

# **A Participation Points System to Help Passive Students Communicate**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This article will briefly examine the causes behind student passivity, and will present the Participation Points System (hereafter PPS) as a means of helping students gain the confidence they need to communicate in the classroom. After explaining what the PPS is, and how I came to use it, the results of a recent survey on the students' perceptions of the PPS is discussed. Finally, a number of comments are made on the strengths, as well as the weaknesses of the PPS.

## **DE-MOTIVATION AND PASSIVITY**

Passivity is a direct result of de-motivation, for the simple reason that de-motivated students tend to avoid situations that will draw attention to themselves, such as speaking English in the classroom.

Many factors impact negatively on student motivation and cause passivity, such as their home background, their personal lives and personalities. A noteworthy cause of student de-motivation, and the passivity following it, can be found in their previous experience with the Confucian-based high school educational system, where much is hierarchical and standardized. With regard to learning English, much of their time has been spent preparing for the university entrance examinations as the principal goal. Their studies were not for the most part aimed at acquiring speaking and listening skills, but on grammar and reading skills. Once they enter university, passing their entrance examination no longer remains a goal and de-motivation quickly sets in.

Therefore it is not surprising that one of the biggest challenges teachers face is student passivity. Novice-level university students are fairly skilled with basic grammatical structures and reading, but are only capable of the simplest utterances, and have a poor listening ability. The communicative approach however emphasizes meaning above structure, fluency above accuracy, and meaningful social interaction above grammatical accuracy (Gray 1990). Students therefore have to make quite an adjustment when they are faced with the communicative approach, and most Japanese students experience a communicative classroom for the first time when they enter a university. For many, this can be a terrifying experience.

English conversation is seen as a set of grammar rules that somehow has to be extended with equal accuracy into conversation.

As a result, the Visiting Faculty Members of the Center for English Language Education (hereafter CELE) of Asia University constantly seek ways to motivate students to participate in the classroom, especially in communicative activities. Finding ways to motivate students to participate is especially important. This is because motivation concerns a student's orientation with regard to the purpose of learning English. Still, many teachers focus almost exclusively on trying to raise students' sense of intrinsic contentment with games, songs and puzzles that do have positive effects but are usually short-lived. The motivation ends suddenly when communicative tasks are begun. This is because participation, especially communicative participation, will be successful only when participation can be made motivational. In many instances the passivity simply remains, because the motivation needed to overcome passivity does not exist.

The reason why it does not exist is that learning grammar and reading, with considerably less emphasis on conversational skills for six years leads to a fearful aversion to English that is deeply ingrained by the time they enter Freshman English (hereafter FE) university classes at Asia University. By this time students have lost their self-confidence and become afraid to make mistakes. The fear of making mistakes leads to anxiety, especially when experiencing the communicative approach for the first time.

The following is a simple procedure that I have used to help students to overcome their fear of speaking English and to benefit more from the communicative approach.

### **THE PARTICIPATION POINTS SYSTEM**

According to Fisher (1990) there are essentially three levels of motivation: intrinsic satisfaction (the student's natural interest), extrinsic motivation (the future reward such as enhanced employment prospects) and the combination of satisfaction and reward (success in the task). It is the latter, in combining satisfaction and reward, where true motivation is born. Without task-based satisfaction there would be no foundation upon which to build intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. The notion is that if students do a task well, they will be praised. This is motivational, and the best form of praise is rewarding them immediately with participation points, and making the participation points an important part of the grading process. In order for the praise to be effective it also needs to be as tangible, and the more tangible it is the more students will become motivated.

I initially tried unsuccessfully to find a practical way of implementing a tangible means of motivating participation through giving the students an immediate sense of competence. Some things had a slight impact but nothing really worked well by way of sustaining motivation until I read the following by Hadley (1997, 1):

What I have done is to turn my participation points into a form of classroom hard currency, which the students cash in at the end of each class for participation points. This year I use poker chips (before I used cardboard coupons). It really does not matter what one chooses to represent the actual participation points.

Hadley is the inventor of the PPS, and I was working with him at the time at the Communicative English Program at the Niigata University of International and Information Studies in Japan. He encouraged me to try the PPS in my classes.

After implementing the PPS the difference was very obvious. I noticed hands going up and communicative activities became lively. I distributed points to the students who, in contradiction to what I had imagined, actually looked happy to have them. I continued to use them for three years with good results at the Communicative English Program at the Niigata University of International and Information Studies.

When I came to CELE in April 2003, I decide to not use the PPS and see if participation could happen naturally. I thought that students from Tokyo would be more naturally communicative, and not need the PPS. This was not the case however. Perhaps the reason is that I have novice-level freshman students for whom English is a compulsory subject.

After noticing how passive my students remained after the first few weeks I decided to use the PPS again. At this juncture it is important to note that the other students of Asia University taking the voluntary communication courses were sufficiently motivated not to need the PPS, but the FE students, whose courses are compulsory, needed it, as they were extremely passive and unfocussed.

Again, the result was especially noticeable, with students becoming much more enthusiastic to participate in all activities. It was also pleasing to notice that many more students were smiling and seemed to be enjoying themselves with the PPS than without.

## **APPLYING THE PPS**

The PPS is therefore a method of motivating classroom participation, especially communicative participation, by giving students something tangible (such as discs, marbles,

poker chips etc.) while activities are underway to represent their participation scores. Anything can be used.

In my classes, a glass disc is worth one point while a marble is worth three points. I use gold discs for those who participate outstandingly, which count for six points. Students are always encouraged and rewarded for going the extra mile. I give the discs, worth one point each, to students for fulfilling what could be considered “standard” for participation, in line of what is expected of them at their level such as speaking English, answering questions (one-word or short answers), and asking me if they do not understand. However, if they speak more “in depth” and volunteer to answer more difficult questions and elaborate in any way, they receive marbles worth three points each.

Practically, I apply the PPS in the following way. My way, based on my teaching philosophy, can be used in a multitude of other ways. My personal preference is to start with grammar-based accuracy tasks for homework and move quickly to fluency-based conversation activities, with listening activities in between.

As the students enter the classroom they each receive one point for being on time, which emphasizes the importance of punctuality. I have found that punctuality improves when students are rewarded in this way for being on time. Before, there were always a number of late students drifting into the class after the lesson had started which was disruptive.

When homework is checked students open their books at the assigned task (usually a consciousness-raising grammar exercise). I walk through the class, and check that each student has done the homework, and those that have done it receive one point.

While homework answers are solicited, students who volunteer answers are awarded more points. It is important to emphasize that, even if their answers are wrong, they still receive points, usually one per answer, or more if they elaborate.

Homework checking only takes about five to ten minutes. After that the students form groups of four, for the listening activities. The students close their books and listen to the CD narration. If it is a fairly difficult narration I write the questions on the blackboard so that they know what to listen for. After playing the track twice, or more, I ask questions, solicit answers, and award points.

After that we start the communicative activities. By this time, the students are well acquainted with the topic – they have done some grammar structures and have listened to related issues. Now they are ready to talk about it. These communicative activities, based on

the homework and listening activities, take up about one third of class time. This is because of the communicative philosophy behind FE.

It is in the communicative activities where the students do all the talking. I set the activity, and then walk around the classroom as a facilitator encouraging them and handing out participation points. It is in the communicative activities that most points are awarded.

Just before the end of class, I have the students count their participation points, which is their hard currency reward for participating, and then “cash them in”. I then collect the discs and marbles.

### **STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF THE PPS**

It would be a mistake to presume that the PPS is successful without taking into consideration how the students feel about it. From a teacher’s point of view, the students respond well to it, but it is difficult to know if students really identify with it.

I administered a survey to all my FE students (Business 20, Law 20 and Economics 14) on October 23, 2003 and received 47 responses. The questionnaires were handed out and briefly explained to the students who were encouraged to ask questions about anything they did not understand.

After that they were given 15 minutes to complete the questionnaires, which included the open-ended question: “Please write anything you want to about the Participation Points System”.

All students appeared to have no trouble in completing the questionnaire in the required time, and almost all wrote comments for the open-ended question. The results of the survey are shown in the table.

Survey Results (n = 47 with Business 20 = 15, Law 20 = 14 and Economics = 18)

Questions	“YES” Percentage by Class		Total “Yes” Percentage
	Class	Percentage	
Participation Points is a good idea	Business 20	100 %	100 %
	Law 20	100 %	
	Economics 14	100 %	
Participation Points are not stressful	Business 20	67 %	68 %
	Law 20	64 %	
	Economics 14	72 %	
Participation points are fun, like a game	Business 20	100 %	91 %
	Law 20	79 %	
	Economics 14	94 %	
Participation points make me speak English more in the classroom	Business 20	93 %	81 %
	Law 20	79 %	
	Economics 14	72 %	
Participation points make me try harder in all classroom activities	Business 20	87 %	80 %
	Law 20	71 %	
	Economics 14	83 %	
Participation points make me more interested in English	Business 20	73 %	79 %
	Law 20	86 %	
	Economics 14	78 %	
Participation points make me a better speaker of English	Business 20	73 %	71 %
	Law 20	79 %	
	Economics 14	61 %	

It should be noted that the students were unanimous in their agreement that the PPS was a good idea. This strongly suggests that the PPS makes studying English meaningful and thereby motivational for them. Also, 91% found the PPS to be fun, followed by other sizable

proportions who felt the PPS had helped them use more English in the classroom, try harder, and had made them more interested in English.

At the lower end of the scale, but still well within the majority, there was agreement that the PPS had made them better speakers of English (71%) and there was also general agreement that the PPS was not stressful. These results showed that the PPS was thought to be a good idea by all the students, and is well liked and seen as beneficial by the majority of students.

It is interesting to note that, despite the positive perception of the PPS, 32% of the students did find the PPS to be stressful. These students may be susceptible to the competitive element of the PPS. It is important that teachers using the PPS be aware of this, and make sure that all students have enough points so as not to feel embarrassed at the end of the class when they call back their points. Perhaps I was somewhat negligent of this at times. A way of avoiding this would be to have the students record them privately, but I have always felt that if the students know that they will call out their scores at the end of class it would persuade them to make more of an effort, which is not necessarily a bad thing.

All but two students wrote something for the open question. There were no negative comments. Their answers can be classified into broad categories as follows:

- I like the PPS (most said this)
- The PPS makes me try harder
- The PPS is interesting
- The PPS is like a game
- The PPS improves my English skills
- The PPS makes me happy
- The PPS is no problem

### **COMMENTS ON THE PPS**

It is clear from the survey results that the students like the PPS, and feel it helps them in many ways. As their teacher, it is a very effective in getting them to participate, especially communicatively, and it does indeed seem to make them more interested in English as the survey results show.

It seems the main reason why the PPS works is because it combines motivation and participation by giving positive and instantaneous feedback to students. It is a very straightforward, even simple approach, but its real strength lies in its tangibility, with which

the students can identify. They raise their hands to answer questions, and they reach out to receive the discs and marbles. They thank me with a bow of the head when they receive them, and look at them with a sense of achievement. It makes what could often be called boring classroom activities more of a game, and the students take these points really seriously. They also engage less in avoidance strategies, such as sitting at the back of the class and trying not to be noticed. Some even come to check that I have recorded their scores correctly in my classroom file after the lesson. That never happened before I used the PPS.

These are the same students who, without the PPS would, by their passive nature, rarely solicit feedback on their performance on the own. Even if I were to elaborate verbally on their performances (without the PPS) it is doubtful if they would comprehend it fully or be convinced of the sincerity. However, the points “speak for themselves”, and students know they are performing well without even telling them so. Through the PPS students realize that talking freely and making comprehensible communication is more important, and more meaningful, than worrying about making mistakes. They put in more effort, and they generally get better at what they are doing, which in turn sustains their motivation.

This subsequently gives them the confidence to venture into the unknown realm of taking risks and being less fearful of failure. This serves towards replacing their low self-esteem, inherited from their earlier school experiences with a newfound self-confidence. Students no longer see themselves as failures. Their self-confidence increases their realization that they do have an ability to speak English, which in turn increases their self-confidence in a positive and self-sustaining way. Rather than saying, “I cannot speak English because I’m Japanese” they say, “I’m Japanese and I can speak English, look at my score!”

Despite the effectiveness of the PPS, it does take a lot of physical exertion to maneuver around the classroom distributing discs and marbles, especially if there are three 45-minute classes in succession. This is a big drawback, unless one is a health fanatic. I am lucky to have fairly small numbers of students in my classes. I often have them place their bags and umbrellas well out of the way as this makes it fairly easy to walk around unhindered. Before this, I was always tripping against the odd bag or umbrella, which can be embarrassing and even dangerous.

Also, walking around the class consistently can detract somewhat from focusing on specifics and teaching higher quality lessons. On the positive side it does place the teacher in the role of facilitator, making students feel more in control, which encourages them towards taking an active role. In this way it helps teachers “show” rather than “tell”, and let the



students do the talking. This is important for communicative classes, where there is always a tendency for teachers to talk too much.

While it makes them raise their hands, it is also sometimes difficult to see which hand goes up first. When that happens I award a point to each student (even if some students may have not raised their hands) as this significantly increases morale and gets the passive students to participate.

It could also be tempting to use the PPS in a disciplinary way by taking away points once they have been given (for example if a student returns to passivity once having accumulated a certain number of points, or disrupts the class). This can be effective, given that even undisciplined students generally take the PPS seriously, and given that they know that they will have to call back their points at the end of class. However, it is not advised to take points away, and if it must be done it should be done sparingly, as it can impact negatively not only on the student in question, but on the class as a whole.

The PPS should rather be used to persuade undisciplined students to participate and encourage weaker students by rewarding them for what they can do rather than penalizing them for what they cannot do. This is another reason why it is counterproductive to take points away too often from students. It is very important to note that, even if the student gets the answer wrong, the student will still be rewarded discs and marbles, and under no circumstances will points not be given for wrong answers. Points are essentially given to reward participation, and make students understand that it is no shame to make mistakes.

Another criticism of the PPS made by many observers is that it looks bizarre giving young adults discs and marbles, and is thus behaviorist in nature. In fact, my parents gave me little things when I was only three years old to encourage me to finish my vegetables. Is the basis of this process not strikingly similar, and is it not condescending and even behaviorist to do the same kind of thing to young adults learning English? I would have been upset if my teachers had used the same tactics when I entered university and learned Afrikaans, a second-language in South Africa. After all, these young adults need to learn to speak English in a world that does not use disc and marbles in ordinary conversation. The answer to this question is not an easy one. The PPS does work, and the survey shows that the students like it and feel they benefit from it too. I have never had a student tell me, or infer, that the PPS was patronizing. On the contrary, they say they want even more points next time.

It would probably be best to use the PPS only with students doing the compulsory FE courses, and also only with the lower-level and exceptionally passive students where motivation is low. This is because it helps students make the transition between their

generally unpleasant grammar-drilling orientated experiences of English at high school and the communicative approach of FE. Once they have overcome their passivity the PPS can be removed, perhaps after they have had a year of experience with the communicative approach. At this time they can go “solo” as they would have a better idea of what to do and what is expected of them.

The benefits of using the PPS seem to outweigh the disadvantages. In the final analysis, if students are merely told that they are doing well, even those who understand will soon forget. However the PPS is a tangible and immediate form of feedback, which is very motivational for students. I suggest using the PPS in your classrooms, as I am sure that this simple yet effectual approach will be of benefit.

## References

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