How to Actively Engage Our Students in the Language Classes

Edited by

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Series in Education

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Foreword

This volume was inspired by a presentation I gave at a conference a few years ago.

I presented a paper on how to engage our generation of students and how to make learning and precisely make learning a language more relevant to them.

In a world that moves at a speed that only a few years ago seemed impossible to achieve, our students are used to having the universe at their fingertips and breathing technology. As educators in the twenty-first century, we need to understand its impact on society and especially on our student's learning experience and find a way to make it work to our, and most importantly, their — our students'— advantage.

Personally, I have been experimenting with several active learning strategies to promote a student-centered learning environment where learners get the chance to engage with the professor, the course material, and their peers on a deeper level. They get to share what they learn and have an opportunity to confront their understanding with peers and practice 'freely' (with no pressure) what they have learned via different media. However, I was eager to know what other colleagues around the world had been doing on the matter. That is why I decided to send out a call for articles on engaging students in the classroom (both in-person and online). The response I got was overwhelming, and I carefully selected the more innovative and thought-provoking articles.

This edited volume presents some inspiring research in second language acquisition, focusing on active learning, cooperative and collaborative approach, and other innovative strategies to engage the students and promote learning. I sincerely hope you enjoy reading it as much as I did, and I hope you can find some valuable advice and inspiration in it.

Carmela B. Scala

Editor

Incorporating *Last Week Tonight* into an ESL/EFL Active Learning Classroom

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Abstract: When teaching a writing course, it can be daunting to include active learning - one of the main things the students should be doing is writing, which is inherently not very social. However, in many Composition classes, one of the primary skills being acquired is argumentation, and this can be very social indeed. This chapter presents an approach for using episodes of the HBO show *Last Week Tonight* as a frame for modeling argumentation, followed by a simulation roleplay that requires active debate and discussion for the students. Although I present this as mainly a writing lesson, it can easily incorporate all the traditional four skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening. Further, while the lesson described focuses the classroom discussion around the topic of lotteries, the chapter is intended as a template that could be applied to many other topics investigated by the show.

Keywords: Active learning, argumentative writing, ESL, role-playing, simulations.

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Intended Audience

This is a lesson template intended for adult learners and would work best in a Writing/Composition course or four-skills ESL course. I have used these lessons at Indiana State University in our ESL 103A and B courses, which are intended to prepare for college-level Introductory Composition. As such, the students have tested into the university with sufficient English to take college courses, but have been found to need enough writing support that they don't go straight into native-speaking writing courses. 103A (and B especially) are modeled after Composition and feature similar assignments, such as Compare and Contrast and Argumentative essays. Thus, the lessons here focus on analyzing argumentation and rhetorical appeals and are intended for advanced

learners of English. Neither the topics nor the register of language is appropriate for children, although they might be fitting for high schoolers.

Active Learning and Simulations

Felder and Brent define *active learning* as "anything course-related that all students in a class session are called upon to do other than simply watching, listening and taking notes" (Felder and Brent 2009, 2). With that in mind, this chapter aims to incorporate active learning methods into an ESL writing curriculum, with a focus on simulations. There is strong scholarly evidence that active learning classroom practices are beneficial to students – to the point that a meta-study of 225 papers on active learning had this to say:

> If the experiments analyzed here had been conducted as randomized controlled trials of medical interventions, they may have been stopped for benefit—meaning that enrolling patients in the control condition might be discontinued because the treatment being tested was clearly more beneficial. (Freeman et al. 2014, 8413).

Freeman et al. point to improved scores on tests as specific benefits of an active learning classroom, and Allsop, Young, Nelson, Piatt, and Knapp point to additional benefits in their own work to assess the benefits of active learning, commenting:

> The results of this study support previous research demonstrating that increases in student engagement, participation and learning are firmly established benefits of active learning. The findings also identified four additional active learning classroom benefits: communication and interactivity, community and connectedness, satisfaction, and flexibility. (Allsop et al. 2020, 423).

There are many ways to employ active learning strategies, from games to debates to simulations, but they must be consciously be made part of the pedagogy. How, then, can ESL instructors create this environment, and what might a set of lessons look like?

This chapter uses an example simulation from the text *English Composition Simulations* by Gene Halleck (Halleck 2013), and so I'll spend some time discussing the book as well as some of its premises which relate to simulations in general. Simulations are unscripted role-plays in which the participants act out a scenario, usually with some sort of intended goal or outcome at the conclusion. Many examples of this style of activity can be seen in popular culture, such as party games like murder mysteries, *Werewolf* or *Mafia,* or the

recently-trendy *Among Us* video game. In the latter examples, the players are asked to work as a group to determine who among them is a double-agent or 'Imposter,' who is working to undermine the team.

While I'm a great fan of using these games in a teaching setting, a key element of them is that the players have almost no actual information to work with, because there are very few mechanics to definitively learn another player's role. They must base nearly everything on intuition and reading mannerisms. While this can make for great fun and speculation, the players have little concrete evidence to form arguments with. Many of the simulations in *English Composition Simulations,* however (such as the one discussed here), require prior research on the students' part in order to carry out effectively. This can make them more suited to a Composition classroom, as the students will need to plan their own arguments, as well as be ready for possible counter-arguments from other teams.

Although this chapter's simulation is similar in style to a debate, it is important to notice the role-playing component of it. Beyond just arguing a pro or con position, the students are encouraged to take on named roles (in this case, a family deciding how to spend lottery winnings). There are a few reasons for this – one, providing a backstory and character dynamics can make for a more engaging activity with more rigorous (and fun) debate. But in addition, it allows some mental space and distance between the students and their roles. Students that may be more reluctant to speak in class are sometimes willing to be more vocal and direct if they are playing a role rather than being themselves. A crucial element of the role-play, however, is the distraction from language provided by playing the game. Discussions during the simulation can be animated, intense, and most importantly, spontaneous. While the students will have had time to prepare and research their positions, the actual argumentation and discussion will be unscripted, and they will need quick responses. Wanting to win and to perform their role becomes the primary goal, and they will not have time to carefully plan and conjugate every sentence. A simulation such as this thus provides an excellent balance for skills in the classroom – some initial scaffolding and planning time to learn vocabulary and form arguments, a time to actively debate and speak off the cuff, and a debriefing time afterward to reflect. Halleck emphasizes the importance of this last piece, commenting:

> Each simulation in this book includes recommendations for debriefing. We consider debriefing to be an integral part of each simulation and hope that when you introduce a simulation in class that you remember to allocate time for participants to debrief at the end. (Halleck 2013, vi)

Last Week Tonight

As background, the news satire series *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver* (Carvell et al. 2014-2022) has been airing on HBO since 2014, and as of this writing, has been renewed for three more seasons, to continue at least through 2023. The show airs as a 30-minute episode hosted by John Oliver on Sunday nights at 11pm, and most often consists of some shorter segments that frame a single-topic monologue by Oliver. Its format has been compared to Comedy Central's *The Daily Show,* on which Oliver was a correspondent, but it is notably different with its longer deep-dives on issues rather than being a series of short segments. The topics vary weekly and have included discussion of lotteries, tobacco, and government goings-on. Some topics have recurred, such as multiple episodes addressing Net Neutrality, and corruption within the FIFA sports organization.

Oliver's main discussion generally lasts around twenty minutes, and these clips are uploaded weekly by HBO to YouTube, allowing them to be used as a no-cost classroom resource. His examinations of a topic are always argumentative, using a mix of comedy and news to make and substantiate his points. As such, I have found his clips to be of great value for a college-aged audience – his topics are relevant and current, and the use of humor keeps them from being dry or boring to the students. At the same time, a 15-20-minute runtime for clips works well for a classroom discussion – the clip can be shown at the beginning of a class with ample time available afterwards for activities and follow-up or assigned as homework without a student needing to block off hours for screening.

The organization of the clips is also well-suited to teaching argumentative writing – Oliver typically has a central argument that he reinforces with two or three central premises. For example, in his "Tobacco" segment (Oliver 2015), he argues that tobacco companies are unethical bullies, and supports this by focusing on three central issues – their desire to market to children, their dubious litigation attempts to overturn plain-packaging laws, and their threats to bankrupt small countries that impose any sorts of limitations on smoking. During a classroom discussion, all of these can be analyzed in further detail. For a rhetoric-minded course, an instructor could draw attention to Oliver's ethos appeals (a company shouldn't be able to overturn the laws of a sovereign nation), while also noting the effect of his use humor, at one point trotting out 'Jeff the Diseased Lung' as a proposed new mascot for Marlboro.

In this chapter, I'll focus on adapting one episode in particular – *The Lottery,* (Oliver 2014a) to an active classroom discussion, but I want to emphasize that I see a central value of the program as being the diversity of its topics – its

episodes could easily be adapted to any number of lessons. The format of the show itself can also generate strong discussion, such as examining the situated ethos of Oliver himself as a non-expert speaking with authority, or what the structure of the show reveals about its intended audiences (for example, the fact that it airs on a pay-cable channel implies a more well-to-do viewership, and its late airing time (and liberal swearing) suggests a show not intended for children).

<div align="center">**Main Lesson**</div>

This lesson combines an Oliver clip (*The Lottery* – [Oliver 2014a]) with a simulation from Halleck – in this case the *Lottery: Money Changes Everything* simulation by Galena Shleykina (Shleykina 2013). Both relate to lotteries, and I'll walk through the main points and takeaways of the activities, and also include ways to add additional exercises and expand upon them if so desired. For addressing the Oliver clip, I suggest roughly an hour to view and discuss it, and for the Halleck simulation I recommend at least an hour or more for students to prepare for it, an hour for the simulation itself, and some time afterward to debrief.

<div align="center">**The Lottery**</div>

This clip is 14:35 minutes, and Oliver begins the clip by describing it as "the second-best use of markers on ping-pong balls after Kermit the Frog's eyes." He then starts his discussion by introducing a major Mega Millions winner, but with the advice that if the viewer themselves hasn't won, they'll have plenty of other chances to play. Showing a map that depicts the 44 states of the US that hold lotteries, he emphasizes that state-run lotteries are extremely prevalent in the United States, and also have a long history. This is part of why I've used this particular clip for this assignment, as learners in nearly all of the US will be getting exposure to American lotteries.

From here, he addresses lotteries as major money-makers for states, who thus obviously have a huge incentive to run them, as they bring in $68 billion annually. He comments that the idea of state-run gambling businesses is a bit odd but has been propped up by treating the gambling more as charity. The money is justified by three main points, and attacking them forms the basis for the rest of the clip:

1) They're essentially harmless fun for those who lose

2) Lotteries provide big benefits to those who win

3) The money raised by them goes to good causes within their states, often education funding

At 2:55 he makes the points explicit, saying "So let's take a look at those slogans – 'Everybody wins,' 'The lottery does good things,' and 'It's game-changing, life-changing fun. Is it, does it, and do they?" For an instructor, this is a nicely visible way to lay out both his main thesis ('lotteries are harmful'), while also presenting three clear threads of argument to reinforce the argument. Notice that such a layout also fits nicely with teaching five-paragraph essays or other shorter writing/presenting work, in which the student will likely have space to address two or three central points. Breaking down the clip with the students in the class essentially models outlining for them.

To address the first point, Oliver points to studies of who spends on the lottery and observes that players are primarily those with low incomes, and do not have much money to spend. He points to ads that depict aspirational spending for winners like paying for their children's college or whimsical things like taking a penguin hang-gliding so it can fly. However, he shows clips that discuss how incredibly unlikely winning the lottery is, and then the discussion darkens further as he presents data showing that state-run gambling such as video poker machines are extremely addictive, with players losing on average over $2,500 a year. He plays a news interview with a woman who spent their family's available grocery money on video poker coming home with no money and no groceries. If you are using a more rhetoric-focused discussion in the classroom, it's worth noting that these points reinforce Oliver's position with several appeals – using Logos to show data of significant financial loss, using Pathos to evoke sympathy for the woman's plight, and using Ethos to argue that the job of the state is not to be causing harm to its own citizens. He punctuates this last point by showing a Google hit for 'lottery intervention,' which, instead of offering support for problem gambling, is in fact an ad for Washington DC's lottery.

In addressing the point that lotteries benefit their winners, he makes similar moves, presenting a montage of headlines such as 'Lottery Winner Blows Through $27 million,' 'Lottery Winner Found Dead in Bed,' and 'Brother Hired Hit Man Over $16 Million Jackpot Win.' He then shows lottery winners in Israel wearing masks to protect their identities, along with a man from Gaza collecting his money with a bag over his head. This section receives by far the least discussion and is the weakest of three points, which again is a teachable moment – the other two points receive multiple minutes of discussion, whereas possible harm for winners is extremely brief. The class could address the fact that while risks are certainly possible, they're likely not the norm, and thus part of why Oliver spends little time with them.

Oliver spends much more time addressing his final point – after showing the harms that can be caused by lotteries, he asks 'Why do state lawmakers keep approving lotteries?' To answer this, he walks through some history, showing a

clip from the first New Hampshire state lottery's founding in 1964. In it, a woman buys a ticket and remarks "I feel that it is for a very good cause – education." He quips that funding education indirectly like this is inefficient, and there are better ways to do so, such as "sales tax, bake sales, or simply putting cash into an envelope, writing 'SCHOOL' on the front of it, and mailing it." Beyond inefficiency, however, he moves on to point out that the money allocated for education from lotteries often never makes it there.

He shows a news clip that investigates 24 states that fund education with lotteries and finds that 21 of the states have either flat or lower spending on education since before the lotteries started. "How is this possible?" he asks, moving into a look at North Carolina specifically. He presents another clip describing how North Carolina essentially reallocated money after its 'North Carolina Education Lottery' went live – taking money away from education and moving it to construction and then replacing (not even all!) the loss with lottery funds. Notice again a paired approach of rhetorical appeals – Logos to show dollar figures and evidence that the money-shifting took place, followed by an Ethos appeal that this is unethical, or at the very least not in the spirit that the lottery had been initially marketed as.

He concludes with the following summation:

> As I think we've seen by now, lotteries are bad for losers, often bad for winners, and a pretty compromising way to assist state budgets. Think about it this way – gambling is a little like alcohol. Most people like it, some are addicted to it, and it's not like the state can or should outlaw it altogether. But it would be a little strange if the state was in the liquor business, advertising it by claiming that every shot of vodka you drink helps schoolchildren learn.

As you can see, Oliver's clip thus mirrors very well what a student is expected to do in an argumentative piece – lays out a clear thesis, presents three central positions that support the thesis using a variety of rhetorical appeals, and concisely finishes with a conclusion that draws from all of the main points. Though not every piece of his has its structure wrapped up quite so nicely in a bow, a great many clips of his address relevant, topical issues that make for good discussion in a writing class. While an in-class breakdown of a *Last Week Tonight* monologue can make for an excellent activity on its own, it can also be used as scaffolding for further class periods on the same topic.

Lottery: Money Changes Everything

As an example of a way to employ active learning after a *Last Week Tonight Clip*, I will walk through an example simulation from *English Composition*

Simulations (Shleykina 2013, 131-146), also on the topic of lotteries. The simulation itself includes its own scaffolding, asking students to listen to an NPR clip entitled *Economic Woes Won't Stop Spain's Lottery Dreams* (Frayer 2012) and answer a few short comprehension questions. The clip addresses El Gordo, Spain's massive yearly Christmas lottery. Worth noting is that this clip, like most on NPR, is great for a language-teaching classroom, as it includes both an audio file and a written transcript, allowing the instructor to reinforce whichever language skills they wish. And, of course, if the instructor desires a more recent clip on the subject, El Gordo will receive fresh coverage every year.

The simulation also includes questions responding to a 2012 piece from the *Wall Street Journal* by Robert Frank, entitled *Will Winning the Lottery Ruin Your Life?* (Frank 2012) which obviously pairs well with the themes addressed in Oliver's segment. And like El Gordo, if the instructor desires more recent material on the theme, there are many options (Canales 2019; Witt 2018; York 2019). Also included are a pair of short, fictional articles written on the topic that include prompts to give opinions or respond to questions. Suffice it to say, the materials allow for a high degree of customization on the amount of scaffolding and support for the unit in a class. Between Oliver and the other media, multiple class sessions could be spent on the topic of lotteries, teaching vocabulary if needed, addressing controversies, and doing anything else necessary to prepare students for the simulation itself.

In the simulation, the students are asked to roleplay as members of the Rogers family, who have recently won $500,000 in the lottery. The family is torn on how to spend the money and has to pick from one of several options, such as buying a house or sending a child to college (because in many areas, it would be possible to do more than one option with the winnings, I've usually lowered the payout to something more like $50,000 or $100,000 – enough of a windfall to make options feasible but not so much that the teams could realistically just divide up the money). The five full teams provided have the following main goals:

1) Buy a house for the family
2) Take the entire family on a once-in-a-lifetime world tour
3) Sending a gifted daughter in the family to a prestigious college
4) Donating the money to charity
5) Paying back another family (The Woes) who gave them money in the past and are now in dire need

With these in mind, you can see why I recommend lowering the payout – blowing a full $500,000 on travel is a bit ludicrous, but taking a dozen or so people on a world tour for $50,000 could realistically spend the lot. And while

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FROM THIS FREE SAMPLE

List of Acronyms

B.A.	Bachelor of Arts
BBA	Bachelor of Business Administration
BCA	Bachelor of Computer Application
B. Com	Bachelor of Commerce
BE	Bachelor of Engineering
B. Tech	Bachelor of Technology
ELT	English Language Teaching
ESL	English as a Second Language
ICT	Information Communication Technologies
LLB	Bachelor of Laws
LMS	Learning Management System
M.A.	Master of Arts
MOOC	Massive Open Online Courses
QCA	Qualitative Content Analysis
TPACK	Technological Pedagogical and Content Knowledge
TPCK	Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge

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