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# Increasing participation and managing group work

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## Our teaching contexts

My name is Mandeep Choudhary and I teach in a government school. I teach a large class of students from very poor backgrounds where not even a single word of English is spoken at home.

My name is Merium Aftab. I teach young children at elementary level in a private school in Pakistan. The students come from a range of backgrounds.



## The problems we face

We teach in very different contexts and work within different educational systems. Even so, there are some problems which we both face. Many of our students are reluctant to participate in speaking activities, in some cases, to even speak at all and this becomes even more apparent during group work. The particular problem I, Mandeep, face is that my learners are so passive and will not respond to even the most simple questions. They produce very little or no work and often misbehave. I, Merium, face a slightly different problem since my learners are quite active and responsive when they do individual reading and writing work. However, when it comes to group work, there are some students who do not participate, become disruptive and disturb the others. This makes it very difficult to maintain discipline and evaluate individual contributions.

## What we did

### **We formulated questions**

Having shared and discussed our problems, we agreed that it would be helpful to focus on some specific issues, and seek answers to the following questions:

- How can we encourage students to participate in class discussions when they are not at all interested?
- How can we at least get them to speak?
- How can we get students interested in group work?
- How can we ensure that everyone in the group participates?
- How can we evaluate each member of the group?
- How can we control the noise level while students are working in groups?

### **We discussed our problems and consulted colleagues**

After discussing our situations together, we consulted teachers with similar problems and also more experienced teachers. Some suggestions, although useful, we had already tried but without success. However, eventually two or three colleagues were able to suggest some interesting ideas that we could focus on. From these we drew up a list of possible strategies which we could go back to our classrooms and try.

## **What we learned**

### **Motivation**

As teachers we can motivate learners to participate using a range of strategies and appeal to different learning preferences. Many students are keen on movies so we can show movie clips in class once a week, pausing to ask simple questions at key moments. During the holidays we could ask them to write about a movie they've seen. Instead of insisting on communicating in English face to face, especially with those learners who will not speak at all, we could go for virtual speaking on the phone or communicating via the internet. We can also make a conscious effort to be more positive and give positive feedback by writing comments such as 'good job' or 'well done' in their notebooks. We can even give merit cards for participation and performance.

### **Maintaining discipline**

We need to establish some rules and we can do this by negotiating them with the students and agreeing on some interesting consequences for those who break them. We can explain that every game has certain rules so that is what we are going to do. We will set some rules and penalties together for not participating in the group work. We could also appoint group leaders to monitor and maintain discipline within their groups and control the noise level, although we also need to monitor efficiently to make sure all groups are on task and be available to assist where necessary.

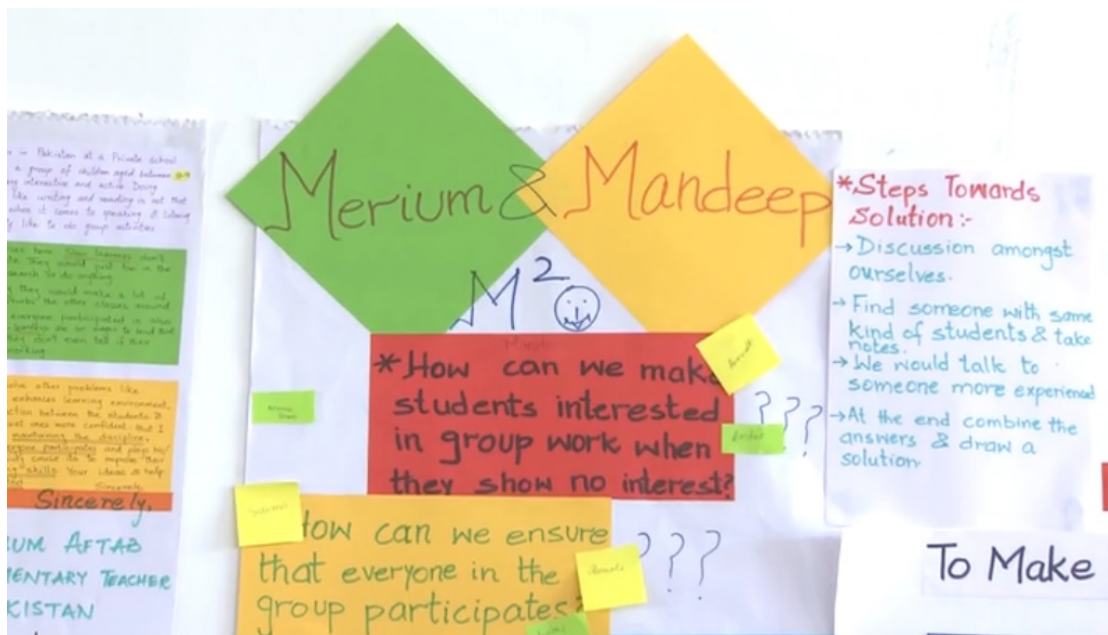
### **Ensuring individual participation**

We need to monitor groups carefully to ensure each member is contributing. It could help to group students according to proficiency levels, or in mixed-level groups give the lower-level students a specific role e.g. group leader. We can allocate clear tasks to different group members according to their interests and abilities. That way they each have a clear part to play in achieving the group task. Group work can also be assessed and rewarded. For

example, those who participate and collaborate well could be given group leader or class helper duties.

## Evaluation

While monitoring participation during group work we need to make notes about each student's contribution to achieving the goal. For this we can make an observation chart to grade each student's performance e.g. vocabulary, fluency, ideas or knowledge, depending on the type of task. This will help in identifying learners who are either having difficulties or not engaged in the topic, so that we can introduce tasks which are more suited to their interests, level or needs.



## What we tried

### Mandeep

These are some of the strategies I applied and that worked well.

I developed and maintained informal relationships with my senior students and that provided me with an opportunity to get to know them and bring them more on track, at least for answering questions in class. I even connected with some students via WhatsApp and consulted them about what they would like to do in the lessons. Gradually they became more open to me and communications improved.

I consulted the most passive learners on a classroom contract. This made them feel special and they started opening up to me and conversing with me both inside and outside the classroom.

Regarding group activities, I decided to let them choose their own groups and then when they had started to enjoy the activities I slowly introduced different groupings and it worked wonderfully.

As I got to know them better I found there were some artists among them. To raise their interest and involve them more, I brought them to the front to draw pictures related to the lesson on the blackboard. The whole class was engaged and encouraged to participate in general discussion.

### **Merium**

At the start of the new session I was full of motivation and new ideas. I started by negotiating a set of rules with my students for classroom activities. This gave them a sense of ownership and they tend to follow some, if not all of them during the activities. I also made gold, silver and bronze medals to award to the groups which maintain discipline and participate the most fully. Maintaining discipline has become much easier with the rules and the medals. Students who were previously not interested in working started participating for the medals.

For group work activities, after dividing students into mixed-level groups, I now make the least proficient students the group leaders. This gives them some confidence plus motivation and as a result participation levels have increased as has the desire to learn. I also found that because these learners were lacking in confidence, they were more helpful and less dominant as leaders.

To evaluate each member of the group I move around the class monitoring each student twice with a gap of around ten minutes. One other thing I do to evaluate them is to ask each member of the group to reflect on one thing they have learnt. This helps me to know if the students have actually picked up what I wanted them to learn.

## **Reflections**

### **Mandeep**

The most important thing that I have learnt is that sharing problems with other people can bring solutions. I can now talk to my friends or fellow teachers more openly about my problems or successes.

### **Merium**

'Sharing is caring' is what I believe in now, since discussing my problem with others enriched my knowledge and I also found solutions. Small issues faced during teaching on a daily basis can be resolved by working with colleagues, as they understand the students and the system. I have also learnt that encouragement is effective in helping learning take place.

## **Reflection questions**

Q1: How did Mandeep and Merium go about finding possible solutions to their problems? What problems do you face in your teaching context? Could you discuss these with your

colleagues? Maybe they face similar difficulties and you can work together to find solutions. Or maybe they can suggest some tips which you can try out.

Q2: How do you maintain a positive attitude when faced with passive, unresponsive or unmotivated students? What changes can you make to build your learners' confidence and increase their motivation? Could you try any of the techniques above? Which would you like to try?

Q3: What do you think about communicating with your students by internet or mobile phone? Have you ever tried using a class wiki or blog? Why?/Why not?