

Participation Points System to Encourage Classroom Communication

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This article introduces a helpful method to help promote communicative participation in ESL classrooms.

Introduction

Encouraging classroom participation is one of the greatest challenges for ESL teachers in Japan. This article presents a Participation Points System (or PPS), which is a very simple yet very effective method of motivating students to overcome their passivity. The PPS aims at overcoming this barrier by allowing a tangible and immediate form of feedback to students.

The Participation Points System (PPS)

Many teachers use different methods of motivation and recording participation, but simple methods would seem to work best. The following is an extremely simple method that I learned and experimented with at the Communicative English Program of the Niigata University of International and Information Studies in Japan. I continue to use the PPS at the Center for English Language Education at Asia University, also in Japan. It has been one of the most effective techniques that I have learned as an ESL teacher.

The inventor of the PPS, Hadley (1997, 1) said the following with regard to overcoming the challenges of recording participation:

What I have done is to turn my participation points into a form of classroom hard currency, which the students cash in at the end of each class for participation points. This year I use poker chips (before I used cardboard coupons). It really does not matter what one chooses to represent the actual participation points.

By doing this Hadley was able to give positive and instantaneous feedback to his students by making participation motivational. This straightforward technique, which I adopted in my classes, has been successful in helping my students overcome their passivity.

Students in Japan, by their passive nature, rarely solicit feedback on their performance from teachers, and even if the teacher elaborates on their progress in English it remains uncertain if they understand fully, or are convinced of the sincerity. Thus the intended impact of feedback can be lost immediately. However, the PPS aims to overcome this obstacle by giving students something on the spot that lets them know immediately of their progress. Students then feel an immediate sense of achievement, which is needed to encourage them to speak more, and to use imagination.

To emphasize the need to practice speaking as much as possible, my students receive points in the form of glass discs and marbles (which can be bought easily at game stores). In Niigata I used plastic poker chips. The intention is to give students a highly visible reward for participating, especially in a communicative sense, and to help them overcome their concern to say "right" words, and in that way help students to overcome their shyness and passivity.

The main advantage of the PPS is its tangibility. The students hold the discs and marbles in the classroom, extend their hands to receive them, and look at them with a sense of achievement. I do not mind if they mistakenly drop them and pick them up again, or make a noise with them (within reason), as this is a constant reminder that what they see and hold is their reward for making an effort to communicate in English. It also brings an element of a game to the classroom, which students enjoy. It also adds a competitive dimension, although this may cause anxiety among some students, but teachers can use their discretion in all cases.

Each glass disc is worth one point, and each marble is worth three points, but teachers can decide what they want to use and what scores they want to assign. Different colors can also represent different scores with a few gold discs or chips to represent exceptionally good participation. In my classes the discs are given to the students for fulfilling what would possibly be considered standard for speaking English and answering questions, while the marbles are given for attempting more challenging issues. When the responses are short and one-worded they usually receive one point. If they elaborate in any way, add some "depth", or attempt to answer more difficult questions, then they receive more points. It is very important that, even if a student has a wrong answer, that student will keep the participation points because points are given mainly for making an effort to communicate in the classroom, and not primarily for correct answers.

There are many ways of practically applying the PPS, and the following description is only my way, as it can be adapted to accommodate many teaching situations. In my classes, one point is given for being on time. As each student comes into the classroom they are given one point. During the homework check after that, students who have done the homework also get one point. Then homework answers are solicited, and students who make attempts to answer them are given more points. Students are asked to raise their hands. It is sometimes difficult to see whose hand is up first, especially when many hands go up at the same time (which has become the case) but this is not too problematic (as each student is then given a point to award joint effort).

Listening activities usually follow homework activities, where more answers are solicited and more points awarded. However, the listening activities are consciousness-raising exercises for the communication activities that follow. The topics of the communication activities are also based on the topics of the homework and listening activities. Task-based activities are often used to supplement the textbook. It is therefore in the communicative activities that most points are awarded. Walk between the groups (each of two to four students) listen attentively to what they are saying and award the points accordingly. Encourage them with the PPS.

At the end of the class, the students count their points and then "cash them in". Their names are called and they call back their scores, which serves as the roll simultaneously. After that their discs and marbles are collected. They can be kept in a plastic "lunch-box" (or anything will do, like a bag for example). Whilst students could possibly cheat in this activity, I have not experienced a single incident of dishonesty. I record the points in my classroom file and they constitute a fairly sizable thirty percent of their final grade.

Personal Reflections on the PPS

The PPS is very effective in getting the students to communicate. However, all good methods have some drawbacks. One problem with the PPS is that it takes a lot of energy to move around the classroom distributing points. After three forty-five minute classes in succession I feel I have had a fairly extensive physical workout. In this way it has detracted from the opportunity of spending more time focusing on higher quality teaching, and giving individual students special attention.

It is also difficult to move around in some classes, especially where there is a fair amount of congestion. It is best to use in classes with twenty or less students, and where they can be placed into groups and where one can easily maneuver between them whilst teaching simultaneously. A good idea would be to have the students place their bags and umbrellas at the back of the classroom, as it is easy to trip over these and fall.

It is also possible to take away points that were given, for example when a student, having already accumulated a fair amount of points returns to passivity, or speaks Japanese too much, but this should be done sparingly because this can impact negatively on motivation and morale. This can negate from the true intention of using the PPS, which is to encourage students to make an effort to communicate in English.

Some may say that the PPS is somewhat behaviorist in nature, but Hadley (2001, 5) notes:

this strategy consistently works in modifying the passive behavior and learned helplessness that many have acquired during their secondary education days.

Therefore, the objective is not to control or to dominate students, but rather to encourage them to overcome their psychological barriers to communicating in English, and chiefly among these would be overcoming their basic fear of making mistakes. It is merely intended as a guide to assist students in overcoming their passivity, and once they have overcome their passivity (usually after a year

in my case) it can be removed.

The PPS has been very helpful for my students in overcoming their passivity, and have also made my classes easier to teach. The advantages of using the PPS have undoubtedly outweighed the disadvantages. I have found it easier to help the students understand certain things, like the benefits of speaking English in the classroom, by giving them points at the appropriate times, rather than trying to explain the benefits verbally. In this way it also cuts down on unnecessary teacher talking time, and giving more time to the students to talk. I suggest trying the PPS in your own classrooms, as I am sure that this straightforward but effectual approach will be of benefit to you and your students.

References

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