



## **Participation and Engagement in Language Learning. Implications for Teaching.**

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### ***Abstract***

When discussing learner participation in language learning the emphasis is in general on learner verbal activity which can be measured. However, research on online language learning highlights how learner participation can also emerge through non-activity and how it can be measured as non-verbal [1]. This paper will explore a number of additional notions that are used in the literature to discuss learner participation such as learner engagement [2] and willingness to communicate [3]. Examples will be provided from both face-to-face contexts and online learning. The paper will also examine learner participation from the point of view of teacher participation and will attempt to illustrate how conceptualizations around the teacher's role and teaching and learning may impact on what emerges as participation and play an important role in curriculum development and testing. The final part of the paper will take a look at how traditional and Anglocentric discussions of language learner participation in the literature may be providing a narrow take on participation and actually be limiting in terms of language learning and measuring performance. The paper will also present a reflective practice exercise for teachers who are interested in gaining insight into how their classroom practice may be impacting on student participation.

**Keywords:** *learner participation, engagement, willingness to communicate*

### **1. Participation**

Over the last 20 years, with the increasing endorsement of socio-cultural theories of learning within second and foreign language instruction and in web-based education, greater attention has been placed on *learner participation* as a key component of learning (Panichi, 2015). In the literature, participation is generally understood as some form of *linguistic activity* or *interaction* in the target language. According to van Lier (2004), foreign and second language learning are perceived as the learner's ability to engage with the environment in relation to its affordances. Along similar lines, Lantolf (2000) refers to participation as learner activity as it arises in relation to specific tasks of the learning context. Furthermore, by participating in the discursive practices of the target community the language learner develops as a speaker of the target language and progressively becomes a member of the community (Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000). Breen (2001) goes on to analyze learners' contributions to their own learning whereby participation can be equated with classroom talk and discourse in which interaction with teachers also becomes relevant. Finally, Norton (2001) discusses participation from the point of view of "non-participation". According to Norton, participation also requires some form of emotional connection with the target language. Learners may well be engaging with activities in the classroom in the sense that they are carrying out the prescribed tasks, but this is no guarantee nor indication of emotional engagement. The fact that students may not be able to perceive themselves as belonging in some form to the community of native speakers whose language they are investing in may lead to student drop-out, for example.

#### **1.2. Online participation**

While teacher-student interaction in face-to-face contexts is easy to observe either because the student is talking or using body language of some sort (i.e. nodding, smiling, making eye contact, turned towards the teacher or their peers, etc.), this is often not the case in online contexts where a number of factors can intervene to hide or distort student interaction and participation: connection, video and sound issues, technological problems and lack of adequate support, lack of familiarity with the medium by the student and the teacher, to name just a few. If we take a look at online educational settings such as virtual worlds, for example, the idea of participation takes on additional connotations. If students and teacher are represented by an avatar, participation is no longer about body language and eye gaze or video "on" or video "off" but may be determined by avatar movement and activity in the virtual space. In addition to this, in his discussion of online participation contributions in writing in



an organizational and management learning context, Hrastinski (2008) lists in addition to “doing” and “communicating” issues such as the learner’s sense of belonging, feelings, and their relationships with others. He also shows that online participation also reflects what is going on “offline” thus suggesting that, when discussing participation, learner activity in an educational setting needs to be seen in a continuum and not limited to only one mode or setting.

### **1.2. Learner engagement**

Another conceptualization worth mentioning as it has implications for understanding participation is that of learner engagement. Learner engagement is discussed in the literature as a dynamic, multidimensional construct comprising situated notions of cognition, affect and behaviors – including social interactions – in which action is a requisite component. (Hiver, 2021). Again, as in the discussion above on participation, the notion of engagement would seem to imply activity in a meaningful context.

### **1.3. Willingness to participate**

Willingness to participate (WTC) is understood as the extent to which a learner is prepared to take part in the interaction required for participation and is connected with cultural, political, social, identity, motivational, emotional, pedagogical and other issues learners face in their educational settings (MacIntyre, 2020). As such, unlike the notion of engagement which overlaps with that of active participation in the literature cited above, WTC can be seen as a state or trait that has an impact on participation yet precedes the act of participation itself.

### **1.4. Teacher participation**

If the learning context is to be understood as one where social interaction takes place, it makes sense to take a look at the teacher’s role in our discussion. In their study, Young and Miller (2004) develop an understanding of participation as co-participation involving not only the learner but also the teacher. They show how participation patterns of both the learner and teacher change over time and how student increased proficiency in the target language leads to shifts in the participation of the teacher. In this sense, they view learning as involving changing participation

## **2. A critical view of participation**

In *The politics of participation in international English Education* by Holliday (1997) the author discusses participation from the point of view of culture and power. By introducing the concept of “discourse of participation” he challenges our understanding of participation by looking at the way we refer to student behaviour in our professional language-teaching discourse and settings. For example, Holliday suggests that the BANA (British, Australasian, North American) language teaching and learning methodology is biased in the sense that it is based on Western dominant conceptualisations of participation as “active” participation which may not be relevant or appropriate in other contexts.

## **3. Implications and conclusions**

As teachers, advisers, designers of materials and syllabi and examiners we are called upon to observe, interpret, measure and comment on learners’ *performance* in the target language in multiple contexts and via different media. In our professional roles, it is often the case that learner participation understood as some sort of activity carried out or performed by the student in the target language is seen positively and, conversely, limited participation may be viewed negatively. In this sense, a link is created between performance and activity which has implications in terms of our evaluation of learners. Sometimes our observations and interactions with students are one-off occasions; often our professional activities span over a full term or year. However, whatever the amount of exposure to learner performance (speaking, writing, online, offline, blended, etc.) a deeper and broader understanding of participation may enable more accurate observations and interventions. The following is a non-comprehensive list of questions to encourage teacher reflection based on the issues around participation presented in this paper:

- Does the learner perform better under certain circumstances compared to others?
- What might be causing this difference in performance?
- To what extent and at what level are the activities learners are engaged in actually meaningful to them?
- Is assessment of students based on a narrow or broad understanding of participation?
- What do I mean by participation in my specific context?
- Are their cultural issues surrounding participation in my specific context?
- Are the teaching materials in use in my context suitable for different cultural understandings of participation?
- Does the social context of the classroom favour greater participation by some students over others?



- Do I have information about student activity which I cannot observe directly but which may be relevant to their participation and learning?
- How do we read and react to what may seem to be non-participatory behaviour?
- What might my bias or that of my institution be in relation to our conceptualization of participation and the value we attribute to it?
- Do we share an understanding of participation with our learners?
- Do we share an understanding of participation with the communities we serve and our stakeholders or is it simply assumed?

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