

Enhancing the classroom participation: The Case of 2nd Year Students of Water Resources and Irrigation Management (BSc) at Dilla University

Adimasu Woldesenbet Worako

Department of WRIM, Dilla University, Ethiopia

Abstract

Education is a pillar to socio-economic, political and sustainable development of a society and it's also a basic source for the civilization. Ensuring the quality of education plays a great role in the process of producing a creative and innovative generation which solves the world's pronounced problems on their own means. After 1994 the Ethiopian new education policy was launched the student-centered approaches became popular and applied in many education centers in order to ensure the quality of education. However, in the higher education centers the implementation was very poor due to several reasons. In Dilla University also the implementation is so weak and student's participation in the classroom is too passive. Hence, this action research was designed to enhance the participation of students in the class for the course soil and water conservation engineering. All of students registered for the course were selected and primary and secondary data collection methods were used to accomplish the work. The collected and observed data were organized and analyzed qualitatively and explained briefly. Intervention measures were designed by considering and out-looking the student's condition in the classroom for the long time. Based on the study the factors affecting the participation of students in the classroom identified were shying and fearing for their friends, language problem, teaching methodology, and lack of material accessibility, sitting arrangement and others. Designed actions taken to solve the stated troubles were describing the lesson objectives clearly and precisely before the main topic, allowing students to talk freely in the classroom by oral motivation and appreciation system, orienting the sitting arrangements in the room, forming cooperative-learning teams, assigning duties and responsibilities for each student in their group and observing all students without any discrimination or bias. Actions which are taken to solve the problem have shown viable out-puts like self-esteem and confidence, self-respect among students and cooperativeness, participation in every issue raised by anyone, positive attitude for the cooperative-learning and speaking freely in and out of class. Hence, the devised or designed action plans have a great role in enhancing the participation of students in the classroom and shaped the learning environment in advanced way. Every instructor should implement the cooperative-learning system to increase the participation of students and to elevate the level of education quality in the universities.

Keywords: Education; cooperative-learning; intervention actions; student-participation; student-centered

1. Introduction

Education is the pillar for sustainable and infallibly overall development of the given country. Ethiopia launched new education and training policy in 1994 to enable citizens who respect human rights, stand for the well-being of people, as well as for equality, justice and peace, endowed with democratic culture and discipline (EEP, 1994). To meet these objectives the country chose student-centered approach over the old teacher based training delivery system. Moreover, the system accepted as a means to ensure the quality of education and considered as a process in producing the creative and innovative generation which solves the country's long-lasting problems by their own capacity. Hence, participation of learners in the classroom is the key point to achieve the intended purposes. Classroom participation is very critical to ensure the active learning process and that requires student's active participatory role rather adopting a receptive and passive posture in the learning room (Snyder, 2003). The benefits of students' participation are well recognized in the world but it has been a great challenge to implement it in specific situations (Haruna, 2007). As Zepke and Leach (2010) report, classroom participation or active learning is considered as students' cognitive investment, active participation in and emotional commitment to their learning. Without student's proactive participation in the classroom delivering lesson is like shouting in the borehole which is filled up to top with water, i.e., simply speaking more without active listeners in the room.

Students' silence in the classroom is very common which despairs teachers to deliver the lesson effectively and efficiently as well as to advance their status by searching and reading various books/information sources to upgrade their status. Hot-tempered and motivated student's engagement in the class inspires and initiates instructors to do more in order to fulfill the demand and satisfy their feeling in searching new knowledge and skill. Education is a great weapon to shape and invent the world which demands participation or contribution of students in the classroom. Questioning generation has a great value in solving contemporary unending challenges of the world and creating sustainable systems to cop-up it. However, the participation of students' is passive to realize the objectives of education and it needs intervention measures. Hence, this action research was designed to enhance participation or to improve the teaching-learning process in the classroom with a proactive participation of students. Specific objectives of this action research are:

- to identify the factors which affects/hinders active classroom participation
- to reduce the problems which affects students' active participation in the classroom
- to design effective teaching-learning processes that help to participate the whole students.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Factors which affect active participation in the classroom

There are numerous objections which reduce classroom participation in the higher education. Teaching methodology (Binulal, 2013), nature of the curriculum (Norton & Crowley, 1995) language problem (Gorham, 1988; Tatar, 2005), teachers' approach to students inside and outside the classroom (Dallimore et al., 2004; Myers, et al., 2002; Rita, 1996; Rocca, 2009), guidance and teaching ability of instructors (Feldman's, 1988; Fritschner, 2000; Wade, 1994; Myers, et al., 2009), students' background history and the culture (Hargis, 1997), teacher-student relationship (Barbara, 1996; Myers, et al., 2009), lack of module accessibility (Good and Brophy, 2006), fear and shy to speak in front of audience (Brophy, 1998; Fritschner, 2000; Weaver & Qi, 2005) and so on are the well-recognized factors which affect active participation of students in the classroom.

2.2 Methods that enhance participation in the classroom

Different researches revealed that group work or cooperative learning system is useful to enhance motivation to learn, retention of knowledge, depth of understanding and appreciation of the subject matter being taught in the classroom (Graham et al., 2007; Felder & Brent, 1996). Ways which help to enhance classroom participation are respecting, appreciating and giving more time/chance for students to talk freely (Rita, 1996; Fassinger, 2000), applying student-student and two-way communication in teaching methodology, asking their opinions or views about points raised in the class, approaching friendly, communicating smoothly and stressing on empathy (Barbara, 1996), using inclusive language (Gorham, 1988; Kumar, 2007), reinforcement and encouraging for their feedback, developing positive interdependency, etc.

2.3 Important benefits gained by participation

Participation in the classroom increases better understanding of the student about the lesson (Petress, 2006), developing self-confidence and eagerness to know more (Fewings & Wonder, 2009; Rich, 2004), enhances critical and analytical thinking ability (Raisa et al., 2014), improving the communication skills and interactions within and among the peers (Dancer & Kamvounias, 2005), developing interpretation, analysis and synthesis capacity (Abel, 2008; Bean & Peterson, 2016) and also they are developing the democratic cultures in their life. These are among some crucial benefits of participation which deeply-sensed and observed by various investigators.

It encourages the social interactions inside and outside of the class, builds team-spirit and togetherness, develops good attitude and respect to others. Moreover, it also elevates the collaboration and cooperation to work in together and pillar to aggregated personal development (Bean & Peterson, 2016). Hence, enhancing participation in the classroom makes the education media more soundable and attractive for the generation and as well produces confidential society.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

Supple qualitative design was used for the study which deals with the current status of the situation under consideration.

Steps followed: First problems were identified, second strategies to tackle the problems were designed, at third the designed strategies implemented and fourthly impact of the interventions was evaluated.

3.2. Sampling Techniques

Since the study focuses on only one class (40 students) students all are included in the study. There is no especial sampling technique employed during the study. The total number of students registered to take the course 'Soil and water conservation engineering' were included in an investigation.

3.3. Data Collection Methods

For this action research both primary and secondary data were used. Primary data were collected by using direct/closely and intensive observation in the classroom, informal interview, asking questions and distributing the suggestion/comment writing simple papers to the all class students. Secondary data were gathered from documents (registrar about the score of students and their background information) and from other teachers who are teaching second year Water Resources and Irrigation Management students.

3.4. Data Organization and Analysis

The data gathered were interpreted qualitatively and expressed briefly with detailed explanations. Qualitatively here means that the data gathered were no structured questions and the view or outlook of the students regarding to the problems and challenges were not quantified in number. Students' opinions and suggestions and as well the instructor views were incorporated elaborated without any measured value.

3.5. Interventions/Actions Taken

To enhance students' participation and to make teaching-learning arena conducive and attractive for both teachers and students, the following interventions/ actions were taken.

- Objectives of the lesson of the day is introduced briefly before starting the main points at the beginning. This activity was aimed to catch-up the students' attention and to direct them what be expected from them at the end of the lesson.
- More time and opportunity were given to students to share their experience for others in the class and encouraging a free-talking system in the classroom (Fritschner, 2000). Appreciating those students who raise hot issues that enhance the participation of all students in the classroom. Inspiration and motivation to the students who raises questions can have a great impact on their emotion and feeling that would help to enhance their participation. Budgeting extra marks for active participation in the class on their final grade would be used as a means to increase participation (Boniecki & Moore, 2003).
- Orientation was given to arrange the sitting position of students to discuss in the group and to use think-pair-share strategy in the classroom. Circular/round/U-shaped sitting arrangement was preferred over the traditional and row and column sitting to augment the participation (Fritschner, 2000). Relevant seating arrangement promotes effective and efficient time utilization.
- Cooperative learning strategies (one to five group based cooperation strategy, i.e., one top scorer student leads the five students in the group and others participates in every activity which allocated for the group work) were applied to increase interdependency and self-confidence among students. This may reduce the gap in between students and shyness that emanates from fear to each other (Winters, 2002).
- Duties and responsibilities are shared to every student during the class discussion and adequate support was delivered on the point they need by deploying and strengthening the spot-help-system.
- Equal observation are used to inspire and motivate all students without any discrimination. That means giving equal chance for the top, medium and low achiever students to be participant in every instant at classroom. Calling students by their name to encourage speaking, build self-esteem and scaling-up the recognition by other friends were another strategy applied as a tool to enhance students' participation.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Factors hindering students' participation in the classroom

As suggestion given by students the factors which affect the participation of students in the classroom were fear for their friends, teaching methodology, sitting arrangement, teachers approach in the classroom and outside, shyness (based on their background and cultural influence), lack of material accessibility to prepare them before the session, schedule tightness that leads to prolixity, problem of language, lack of reinforcement and shortage of time.

From the stated reasons the one which takes the lion-share is language problem. They couldn't understand when teachers speaking in English language only and they being passive even if their

posture is present in the classroom. According to their opinion sometimes if teachers mix English language with Amharic it's easy to understand and to reflect on issues that demands participation. Changing language from English to Amharic in between lecturing has a great potential to maintain students' attention and clearly address the course objectives. Due to multilingualism of the nation some students are disappointed when the teachers deliver the lessons in Amharic language since they think the one who spoke the language as a mother-tongue grasp more knowledge and this was considered as a favor.

Teaching methodology has also a great impact on the students' participation in the classroom. The majority of students said that only one-way communication kills their participation since teachers talk more without giving any chance to students. However, some students said that using two-way communication or active-learning strategy is considered as a time killing and energy saving strategy of instructors. But this idea has low weight on their comments. Most of the students appreciate an active-learning strategy compared to the old passive-learning system.

Another problem is sitting arrangement and shortage of time to discuss issues raised by instructors and their classmates. Students sit in the classroom randomly as they wish and that hinders to apply cooperative learning, since it consumes time to reorganize their sitting arrangement. Some courses have short and small contents that can be covered by the class on the stated schedule period and it would favor the cooperative style. However, the courses like Soil and water Conservation Engineering (SWCE) which has wide content couldn't be covered within the scheduled time and it leads to tension at the end of the semester termination. The portion of SWCE course is very wide due to this using group discussion and cooperative learning strategy to cover the content based on the schedule is too difficult. Even though the formation of groups is also an important task in the process of enhancing interaction and transforming the pair groups into effective teaching-learning teams.

Lack of module accessibility in the library to prepare themselves before attending the class or session and after the class is one of the hindrances to the active participation. Aside to that teachers' approach inside and outside the class have its own impact on the participation. If instructors approach friendly and appreciate students that may encourage classroom participation. However, if instructors are too serious in every circumstance the vice-versa is also true.

4.2 Effects of Intervention/Action

Even though the effect of intervention is not addressed very well due to schedule overlapping for the national election related aspects in 2015; after the implementation of interventions some changes were observed in the classroom. Some of observed changes are the following:

- Students speak freely without any fear and shyness to their friends in the classroom and ask questions about unclear things. By using media of instruction or local languages they raise questions and react to the ideas of others' without any hesitation and hitch in the classroom. They have developed amiable social characteristics and well integrity with their friends and instructors.
- They have shown positive attitude towards cooperative learning and to arrange their sitting position to save the time without any hesitation. They improved positive interdependent learning style.
- Assumed first the active learning strategies as a way of instructors to reduce their work load but now they consider it as a tool to equip them with deep-sense of knowledge and experience sharing mechanism. Class atmosphere becomes warmer and noisy during the lesson after implementation of the strategies. But still now there is the persistent problem

which is always waiting for teacher action or expecting all things from the teacher rather than practicing and exercising by themselves.

- Self-esteem and respecting each other also developed in the classroom and outside the class. They are being eager and vigilant when attending the class.
- 86% of students have shown great improvements on their final exam score in comparing with the pre-test score. That indicates the development of self-confidence and advancement in their level of thinking and understanding ability due to engagement in classroom participation.

5. Conclusion

There are several factors which affect student's participation in the classroom. Among the major or dominant factors language problem, sitting arrangement, teaching methodology, lack of module accessibility and shyness or fear to the instructors and classmates are arduous. To enhance students' participation some interventions were applied such as using local language (Amharic) in addition to English on the points which need more clarity, student-centered approach and interactive teaching methodology, building self-confidence and creating positive interdependence by using cooperative learning system, and giving reinforcement. These strategies to some extent relaxed and motivated students in the classroom to be part and heart in teaching-learning process. As this action research revealed that students always demand a more interactive learning approach than the teacher centered approach even if it consumes more time and is challenging to apply in large classes. So, university should encourage cooperative learning application in the compound by giving/developing awareness to instructors. Teachers should observe their students condition in depth before delivering the lesson and take comments and suggestions after completing the session and should inform about the coming session lesson topic in advance.

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