



Cross Disciplinary Active Learning Methodologies to Engage EFL Students

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Abstract

The continued demand and unique learning environment for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners is ever changing as educators focus on best practices to promote optimal learning for 21st century students and meet the demands of our globalized world. Central to the demand for revitalizing the classroom experience is to prepare students to enter the evolving workforce, particularly in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields. Expert EFL skills are often tantamount to achieving success in this endeavor and keeping up with the rapid pace of learning. Not only are EFL students expected to demonstrate observable and measurable English skills, but they also need to exhibit strengths critical to cross disciplinary fields as well as collaborative active learning methods. This manuscript includes examples of programs with instructional methods that focus on “tried and true” active learning environments, highlighting experiences from STEM disciplines, and emphasizing direct EFL preparation to ensure success and promote purposeful collaboration and engaged English learning. Teaching strategies and methodologies focusing on active, hands-on learning in the EFL classroom will be discussed. Challenging activities will be suggested that can be adjusted for a variety of abilities across age groups featuring key transferable English language competencies. Exploration of best practices that build a culture of innovation and prepare students for EFL content areas will be addressed.

Keywords: *Cross disciplinary, Methodologies, EFL Competencies*

1. Introduction

A curriculum focusing on cross disciplinary learning methodologies offers strategies integral to EFL learning with focused interactions among students and teachers. Diaz Frias points out that teaching a second language implies a series of detailed processes which are focused on a communicative approach [1]. Future focused EFL pedagogy and coursework reflecting cross disciplinary content and creatively engaged and involved students in an inclusive learning environment will be discussed along with accompanying methods to inspire confidence and build on students' strengths and prior knowledge. An identified need for a multilingual, multicultural, and information and communication technology-driven society is a shift from a monolingual to a multilingual paradigm [2]. The goal is to demonstrate positive outcomes in both content and communication in a vibrant EFL learning environment as students confront rigorous STEM expectations. These collaborative connections interwoven with hands on methodologies and active learning featuring evidence-based best practices and accomplishments will ensure optimum learning for EFL students as they set active goals integral to their success. The past three years have presented a multitude of challenges to EFL students and educators as they dealt with the multifaceted aspects associated with the Covid epidemic that slowed interpersonal, educational and international opportunities. Traditional models can no longer be counted to work for all students and it's necessary to put goals in perspective and explore myriad strategies to encourage EFL students to persist in their academic accomplishments. EFL students and educators are resilient in their passion for success and have risen to the situation and are now poised to confront the slowdown of opportunities and move forward toward their goals.

2. Key strategies and methodologies for teaching EFL



Teaching EFL encompasses learning grammar, vocabulary, listening, reading, and writing skills coupled with an emphasis on comprehension and understanding of English. This is a tremendous amount to balance sequentially based on the skills and abilities of the student. Students begin at different places with their language learning and their reasons for learning English have a tremendous impact on their success and language development. The experience and the abilities of the educator also strongly impact student success. For example, technical specifications of EFL learning strongly impact outcomes. Zilberman suggests three fundamental questions to pursue [3].

1. Should the best method be based on conscious learning and memorization or on subconscious training in English skills?
2. Should we learn grammar, vocabulary, listening, reading, and writing skills separately or should we subconsciously train all language skills concurrently?
3. Should we turn our teachers into coaches and trainers who will be able to introduce the new technology and add a human touch to using self-training applications in a class or at home or at work?

As we discuss and ponder these questions, it is possible to formulate a strategy to serve and engage EFL students in optimal learning activities and pique their interest in growing their English language abilities and STEM interdisciplinary learning. Numerous educators were trained in schools and colleges of education to embrace traditional English language teaching methodologies that follow textbooks and workbooks sequentially adding increasingly challenging levels and skills. Most language learning programs focus on concurrent learning of grammar, vocabulary, listening, reading, and writing skills while emphasizing some skills more strongly as students' abilities and achievements progress. Certainly, technology and the numerous applications available for language learning today have a tremendous impact on EFL learning across all levels, and students who are motivated to excel have myriad opportunities and websites available for teaching and learning English.

3. Pedagogy and curriculum reflecting cross disciplinary content

It is no surprise that educators who are teaching content area subjects other than English did not receive professional development or any type of English language teaching methods instruction. While engaged in content area courses such as science, mathematics, history, the arts, and numerous other subjects, EFL students are struggling to gain comprehensible input and an understanding of the subject being taught in English. Educators are also challenged and limited in their abilities to reach students who are not able to comprehend the subject matter of the course. It is critical to share best practices with these educators to encourage them to effectively develop, design and deliver cross disciplinary coursework in person or online that will support EFL core competency. Kilmeliene explores ways that English educators can incorporate Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) to adopt a systematic and organized way to incorporate cross-curricular content [4]. She emphasizes the value of making key language salient by pointing out vocabulary, structures, and chunks students will likely need to carry out tasks. Preparing a glossary before class or eliciting and building a language bank on the board is also helpful. Educators can assign a pre-lesson task focusing on specific linguistic features [4]. It is definitely a challenge for educators to have groups of students in their classes who are native English speakers and focused on course content, yet at the same time, trying to meet the needs of students who are grappling with English language learning and curricular content simultaneously. International students enrolled in universities in the United States or other English-speaking countries often face cultural and academic adjustments as they pursue their education and struggle with a foreign language and educational system that is unfamiliar to them. Oxner and Bandy address the anxiety that students encounter particularly during class discussion and group activities [5]. They emphasize transparency, clarification of expectations, and multiple forms of participation. During group activities, they suggest that you diversify work, organize study groups, and group projects to assist students and motivate them to excel [5]. As educators and university faculty determine the needs for EFL students to receive additional support for coursework in STEM and other content areas, programs can be developed to meet their specific needs. At many universities, these programs are already in existence and, not only EFL instruction is provided, but specialized tutoring in cross disciplinary coursework. For example, at Georgia Institute of Technology Language Institute, an intensive English program is offered that serves students from over 100 countries. This program is designed to meet individual student needs by honing academic English skills or strengthening



professional English skills [6]. At the University of Southern California in Los Angeles, California, courses are developed to meet the needs of each individual student's skill set and goals across all levels of English language proficiency with high-quality English instruction in small interactive classes focusing on reading, writing, listening, speaking and pronunciation. The program is complemented by conversation groups and language labs [7]. Dual language institutes are also beneficial for providing participants with research-based effective methods for teaching academic language at all levels as EFL students are enabled to navigate the path to university degrees in STEM and other fields.

4. Cross disciplinary collaborative connections and enhancing student engagement

Research shows that collaborative practices and learning communities benefit traditionally underrepresented students by encouraging engagement between learners of diverse backgrounds, leading to increased multicultural competence [8]. At Boise State University, located in Boise, Idaho, unique programs exist to successfully meet the needs of both English learners and educators of English learners. In the Intensive English Program for university students, eight-week sessions from beginning to advanced English language instruction are offered for EFL students [9]. In the College of Education at Boise State University, the Elementary Education TESOL/ENL degree prepares undergraduate candidates to teach English language learners (ELLs) in various contexts, including cross disciplinary, general education or ENL classrooms, and they work collaboratively with other teachers to support ELLs [9]. At the graduate level, a Graduate Certificate, in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), prepares educators to teach students who are non-native English speakers in schools where English is the language of instruction. Graduates will be better prepared to support all learners in their classrooms, enabling their students to succeed in all academic content areas. Students in this program learn to use TESOL frameworks to support their students' simultaneous English language and content knowledge acquisition. The Graduate Certificate in Bilingual Education prepares educators to teach all subjects in both Spanish and English, while simultaneously helping students develop as bilingual speakers. Varying levels of complexity coupled with collaborative connections and student engagement opportunities are highly beneficial to support EFL learning as well as to bolster comprehension and achievement in cross disciplinary fields. Elearning curriculum and instructional design features have the potential to support learning along with eSkills and literacy for learning. Virtual learning experiences essential for success can powerfully impact knowledge and comprehension and it is crucial to be innovative in the ways that courses are offered to EFL students. Critical thinking skills in cross disciplinary subjects are strengthened through interdisciplinary knowledge that will equip students to meet the English language demands of their academic courses. High-functioning and inclusive discussions will support student listening and speaking skills, as well as learning across the curriculum.

5. Conclusion

Meeting the unique demands of EFL learners in English and cross disciplinary fields, particularly STEM subject areas, is determined by numerous strategic factors, and whatever works best for each individual student is crucial for achieving identified goals. Some students benefit from total immersion situations and spontaneous learning, while others prefer a less rigorous instructional design based on multiple EFL language learning factors introduced sequentially. By highlighting numerous programs and opportunities with varied levels of complexity inside and outside of the classroom, EFL students will be able to pursue comprehensive academic initiatives to support their learning and success. Staying on top of important research in EFL learning and utilizing innovative strategies is essential to supporting positive outcomes for these students in our complex globalized world.

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