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## **Energising Students in Learning English as A Second Language**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This study investigates learners' perceptions of kinesthetic learning activities (KLA) used to teach English as a second language in secondary level. Using mixed method research design, with surveys and interviews, this research which is mainly qualitative and descriptive in nature presents students' perceptions towards KLA so as to promote active learning environments. The findings showed that KLA averted monotony, eliminated stress and encouraged social interaction in an enjoyable and active learning atmosphere. The study also discovered that the subjects equated kinesthetic learning activities to learning processes which would encourage fun learning experiences.*

**Keywords:** *Kinesthetic Learning Activities (KLA), Active Learning (AL)*

### **Introduction**

Research has consistently shown that traditional lecture methods, in which instructors talk and learners listen, continue to dominate school, college and university classrooms. However, Chickering and Gamson (1987) argue that learners must do more than just listen passively: they must read, write, discuss, or be involved in solving problems. This is because the learning process is inherently active and learners should therefore be actively involved while listening to formal presentations in the classroom. McKeachie et al. (1986) conducted an extensive review of the research literature on college teaching methods and reached a similar conclusion: "If we want students to become more effective in meaningful learning and thinking, they need to spend more time in active, meaningful *learning and thinking* – not just sitting and passively receiving information." In view of this, it is proposed that KLA should be integrated as a part of instructional activities in the teaching and learning of English as a second language in order to "activate" the students to become "mobile" instead of being "inert" in class. This study investigates

the use of KLA by secondary school teachers who teach English as a second language to explore the learners' perspectives of the strategy used in order to promote active learning. The study is contextualised in literature on second language learning which also incorporate a fresh perspective on learning styles and active learning.

### **Second language learning and kinesthetic learning**

Second language learning has grown exponentially since its beginning in the 1960s and has splintered into a number of sub-fields of enquiry, each supported by its own theoretical framework and often conducted by means of very different methodological procedures (see Ellis 1994 for a survey of this sub-fields). One particular sub-field that has continued the tradition of strong link with language pedagogy is the study of the role of input and interaction in L2 acquisition (e.g. Long 1981 and Pica 1992). It is acknowledged that interaction is the key to second language learning. Ellis (1985) defines interaction as the discourse jointly constructed by the learner and his interlocutors and input as the result of interaction. Long (1990) as cited in Ellis (1994) proposed that interaction is necessary for second language acquisition. According to him, three aspects of verbal interaction can be distinguished: input, production and feedback. Input is the language offered to the learner by native speakers or other learners, production (output) is the language spoken by the language learners themselves and feedback is the response given by the conversational partners to the production of the learner. His interaction hypothesis emphasised the importance of comprehensible input and claims that it is most effective when it is modified through the negotiation of meaning. He suggested that when meaning is modified (negotiated), input comprehensibility is usually increased and learners tend to focus on important linguistic features as interactional modifications are meant to better enable the learner to understand the comprehensible input available. Examples of interactional modifications are comprehension checks, clarification requests and confirmation checks. These examples actually take place when the students exchange information or input while engaging themselves in kinesthetic learning activities. In order for them to solve a given task, they would have to sometimes modify their sentences so as to make it comprehensible to their peers.

Kinesthetic learning is a process where students learn by actively carrying out physical activities rather than by passively listening to lectures or merely watching a demonstration. Pedagogical research has also indicated that kinesthetic learning is a "fundamental, powerful, and ubiquitous learning style" and "can serve as mnemonic hooks for the most important concepts" (Sivilotti and Pike, 2007). Kinesthetic activities tap into what Piaget termed "sensorimotor learning," in which physical participation transfers into mental symbols representing that experience (Hergenhahn

and Olson, 1997). Kinesthetic learning activities can also engage other important learning styles, such as Felder and Silverman's active, sensing, intuitive, visual, or global learners (Felder and Silverman, 1988). During kinesthetic learning activities, students might stand, walk, dance, jump, talk, point, or even work with props. The key characteristics of a KLA are that (i) students are actively, physically engaged in the exposition and assimilation of classroom material and (ii) this engagement directly supports some specific learning objective (Sivilotti and Pike, 2007). These benefits are said to raise the level of students' engagement during the learning periods instead of having to endure long series of lectures and these activities can be used to re-energise and re-focus the class by creating a new perspective of the lesson.

### **Learning styles and active learning**

In L2 learning context, language learning style has been identified as another key determiner of L2 strategy choice. Keefe (1979) defined learning styles as characteristic cognitive, affective, and psychological behaviors that serve as relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, respond to the learning environment. Gregorc (1979) defined learning style as distinctive behaviors which serve as indicators of how a person learns from and adapts to his or her environment. When allowed to learn in their favourite way, unpressured by the learning environment or other factors, students often use strategies that directly reflect their preferred learning style. For example, students with an analytic learning style prefer strategies such as contrastive analysis, and dissecting words and phrases, whereas students with a global style use strategies that aid them find the big picture (i.e., guessing, scanning, predicting) and help them in conversing without knowing all the words (i.e., paraphrasing, gesturing). Visually oriented students employ strategies such as listing, word grouping, and so on, whereas those with an auditory preference like to work with practice aloud and tapes. Finally, tactile or kinesthetic students prefer hands-on activities, group work and peer coaching.

Students' involvement in the learning process may be conceptualised as falling on a continuum of attention or engagement, ranging from active learning on one end to passive learning on the other. For instance, students' engagement in class can range from being "passive" (e.g., total inattentiveness –looking out the window and thinking about other things) to "moderately active" (e.g., intermittent attention – tuning in only when the teacher writes something on the board) to "very active" (e.g., listening intently, taking notes, monitoring comprehension, asking questions, and participating in class discussions). In view of this, the amount of mental energy invested and the degree of psychological involvement in the learning process will substantially increase when students are physically and actively engaging themselves in hands-on activities that are related to the material being utilised. The notion of

active learning is not a new idea. It is derived from “two basic assumptions: (i) that learning is by nature an active endeavor and (ii) that different people learn in different ways” and the elements of active learning are talking and listening, writing, reading, and reflecting (Meyers and Jones, 1993). It is noted that active learning involves putting the students in situations which compel them to read, speak, listen, think deeply, and write. Hence, to be actively involved, students must engage in higher-order thinking (HOT) tasks such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Bonwell and Eison, 1991). Active learning also puts the responsibility of organising what is to be learned in the hands of the learners themselves, and ideally lends itself to a more diverse range of learning styles. Research shows greater learning when students are engaged in active learning. It is important to remember, however, that lecture does have its place and that you should not do active learning without content or objectives.

Taken together, all these findings point to the conclusion that an inordinate amount of class time should not be devoted to lecturing, especially on material which could readily be presented in print form and which students could process more effectively by reading it at their own pace. Given the aforementioned evidence that the lecture method is the predominant method of instruction in the elementary, secondary and tertiary classroom, the use of more student-centered instructional strategies endorsed in kinesthetic learning activities that promote active learning should fill a pedagogical void by exposing students to a distinctive method of instruction that encourages them to play a more active role in the learning process.

### **Participants**

The setting was a secondary institution located in the Malaysian state of Johor where English is taught as a subject in public schools and by the time the students enter secondary school, they have about at least 6 years of formal instruction of English.

The participants were 12 secondary school students, aged 13-17. They were exposed to KLA for a period of 2 months. These participants were “purposefully” selected due to their varying learning styles that were determined from the online Style Analysis Survey so as to prove that various learning styles do exist among students and also their abilities to voice out their thoughts in English proficiently since all of the questions posed to them were all in English.

### **Method**

In this research, qualitative method was the method utilised to acquire data. Patton (1990) explained that the first implication of this type of study is that what is

important to know is what people experience and how they interpret the world. The second implication is that the only way for us to really know what another person experiences is to experience it for ourselves. Thus, the participant observation is viewed as an important factor.

At the beginning of the study, the participants were briefed on the purpose of the study, some background information of kinesthetic learning activities and what was going to take place in the study. When the classroom observation ended, the participants were interviewed by the researchers based on the group interview questions that were assigned to them when they were called in. After the data was collected, the data that was recorded during the interview was immediately transcribed by the researchers. This was done to reduce loss of valuable insights obtained from the study. Transcriptions were checked twice and counter-checked against the earlier transcribed text.

## **Results and discussion**

The study sought to ascertain students' perceptions of kinesthetic learning activities conducted in an English classroom. One of the first perceptions of kinesthetic learning activities cited by the participants was the positive addition of physical movement in the traditionally passive secondary classroom environment. This revelation is valuable as Raffini (1996) argued that when students' minds and bodies were dynamically engaged in the construction of meaning and in the integration of ideas and skills, they became active participants in learning, rather than mere observers. The data from this study supported Raffini's research. The participants argued that movement during the learning process was crucial in holding their attention even if that movement was limited to activities such as board games or puzzles. It is evident that this was one of the greatest appeals of the kinesthetic learning activities to this group of students. They equated lack of movement such as that experienced during a lecture-based class with boredom. When these students were involved in constructing and implementing kinesthetic activities designed to cover material in the unit of study, they became excited about learning and were able to learn actively. While these participants attested that the visual appeal of activities such as vocabulary and task cards, the auditory appeal of conversing about the material in the learning stations were also beneficial to them. Additionally, the whole body movement when performing drama, song, and dance greatly appealed to them as well. This type of learning environment created what Brunner referred to as "wholeness" in the learning environment, which combined the iconic, enactive, and symbolic ways of knowing (Samples, 1992).

The study also investigated the types of kinesthetic learning activities that are beneficial to secondary students. It was found that the participants preferred kinesthetic learning activities that involved games such as “Jeopardy,” “Grammar Reversi,” “The Informant,” and activities that involved simulation such as flash cards or mind maps. This is not a surprise since games and simulations have become the learning resource in “providing solutions to a wide range of learning objectives” (Gee, 2003). This is because when students engage themselves in games, they tend to forget about their stress or other concerns. What is important for them is to win the game, get ahead or solve the puzzle. Simulations on the other hand, will attract their attention to the materials being taught. When they are responsible to create their own flash cards, their thoughts will be immersed in decorating and producing well-made cards and in organising the content of the cards. This again will take the students’ minds away from any emotional or psychological stress that they might have. The participants also noted that kinesthetic learning activities provided a stress free and conducive atmosphere to the classroom setting that was often missing in a secondary level whereby kinesthetic learning activities offers movement that would encourage social interaction. These participants also agreed that the social experiences which elementary school had provided appeared to vanish at a secondary level.

In addition, these participants perceived that the elements of social fun in kinesthetic activities promoted a positive active learning environment. The conversations they had about the materials they constructed and then implemented in the learning activities facilitated them to remember the materials better because they had fun while doing these learning materials. It was their belief that experiences of this nature will be translated into long-term memory. These experiences could be retrieved from memory at a later time and utilised in some other manner. It was interesting to note that there were so many levels of learning taking place through the activities in these English classes. Students had embraced learning grammar, appreciation of literature and others, and appeared not only to remember what they had learned but also to understand how to apply the concepts both kinesthetically and visually. When the participants were asked by the researcher whether they would like to have more of these kind of learning activities, they immediately answered “yes, definitely” in chorus. All of them seemed to be in favour of kinesthetic learning activities and claimed that they had gained self-confidence in learning, writing and speaking in English in a fun and relaxed environment as opposed to a passive classroom lesson. This fun-filled social learning environment provided them with a pleasant atmosphere which promoted active learning.

Last but not least, throughout the interviews, the participants exhibited clear-cut expectations of the role of a secondary teacher. They longed for the teacher to be catalyst, one who would set things in motion and then to be there to see that the



results were satisfactory. All of the participants contented that this type of teaching give them an opportunity to be creative. It was then the teacher's role to monitor, to evaluate, and ultimately to improve the activities. Secondly, the participants expected the teacher to be excited about teaching as a passive approach to teaching would do nothing but create passive students. Although these participants agreed that kinesthetic activities provided them with a fun and relaxing learning environment, they actually admitted that they cannot express their creativity fully on their own and needed the guidance that a teacher could provide to assist them in designing their learning materials. This echoed McCarthy (1987), who contended that when working with kinesthetic learning activities in the classroom, it is the teacher's role to provide the materials necessary for a "trying things out" environment. All the participants agreed that they needed the structure of a classroom setting and the prompting from the teacher who would provide the time, materials, and ideas in order to engage in kinesthetic activities.

## **Conclusion**

This study on the use of KLA incorporated in teaching English as a second language in order to promote active learning among secondary students showed that these kinesthetic learning activities reinforced materials in the lesson that they had learnt and allowed them to catch up on learning materials quickly after an absence. The participants argued that small groups worked best when all students were focused on the same kinesthetic learning activities. Nevertheless, all participants agreed that teachers should utilise a variety of approaches in the classroom in order to accommodate all types of learning styles. These participants were also motivated by the social interaction during kinesthetic learning activities which they claimed to initiate what they referred to as "long-term memory experiences," and the whole body movement encouraged creativity. The participants also recognised that one challenge in implementing kinesthetic learning activities would be poorly planned kinesthetic learning activities. Such learning activities would only lead to a chaotic environment. This would certainly be a waste; thus, defeating the whole purpose of serving multiple learning styles among the students. Hence, it is the teacher's responsibility to ensure that the teaching and learning process would be executed so as to achieve the intended objectives. Teachers being professionals encompass all aspects of teaching to learners. It means possessing knowledge and being able to transmit it to learners, and being able to create an environment in which learning takes place. If students are in favour of kinesthetic learning activities, then teachers should accommodate such interest. The rigidity of secondary classroom environment should be avoided as the participants associated their inability to stay focused in a lecture-based classroom due to the lack of movement which caused them a considerable amount of stress. This is in line with Dunn and Dunn (1993) who noted

that because so little of what happens instructionally in most secondary classes responds to the tactual kinesthetic senses; some students are in very real sense, "handicapped" and in turn may affect their academic achievement. In this instance, kinesthetic learning activities were noted to be beneficial since they presented an alternative to note-taking. Therefore, instructors would have to be up to date with the current learning strategies, theoretically and with developments in technology. As we know, for instance, theories and knowledge in language teaching and learning are constantly developing and being modified. Therefore, we need to keep abreast with these changes to provide a quality service to our students. All too often, secondary teachers encourage students to accept a passive role in the classroom by adhering to traditional teaching method. These methods at best appeal to auditory or visual learners. Both the researchers and the participants involved in this study argued that students' minds and bodies should be dynamically engaged in the learning process. It is time to re-examine the traditional method of teaching and to create learning environment which will accommodate all types of learners.

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