

Engaging Students - My Journey from Imitator to Innovator

Robert Remmerswaal
Kumamoto Gakuen University

Reflecting on my journey, I have moved from imitating my coworkers to designing my own curriculum. Today, my pedagogy is heavily influenced by situated learning, distributed cognition, and gamification. I explain how these are used in different combinations based on the type of student I am teaching. First, I provide some detail on these theories. I then give some examples of their application and the activities used in my classes. An important step in my journey was to define my own pedagogy to create a lens through which I could evaluate activities for my classroom. This made it easier to choose and implement my course objectives. The goal with each activity I design is to engage students while achieving worthwhile learning outcomes. Examples of how I use these theories to meet course goals come from my kindergarten, English school, and university classes.

Introduction

Throughout my journey as an English language instructor, I have always wanted to get my students more engaged in my classes. I believe that to enjoy my job, my students need to enjoy the class, at least most of the time. Along my journey, I have incorporated a few teaching approaches into my teaching strategy and pedagogy. I have applied various aspects of situated learning, situated conversations, gamification, distributed cognition, and some behaviorism to keep my students motivated and engaged in my classroom. As I teach a wide range of ages, from kindergarten to adults, the strategies I use differ based on age, maturity, time together, and English level. The development of my strategies began from my desire to be a better teacher.

Beginning My Journey

Before moving to Japan, I had several years of experience in a large technology firm as well as a Canadian bank. Those workplaces relied heavily on technology and were always seeking ways to increase efficiency with better tools. When I chose to

move to Japan, I prepared to become a teacher by taking an online TEFL course and observing a few English lessons. In 2015, my teaching journey began as a full-time teacher at an Eikaiwa (English language school). It was there that I realized just how much I still needed to learn.

I started by shadowing my coworkers and I was encouraged to imitate their pattern in my classes. Initially, this is what I did, but I did not believe students were meeting their potential. One limitation of an Eikaiwa is how easily students can quit. This means that student enjoyment must be balanced with student learning. I found that student enjoyment would often become the focus whenever enrolment numbers decreased. After a few months of imitation, I moved from full imitator to partial creator by shifting more focus on learning. However, I was unsure of how to achieve this. I decided to replicate the drill and repeat style from my own childhood language learning.

My first target was reading, as I was shocked by ten-year-old students struggling with phonics after five or more years at the school. I chose a reading textbook, assigned vocabulary homework, and gave tests. Students had to memorize and repeat vocabulary to succeed in class. This drill and repeat style had success. Within six months students were reading, but they often complained of the difficulty, tediousness, and dislike of this style. This reminded me of the feelings I had when learning in that same way. I began searching for teaching tools that could make the process more enjoyable and efficient, drawing from my previous experience with technology.

As I searched for different tools and methods to use in my classroom, it quickly became overwhelming. My searches online resulted in finding too many potential tools to properly evaluate them all and many differing opinions as to which was the best or provided the most benefit for students. I would often research and trial one tool enough to feel confident it was a worthwhile choice, only to learn of another tool and feel uncertain which would be best. This resulted in a lot of researching and

hypothesizing with very little action taken.

I began to consider my own pedagogy and realized I was unable to define it. As I researched educational theory, I decided it would be beneficial for someone to guide me through this process. This led me to register for a Master of Educational Technology. In this program I gained a new perspective from which to evaluate technology, frameworks, and theories to apply to my classroom, as well as a better idea of my own pedagogy. With this new mindset, I was motivated to experiment and integrate the theories of situated learning, distributed cognition, gamification, and behaviorism to better engage my students.

Theoretical Framework

Developing and internalizing these different strategies assisted in me defining my own pedagogy. My methods include teaching through collaboration, students utilizing each other as resources, and guiding students into critical thinking. The following briefly details the theories I use.

Situated Learning

Situated learning plays a large part in my pedagogy. It claims that students are more likely to learn when they are actively participating in the learning experience (Northern Illinois University Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning, 2012). Learning should take place through relationships between people and connecting prior knowledge with authentic, informal contextual learning (Northern Illinois University Center for Innovative Teaching and Learning, 2012). These situations must be realistic, problem centered activities that allow students to learn through their completion (Stein, 1998).

The role of an instructor is then to guide students towards greater proficiency, provide scaffolding and support for beginners, track progress and assess what students produce, build collaborative spaces for learning, and encourage reflection (Stein, 1998). Reeves, Harrington, and Oliver (2002) provide ten guiding points for creating authentic, situated activities, as listed below.

1. Have real-world relevance rather than decontextualized or classroom-based tasks.
2. Require multiple interpretations of tasks,

with students needing to create smaller tasks to complete the larger tasks.

3. Require substantial amounts of time to complete.
4. Require different perspectives with students finding their own relevant information from a variety of sources.
5. Require collaboration.
6. Provide a chance for students to reflect on their own work and that of the social group.
7. Go beyond a single subject area or field.
8. Include assessment that is integrated into the task and based on real world assessment, not artificial assessment.
9. Create a final product, not a product preparing for something else.
10. Allow for diverse outcomes or various solutions.

Situated Conversations

Situated learning does not always meet the constraints of an English classroom. I created a group of activities that I refer to as situated conversations to fill this gap while adhering to the principles of situated learning when possible. The main deviation from situated learning is they do not require substantial amounts of time, assessment, or a final product. This allows them to be used within a single class period. It is similar to situated learning in that students are active participants, connect prior knowledge with informal contextual learning, and the situations are realistic with problematic scenarios introduced by the teacher, who remains the guide. These are a great way to expand student vocabulary and sentence patterns while engaging students in critical thinking. These conversations rely on students sharing their experiences and opinions while explaining their reactions and rationale.

To do this, a variety of scenarios are discussed in class, the teacher prompts students to participate, and problems or alternate scenarios are introduced by the teacher or other students. Critical thinking is necessary for students to explain the rationale for their behavior or opinions. The teacher's role is to prompt students to explore new vocabulary and develop the skills to express and defend their opinions. Expressing opinions is what brings this beyond a role-playing activity, such as ordering at a restaurant. The goal is not to prepare students for a specific future experience, but rather to explore

vocabulary and sentence patterns by using informal contexts and the prior experiences of the students.

A question could be, "Have you ever hit another car in a parking lot? What did you do? Why? What would you do if this happened tomorrow?" Some follow-up questions include, "Do you think something bad would happen if you did nothing?" "What would you do if someone hit your car?" The teacher or other students can continue asking questions and sharing their own opinions on the situation. The teacher should take time to explain new vocabulary and sentence patterns as they arise in class. By connecting vocabulary and sentence patterns with prior experiences and beliefs, students should have a stronger connection with what was learned, making it easier for them to recall the lesson as needed.

Distributed Cognition

This theory relates to course organization and considers what resources are available to students. Distributed cognition stipulates that our ability to think and process goes beyond our own brains and utilizes other people, tools, and artifacts (Swan & Shea, 2005). In my classrooms, students are therefore a resource for other students to use, along with the teacher, their personal devices, and any computers in the room. Additionally, all processes that are required for a task should be considered and ordered to best make use of student time and all available resources (Rogers & Ellis, 1994). To accomplish this, a teacher should be aware of when and how to introduce resources and the order of the learning tasks should attempt to use time efficiently. Furthermore, distributed cognition puts emphasis on where or from whom knowledge can be accessed rather than knowledge acquisition (Hutchins, 2000). In my classroom, I interpret this as allowing students to utilize online translation software as desired and teaching students how to use these tools to express themselves, rather than focus on vocabulary memorization. I do believe vocabulary is an important piece of language learning, but students should be aware of the tools that are available to them on their language learning journey.

Gamification

Gamification is typically taking any mundane task and making it rewarding using game elements and game design in a non-game context (Werbach &

Hunter, 2012), for example, earning badges from an app for walking a certain distance. Users are motivated by incorporating things such as leader boards, points, and immediate feedback. The user feels empowered and understanding the game becomes important to succeed, which leads users to engage in the process (Flores, 2015). There are many ways to implement and design an activity with gamification, but in general they have been shown to improve student engagement, motivation, attendance, and academic performance (Hung, 2017). One of the most used features is a points system. Dignan (2011) states that users see points as a reward even when they are not connected to a tangible reward because they give a sense of validation.

Dignan (2011) notes that gamification has the potential to encourage students to cheat or game the system for the sake of points. Some worry that gamification can be exploitative, oversimplifies a task, and that the associated learning analytics do not translate into actual learning (Hung, 2017). Not all gamification has these downfalls, but these criticisms must be considered in the design of any activity that utilizes gamification. For example, with an app that rewards steps, a person may be inclined to shake their phone or find other ways to artificially increase their step count if the reward is seen as valuable. As the value of the reward increases, this inclination to game the system also increases.

The benefits must outweigh the risks of gamification when contemplating its use in the classroom. To weigh the risks and rewards, Hung (2017) makes several suggestions in his review of current literature, as follows:

- Ensure that students receive meaningful feedback and can learn from the activity.
- Consider if gamification will improve the student experience of the course through increased learning, a sense of progress in the course, or more timely and useful feedback.
- Choose desired learning outcomes before considering technology or any game mechanics; technology should not be at the center
- Any analytics provided by a gamified system should not be the main benchmark for student learning progress.

- Always go back and revise for improvements based on your experience, new research, and data that you accumulate.
- Use gamification for the enjoyment of the students and the teacher.

Behaviorism

I apply this method to remedy classroom problems. Behaviorism often involves tokens, praise, parental feedback, and other methods to encourage or discourage certain behavior (Besalel-Azrin et al., 1977). My application is limited to young learners, where it is used to prevent students from distracting or discouraging each other. This includes rewarding good behavior with praise and increased chances to participate as well as discouraging poor behavior with a warning system.

Classroom Activities

The age, maturity, and English level of my students plays a role on which theories I choose to apply to my classroom. Long, complex, authentic tasks do not fit well with younger children. Using a time-out would not be useful with university students. Below, I detail a few activities used to engage students in my various classrooms.

Kindergarten

With this age group, behaviorism is used to reinforce positive behavior. My method is to reward good behavior with additional opportunities to participate at the front of the class. Students catch on quickly that poor behavior results in being passed over for games and activities and adjust their behavior accordingly without direct discipline from a teacher. With classes ranging from 18-45 students, there are rare circumstances where I discourage inappropriate behavior directly. However, I have found positive reinforcement will often suffice.

Other aspects have been gamified. For example, many students use katakana English when giving answers. To encourage proper pronunciation, I use a game that rewards pronunciation. First, students line up behind their favorite card and then chorus after me the vocabulary word using the target sentence pattern. I use my hand to gesture the intonation for the phrase when I speak and when the students chorus the phrase back. After two tries, I declare one line of students, with the best intonation, the winners. I try to be expressive with my

face and body language to show when they are parroting well and when they make a mistake. After using this game, I noticed students started using correct pronunciation during the review lessons.

Eikaiwa

There are a wide range of ages at an Eikaiwa, which require their own techniques for engagement. Currently, I teach young elementary grades and adult students.

Children

Improving student reading first inspired my journey, but I now use some fun activities to engage students. I noticed some students did not associate phonics with reading and appeared to fall behind in class due to this disconnect. By gamifying the reading experience, students begin to see reading and memorizing phonics as a way to win a game. The game starts with the class reading together, then the teacher reads while clapping to establish a rhythm. Students repeat this rhythm, and the clapping gets faster with each round. Like a game, students get lives, which are usually tied to the time available and the difficulty of the reading. If you make a mistake or lose the rhythm, you lose a life and can try that level again. To win, you must complete the final speed level before running out of lives. All students have a chance to win and typically understand the rules after their first attempt. Students can parrot the teacher at first, but to succeed they must be able to either memorize or read quickly. Since utilizing this method, I have observed my lower students remembering their phonics and sight words with much more accuracy.

Some aspects of behaviorism are used in moderation. This includes warning points given for talking repeatedly out of turn, hitting other students, or other poor behavior. In the rare case, students will reach three points and be given a time-out. This tends to be used with elementary grade one students who are very excited to be with their friends. Warning points are used after a reminder that their current behavior is not appropriate. There is a chance to have the points removed with appropriate behavior. If several students continue to speak with each other or are otherwise distracted, I will stop the activity instead of giving everyone warning points. I find that this age group has certain days when sitting still is not an option and it is

important to be flexible with the activities. By the third grade of elementary school, a verbal reminder about behavior will typically suffice.

In higher level classes, vocabulary gets explored with situated conversations. The textbook I use has new vocabulary each unit. These words are explored by relating them to the lives of the student. For example, if "Traffic" was a new vocabulary word, I may ask about traffic on the way to class that day, feelings about traffic, and other questions of this nature. Students are exposed to the word many times in a short period and can apply it to their everyday lives. I have observed students able to naturally recall and use these words weeks later. Students are often introduced to the perspectives of other students and are required to use critical thinking in forming and weighing their opinions against those of the other students.

Adults

My adult students typically pay for their own lessons, demonstrating motivation to be in the class, and usually opt for a class that is textbook centered. Situated conversations are drawn out from the textbook material to stimulate and engage students. If there was a story about a concert, I would use concerts as a topic to draw out student experiences, opinions, and feelings. It is a mix of sharing experiences, discussing hypotheticals, and learning new vocabulary. These situated conversations have been used with my lowest adult students, who are still working on conjugating the 'be' verb, all the way to my fluent students. Many idioms and new words are added to the working vocabulary of these students. I write down and define new words as they are encountered, giving students a physical and/or digital copy at the end of class. Often students use these words appropriately in future lessons. Occasionally they are added to the word list two or three times before students remember them.

University

I have the greatest flexibility and responsibility to create a curriculum in these classes. All my courses are taught with students having access to computers. I have implemented various activities and assignments, but a few are worth sharing for their engaging qualities.

The first is gamified vocabulary and comprehension questions. Using the free-to-use

kahoot.com, I create quizzes that students take in class, with results shown live. Questions are presented on the classroom screen and each student or group answers the questions on an internet connected device within twenty seconds. The faster an answer is given the higher the points received. Scores are shown after each question, motivating the individual or team to answer quickly and correctly. To avoid students manipulating the system, these quizzes are only worth participation marks, the desire to accumulate points is therefore internally based. I also allow students to use the Internet to find an answer, but with 20 seconds, it is not very useful. The results provide insight into vocabulary or sections in the reading the students likely do not understand. I am then able to address misunderstandings or allocate more time for missing vocabulary in my lesson. This has also been a great way to wake students up in morning classes and get them engaged for the rest of the period.

Another task is to create a situated learning environment, where I introduce potential work scenarios to my students. I then divide students into groups and provide assignments related to email creation. Students are given freedom to write from the perspective of any employee within any business (real or fake) and can choose the target recipient(s) of the emails. Some examples are emails related to marketing, partner relationships, collaboration, and job applications. Certain tasks are done in groups and others are done individually. At first, groups can be slow to collaborate, but after I meet with each group and ask a few questions, a lively group discussion is started. Once an idea is chosen, students will typically actively participate on the task in class, engage in group discussions, and ask me questions to improve their writing quality. Students appear to enjoy writing from the perspective of an employee.

Discussion

In presenting my journey at the SUTLF 6 conference, a few audience members shared other ways they engage their students in the classroom. One teacher encourages student participation by giving two points to students who participate in class without a prompt and one point to students who participate after being called by name. These points are then used as a reference when creating a final grade. Another teacher includes peer evaluation in

each class. She found that this encouraged students to be engaged as they know the person next to them will be evaluating them shortly. Both teachers reported observing increased engagement when using these methods.

The methods I have mentioned keep my students and me interested in the lesson. However, it must be noted that none of activities have been researched for effectiveness. I have observed higher student engagement in my classroom when using them, but these are anecdotal observations. I am always thinking of ways to improve these activities and create new ones as well.

Reflecting on my journey has reminded me just how important it was to understand my pedagogy. My initial struggle to choose a tool for my classroom was related to my inexperience as a teacher. I wanted to choose a tool before choosing the methods and goals for the class. I started my journey thinking that a tool would lead my decision to learning outcomes and methods, when in fact it is the desired learning outcomes, and the desired methods, that should guide my choice of tools. Defining my pedagogy provided a lens from which to evaluate activities for their learning outcomes and to imagine ways to make them more engaging. Imitation was a necessary first step in my journey and as I continue to teach, I believe imitation will continue to play a part in the courses I create. The ideas and work of others are a great inspiration and provide an opportunity to learn and improve my own activities. In this way, I believe that I am an innovator who can use imitation as a tool.

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Author Bio

Robert Remmerswaal currently teaches university students and has experience teaching all ages in a variety of settings. He is interested in new ways of engaging students and enjoys bringing new activities to the classroom. Currently, he is using Minecraft to increase the time students spend using English outside of the classroom.

