

CULTURAL RELEVANCE AND FAMILIAR TOPICS AS CATALYSTS FOR ESL LEARNER ENGAGEMENT: AN INVESTIGATION OF RURAL STUDENTS IN URBAN CLASSROOMS

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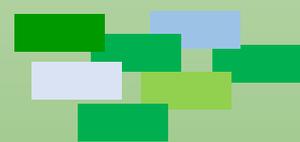
Abstract:

The teaching of foreign language or second language comprises various methods and approaches that aim to propel learners' linguistic proficiency, communication skills, and autonomy. While previous studies mentioned various motivational strategies and the role of familiar topics in promoting learners' engagement, this paper investigates how familiar topics and local culture motivate learners, especially those transitioning from rural to urban settings, to actively participate in ESL classroom. Specifically, the study examines how topics related to rural life, culture and customs make the learners more engaged in ESL speaking activities. A mixed methods approach has been employed, incorporating classroom observations and surveys to assess the learners' participation and motivation level in response to familiar and abstract topics. The findings suggest that learners showed a higher level of enthusiasm and motivation engaging more actively in speaking activities based on familiar and culture-related topics. And it indicated a significant improvement in fluency and confidence level to initiate conversations. Ultimately, these results highlight the significance of integrating culturally and socially familiar topics into the ESL curriculum to reduce the inhibition, psychological discomfort or reluctance while speaking unfamiliar topics, among the ESL learners resulting in active participation and engagement.

Keywords: ESL Engagement, Familiar Topics, Local Culture, Rural to Urban Transition, Speaking Fluency, Motivation in Language Learning, Learner Participation, Cultural Relevance

Introduction:

Methods of teaching a second language or foreign language, including ESL, have been the crux of many research studies for years. Fundamentally, all the methods such as the Grammar-Translation Method, Audio-Lingual Method, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), and Task-Based Learning have contributed to the evolution of the domain of ESL pedagogy. However, one unrelenting hurdle remains: how to inculcate students' engagement and active participation in the learning process, especially when they confront cultural, psychological, or linguistic barriers. Therefore, the efficacy of these methods relies on various elements like context, age group, L1, learners' upbringing and background etc.,



In Uzbekistan, an escalating number of students from rural areas relocate to urban centers like Tashkent for higher education. These students often come across obstacles adapting to unfamiliar academic environments, which can impede their participation in ESL classrooms. This study investigates whether introducing topics pertaining to their cultural and social backgrounds—specifically rural customs, traditions, and everyday experiences—can foster better participation and speaking fluency.

Literature Review:

Multiple studies accentuate the significance of motivation in language learning (Dörnyei, 2001; Gardner, 1985). According to schema theory, learners grasp and retain new information better when it connects to their pre-existing knowledge (Anderson, 1984). Culturally responsive teaching has been advocated by Gay (2000) and Ladson-Billings (1994), who underline the demand for educational practices that recognize and integrate learners' cultural contexts.

In ESL classrooms, engaging content has been linked to increased learner motivation (Krashen, 1982). Topics that resonate with students' real-life experiences, identities, and values can boost their confidence and willingness to communicate (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This is especially pertinent for learners going through major life transitions, such as migrating from rural to urban settings.

Methodology:

This study utilized a mixed-methods approach to examine the impact of familiar topics on ESL learners' speaking fluency and classroom engagement.

Participants: 50 first-year university students enrolled in ESL courses at Uzbekistan State World Languages University, Tashkent, were selected. All participants had recently relocated from various rural regions of Uzbekistan.

Instruments: Two main tools were used:

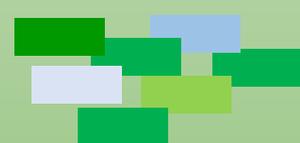
1. *Classroom Observation* – Participants were observed during lessons over four weeks.

Speaking tasks were designed to incorporate both familiar topics (e.g., village festivals, family traditions) and abstract topics (e.g., global warming, space exploration).

2. *Survey Questionnaire* – Participants rated their comfort, engagement, and interest levels after each session on a 5-point Likert scale.

Results and Analysis:

The classroom observations uncovered a striking difference in learner behavior depending on the topic type.



During discussions on familiar, cultural context-driven topics:

- 84% of students proactively engaged in speaking activities.
- The average speaking time per student enhanced by 45%.
- Observed reluctance and pauses declined evidently.

Survey results reflected these findings:

- 92% of students felt more comfortable discussing topics related to their cultural backgrounds.
- 86% reported increased confidence in initiating and sustaining conversations.
- 81% stated they felt more connected to the class content.

Conversely, abstract topics faced lessened engagement and more frequent pauses, with only 53% of participants showcasing self-assurance.

Discussion:

The observations indicate that cultural familiarity is instrumental in inculcating ESL learners' willingness to participate and improving their speaking fluency. When learners are exposed to their own experiences, they feel more confident and able to articulate their thoughts and ideas. This supports Dörnyei's (2001) motivational theory, which underscores the demand for personally relevant learning content.

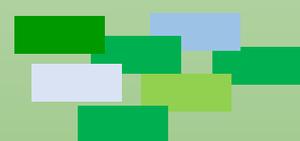
Furthermore, incorporating cultural awareness into ESL instruction not only fosters linguistic skills but also authenticates learners' identities and backgrounds. This is particularly indispensable in multicultural classrooms or where students confront the double challenge of language acquisition and cultural adaptation.

Conclusion:

This study emphasizes the profound influence of culturally familiar topics in stimulating ESL learners' engagement and fluency. For rural students relocating to urban academic settings, discussing familiar cultural themes alleviate stress, builds confidence, and facilitate active involvement. Language instructors should reflect on infusing local culture and familiar contexts into ESL curricula to cultivate more inclusive and dynamic learning environments.

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