ENHANCING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT THROUGH MEANINGFUL 'FORWARD-WASH'

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ABSTRACT

This research involved assessing, negotiating with, and supporting two small classes at two different Thai universities as to what they would need to be able to do with English after graduating with an undergraduate degree and looking for an internship or their first job. Based on examining their expectations and applying a negotiated needs assessment or 'forward-wash,' student engagement was supported during the course. With an overwhelming amount of online advice and support available, a myriad of career interests, and a never-ending combination and permutation of specific job opportunities and their application requirements, students were purposely led through a chaotic and constantly changing scenario. With the relatively small class sizes 14 and 16, differentiated support and direction were provided to individuals or smaller groups based on their English skills, personal background, and career expectations. This case study found that when students knew exactly what they needed to be able to do and were provided with the tools to achieve this based on their varying abilities, the two courses could be defined as having been successful. In addition, it was determined that while students were often confused or frustrated as to what was being undertaken, on completion of the course, most could see the benefit of having experienced this in a safe and non-threatening environment. Finally, despite a reluctance to practice repeatedly, students came to appreciate that knowing how to monitor and control their speaking speed enables them to control one manifestation of nervousness: speaking quickly.
Keywords: Student Engagement, Affinity-seeking Measures, Differentiated Learning, Student Frustration

INTRODUCTION

It should be incumbent on educators to constantly assess and evaluate students based on parameters that may exist within an institution to allow them to move forward in their studies or based on improvement in skills needed for a particular standardized test, for example, IELTS, TOEIC, or TOEFL. However, in contrast to the effect wash-back or back-wash may have in enhancing student commitment to learning, an often-overlooked feature that can lead to enhanced engagement can be best succinctly described as forward-wash.

Forward-wash can be defined as how specific future student-related English needs impact course design, with the desired result being to establish and maintain student engagement. However, unlike back-wash, which looks at and is often influenced by particular standardized test requirements with a limited and known range of needs, forward-wash involves carefully analyzing future needs students may have in a particular post-course environment, along with the myriad of combinations and permutations in terms of different needs have and working to meet these needs while considering their current English ability with differentiated expectations as to what can be accomplished in a given time.

This forward look requires understanding what students hope to do with their English once they leave class and then negotiating about what they can expect to do when they need to perform selected tasks in the future, based on what they can do at present and what can be augmented during the course ahead.

LITERATURE REVIEWS

While a great deal has been published and researched concerning back-wash, defined by Alderson and Wall (1993) as the observed teaching designed to help students with a particular test-related skill or ability to answer test-related questions, with early articles and research more concerned with negative washback, later authors have suggested that there might also be a positive side to back-wash (Turner & Purpura, 2015).

It is with this in mind that if positive back-wash (Hughes, 1989) can be employed to enhance student engagement, then careful analysis of future non-test English requirements could also have a positive forward-wash effect on student engagement defined as how students approach a particular learning task in terms of their motivation to accomplish what is asked of them, their acceptance of their needs, their current and likely future English ability at the time they will need to perform (Sittisuwan, 2019) all combined to encourage them to participate in and be successful in the learning process (Lowe, & El Hakim, 2020).

In the planned course, while all four engagement-related strands mentioned in Zepke & Leach (2010) were in place, the main emphasis was focused on the two aspects considered to be more flexible based on the particular educator and their efforts to encourage intrinsic student motivation to take on and work towards what they felt they would need in the future when job hunting and to emphasis and monitor personal efforts with transactional engagement as they students increasingly came for advice, help, and direction. While other Thai-based studies, for example, Carrera (2024) included other agents in their studies related to Thai university students entering the job market, that is, human resource managers and experts as well as university staff members, these two factors were not included in the preparation or presentation of these two courses.

With a class with mixed language abilities, varying career goals, and significantly different backgrounds in terms factors often dealt with in applying for a first, post-graduate employment opportunity, engagement was further enhanced by allowing students the freedom to make their own decision, a key factor mentioned by Vaughn, (2020) as to what they would want to include, how to present it, based on characteristics typical in the target industry, and most importantly, to continue to deal with the seemingly never-ending steps and needs involved when preparing a resume, cover letters, and answers in anticipation of what might be asked during an interview.

With a diverse class and resulting needs, and to avoid risking losing motivation with being asked to do something they could not see the need (Kickert et al., 2022), class activities were carefully explained as to why they were of use, how the activity was aimed at this need, and the way in which to practice and acquire a skill, for example, working with various ways to provide time to think of an answer, while avoiding a long silence. With an acceptance that even the most mundane task, for example, chorus pronunciation exercises at a greatly reduced speaking speed, ensured motivation was constant.

With the term 'forward wash' constantly in mind and the underlying idea that as the job-hunting process could prove daunting in terms of combinations and permutations of various content, tasks, and steps involved, student-teacher interactions were constantly self-monitored by the instructor to highlight positive achievements and at all costs refrain from overtly pointing out mistakes and omissions in an additional effort to build engagement through positive interactions. This was felt to be particularly important as a central aspect of the course design and implementation was to lead students into and through the myriad of job-search advice, articles, and recommendations so that, despite frustration and dismay felt by many, at course end, having struggled through this daunting task, students agreed they were now prepared to expand their job search efforts to multiple job offerings and their, often varying application needs.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In two classes planned to help graduating students with the English needed to complete job applications, correspond with potential employers, and to prepare for interviews, students were presented with the goal of preparing a resume based on their experience, along with covering, follow-up, and thank you email messages needed in their ongoing search for an internship or employment opportunities. Based on earlier success (Cornwall, 2015) in creating controlled havoc in the class, and due to the chaotic nature associated with job hunting and changing needs and expectations, students were provided with the constant need to revise based on adapting resumes and cover messages on a constant basis. In addition, and a core factor in creating controlled havoc, students were provided with far too much material for a short course. They had to learn to assess and quickly accept or reject materials based on their personal background, situation, and desired industry and entry-level employment opportunities.

In addition, based on previous success in researching and applying affinity-seeking measures in a Thai and international class (Cornwall, 2015a; Cornwall, 2023), every effort was made to maintain and, most importantly, support students as they dealt with the frustration that came with the many changes they were required to make during the course and the need to weed through vast amounts of irrelevant material in their search for applicable ideas and recommendations (Cornwall, 2015).

In addition, and to encourage the need to practice and be prepared for interviews constantly, students were provided with extensive practice in speaking slowly and clearly and learning how to deal with answering questions, including thinking noises and other techniques to provide time to think before speaking. With extensive time provided for pair work in class, with guided questions, for example, "Where do you expect to be in five years?" and the need to provide a minimum of three reasons why, three important goals were met. First, to provide students with a safe environment to practice answering this and other difficult questions during which they would be questioned and supported in developing a clear, albeit not memorized, answer. Second, it provided students with the opportunity to practice the various thinking and listening gambits needed in an interview, repeating the question asked, either in full or in part. Finally, it provided students with alternative ideas to set questions that they could incorporate in their future replies or could lead to insights into how they could reply to these questions.

At the end of each course, employing two open-ended questions: 'finding ways to make the course material relevant to my life' and 'applying course material to my life', included in The Student Course Engagement Questionnaire (SCEQ) (Handelsman et al., 2005) students in two classes at two universities in Thailand were questioned as to the extent forward-wash on which the course had been structured has encouraged them to be engaged in the material and to what extent.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The high participation rate, reflected in the volume of assignments (resumes, cover, follow-up, and thank-you messages), on average two per week, during the 15-week course, handed in during the course, the final exam in which all students' pronunciation and speed control were within the very strict parameters given and finally with all students completing the course, it was clear most students were pleased with the course. However, a few were dismayed by the somewhat chaotic nature of the course, "*I did not like the constant changes*", or "*There* (sic) *too many things to remember and do. I felt it was a grammar class in junior high school,*" and the frustration they felt at the ever-changing assignment requirements, "*I did not like that I do* (sic) *the same cover message every week. Why little things needed to be changed. Now, I have many different homeworks* (sic) *I can use later.* Finally, while during the early part of the course, students were not happy with there being so much reading to deal with, by course end, most were pleased with, to varying degrees, weed through online content to find what they needed, "*In first class* (sic)*, so much to read. I tried. I was not happy teacher said most was not useful. I used much time for nothing. Now, I know what is good and what is not good. This helps me much* (sic)"

With regards to the written portion, comments included satisfaction with now having the ability to write a short, concise, and professional cover, follow-up, and thank-you email with a level of accuracy they will be able to maintain when needed in their future job or internship search, "*I wrote so many different ideas for so many different jobs. Now I have something I can use.*" Most students saw the need to have various application cover messages ready and the ability to make minimal changes based on the position for which they were applying, "*During the course, I did not like writing the same message every week. But now, I have many ready to use, which is good for me.*" "*Now I have model messages I wrote and can understand and change if I want to.*"

Comments related to preparing their resume ranged from an appreciation of what they needed to include, their ability to describe their strengths in a work-related manner and to deal with stated weaknesses. "*I really liked not hiding that I am an introvert. Now I know what to say when asked about what work I want.*" However, some students did feel that they were responsible for too much of the resume design and content, "*the teacher should pick the resume format next time. There are too many to choose from.*" Finally, many expressed that while there did not seem to be much preparation by the lecturer, they did appreciate that they now had the skills to complete the application process based on a particular job, "*I was not used to the teacher giving us things we did not need. I spent too much time on things I did not need.*"

The interview preparation part of the course drew the most positive responses, with the constantly repeated choral and individual exercises aimed at reducing their speaking speed: "*I like speaking slower. My friends all say my English is so much better, but all I do is speak slower.*" Another frequent comment was their ability to self-monitor their speed, "*when I am speaking, I still go fast sometimes. But now I can slow down.*" "*At first, 60 words a minute seemed so slow. Now, it sounds good to me.*"

Students had positive comments about the course. However, many expressed that the constant revisions in their written work and the constant slow speaking practice were sometimes boring, "*every time we did another speaking practice, I was bored.*" However, many expressed ideas

similar to one student who reported that now the class was over, *"I did not like the practice two, three times every class, but now I know I needed it."*

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION
While students were engaged in the course, reflected in their success in continually completing assignments, on-time attendance, and participation, the repetitive practice needed to speak at self-selected speeds and to revise homework repeatedly required more effort to support motivation.

However, as fossilized pronunciation patterns related to speaking speed need to be rectified, repetition is needed. In addition, the need to continually revise CVs, not only in terms of content and design but also regarded by some as repetitive, reflects the need to be careful when producing this document.

As the course required students to prepare for a real-life situation they would be experiencing shortly, it was easy for both the teacher and the student to agree on what was needed. The only concern was that most students were not prepared for the repetitive nature of this preparation. The chaos that ensued when both too much background material was provided and changing requirements led to the need to do repetitive edits in resumes and the various message types needed. However, as one student suggested, *"Now I am confident. I know what to do and am not so scared."* Another also reported, *"I know I need to redo everything more. I do not like it. But I need it."*

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