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Exploring Students' Engagement through Active Learning in the English as a Second Language (ESL) Classroom

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Introduction

Getting students to pay attention during a learning session is never easy. Most of the time, the instructor would be the only one doing the talking part without receiving any responses. Only a few students, occasionally fewer than five, would reply. Everyone's voice was only audible to the instructor once the class was over, and they walked out to the door and said, "Thank you, madam". Students' participation and engagement in class were not up to expectations.

One of the reasons behind the low engagement and participation may be the traditional learning methods that rely on memorisation, lecture, and textbook readings, where students are primarily passive recipients of information. This method is stereotypical, boring, and lacks active students, making knowledge transfer difficult (Ezeh et al., 2021). Because of these reasons, teachers must find a new strategy to increase student engagement.

Active learning is one of many strategies the instructor can implement in the lesson activities. Based on the zone of proximal development (ZPD) theory, the best way to learn is by facing tasks that are slightly more challenging than the learner's current ability level but can still be accomplished with some guidance (Vygotsky, 1978). Active learning encourages instructors to scaffold their teaching to meet learners in their ZPD, providing support and opportunities for growth.

Engaging students in learning is crucial for effective language acquisition and development. One innovative approach to foster student engagement is through active learning strategies. In this context, active learning refers to an approach where learners engage in class activities that require them to actively participate in the learning process rather than passively receive information. According to Johnson and Smith (2020), active learning techniques have been demonstrated to increase student

engagement and knowledge retention. Active learning strategies encourage students to actively participate and collaborate with peers and promote a deeper understanding of English lessons. One such strategy used in this ESL classroom, which is an information transfer activity, namely, a mind-map, offers a dynamic and interactive approach to enhance student engagement and comprehension of specific lessons.

In light of these considerations and in order to understand further whether this method is suitable for students, researchers should consider students' perspectives to determine the effectiveness of the method. Therefore, this study explores how ESL students perceive an active learning approach to support the learning process and the strategies used to carry out active learning activities in the classroom. The research questions formulated in the current study are as follows:

1) What are the students' perspectives on the active learning approach used in their language learning process?

2) What are the students' strategies for the active learning activities conducted in the ESL classroom?

Methodology

This study employs an action research methodology as it allows the instructor to take the role of the researcher to investigate how to improve teaching. The samples of this study were 68 diploma and degree students who enrolled in two English language courses during Semester 2, 2022/2023, at one of the technical universities in Malaysia. These students were taught by the same instructor, the principal researcher of this study. The study was conducted from Week 2 until Week 9 of the semester. Throughout that period, the students were instructed to interact and work collaboratively with their team members during classroom activities to complete the task assigned. The detailed implementation of the said activity is illustrated in Figure 1.

This study employed classroom observation and survey as the means of data collection. The survey was conducted towards the end of the study to elicit students' feedback on the benefits of having several information transfer activities using mind maps in the classroom. The survey was conducted online via Google Form, consisting of two sections. The first section was respondents' demographic information, and the second section comprised five Likert-type items on a five-point scale ranging from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree) to assess the respondents' perceived benefits of having the active learning activity in English class.
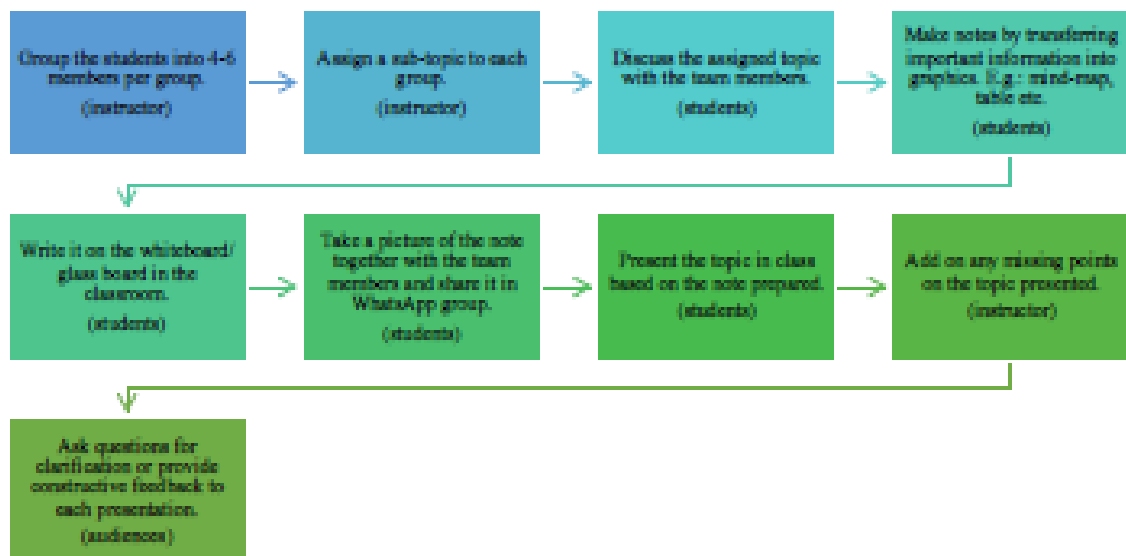
Figure 1. ESL Class Activity Implementation.

Findings and Discussion

An analysis was performed for each item to determine students' perception of active learning conducted in ESL classrooms. The result showed that many respondents (97%) reported a positive perception of active learning in ESL classrooms, meaning that they believe this teaching method is effective and engaging. Only a tiny percentage of respondents (1.5%) said they did not prefer this method, while another 1.5% were unsure about it. Hartikainen et al. (2019) found that five previous research projects on active learning from the viewpoint of student learning outcomes have been primarily positive. Thus, this has supported the role of active learning as a superior approach compared to content-centred approaches such as lecturing.

Table 1 indicates that students reported positive perceptions of active learning in ESL classrooms. The results suggested that students displayed a high level of preference for using an active learning approach during the lessons. Among the items used to look for students' perceptions of active learning, item 5, which states, "Working with peers helps me to develop my social skills, i.e., helps me communicate better and have better relationships with my classmates." ranked the highest mean score of M = 4.24 with SD = 0.971.

Item	Mean (M)	Std. Deviation (SD)	Practice Level
1. I learn best when my lessons involve active learning.	3.93	1.063	Medium High
2. Active learning helps me to remember the knowledge better.	4.07	.990	High
3. I enjoy lessons more if they involve active learning.	4.03	1.029	High
4. I learn better when I work with my peers.	3.93	1.049	Medium High
5. Working with peers helps me to develop my social skills, i.e., helps me communicate better and have better relationships with my classmates.	4.24	.971	High

Table 1. Students' Perceptions of Active Learning

Meanwhile, Item 1, which states, "I learn best when my lessons involve active learning." and Item 4 ", I learn better when I work with my peers." received a medium-high score with M = 3.93, SD = 1.063, M = 3.93, SD = 1.049 respectively. Azley and Shah (2016) state that active learning pedagogy must be used in teaching and learning since it fosters positive attitudes and optimistic views towards learning. Thus, this survey signaled that active learning can be a valuable approach to enhance students' engagement and participation in ESL classrooms.

In the meantime, when employing an active learning approach for class activities, the instructor identified a few circumstances related to the students' strategies in the ESL classroom. When they were first given a task, the students divided it among themselves and completed it under the instructor's guidance within the allotted class time. Nguyen et al. (2021) illustrated that once activities in class have started, engagement is ensured through a facilitation strategy, including working one-on-one with students. This shows that the students could manage their time effectively and work collaboratively with peers to achieve the task.

Additionally, based on the module they referred to in class, students could make graphical notes using mind maps. This indicates that the active learning approach helped them not only understand the content better but also present it in a visually appealing manner.

Correspondingly, Chai and Kong (2017) implied that educators should create a learning environment that supports students in creating their own understanding, which could broaden learners' creativity. Besides, students could cooperate well with each other to transfer those infographics to the whiteboard or glass boards provided in the class. This reveals that the students could communicate effectively and share their ideas.

While conducting the activity, some proactive students asked the instructor for further information and clarification to prepare for their presentation. This shows that the students were motivated to learn more and were actively engaged in the learning process. During the presentation, the instructor found that some students used additional information not stated in the module to describe and explain further their points. They might be using their prior knowledge or doing a quick search for specific information to make sure audiences understand better from their presentation. This suggests that students could apply their critical thinking skills and use external sources to support their explanations. Hartikainen et al. (2019) figured out that a few studies saw students' construction of knowledge as a crucial part of active learning, and that interactive work with others was connected to active learning through collaboration and engagement.

Furthermore, each team member participated in the presentation in order to allow everyone to contribute to the team. This exhibits that the students could participate equally and were allowed to showcase their skills. Initially, the students felt scared and overwhelmed when participating in the class activity. However, after practising it in several lessons, they became more comfortable and enjoyed the sessions with their classmates. This demonstrates that the active learning approach helped the students overcome their fears and become more confident in their abilities.

Conclusion

This study seeks to contribute to the field of ESL education by exploring the advantages of active learning approaches to increase student involvement in the ESL classroom, such as collaborative learning through group discussion, creativity in note-making, and constructive learning through peer teaching and feedback. Likewise, in a collaborative setting, support and encouragement from peers and instructors aid ESL learners in gaining confidence because such an environment makes learners feel less hesitant to engage, owing to active learning features (Arumugam et al., 2013). Students could work together in groups to discuss and share their ideas, which helps enhance their understanding of the subject matter and promotes creativity in note-making. Besides, the learning process, such as

peer teaching and peer feedback, could help reinforce students' understanding of the subject matter and promote constructive learning.

Implementing student-centred learning approaches in ESL classes can encourage students to participate actively during lessons. This learning approach, which focuses on the student and their learning needs, encourages them to actively participate in the learning process and take responsibility for their own learning. ESL instructors can benefit from the findings of this study, as it provides valuable insights to improve their teaching methods and enhance their students' learning experience. It is important to note that individual perceptions and experiences may differ, and the effectiveness of active learning can be influenced by various factors, including the instructor's teaching style, the specific context of the learning environment, and the student's prior knowledge and preferences.

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