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Active Learning Strategies for Increasing Student Engagement in English Language Teaching

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Abstract
Keeping students engaged has always been a challenge, and it has only gotten tougher with hybrid and online classes everywhere. The old routine-teachers talking, students quietly listening-just doesn't work anymore. Students want and need more, like multimodal affect prediction, analytics powered by large language models, and real-time data from environmental sensors. The idea is to build a system that actually knows the instant a student starts drifting, when that happens, teachers can jump in right away with targeted, personal strategies to pull them back in. Some use sensors to pick up subtle emotional changes, others tap into the huge flow of data from learning management systems. They're useful, but on their own, each one is limited. What we really need is a model that blends social, behavioural, and emotional cues-a full, layered picture of what's going on with students. This goes deeper than just noticing when someone loses focus. It helps teachers figure out what makes students jump in, stick around, or totally check out, furthermore, the goal is straightforward: turn English Language Teaching classrooms into dynamic, responsive spaces that change as students do. In these classrooms, the way teachers teach and the way students interact can shift in real time, guided by actual data about what's working. Accomplishing that means letting go of the old idea of classrooms as fixed spaces and see them as living systems where technology and teaching move together, meeting every student right where they are and ensuring active participation in the pedagogical process, supported by machine learning systems that optimize the learning environment.

Keywords: *active learning, student engagement, learner-cantered pedagogy, collaborative learning, communicative competence.*

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Introduction

Student engagement stands out as a key marker of success in today's classrooms because true engagement is visible in how much they participate, how motivated they feel, and how well they navigate with their learning, their exam results and confidence, as well. This matters even more in English Language Teaching (ELT), as language is active, built on listening input, conversation, practice, and real interaction towards better communication skills. Yet, many traditional methods such as endless lectures, rote memorization, fill-in-the-blank drills, leave little room for real conversation or meaningful practice, given the reason, both researchers and teachers keep turning toward active learning. They see how students come out of lessons that have them talk, collaborate, solve problems, and reflect on what they're doing (Bonwell & Eison, 1991). Active learning moves students to the centre of learning, powering both their minds and their motivation and adding technology takes learning and teaching to a whole new dimension. With the spread of educational technology, learning analytics, and AI tutors, we now have more ways than ever to track and support engagement so that students - whether online or in person- perform better (Moubayed et al., 2018). Meanwhile, tools like AI and digital platforms can fuel and boost active learning, provided that teachers use them accordingly, (Chen et al., 2026; Johnston et al., 2024). This article presents how active learning strategies drive engagement in English Language Teaching, laying out the main theories behind active learning and why engagement matters, then dive into some of the best classroom strategies. Along the way, the article emphasises how technology and AI fall into the picture weighing the real advantages of making active learning part of today's language classrooms.

Understanding Student Engagement in Language Learning

Student commitment isn't just a catchphrase - it covers three big areas: student's behaviour, student's feelings toward what they are being taught, and how deeply they think (Fredricks et al., 2004). Behavioural engagement shows up in presence, determination, and contribution; emotional engagement is about awareness, eagerness, and that sense of fitting in class but cognitive engagement goes profound: it's the cerebral investment and approach students bring to their education. In language classrooms, engagement really matters because language is not acquired if students aren't interrelating in noteworthy ways. Those who engage into talkative tasks get more chances to elucidate connotation, acquire feedback, and practice their expertise, furthermore this is related to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory - learning is produced and grows out of social communication and cooperation (Vygotsky, 1978), so engagement isn't additional, it's crucial for developing language. Recent research keeps showing the same pattern of engaged students who perform better, for example, (Moubayed et al. 2018) looked at e-learning and found strong links between active learning, commitment and academic performance. Students who interrelate with materials, join deliberations, and are active with engagements consistently produce higher exam grades thus proving that active engagement contours how well students absorb a foreign language. The same is valid for large-scale digital platforms, such as Moodle, where Johnston et al. (2024) examined the activity and concluded that students who participated regularly, submitted projects on time, and intermingled with course resources also scored higher. Active learning rests on the idea that students shape their own understanding through practical involvement and communication (Piaget, 1972; Vygotsky, 1978) since meaning doesn't just occur -it gets fabricated as students solve problems, deliberate, and mirror together. Bonwell and Eison

(1991) stated a short definition of active learning, that while performing and discerning, students get tangled, dispute, work together, challenge cases, and imitate, instead of just listening, furthermore students don't just learn, they really comprehend by relating, scrutinizing, and assessing. Contained by language teaching, this methodology aligns with Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), which impulsions for meaningful communication as the real objective (Richards, 2006) - in CLT, and makes learners use language authentically, through interaction and teamwork, and TBLT, which focuses on realistic tasks that necessitate active language usage in unpretentious situations (Nunan, 2004).

Active Learning Strategies

Collaborative learning, one of the most used strategies in English language teaching gets students working in pairs or groups or even "vulnerable groups" (Paraschivu, Cotuna, 2021:573) to attain shared goals by swapping ideas, debate over meaning together, solve problems, "boost personal, social and professional growth in future career and social interaction within the academic environment or imminent job" (Bărbuceanu, 2019:46) to build language confidence and knowledge as a team. According to Vygotsky (1978), students grow academically when they interact within their "zones of proximal development"-that is, just beyond what they manage to do alone. In these group settings or classes, more advanced students are paired together with less advanced ones and can even guide their peers, which sparks both language progress and cognitive development through small-group discussions, peer editing, information-gap tasks, and group projects, activities which push students to use language for realistic purposes, while they practice listening, speaking, reading, and writing, all at once. Working together doesn't just improve and sharpen language skills but it also helps students feel more involved or part of a group thus increasing motivation and giving learners a sense of belonging. Collaborative work lowers the level of language anxiety and determines students, who feel emotionally connected to their classmates, to stick with their studies and be more prone and willing to speak in English. "Students who account to have warm interactions with their peers and teachers also have the inclination to show better academic self-drive and engagement than students who lack this reciprocal affect." (Bărbuceanu, 2022: 185). Many students feel more comfortable debating and sharing ideas in a small group than speaking in front of the whole class, making collaborative learning a relaxed setting that boosts confidence and keeps students engaged in using the target language through genuine interaction. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) stands out as another influential approach in today's language teaching with the focus being on real tasks that require students to use language to accomplish something-whether it's planning something, interviewing someone, solving a problem, prepping a presentation, or managing a research project. These tasks are quite realistic, they look a lot like what people actually do outside the classroom, making language practice feel real and goal centred, moreover keeping students engaged by making choices, find information, and figure things out together, instead of focusing on small, unimportant details, disapproving grammar, students aim to get their message across. The result is the rise in motivation when students see how lesson activities connect with real-world needs, they become increasingly interested. "Increase of motivation and enthusiasm of students and teachers through active involvement in the process of live communication, possibilities of language acquisition are increasing thanks to the cooperation, interaction and communication in learning language." (Chiriţescu, Păunescu, 2017:376). TBLT tasks often involve

teamwork, problem-solving, and creativity, which draws them in on a deeper, cognitive level and technology takes this approach even further: digital storytelling, online research, collaborative writing, and virtual exchanges - these open up ways for students to use English with real audacity and audiences and for authentic purposes, reaching far beyond the four walls of the classroom. Role-play and simulation push and put students right into the middle of communication - they have to use English in situations that feel real: mock job interviews, pretend business meetings, or even rehearsed customer service chats, a lively debate, a medical consultation, if it is ESP language use. The point of these events it to force language out of students' mouths because the situation demands it, not because a textbook says so. In role-plays, students are subjected to listening-to each other, to the changing mood-and adjust language as they go. They have to think on their feet, make judgments, and sometimes improvise, thus boosting student personality here, even some resourcefulness and imagination, grabbing attention and keeping the students emotionally invested. Role-plays do more than just spark engagement, they sharpen communicative skills, too, as students learn to start and accomplish conversations, negotiate, get their points transversely, and solve problems - all in English, "this result can be accomplished by personal and social awareness and proper emotional feedback in specific circumstances." (Buşu, 2020:205). Harmer (2015) points out that as students dramatize different circumstances and repeat these activities, their self-assurance rises, furthermore they stop worrying so much about mistakes, and start focusing on the real conversation. Think about Project-Based Learning (PBL) where, students don't just memorize rules or fill out worksheets-they are actively engaged and cognitively prone to dig into tough questions. There aren't easy answers, and the tasks aren't simple and maybe they dive into researching a cultural tradition, design a website from scratch, produce a video, or run a survey in the community, along the way, they're practicing language but they're also sharpening their critical thinking**.** PBL isn't just about grammar drills, it's about creating something real: a presentation, a detailed report, or some other meaningful outcome that actually matters where students drive the whole process, organize, plan, and put everything into motion, thus active learning at its core. The length of these projects stretches over weeks or months, which keeps students actively tangled and with genuine care about their work; much more than unmemorable assignments- because "it is the human nature itself to pursue the maximal outcome at the minimal amount of effort." (Buşu, 2022:98). Furthermore, project-based learning sparks true enthusiasm because it never occurs in isolation, students talk to each other, share ideas, rethink their approaches, and change course when needed, take on different roles, learn to appraise how things are going, and end up involved on all levels - behaviourally, emotionally, and cognitively. Learning management systems, online platforms, instructive apps, and artificial intelligence make active learning not only easier but often more exciting for everyone involved. Scholars are paying more attention to this intersection between technology and student engagement, Johnston et al. (2024) found that the way students interact in platforms like Moodle tells us a lot about their learning habits, and more interaction with digital resources leads to better academic results through "activities that are meant to encourage the student's creativity, critical thinking and communication skills." (Stoian, 2019a:131). Similarly, Moubayed et al. (2018) showed that engagement procedures in e-learning surroundings closely track with academic success, so, it makes sense to use technology-driven active learning approaches that keep students involved repeatedly. Technology opens the door to all kinds of paths for students to work together-writing, discussion boards, peer reviews, multimedia assignments, and virtual communication.

Recent studies highpoint a clear link between engagement and stronger academic results (Moubayed et al., 2018; Johnston et al., 2024). New technologies like artificial intelligence keep escalating making it easier to personalize learning and keep students attracted (Chen et al., 2026; Hamdi et al., 2024). These implements push education beyond classroom walls and give students fresh occasions to put their language skills to use, thus "From a social constructivist perspective, the learner builds his knowledge through active interaction with his physical and social environment." (Scorţan, 2021:143). But just having technology isn't enough to spark real engagement-teachers still need to design their lessons attentively to make that materialise. Now, artificial intelligence is starting to play a greater role in education, "in order to obtain better student outcomes" (Stoian, 2019b), one can see AI tutors, chatbots, systems that produce feedback spontaneously, and adaptive learning platforms-each one helping produce a more tailored learning experience. AI can help adapt learning to fit specific necessities, making education feel a lot more subjective, moreover the study by Chen et al. (2026), for instance, looked at how students at different colleges interrelated with generative AI tutors and found that students actually didn't all use these tools the similar way. Hamdi et al. (2024) developed a sentiment-based metric that lets large language models analyse how engaged students are with e-learning systems. This highpoints how artificial intelligence implements help instructors spot engagement inclinations and identify students who need more sustenance. In English Language Teaching, AI opens a lot of doors, from conversational AI, students can work on their speaking and writing skills on their own, to intelligent tutoring systems that give targeted feedback-on grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation, overall, this kind of support builds self-reliance, since it gives learners a space to practice language without feeling anxious so that "active and constructive learning can be applied later in social, professional and cultural terms." (Lăpădat, Lăpădat, 2020a:142).

Teachers have to make sure AI doesn't push out real human collaboration because language learning thrives on people talking and connecting-it's always been social, furthermore students need genuine, thoughtful back-and-forth with their teachers and classmates to build their communication skills. The classroom itself plays a big role, not just the teaching style, moreover Gao and colleagues (2022) explored how seating arrangements shape student engagement and group work in different classes. The findings were conclusive, the way students sit really changes how much they participate, join teams, and stay interested because flexible classrooms-where students can shift seats, build groups, and actually talk, spark much more commitment than the old-school setup of rows staring at one teacher. "The present tense conditions the listeners to actively listen and be involved in the activity of learning in the present with a view of improving the future." (Chiriţescu, Păunescu, 2021:102). When students sit in the vicinity of their peers, they're more likely to interconnect and work through problems together, with low levels of nervousness. So, language teachers should focus on creating spaces that embolden real collaboration, such as movable desks, group computer terminals, and technologically-friendly arrangements to spark active learning.

Challenges in implementing Active Learning

Active learning has plenty of advantages, but actually using these strategies presents real hurdles-and one needs the right setup and planning to make it work moreover teaching a big class only adds to the complexity. Teachers struggle to keep track of participation and make sure everyone gets involved, not just the same few students every time. It's easy for a handful of students to dominate while others fade into the background.

Some students pull back, especially if they're used to the teacher carrying the conversation, suddenly shifting responsibility onto them feels unfamiliar, maybe even awkward at first. Change takes effort, for everyone in the room. "In the universe of communication, there is practically a vulnerability of reception of the individual who perceives himself to be a unique and original snowflake." (Lăpădat, Lăpădat, 2020b:121). Language anxiety, cultural differences, and varying skill levels all shape whether students actually want to join in even if there's no escaping it, these barriers influence participation. The presence of technology into the mix makes everything more complicated than it seems. Not every student has a reliable device or feels comfortable with new tech, so some end up side-lined, thus, for active learning to really take place, teachers must introduce strategies gradually, give straightforward instructions, and create a classroom where students feel supported. Activities should always be related to the course objectives-that connection matters moreover making sure activities fit the goals of the course is also of uttermost importance because teachers themselves face obstacles-integrating technology, ensuring students are ready, managing resources, the need for support and "social well-being" aimed to increase the resilience status of the communities." (Olimid, Olimid, 2022:91).

Conclusion

Student engagement sits at the heart of English Language Teaching-it's what shapes real success in the classroom, especially when teachers use active learning strategies, everything changes. Suddenly, students become from reluctant to involved, responding, and thinking more deeply. These methods stem from constructivist and sociocultural theories, emphasizing the importance of genuine interaction with both concepts and classmates because it's not enough to memorize facts-students need to connect, question, and explore together, furthermore "Emotions therefore accompany the students (…) and may interfere with learning or consolidate it." (Scorţan, 2022:146). Collaborative learning, task-based language teaching, role-play, project-based learning, and technology-driven activities actually pull students into the action, shifting the paradigm from just watching to involvement, talking, figuring things out, and standing on their own two feet. As classrooms keep evolving, teachers who remain faithfully to active learning give students space to speak up, ask questions, and build confidence. They aren't just memorizing; they're learning how to connect and communicate in real life and society today. In a world where being linked matters more than ever, creating these kinds of teaching spaces equips students with what they need to thrive.

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