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Stories from the Feedback Frontier: Reflective Tales Unpacking the Elusive Link between Articulated Response and Deep Engagement

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Personal Vignette

I began my appointment as a senior lecturer in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) at a Malaysian public university, buoyed by a decade of primary school teaching experience. In my former classroom, pupils' readiness to raise hands, volunteer answers, or laugh during language games functioned as a dependable barometer of engagement. Consequently, when my undergraduates appeared silent, and heads bowed over iPads while I lectured, I defaulted to the assumption that they were passive. My remedies were familiar, such as rapid-fire questions, pop quizzes, and collaborative presentations designed to require them to speak.

Weeks later, graded assignments unsettled that assumption. Students who had offered scant verbal feedback produced meticulously referenced essays. They demonstrated a nuanced understanding of the lectures. They surpassed peers who had been vocally participative. Quiet students also requested one-on-one consultations and submitted reflective logs rich with self-regulated strategies. These "hidden contributors" contradicted my inherited belief that verbal immediacy equals engagement.

Problematizing Visible Engagement

My early misjudgment echoes a wider pedagogical conflation of observable participation with deep involvement. Behavioral indicators, namely eye contact, hand-raising, or on-task talk, are only one strand of a triadic construct that also comprises cognitive and emotional dimensions (Fredricks et al., 2004). Overreliance on surface cues risks marginalizing culturally reticent students, especially East Asian students socialized into a Confucian ethos of attentive silence (Takayama & Lee, 2024). In Malaysian higher education, Chinese international students often calibrate their interactions to preserve face and respect hierarchy. They render public questioning less likely (Haensel et al., 2022). For example, they do not answer any questions asked by me as the lecturer. They keep silent, and their gestures do not indicate any answers. My narrative thus exposes a blind spot. Equating “active feedback” with engagement may reproduce cultural bias and misforms of effort.

Interrogating the Feedback–Engagement Nexus

Empirical studies confirm that students’ feedback behaviors do not consistently predict learning gains. For instance, Dewaele et al. (2025) found that the frequency of classroom questions explained less than 20% of the variance in language achievement scores once preparatory effort was controlled. For example, this happened when their time spent studying, completing tasks, and engaging in advanced reading was taken into account. My anecdote resonates with the findings. Verbal feedback was a partial and culture-dependent element for engagement with this group.

Moreover, engagement itself is dynamic and multidimensional. Borup et al. (2020) foreground the notion of “invisible engagement” in blended contexts. Students demonstrate dedication through digital annotation, asynchronous forums, and reflective

journaling. In such environments, silence can signify concentrated cognitive processing rather than disengagement. My quiet students' stellar essays and proactive consultations exemplify this phenomenon.

Methods and Reflexive Realignment of Practice

Confronted with evidence refuting my assumptions, which included believing that verbal participation reliably signals engagement, silence indicates passivity, and observable behaviors are universal proxies for learning, I adopted three interrelated adjustments. First, I diversified engagement indicators by triangulating classroom observation with artifact analysis (drafts, revision histories) and short metacognitive surveys. Second, I reframed questioning techniques to legitimize non-verbal response modes, such as polling apps, collaborative Padlet walls, and color-coded cue cards, lowering the affective threshold for contribution. Third, I embedded culturally responsive pedagogy by explicitly acknowledging the value of reflective silence during debriefings. Thereby, I validated students who process internally before articulating ideas.

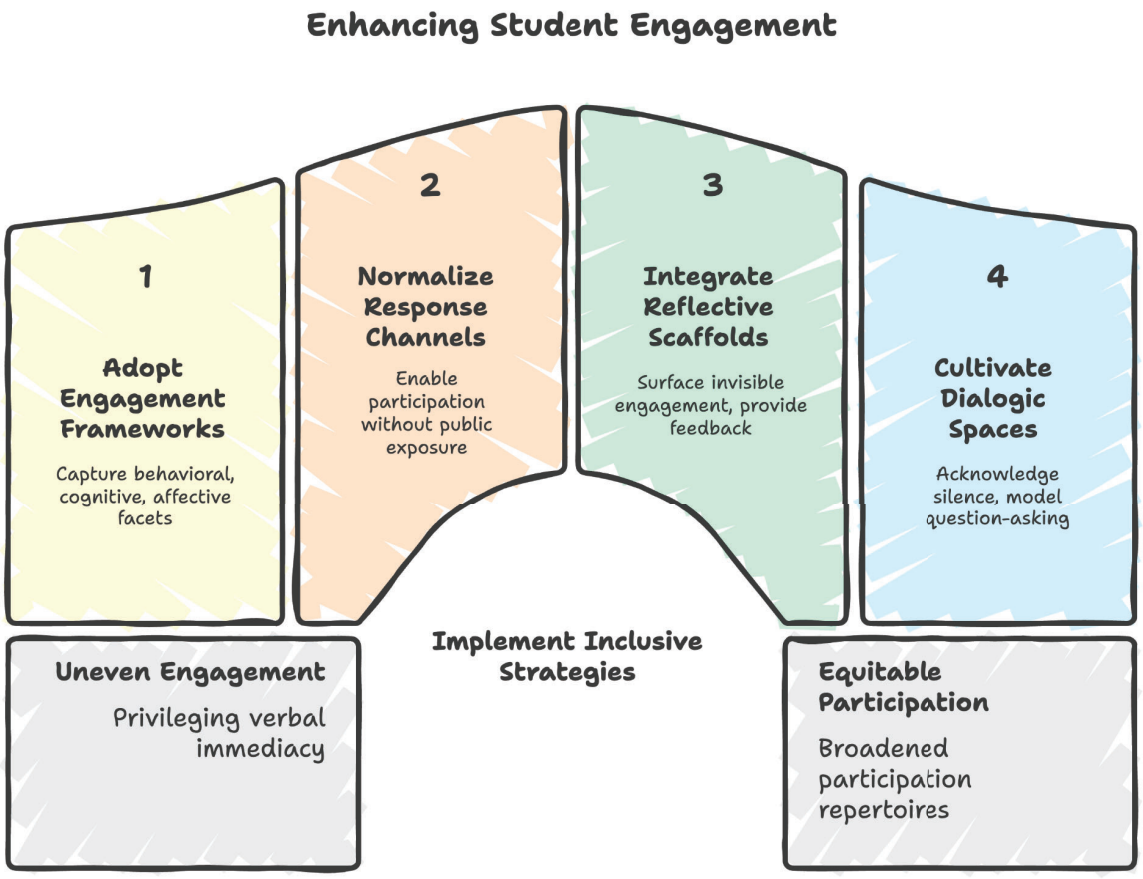
The shift yielded unexpected dividends. Class participation rose. The Chinese students had slightly more verbal responses, eye contact, and body gestures when I asked questions. Yet assignment quality improved substantially across the cohort. Interviews with five students (20 years old; 2 boys and 3 girls; moderate English proficiency) revealed that these Chinese students perceived the new modalities as "face-saving avenues" for expression. It is a finding consistent with social-presence theory. It posits that multimodal feedback can enhance perceived relational warmth (Richardson et al., 2017). My own reflective journal records a parallel transformation. I now read quietness less as absence, more as potential latency.

Research-Informed Recommendations

Drawing from my experience, I propose four practice-oriented suggestions (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Practice-Oriented Suggestions



Educators can potentially enhance inclusivity by first adopting multidimensional engagement frameworks that assess behavioral, cognitive, and affective facets, such as the Online Student Engagement Scale (Dixson, 2015). It is a multidimensional instrument designed to measure how actively and meaningfully students participate in online or blended learning environments. It was created in response to evidence that traditional

behavioral indicators, such as speaking in class or making eye contact, do not adequately capture engagement in technology-mediated contexts. It might avoid an over-reliance on verbal immediacy (Reeve et al., 2025). Second, normalizing low-risk response channels, including technology-mediated backchannels like Mentimeter, Kahoot, or semi-anonymous forums, affords culturally reserved students' opportunities to contribute without the threat of public scrutiny and thus promotes equity (Licorish et al., 2018). Third, integrating reflective scaffolds, such as short exit tickets, digital learning journals, or similar metacognitive prompts, can surface otherwise "invisible" forms of engagement while providing diagnostic feedback on students' depth of understanding (Tanner, 2012). Fourth, cultivating culturally sustaining dialogic spaces requires explicit recognition of silence as a legitimate discourse practice within collectivist traditions and deliberate modeling of question-asking norms to expand participatory repertoires (Alexander, 2020). Implementing these interlocking strategies ultimately demands institutional support for targeted professional-development workshops that sensitize faculty to the cultural variability embedded within feedback practices and engagement indicators.

Concluding Reflection

My journey from misinterpretation to recalibrated pedagogy shows an enduring pedagogical lesson. What is audible is not always emblematic of what is meaningful. Active student feedback may arrive in whispers, text annotations, or well-written essays discernible only to those who look beyond the decibel. By embracing multidimensional engagement metrics and culturally responsive practices, educators can potentially better honor diverse learner dispositions and foster genuinely inclusive classrooms.

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