promoted in their academic work (Cooper, 2014; Shernoff, 2013).

Emotional engagement refers to students’ feelings of belonging or value to their teacher, their classroom and their school (Fredricks et al, 2004; Shernoff, 2013).

3. Are engineering students engaged in learning ESP?

Three types of attitudes towards the ESP class can be noticed among engineering students.

First, there are students whose high level of language makes them feel self-confident and motivates them to be active participants in the English class. These students are very easy to teach. They are eager to engage if they find the tasks challenging. They respond to experiences that take them out of the comfort zones and to activities that make them feel they have progressed. They show constant interest in Professional English, which is studied during their first year at university. They don't have to pay significant efforts during the English course as it is mostly a consolidation of previously acquired knowledge rather than one based on the acquisition of new knowledge. Once the study of Technical English is introduced, two types of behaviour can be easily noticed among these students. Some students who have solid technical knowledge and a real interest in their field of study are more than willing to make efforts to acquire as much technical English as possible. Other students, despite their good language level, are quite reticent about making the slightest effort to familiarise themselves with Technical English, which they perceive as a completely new subject. Since engineers have been in great demand lately in our country, this profession is very popular among young people with or without a technical background. Hence, an ESP teacher is sometimes faced with the challenge of teaching engineering students technical concepts that they know nothing about. The situation may be embarrassing and discouraging for both teachers and students. Decoding a technical text may involve a lot of physics, chemistry or math knowledge. If students lack it, they will find the task tedious and boring.

Second, there are students who see English as an auxiliary subject and treat it as such. These students are so overwhelmed by the complexity of their technical disciplines that ESP is the least of priorities. They lack the motivation to study English mainly because they restrict its use to the classroom environment. Chang (2010) points out that some of the weaknesses in language learning come from learners' attitudes to learning, such as poor motivation to invest effort in classroom activities. Their superficial attitude to language learning is caused by a number of factors, such as their low level of language, which makes them feel uncomfortable, even embarrassed in front of their teacher and peers, their failures to develop their knowledge in the past, which makes them feel that any other attempt at improving their language skills will be as unsuccessful as their previous ones.

Third, there are students who are well aware of the importance of having good language skills when entering the labour market, but find it very hard to adapt to a class which, more often than not, is made up of learners whose English level varies widely from one individual to another. These are usually more mature students who already have a job and have become aware of the importance of being able to speak a foreign language. As Bauer shows, the classroom environment is „a riskier one based on intellectual commitment and engagement”, which many students may find

intimidating. In order to promote student engagement, the fear of failure and judgment must be recognised and addressed by both students and teachers.

4. How can teachers encourage and stimulate engineering students to learn ESP?

Considering the huge importance of involvement for student's current and future success, fostering student engagement is extremely important and the way teachers interact with students on a day-to-day basis is essential. Engaging students while teaching a subject and controlling the class is quite a big challenge. The more engaged a teacher is with their work, the easier it will be for them to help students feel engaged with their academic work.

Teachers may have a different understanding of the concept of student engagement. For instance, some teachers associate such behaviours as attending classes, taking part in discussions, listening attentively, and turning in homework in time with engaged students whereas others describe engaged students as being curious, enthusiastic, motivated, interested and optimistic. From a teacher's perspective, the difference between engaged and disengaged students is huge and the effects on the outcomes of the learning process are visible. Active, enthusiastic learners are associated with a productive environment conducive to progress and success. Disengaged students are bored, not interested in the topic being discussed, or not stimulated by the teacher's teaching style. Effective teachers will know how to handle both kinds of students. They are clear about their expectations as well as the purpose of every classroom activity. They are able to create a supportive environment, which encourages students to be active participants in interactions. They give constructive feedback which motivates students to participate in the lesson without being afraid of making mistakes and being laughed at by their peers.

ESP teachers need to establish a connection between students' academic and professional needs and the course requirements aligned with the real-world professional needs. Since an ESP teacher teaching engineering students is not a specialist in engineering, he/she should give students more choice over the topics chosen for class discussions. Students will find these topics much more accessible if they have already studied them with their teachers who are subject specialists in their field of specialization. Hence, a close cooperation between the ESP teacher and the subject specialist is vital for the success of the lesson. The more students know about the topic being discussed, the more encouraged they will feel to participate in classroom activities and interactions.

Teachers should have realistic expectations, depending on their students' language level. They should analyse and understand their students' goals and needs, their strengths and weaknesses. Students, in their turn, should know that there is a purpose behind any task they do. Engineers are known to be very practical people, that is why they need to be sure that everything they learn will be useful in their future professional lives. It is their teachers' responsibility to select materials that meet their exact needs.

Demotivating teaching behaviours are likely to lead to low student engagement and even disengagement. Teachers who don't encourage students to become autonomous, those who adopt a cold style of teaching, who tend to correct students too often and too abruptly induce a sense of anxiety to students.

5. What do ESP students think of their English class?

A questionnaire was given to engineering students in order to identify their opinion on their ESP course. The questionnaire contained a set of 10 questions to identify levels of student engagement, aspects they find engaging/disengaging, main causes of low engagement or disengagement and correlations between student engagement and their results in exams. The research participants were 60 engineering students. 52 students were in the 19-23 age group, 7 were in their thirties and one of them was in his fifties. 41 were male, 19 were female.

The results of the survey showed that 35 of them considered themselves to be highly engaged, 16 only lowly engaged and the rest - 9 students - said they were disengaged in the ESP class. Among the aspects that increase student engagement, students mentioned the teacher's attitude (empathetic, encouraging, positive, reliable), a safe environment in which they feel free to speak and not be judged, stimulating activities, interesting selection of materials which spark their curiosity and encourage them to ask questions as well as their desire to become confident speakers of the language and be able to use it productively in the classroom and in the workplace.

As to the main causes of low engagement or disengagement, the students mentioned their low level of General English which hinders them from acquiring ESP, the high complexity of ESP, insufficient time at their disposal.

As far as age differences are concerned, the study revealed that younger students reported higher levels of engagement than older students, not because the latter are unaware of the importance of mastering a foreign language, but because of their incapacity to attend all classes.

The study showed that boys reported lower levels of engagement than girls, yet better results in exams. It also revealed a decline in student engagement in the second semester of the first year of study and an obvious increase at the beginning of the second year, which proves that, for most students, the study of technical English is much more relevant to their future careers than the study of professional language. 70% of the students learn because they need good grades and a high class rank. What they need above all is teacher recognition and peer appreciation. Only 30% of the surveyed students get involved in the lesson because they see the value of the work and its benefits in the long run.

6. Conclusion

It is vital for engineering students to understand that the importance of language skills in the workplace cannot be stressed enough. Increasing student engagement in the English class is partly the teacher's responsibility, partly the student's. Student engagement makes teaching more rewarding, having a huge impact on student

performance. When students' behavioural, emotional and cognitive engagement is high, they are likely to build a strong relationship with their academic environment. Teacher - student relationships influence all types of student engagement. There are many different practices and strategies that teachers can use to keep students engaged. If they are implemented properly, students' performance is significantly improved. Most ESP teachers take their students' high level of engagement for granted since they deal with adult learners who have their own expectations and who already know what their needs are. They expect their learners to know that success in the workplace is closely connected with their ability to speak at least one foreign language. In reality, ESP teachers are more and more often faced with the big challenge of finding the right tools to motivate adult learners to pay proper attention to developing their language skills.

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