

## FOSTERING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT THROUGHOUT THE ENGLISH LESSON IN JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL

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**Abstract.** Student engagement has been a household term these past few months, and it has also been associated with active learning. Studies have shown that when students are engaged, they will learn better, behave better, and retain the lesson longer. Literature on this field states three kinds of engagement: behavioural, emotional, and cognitive. This paper aims to describe how teachers encourage and maintain student engagement in their classes and thus attempt to ensure better learning. In particular, student engagement is connected with character building which should be inculcated through indirect teaching. Data are collected through informal interviews with teachers of English in Junior High Schools in and around Malang and several other cities. Data are focused on the strengthening and maintaining the behavioural and emotional engagements which are most closely related to the attitude aspects as delineated in Core Competence 2 in the 2013 Curriculum. Data from interviews are sorted out then described according to the kinds of actions the teachers take to ensure and maintain student engagement. Results are classified according to the answers, which show different ways the teachers do.

**Keywords:** student engagement, character building, core competence, the 2013 curriculum.

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### INTRODUCTION

As many teachers have known, the 2013 Curriculum of the Republic of Indonesia consists of the so-called Core Competences, i.e. the competences that students from all levels of education should master at the end of their education level. These core competences are divided into three types: attitude, knowledge, and skills. Moreover, the attitude competences are further divided into Spiritual competences (Core Competence 1) and Social Competences (Core Competence 2). In the Decree of the Ministry of Education and Culture Number 024, year 2016, it is stated that spiritual competences encompass the attitudes of “accepting and applying the values of his/her religion”; while the social competences cover the display of “the attitudes of honesty, discipline, responsibility, politeness, care, and self-confidence in the interaction with family members, friends, and teachers”. These two competences are aimed at building students’ noble characters.

In the same decree (Ministerial Decree Number 024 year 2016) it is also stated that the first and second Core competences should not be directly taught to students by subject matter teachers, except by teachers of Religion and Civics. Other subject matter

teachers should develop students' attitude and characters through "indirect teaching". These teachers, furthermore, should still have scores of the students' attitudes and characters, as by the end of the semester they have to submit the scores to the homeroom teachers to be written in the students' report card.

However, not much has been said about how the indirect teaching can be conducted, and how, without the students realizing it, they are "developing" their characters in the lesson activities.

On another side, I believe that students learn everything, including good values, best when they enjoy the class activities. When students are actively participating in the class activities, we can say that they are engaged, and when students are engaged, then lessons can be easily "implanted" in them. The question, then, is, what is student engagement? Fredricks et. Al. (2004) state that student engagement is the condition when students are actively participating in school and class activities, when they pay attention to the lessons, and enjoy the activities. They also categorize student engagement into three types: behavioural, emotional, and cognitive.

According to some literature reviewed in Fredricks et al's. paper (2004), behavioural engagement is "participation including involvement in academic, social, or extracurricular activities", while emotional engagement includes "positive and negative reactions to teachers, classmates, academics, or school, and is presumed to create ties to the institution and influence willingness to do the work" (Connell, 1990; Finn, 1989). The last type, cognitive engagement, refers to the idea of investment; "it includes being thoughtful, willing to exert the necessary effort for comprehension of complex ideas and mastery of difficult skills" (Corno & Mandinach, 1983; Newmann, Wehlage, & Lamborn, 1992).

Bedell (2013) asserts that, engaged students are happy, interested, curious and excited students, and it is closely related to positive learning outcomes. In another note, she says that student engagement is influenced by some factors; they are fun situations, autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Those four factors play important roles in developing the three types of engagement, and they are interrelated.

How, then, can teachers ensure that students are engaged in their classes? Bedell (2013) further states that there are ways that teachers can do that. She states that teachers should actively make efforts to relate with their students, and to encourage collaboration in the form of, among others, group work. In addition, teachers should also, as often as possible, challenge students with tasks that require problem solving and applying critical

thinking skills to their reading materials; and finally to use the technology that they use, such as wiki, twitter, etc.

However, to return to the issue of the Core Competences in the Indonesian 2013 Curriculum, there has yet to be studies that aim to describe the ways that teachers can engage students while indirectly building their noble characters. In light of that gap, this study is aimed at finding out and describing the ways teachers of English inculcate the good characters in their students through indirect teaching.

## **METHOD**

The data for this study were collected through informal interviews and online chats with teachers of English in several cities (Malang, Yogyakarta, Jakarta, Kupang, and Lampung). They are experienced teachers whose schools have implemented the 2013 Curriculum for at least 1 year. I asked them how they built their students' character through indirect teaching so that by the end of the semester they have scores to submit to the homeroom teachers. Their answers were noted then classified into two categories: general and specific ways.

The writer then analysed the answers to get some kind of pattern for the English teachers' ways of engaging students in developing their good attitudes and characters.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

From the informal interviews and online chats that I had with the subjects, I found the following ways:

### **1. General ways.**

By general ways, I mean that the teachers do not specifically refer to their lesson (English) in building the students' character. Their ways are as follows:

- a. Every day, before the English class begins, the teacher asks the students to look into the drawers of their desks and on the floor around their seats; when they find rubbish they should pick them up and throw them into the rubbish bin;
- b. At the start of the first and second periods, the teacher asks the students to sing the National anthem and pray;
- c. During tests, students should arrange their seats so they do not sit too close to each other;
- d. The teacher gives rewards to students who never come late in a month;
- e. In group discussions, the teacher notes students' team work, participation and contribution to the discussion.

## 2. Specific ways

In specific ways, the teachers relate the attitude and character building with their English lesson. Some of their ways are as follows:

- a. At the beginning of the English lesson (at any period), the teacher asks one of the students to lead the prayer in English (the teacher has taught them the prayer words beforehand). In every meeting a different student should be the leader, so every student will get the chance to lead prayers in English.
- b. When the lesson is on Greeting cards, for instance, the teacher asks the students whose birthdays are in that month. Then she/he will ask the other students, "*what do you say on your friend's birthday?*"; "*Are you happy for them?*"; "*what can you give to your friend?*" When students answer in Indonesian, then the teacher guides them to use the English expressions.
- c. Students who get good scores in English tests should be peer-tutors for their classmates who have not mastered the lesson.
- d. When the lesson is on "*labels*", the teacher hides several labels around the school yard before the class starts, then assigns the students to go on "Treasure Hunt" in groups to get as many labels as they can, in a limited time.
- e. On the lesson of describing places, for instance, the teacher teaches the expressions of admiration for nature, such as "*What a beautiful garden our school has*", or "*What a fantastic waterfall it is*".
- f. In schools which are non-religion based, students should greet the English teachers and each other with "*Good morning/afternoon*", instead of "*Assalamualaikum*".

When we look at the general ways teachers do to cultivate students' good attitude and noble characters, we can actually modify them to relate the activities to English lesson. For the first example, when the teacher asks students to find rubbish and throw it to the rubbish bin, the teacher can speak in English and insert sentences such as, "*Students, let's keep our classroom clean, shall we? Look around you, in the drawers and on the floor...if you find rubbish, please throw it into the rubbish bin over there*". Students can also be trained to respond in English, with sentences such "*Look, Miss...I found a candy wrap*", or "*Alright, Miss*", and other simple responses. This, indirectly, teaches them cleanliness.

The other activities can also be done in English, when the teacher inserts the values in the instructions. In asking students to sing the national anthem, for instance, the teacher can say, "*Students, you love your country, Indonesia, don't you? OK, to show*

*your love for Indonesia, let us sing our National anthem together.*” The attitude/character in this activity is “*nationalism*”.

In the activity where students have to arrange their seats for tests, we can conclude that the characters the teacher wants to build in the students are discipline and honesty. In that case, the teacher can have the following interaction with the students:

*T : Students, you know we are going to have a test today, don't you?*  
*Ss : Yes, Sir, we do*  
*T : OK, then, how should you do the test? May you see your friend's work?*  
*Ss : No, Sir*  
*T : Fine, so, in that case, how should you sit?*  
*Ss : Far away, Sir*  
*T : Good, so, now please arrange your seats so you don't sit too close to your friend.*

In this instance, the teacher prompts the students to come up with the idea of doing the test honestly, by sitting in every other chair, or, in their own words, “far away” from each other.

Giving rewards for students who are never absent from class in one month can very easily be done by giving congratulation cards, or tokens, written in English. Those cards can read “*Good Job! You have never been absent this month!*”, or by giving them stars or smiley face stickers which read “*100% class attendance*”. These rewards mean a lot to students, and at the same time instilling the value of diligence and discipline.

The last activity in the general category is usually done without the students knowing it; however, the teacher can still praise the students who show self-confidence or good teamwork in their presentations.

In the specific category, it is clear how the teacher's activities can instil good attitude and characters in the students. In the first example, it is clear that the targeted attitudes are spiritual competence and self-confidence. The second activity is clearly an attempt to cultivate caring attitude in the students by remembering their classmates' birthdays and congratulating them. This can also be applied on other occasions, such as congratulating a friend who wins a competition, wishing luck for New Year, etc.

The activity of peer-tutoring among classmates aims to instil the attitude of respect and caring for each other. The students who get good scores should not feel too proud and higher than their classmates, while those who get less than the passing grade should not feel inferior. To create a comfortable atmosphere, the teacher can let the “weaker” students choose their tutor. It should be noted that the superior and inferior students may be different for each test/topic; in that way students can be made to realize

that someone may excel in one topic and others in other topics; therefore they should not be ashamed when they get low scores.

Competitions are one effective way to cultivate the characters of teamwork, competitiveness, and respect for others. In hunting for the hidden labels, students work with their group to find the labels, then to discuss the contents of the labels with their group members, and finally to present their findings to the class.

In describing places around the neighbourhood, students can be taught the exclamation sentences using “*What a ...*” and “*How ...*”, such as “*What a beautiful garden it is*”, and “*How colourful our class is*”. These exclamations indirectly teach the students to respect and love their surroundings.

The last activity described by my respondent is aimed at building respect and tolerance toward other religions/beliefs. Students should be aware that there are six religions which are acknowledged in the Republic of Indonesia; therefore they should respect people of different religions.

All in all, teachers can do various activities to cultivate good attitude and noble characters in the students through indirect teaching as delineated in the 2013 Curriculum of Indonesia. To be successful, the activities should really engage students; and to ensure student engagement, the following requirements should be met (Schlechty centre, no year):

1. The student sees the activity as personally meaningful.
2. The student's level of interest is sufficiently high that he persists in the face of difficulty.
3. The student finds the task sufficiently challenging that she believes she will accomplish something of worth by doing it.
4. The student's emphasis is on optimum performance and on “getting it right.”

Furthermore, the article states that students who are engaged:

1. Learn at high levels and have a profound grasp of what they learn
2. Retain what they learn
3. Can transfer what they learn to new contexts

Based on the above points, we can actually imagine that the activities described above can fulfil the requirements stated in the article.

However, the activities are not the only things that should be taken into consideration. Another important consideration is how teachers communicate with students, how they relate with the students, and how students react to them. Rita Rodabaugh (in Fleming, 2003) provided useful examples of how instructors can communicate respect for students: give them ample time to ask questions, allow

challenges to the professor's views, and encourage open debate. Moreover, Gorham (in Fleming, 2003) found that humour, praising student performance, and engaging in conversations outside class were particularly important in contributing to learning as were self-disclosure, encouraging student talk, and asking questions about students' viewpoints or feelings.

## RECOMMENDATION

From the descriptions and discussion I presented on student engagement and how the good characters as stated in the 2013 Curriculum of Indonesia can be inculcated in the students through indirect teaching, some conclusions can be made. First, since good characters should be taught indirectly, teachers (in this case teachers of English) should create activities that will cultivate the characters without the students realizing it. Classes should be made fun and challenging; in that way, students will be interested and will participate in the activities whole-heartedly. This whole-hearted participation is what we call engagement.

Second, the indirect teaching of good characters and attitude are done in general ways by some teachers, and in specific ways by others. However, when scrutinized closely, even the general ways can actually be made specific by referring to them using English phrases and sentences. In this way, students will learn not only the English sentences for some daily activities, but also will absorb the characters subconsciously.

Finally, it is to be hoped that teachers can cultivate noble characters in students by building rapport and interacting with them warmly. As Fleming (2003) states, "The content of a lesson are more likely to be understood if the teacher interacted with students in a way that encouraged involvement, commitment, and interest."

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