

## ENCOURAGING STUDENTS' ACTIVE CLASSROOM PARTICIPATION THROUGH THE USE OF PARTICIPATION RUBRICS AND SCORESHEETS

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### Abstract

The teaching of English Language in Malaysian Polytechnic focuses on Communicative English. Many English lecturers are facing uphill task in encouraging the students to communicate and participate in classroom activities in order to implement the syllabus. The students are very awkward and shy towards the language and that leads the lecturers to explore ways to assist students to eliminate this problem. A Student Active Classroom Participation Rubric is developed to assist the English lecturers to motivate the students to participate in communicative activities assigned in the classrooms. The rubric, along with a scoresheet, is targeted at weaker students whose apprehensive attitudes restrict them from active participation. In this action research, a total of 35 students were involved as respondents. They were observed of their classroom participation at the beginning of the semester. Some passive students were interviewed on their lacked of participation in classroom activities. During the third week of the semester, the students were introduced to the Classroom Participation Rubric and the lecturer begin to record the students' progress in the scoresheet. Each time a student participates, a stamp is rewarded in his/her scoresheet to indicate her participation as more stamps means better marks in their overall grade. At the seventh week, the lecturer collected the scoresheets from the students to identify which students have not recorded any stamps. These students were later given extra supervision during the conduct of the classroom activities. The recording of students' participation in the scoresheet was carried on throughout the semester. Interviews were conducted with the students at the end of the semester to get their opinions on the use of Participation Rubric in the classroom. While many favour the rubric, very few students are still feeling they are forced to participate in the classroom activities. However, data collected from the students' scoresheets showed a drastic positive change in the overall students' participation before and after the use of the rubric. The English lecturer commented that the rubric works well with both lecturer and students as it is practically simple to use and encourages active participation in communicative activities.

**Keywords:** *English, communication, active participation, rubric*

### INTRODUCTION

As an educator, a teacher or a lecturer, we want to create a classroom environment that helps students of various learning styles and personalities to feel comfortable enough to contribute. To reach this goal, it requires a constant act of encouraging quiet, reflective students to speak up (Damico and Roth 1994). Often a lecturer's effort to encourage quiet students to actively participate in class is a challenging task. A lot of students seem to assume that as long as the assigned work is completed on time, test scores are good, and attendance is satisfactory, they shouldn't be forced to participate. Little did they know that when they speak up in class, they

learn to express their ideas in a way that others can understand or when they ask questions, they learn how to obtain information to enhance their own understanding of a topic (Daoud, Hershberg, Hudley, Polanco, and Wright-Castro 2002).

Hence students Active Classroom Participation Rubric is created as a scoring guide to evaluate a student's performance based on a range of criteria. The rubric is intended to evaluate students' frequency in participation, quality of student's participation quality of group work, interpersonal skills, and student's online participation. The score sheet that is attached with the rubric is developed to guide the students on the kind of learning skills they have to execute in the class. As for the lecturers, the score sheet helps them to observe the students' performance level and achievement in classroom participation.

### **Defining and Measuring Participation**

Though lecturers and students tend to recognize "class participation," what may or may not be counted as "participation" varies slightly with individual instructors and researchers. Participation can be seen as an active engagement process which can be sorted into five categories: preparation, contribution to discussion, group skills, communication skills, and attendance (Dancer & Kamvounias, 2005). It also has been shown that higher institutes perceive six levels of participation from students, moving from simply attending class through giving oral presentations (Fritschner, 2000). Participation also has been defined as "the number of responses volunteered" (Burchfield & Sappington, 1999). It can come in many different forms, including students' questions and comments (Fassinger, 1995), and it can take a few seconds or an extended period of time (Cohen, 1991). Wade (1994) considered the "ideal class discussion" as one in which almost all students participate and are interested, learning, and listening to others' comments and suggestions.

### **Rubric**

The word rubric derives from the Latin rubrica, or "red," and relates to red print used to direct or redirect readers' attention to text of special importance. Today's grading rubric is essentially a set of scoring guidelines that are disclosed to students actively developed in collaboration with students. A good rubric identifies the criteria by which work will be judged and describes the difference between excellent and weaker work.

### **The usability of Students Active Classroom Participation Rubric**

The rubric can be used to assess classroom participation in a wide variety of learning contexts such as:

- a. When the syllabus focuses on interpersonal and communication skills as crucial learning outcomes.
- b. English language classrooms where written and spoken discourse and discussion is an integral part of the learning process.
- c. Lessons which emphasize a more student-centered approach based on assessing classroom participation.

## METHODOLOGY

The study conducted was an action research, making use of data gathering from structured interviews, focus groups, Non-participant observation, and a review of documents. The setting was at Commerce Department, Polytechnic Seberang Perai, Penang. The participants are 35 commerce students who are in their first semester and 1 English Language lecturer from the Department of General Studies of Polytechnic Seberang Perai, Penang. The commerce students were selected based on their willingness to participate in the projects and the lecturers' interest to execute the use of rubric in her classroom.

Data were collected using a multi-method process. Data were gathered via focus group in structured interviews which was conducted with the students and the lecturer during the lessons and by participant observation of the students. Direct Observation and Unobtrusive Observation were done to oversee the on-goings in the classroom.

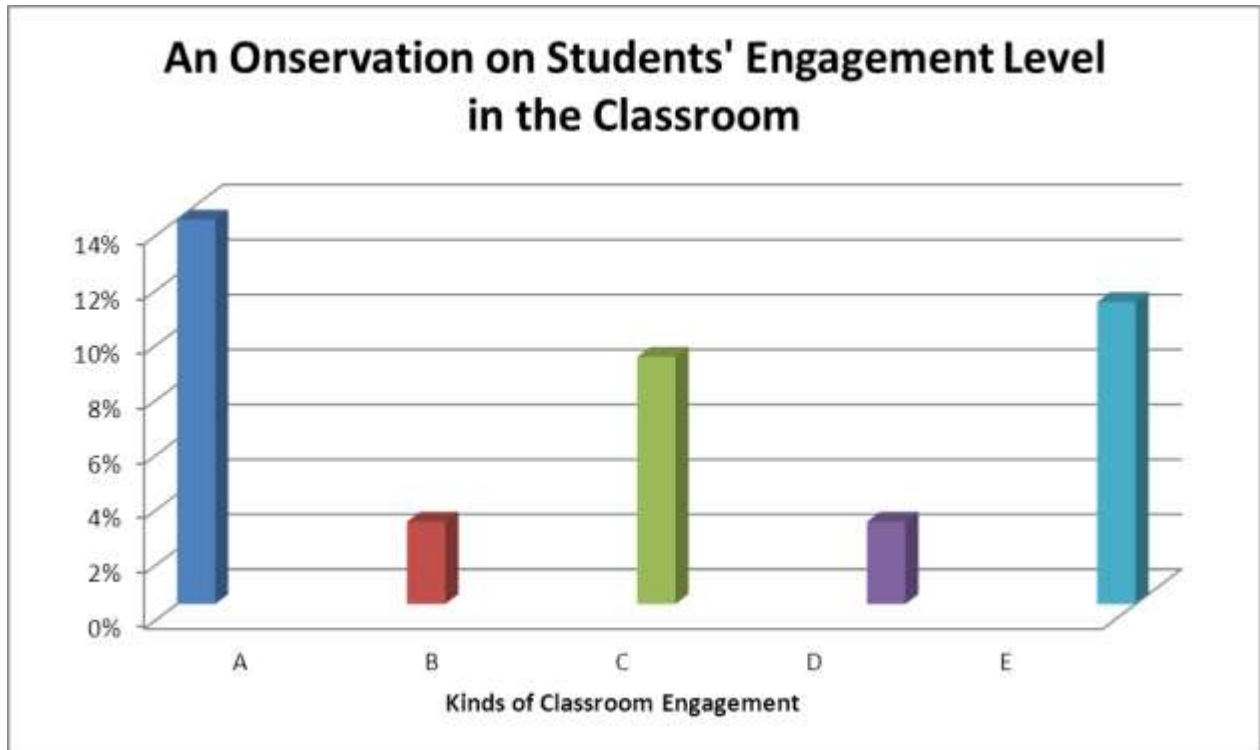
Data such as interview transcripts and scoresheet were analysed using a *constant comparative* approach. The research team identified emerging themes from participants' discussions that described the factors influencing the lack of participation in classroom activities.

### **Design:**

The type of design used for this observational study was naturalistic. The justification for using this type of design is that it gives a more realistic picture of the students' behaviour. Since the students' were not aware that they were being observed, the researcher is able to obtain a better view and understanding of their natural behaviour.

**RESULTS**

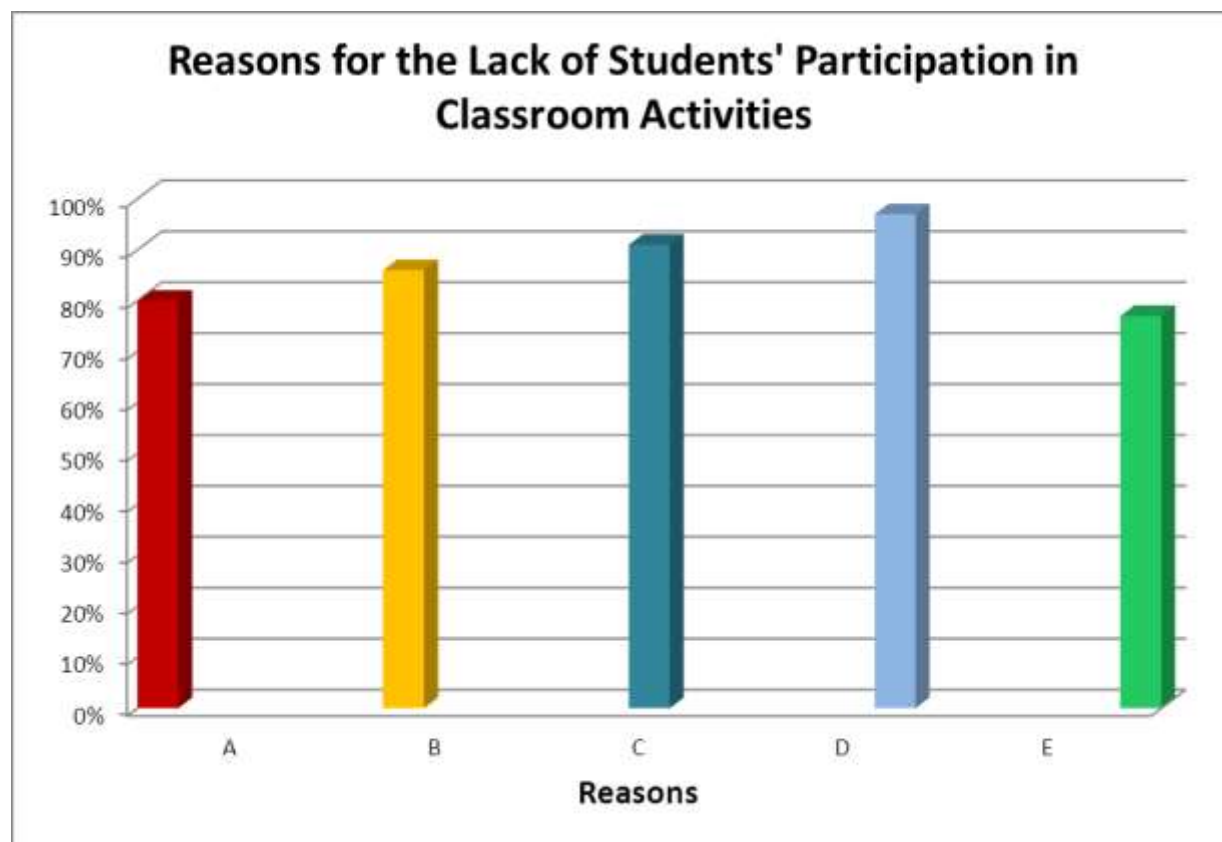
Table 1. *An Observation on Students' Engagement Level in the Classroom*



Kinds of Classroom Engagement		Number of students
A	Students answer questions from the teacher	5
B	Students ask questions to the teacher and/or to other students	1
C	Students make comments and give their opinion	3
D	Students read for the class	1
E	Students volunteers to lead a group discussion	4

The above Table illustrates an observation on students' engagement level in the classroom. The researcher had both event and time sampling procedures. Students were counted the number of times they involved in the classroom participation activity during their 1 hour English Language class which is the time frame for the observations. From the record 14% of the students managed to answer questions from the lecturer where else 11% students volunteered to lead their groups for group discussions. A mere 9% of the students managed to make comments and gave their opinions while 3% of students read for the class and asked questions to his lecturer respectively. The lecturer had stated in the interview that she would expect an at least of 80 % of students' participation to make her teaching and learning process an active and student centered. With a

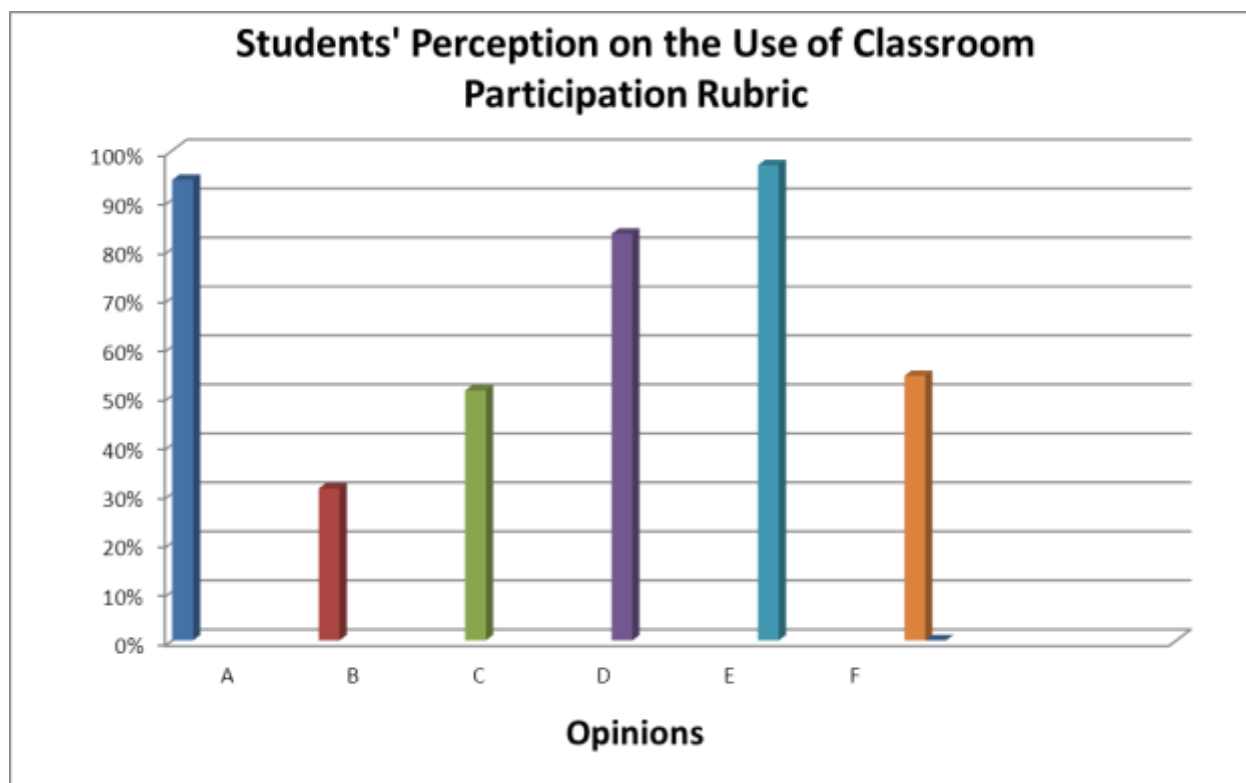
very low level of students' participation, the lessons are possibly dominated by the lecturer alone.



Reasons for the lack of Students' Participation in Classroom Activities		Number of students
A	Fewer participatory opportunities for the students	28
B	Students' own personal fears of criticisms in front of others	30
C	Low confident in speaking English	32
D	No oral encouragement, praise or reward from the lecturer	34
E	Students are not interested or lack of knowledge about the topic of discussion	27

Table 2 shows the reasons for the lack of students' participation in classroom activities. The reasons were stated by the students themselves when the researcher posed them questions on why they were not actively participating in the classroom activities. 97% of students mentioned that no oral encouragement praises or rewards for their efforts from their lecturer discouraged them from participating in classroom activities. Having low confident in speaking English is probably the second popular reason for the students to set back in their classroom involvement. Students also typically suffer from their own personal fears of criticisms in front of other students or lecturers with 85% of students voting for it. Fewer participatory opportunities for the

students in the classroom and students' disinterest or lack of knowledge about the topic of discussion gained 28% and 27% respectively.



Students' Perception on the Use of Classroom Participation Rubric		Number of students
A	Rubric motivates students to participate in activities	33
B	Rubric initiates forced participation	11
C	Rubric promotes rewards	18
D	Rubric creates equal opportunities	29
E	Rubric develops communication skills	34
F	Rubric develops group/ team skills	19

The table illustrates students' perception on the use of classroom participation rubric to measure their participation. 97% of the students agreed that rubric helps them to develop communicative skills while 94% students mentioned that it does motivate them to participate in classroom activities. Rubric also helped the students to enjoy equal opportunities to participate in the classroom activities. While rubric develops group and teamwork skills, 31% of the students considered that rubric can also initiate forced participation from the students.

## DISCUSSION, IMPLICATION AND SUGGESTION

### Reasons Students Do Not Participate in Class

There are various reasons, both speculative and empirically supported, that students fail to participate in class. Course policies on participation as set by the instructor also impact student participation. Berdine (1986) and Smith (1992) suggested that whether or not students participate depends on how much their participation counts toward their final grades. The “pearls of wisdom” approach where students record their participation each day to count toward their end of semester grades was found to be effective in increasing participation in the assessed course and reported to increase participation in other courses (Junn, 1994). Fassinger (1995a, 2000) suggested that students should earn extra credit rather than counting participation as part of a student’s grade, and Boniecki and Moore (2003) and Smith (1992) found that rewarding students with extra credit did increase participation.

Another reason that students may not participate in class is because of their own personal fears of feeling inadequate in front of others. Armstrong and Boud (1983), Fritschner (2000), Howard and Henney (1998), Hyde and Ruth (2002), Karp and Yoels (1976), and Weaver and Qi (2005) all noted that students may feel intimidated or inadequate in front of their classmates and lecturers, and thus choose not to participate. Students even reported confidence as the most motivating factor for their participation in several studies (Armstrong & Boud, 1983; Fassinger, 1995; Wade, 1994; Weaver & Qi, 2005). This concern about being nervous and lacking confidence follows closely with McCroskey’s research) on communication apprehension, which can be trait- or situation-specific. Individuals who may not be particularly high in communication apprehension as a trait are still frequently anxious about communicating in certain situations (e.g., public speaking, meetings).

### **Rubric as a tool for effective classroom participation**

The use of the participation tracker and reward system offered a motivational tool for students to increase their involvement in class discussion. We believe that the students recognized that being involved in class would earn extra points and that the more they participated they would get more points. The students were very excited about participating and knew that having more points increased the probability that they would be awarded with better grade. It appeared that the initial reservations, such as fear of embarrassment and lack of content knowledge, were less influential when the students were provided with an incentive. As a result, academic gains were made by many students.

### **CONCLUSION**

The influences of the reward system motivated students to stay focused and disregard many inhibitions about classroom participation. In addition, due to the fact that students were rewarded for their participation and not for providing correct answers they seemed to recognize a reward for effort. Whiler the data appears to indicate an improvement in classroom performance based on the increased rate of student participation, there are some areas that need to be improved with the future research. For example, prior the implementation of the design, the researcher should have used a diagnostic exam to assess student understanding of a certain topic of the syllabus. This would have provided us with a clearer picture of the academic gains with regard to the topic the syllabus. Another change to the study could have been to monitor the participation rates for a



longer time period. This would have given the researcher a clearer assessment of the student involvement.

Overall the implications of the study offered great insight into improving student achievement. It would appear that the combination of pedagogical practices, reward systems and student support created a student – centred learning environment in the classrooms. As a result of the findings, the researcher would encourage other lecturers to continue the use of the participation tracking system.

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