Engaged to Learn – Ways of Engaging ESL Learners

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Introduction

In this paper I am going to argue that our most important role as language teachers is to provide potentially engaging materials for our learners and then to make use of them in optimally engaging ways. If we do not engage our learners most of the time no amount of exposure, teaching, practice or use of the language will help them to achieve sufficient language acquisition and development.

What Engages You?

Before we consider what engagement is and how we can help our learners to achieve it I would like you to think about what engages you.

First of all I would like you to read the following texts and after each reading to rate the text on an engagement scale of 0-5 (with 5 representing total engagement).

Text 1

An American lawyer and an Irishman are sitting next to each other on a long flight. The American asks if the Irishman would like to play a game to pass the time.

The Irishman is tired and just wants to take a nap but the American persists and says that the game is a lot of fun. 'I ask you a question, and if you don't know the answer, you pay me $5; you ask me one, and if I don't know the answer, I'll pay you $500.' This catches the Irishman's attention and to keep the lawyer quiet, he agrees to play the game.

The American asks the first question. 'What's the distance from The Earth to the Moon?' The Irishman doesn't say a word, reaches in his pocket pulls out a five-dollar bill, and hands it to the American.

Now, it's the Irishman's turn. He asks the American, 'What goes up a hill with three legs, and comes down with four?' The lawyer uses his laptop and searches all the references he can find on the Net. He sends e-mails to all the smart friends he knows, all to no avail. After one hour of searching he finally gives up. He wakes up the Irishman and hands him $500. The Irishman pockets the $500 and goes right back to sleep.

The lawyer is going crazy not knowing the answer. He wakes the Irishman up and asks, 'Well, so what does go up a hill with three legs and come down with four?'

The Irishman reaches in his pocket, hands the lawyer $5 and goes back to sleep.

What is your rating? Why?

Text 2

"There's one minute of added time to go in the European Champions League Final. Can Liverpool do it again? They've come back from 3-0 down and now they're pushing for a winner. Lucas has the ball on the half way line. He tries to find Gerrard but Rooney intercepts. He's off now running at Carragher. He's passed him and he's gone round Reina too. He shoots. He's hit the bar. The ball rebounds to Reina. He throws it out to Gerrard who's already running at speed. He gives it to Torres and goes for the return. It's Gerrard twenty five yards out. He shoots. HE'S SCORED! Liverpool have won for the sixth time. Yet again Stevie Gerrard is the hero. What a player! What a game!"

What is your rating? Why?

Text 3

Song for Last Year's Wife

Alice, this is my first winter

Of waking without you, of knowing

That you, dressed in familiar clothes

Are elsewhere, perhaps not even

Conscious of our anniversary……

…………………………………………

…….Somebody came here today, asked

how you were keeping, what

you were doing. I imagine you

waking in another city, touched

by this same hour. So ordinary

a thing as loss comes now and touches me.

(Extract from Patten, 1983, p.118)

What is your rating? Why?

Now use your experience of reading the three texts to start you off on deciding what it is that engages you.

Think of a particular event in your life which totally engaged you. Visualise the event, and try to feel how you felt at the time.

Now write down a number of sentences about what really engages you.

When I did the exercise above I wrote the following sentences. How many of them match what you are engaged by?

1 I'm engaged by watching football matches which my team win.

2 I'm engaged when I play a game which I can play well.

3 I'm engaged by jokes which make me think and which reward me for doing so.

4 I'm engaged by texts with evident connections to my own life.

5 I'm engaged by texts which leave gaps for me to fill.

6 I'm engaged by texts and tasks which facilitate visualization.

7 I'm engaged by tasks which challenge me to make discoveries for myself.

8 I'm engaged by tasks which challenge me to solve problems.

9 I'm engaged by situations in which I've been stimulated to want to express myself.

10 I'm engaged by films, plays, music etc which make me think and feel.

11 I'm engaged by delicious food.

12 I'm engaged by beautiful scenery.

13 I'm engaged by texts, films, plays etc which are provocative, exciting, moving, mysterious or funny.

14 I'm engaged by texts which are absurd or bizarre.

Interestingly all my sentences refer to positive experiences. I wonder if it is also possible to be engaged by negative experiences. I am certainly not engaged by bad food, ugly environments, mindless films, being forced to speak, texts which I cannot visualize, texts in which everything is overt, texts with no connection with my life, obvious jokes and having to play games which I do not play well. But strangely I am sometimes engaged by watching my team lose an important game and by attempting to play golf. I have just been watching again a game I attended last night in which Liverpool lost to Lyon and I am about to go out into the wind and the rain to play golf. I suppose it is because Liverpool is so important to me that I am really concerned and because there is a slight chance that I will play one or two good shots.

What Is Engagement?

To me engagement is achieved when I am totally focused on an experience, when I give the experience my full attention and when I am not conscious of anything else. This state of total involvement can be achieved by affective stimuli, by cognitive stimuli, by aesthetic stimuli and by kinaesthetic stimuli. The ideal would therefore be to feel, think, appreciate and move during the same experience.

Interestingly many dictionaries do not include the meaning of total involvement in their list of definitions of 'engagement'. Those that do include this meaning either focus on emotional involvement (e.g. 'emotional involvement or commitment' - Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary) or on cognitive involvement (e.g. the Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary says that, 'if something engages you … it keeps you interested in it and thinking about it' (467). However the Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary does not mention anything to do with total involvement in its list of definitions of 'engagement'. Likewise there is no reference to total involvement in the definitions provided by The Free Dictionary by Farlex or by Wikipedia, nor in the following list of web definitions of 'engagement' provided by wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn:

Definitions of engagement on the Web:

battle: a hostile meeting of opposing military forces in the course of a war; "Grant won a decisive victory in the battle of Chickamauga"; "he ...

date: a meeting arranged in advance; "she asked how to avoid kissing at the end of a date"

betrothal: a mutual promise to marry

employment: the act of giving someone a job

employment for performers or performing groups that lasts for a limited period of time; "the play had bookings throughout the summer"

contact by fitting together; "the engagement of the clutch"; "the meshing of gears"

Ironically the definition which comes closest to mine is given by Jeremiah Owyang (2007) when writing about blogs. His definition of engagement in blogs is, "Engagement indicates the level of authentic involvement, intensity,

contribution, and ownership." I think intensity, making a linguistic, physical or mental contribution and making the experience your own are also important characteristics of engagement in a language learning experience.

Why Is Engagement Important in Second Language Learning?

My reading of the literature on second language acquisition and my experience in the ESL classroom have convinced me that cognitive and affective engagement is a pre-requisite for the deep processing needed for durable language acquisition (crail & Lockhart, 1972) and that aesthetic and kinaesthetic engagement are great facilitators too. Finding explicit references to engagement in the literature on second language acquisition (SLA) is not easy though. For example, three of the major works on SLA, Larsen and Freeman (1991), Ellis (1994) and Hinkel (2005) contain no references to engagement in their indexes and do not appear to focus on it anywhere. They do have sections on affective factors (e.g. Larsen & Freeman, 1991, pp. 172-219) but the focus is on such on-going conditions as motivation, anxiety and attitude rather than on engagement in a specific activity or event.

Arnold (1999a) contains no direct reference to the word 'engagement' in the index but a number of chapters refer to relevant research. For example, Arnold and Brown (1999) refer to the work of H. D. Brown (1994, pp. 43-44) who proposes that one way of stimulating the growth of intrinsic motivation in the classroom would be to "involve students in content-based activities related to their interests which focus their attention on meanings and purposes rather than on verbs and prepositions". They also refer to the work of Csikszentmihalyi (1990), whose

concept of flow (a state of effortless movement of psychic energy) is very similar to my concept of engagement and they stress his point that "if experience is intrinsically rewarding, life is justified in the present, instead of being held hostage to a hypothetical future" (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, p. 69). They also quote Goleman (1995, p. 90) as saying, "In flow the emotions are not just contained and channeled, but positive, energised and aligned. … It is a state in which people become utterly absorbed in what they are doing, paying undivided attention to the task, their awareness merged with their actions." Arnold and Brown argue that being in flow is the ideal state for effective learning and make the pertinent point that, "Teachers for whom their work is a source of flow … are highly motivating models for learners." (16). I would go further and say that it is the activities in which the teacher is in flow that are the most likely to engage their learners. Also in Arnold (1999a) Hooper-Hansen (1999) refers to the Lozanov's work on emotional investment and language learning, and especially to his focus on the positive role of aesthetic stimulation. And Arnold (1999b), in advocating visualization activities, argues that it is not words which stimulate mental emotions but the mental images we associate with them.

There is a considerable literature which, whilst not always using the term 'engagement' states that learners who do not think and feel whilst experiencing the language are unlikely to acquire it. Smith (1991), for example, makes strong research based claims for the power of engagement in language learning. Tomlinson (forthcoming 2010) says that, "Thinking whilst experiencing language in use helps to achieve the deep processing required for effective and durable learning (Craik & Lockhart, 1972)". He also says that thinking, "helps learners to

transfer high level skills such as predicting, connecting, interpreting and evaluating … to second language use." In relation to feeling, Tomlinson (2010 forthcoming) says that, "If the learners do not feel any emotion whilst exposed to language in use they are unlikely to acquire anything from their experience." He argues that, "Feeling enjoyment, pleasure and happiness, feeling empathy, being amused, being excited and being stimulated are most likely to influence acquisition positively but feeling annoyance, anger, fear, opposition and sadness is more useful than feeling nothing at all." Braten (2006) makes similar claims when reporting on research into the role of emotion in language learning and use, as do Damasio (1994) when reporting on research on the important role of emotion in memory and Pavlenko (2005) when investigating the role of emotion in second language learning. Also both Schumann (1997, 1999) and Stevick (1999) report research on the value of affective engagement whilst learning a language. As regards cognitive engagement, Byrnes (2000) focuses on the value of using higher cognitive level skills in second language learning and Robinson (2002) contains a number of chapters reporting positive research on cognitive engagement.

Most of the literature referred to above (with the exception of Csikszentmihalyi (1990) and Golemam (1995) focuses on engagement as an on-going phenomenon determined by positive characteristics of the learning environment. In this paper I take the position that engagement is rarely continuous and that it is a variable phenomenon largely dependent on the power of whatever activity a learner is involved in at a particular time. A learner with an enthusiasm for football has the propensity to be engaged by materials which focus on football but he or she might

be engaged by a physical coaching activity in which 'new' lexical items are recycled but not by an analytical activity involving applying the rules to make refereeing decisions. A learner without any enthusiasm for football is unlikely to be engaged by either activity unless the teacher succeeds in generating energy and inspiring participation.

What Engages Second Language Learners?

If I connect my reflections on what engages me to my experience of language learners in the classroom I come to the following suggestions about what is likely to engage learners in the classroom:

1 Texts which have a universal appeal, for example texts about birth, growing up, going to school, starting a career, making friends, falling in love, getting married, having children and growing old (e.g. Tomlinson 1994b).

2 Texts which stimulate and/or provoke affective and cognitive responses - e.g. texts on provocative topics (e.g. Tomlinson 2003b; Wajnryb 1996).

3 Extensive reading of texts which have been chosen by the learner (Day & Bamford 1998; Elley 1991; Krashen 2004; Maley 2008).

3 Tasks which are challenging but achievable - e.g. solving riddles; proposing solutions to problems (e.g. Tomlinson 2003b).

4 Tasks which involve physical activity - e.g. TPR activities; games; yoga (Tomlinson 1994c ; Tomlinson & Masuhara forthcoming 2009).

5 Tasks which stimulate both cooperation and competition - e.g. team games (Tomlinson & Masuhara forthcoming 2009).

6 Tasks which raise the self-esteem of the learners - e.g. projects involving public presentations (e.g. Tomlinson 2001b, 2003b).

7 Tasks which involve the learners in making discoveries for themselves - e.g. language awareness activities (e.g. Tomlinson 1994a).

8 Texts and tasks which can be personalized and localized by the teacher and the learners - e.g. adverts, stories etc whose locations can be changed (e.g. Tomlinson 2003b; 2005a).

9 Texts and tasks which connect with what is important for the learners - e.g. content-based materials (e.g. Tomlinson & Masuhara 2009).

10 Texts and tasks which are enjoyable for the teacher and the learners - e.g. dramatization of stories (e.g. Hae-Ok Park forthcoming 2010; Tomlinson 1994b, 1994c).

11 Texts and tasks which promote laughter - e.g. jokes; humorous short stories; reducing textbook texts to the absurd (e.g. Tomlinson 2003b).

What Does Not Engage Second Language Learners?

My experience as a language teacher in the classroom and as a researcher of teacher and learner responses to materials for language learning (e.g. Tomlinson 2005b) indicates that language learners are rarely engaged by:

1 doing mechanical drills (e.g. substitution tables; minimal pairs; choral repetition)

2 doing guided or controlled practice activities (e.g. sentence completion from given alternatives; blank filling)

3 doing listen and repeat activities

4 repeating dialogues

5 answering comprehension questions

6 learning definitions

7 doing translations

All the above are typical textbook activities (Tomlinson 1999). They are usually done in the classroom as low level de-coding or encoding activities and they rarely engage the learners. It is possible to modify these activities so as to involve the use of high level skills and to make them more engaging (Tomlinson 2003b) but this is by no means the norm. No wonder most learners of English throughout

the world still cannot communicate in English after at least six years of learning English in the classroom.

How Can We Engage Second Language Learners?

These are the types of materials and activities which I have found to be successful in engaging language learners in many different countries around the world.

Task-free experience of potentially engaging texts

This involves the teacher starting each lesson by reading a poem or short story, telling a joke or anecdote, reporting an event or news story. After the teacher performance the main lesson begins without any questions or tasks related to what the learners listened to. At the end of the lesson the teacher encourages anybody who was engaged by the teacher's text to take a written copy of it from her desk and to insert it in a loose-leaf file. The learners are encouraged to re-read the texts in their files every so often and to ask the teacher questions about them if they wish.

Text-driven approaches

These are materials development approaches in which each unit is driven by a potentially engaging text. All the learner activities in a unit relate to the core text and are designed to exploit and to intensify their engagement with it. One example of such an approach uses the following framework:

Activity Type	Procedure	Objective
Readiness activity	Learners think about/or visualize an incident in their lives relevant to the topic of the text	To activate the learners' minds in readiness for the text
Initial response activity	Learners read or listen to the text for a particular holistic purpose	To encourage holistic responses to texts and discourage discrete, word-fixated responses
Intake response activity	Learners think about and then articulate their personal responses to the text	To encourage and reward personal expression
Development activity	Learners develop a written or spoken text which connects to the core text	To encourage and reward creative production of language
Input response activities	Learners return to the core text to make discoveries about what the writer was saying and/or how the writer used a particular linguistic or discourse feature in the text	To deepen the learners awareness of the core text and of how the language is used to achieve appropriacy and effect.
Development activity	Learners return to their text and improve it using what they have discovered in the input response activities	

For detailed accounts of the text-driven approach above see Tomlinson (2003a; 2005c).

Task-driven approaches

These are approaches to materials development in which each unit is driven by a task. All the learner activities in a unit relate to the core task and are designed to exploit and to intensify their engagement with it. An example of such an activity would be:

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Activity Type	Procedure	Objective
Teacher stimulus	Teacher shows students a cardboard box and tells the learners that inside it is a picture of a strange but beautiful building	To rouse the learners' curiosity.
Instruction	Teacher tells the learners that their task in pairs is to reproduce the drawing as quickly and accurately as possible. Only one person from each pair can see the picture and they have to give instructions to their partner.	1 Make the task clear. 2 Stimulate and challenge the learners.
Task activity	One learner from each group goes to look in the teacher's box and then gives their partner instructions to help them to replicate the picture. They can visit the box as many times as they like.	1 For the learners to replicate the picture as quickly and accurately as possible. 2 For the learners to have experience of visualizing, of giving instructions and of seeking clarification.
Feedback 1	Teacher gives feedback to the whole class on the first three pairs to complete their replicas. Teacher focuses on similarities and differences between the pictures.	1 To acknowledge achievement. 2 Provide feedback on the language involved in talking about the pictures.
Feedback 2	Teacher gives feedback to learners on their attempts to give instructions and to seek clarification.	Provide opportunities for learners to increase their awareness of effective ways to give instructions and to seek clarification.
Activity 2	Learners do a similar activity (e.g. reproducing a model) with the members of each pair swapping their roles.	Provide an opportunity for learners to make use of what they have learned about giving instructions and seeking clarification.

For detailed information about task-driven approaches see Van Branden (2006), Willis (1996) and Willis & Willis (2007).

CLIL approaches

These are approaches in which the materials are designed so as to help the learners to acquire English whilst gaining knowledge and skills related to something they are really interested in or to something they are studying.

Examples of such approaches would be the connecting of English, Maths and Science textbooks in Malaysian primary schools and Score (Tomlinson et al. forthcoming 2010) in which students acquire English whilst learning about football skills and tactics. See Snow (2005) for a detailed account of such approaches.

Learner selected topics

In this approach the learners are asked to say what topics are likely to engage them. The materials writer or teacher then selects texts related to these topics to drive the units of material or the lessons to be used on the course. This approach was used very successfully in the development of a textbook in Namibia (On Target 1995; Tomlinson 1995). It includes units driven by controversial texts about tourism, unemployment, corporal punishment, the supernatural and drug abuse, all topics chosen by the learners.

Learner selected texts used with a genre specific set of generic tasks

In such approaches the learners are offered a menu of texts to choose from for each of a number of genres (e.g. stories, adverts, newspaper articles, instructions, recipes etc). For each text the learners select they use a set of generic tasks designed to be appropriate for any text of that genre. They could do the tasks individually or with other learners who have selected that text. See Maley (1998, 2003) and Tomlinson (2003a) for suggestions related to such approaches.

Learner selected tasks

In this approach the learners experience the same text but then decide which of a number of tasks they want to do. For example, after experiencing a poem about an old woman and responding to it personally, the learners chose one of eight different activities specified on cards displayed around the classroom. The learners could do the activity individually, in pairs or in groups, they could change the activity if they found theirs too easy or too difficult and they could present their products to the class if they wanted too. The tasks included learning to recite the poem in the voice of the old lady, painting a picture of the poem, writing the diary for the old lady for that day, writing a letter from the old lady to her son in Australia and writing the dialogue between the old lady and an old man who sat on her bench in the park one day. See Tomlinson (2003a, 2003b) for more information about this approach.

Projects

The learners in groups carry out a project which they have decided on and which involves them going into the outside world (physically and on the web) to find out the views of people in relation to a controversial issue. The teacher helps them by giving feedback on their questionnaires, interview scripts etc and by guiding them in the analysis and reporting of their data. The students then present their findings orally and in a written report. An example of such a project would be a group who decided to find out what commercial companies in their area think about children learning Maths and Science in English in Malaysia or a group who wanted to find out which Premier League team people in their community support and why.

Problem solving

The learners could be given in each lesson a riddle to solve (e.g. 'Where do fish keep their money?') or a puzzling question to answer (e.g. 'Why did the man in the restaurant catch fire?' or 'What was the main social consequence of the invention of gunpowder?). Or the students could be given information about a problem situation and then asked to come up with a solution. For example, they could be presented with the situation described in the novel Salmon Fishing in the Yemen (Torday 2007) in which a scientific agency is asked to design a system for introducing salmon into a wadi in the Yemen or they could be asked to invent a water conserving device and then present it to an international company for possible adoption.

I used this problem solving approach with classes of students at Sultan Qaboos University in Oman and most of the students were engaged by it.

Analytical language discovery approaches

These are approaches in which the learners experience language in use and are then challenged to make discoveries about how specified language features were used. I have been using such approaches for thirty years and most of the time the students have been engaged. The activities I have used have included the very analytical task of translating sentences in a new language by gradually working out the meanings and functions of words given to them from the teachers' feedback on their initial attempts at feedback. Most of the activities though have followed an experiential approach (Kolb 1984) in which the learners first experience a text holistically, then respond to it personally and then return to it to

make discoveries. One such activity involved the learners watching a video of a chef getting celebrity guests to help him make a chocolate cake. The learners then shared their responses to the cake before going back to the video to find out what language the chef used to get his guests to help him. Another such activity involved the learners experiencing an extract from a novel, then responding personally to the parents in the novel arranging a graduation party for their son without inviting his friends and finally making discoveries about how the father used the interrogative to persuade his son to go to the party and how the son used the imperative to refuse. For more information on discovery approaches and examples see Bolitho & Tomlinson (2005), Bolitho et al (2003) and Tomlinson (1994a, 2007a, 2008a).

TPR Plus approaches

These are approaches in which the students follow instructions physically in order to play a game, to mime a story, to make a meal, to paint a picture, to plant seeds etc We used this approach on the PKG project in Indonesia (Tomlinson 1990) and it was so successful in engaging twelve year old students that students from non-experimental classes played truant to watch through the window, that classes often repeated the activities with student 'instructors' once the teacher had left the class and that students often went home and repeated the activities with large groups of younger children from their community. Since then I have used this approach with university students at Kobe University, the National University of Singapore and Sultan Qaboos University in Oman. At first the students were a bit embarrassed and apprehensive but after three activities in all three institutions the students

achieved engagement. For more information about TPR see (Asher 1994) and for information about TPR Plus see Tomlinson (1994b).

Competitive games

I have found that possibly the most engaging type of activities are those which involved cooperating in a team to play a competitive physical game – especially if the game involves getting excited and having to think . An example of such a game which has succeeded in engaging learners of all ages all over the world is Newspaper Hockey. In this game teams of six first of all make hockey sticks and balls out of newspapers. They then sit down facing each other with a chair at each end of their lines representing a goal. In the simple version a student jumps up when her number is called and tries to hit the ball into her opponents' goal. In the more complex version the student jumps up when her number coincides with the answer to a mathematical problem (e.g. the number of wheels on a tricycle plus the number of wheels on a car minus the number of wheels on a motor bike). For more information about this and other such games see Tomlinson & Masuhara (forthcoming 2009) .

Process drama

Process drama involves students and the teacher improvising a scene from a play. For example, the students are given a description by the teacher of a situation in which a government official informs villagers that their village is going to be relocated in order to make way for the construction of a dam. The students and the teacher take roles and then improvise the dialogue. In some approaches the students then write down the script they have improvised and perform their scene

again. I have been using this approach for over thirty years and have happy memories of the engagement achieved by getting students to improvise dramas from poems and stories they have recently experienced (e.g. a drama developed by a class about a teacher leaving the classroom after making a mistake on the board from their reading of Yevteskenko's The Schoolmaster).

For more information about process drama see Bowell & Heap (2001), Kao & O'Neill (1998), Hae-Ok Park (forthcoming 2010)

Unstructured interaction

This involves volunteer students agreeing to use English whenever they meet socially. I know of this approach achieving continuing engagement at a university in Addis Ababa and at Kanda University in Japan. And David Barker (Barker 2009) gives details of experiments at universities where he worked in Japan in which many students achieved engagement in this way.

If I was asked to say which of the approaches above is most likely to achieve engagement for most of the students most of the time I would go for a text-driven approach because it can include a variety of the other approaches (e.g. dramatizing the text while the teacher reads it aloud, stimulating learners to discuss their responses to the text, improvising a dramatic development of the text, making discoveries about how the writer used language to achieve effect). The main point is that different learners are engaged by different activities. So providing a variety of potentially engaging activities is the only way to achieve engagement.

Conclusion

I have found that all of the types of materials and activities outlined above have the potential to optimise the conditions for language acquisition regardless of the culture, previous experience, age, level and motivation of the learner. I am not saying that they always do so but that a principled and coherent set of such procedures can engage learners in ways which activate their minds, stimulate emotions, facilitate connections, achieve salience and make the learning experience positive, enjoyable and memorable. Textbooks have the disadvantage of being constrained by being written at an alienating distance from the learners who use them and by often needing to achieve face validity and conformity. They can achieve engagement but in my experience they rarely do so. Teachers know their learners and have the creative power in the classroom. All that is needed is a little courage and creativity and we can facilitate the engagement our learners need.

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