

# Implementing CRC-Based Participatory Approach to Enhance Students' Participation in English Classes: a Case Study in the Middle Schools of Northern China

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**ABSTRACT.** *This research aims to enhance junior middle school students' participations and performances in English classes in No. 19 and No. 38 middle schools in Hohhot. By implementing the CRC-based participatory teaching methodology, more students could benefit and could improve their performances in classes. And more importantly, the traditional teacher-centered classes could be transformed to classes that are more student-centered and CRC-friendly [3].*

**KEYWORDS:** *CRC, English classroom, Middle school student*

## 1. Introduction

The United Nations General Assembly unanimously adopted the "Convention on the Rights of the Child" (CRC) on 20 November 1989. After China ratified CRC in 1992, related laws and regulations are ratified to protect interests of child. CRC concerns 3Ps - Provision, Protection, and Participation. As the third pillar of CRC, participation is one of the guiding principles of the Convention, as well as one of its basic challenges. Several provisions in the CRC reflect children's right to participation. Article 12 of the CRC states that "children have the right to participate in decision-making processes that may be relevant in their lives and to influence decisions taken in their regard-within the family, the school or the community"[1]. The principle affirms that children have the right to express their views and requires those views be heard and given due weight. It recognizes the potential of children to enrich decision-making processes, to share perspectives and to participate as citizens and actors of change. Article 13 states that "children have the right to get and share information, as long as the information is not damaging to them or others. In exercising the right to freedom of expression, children have the responsibility to also respect the rights, freedoms and reputations of others. The freedom of expression includes the right to share information in any way they choose, including by talking, drawing or writing"[2].

Participatory teaching approach emphasizes the dominant position of students, requiring students to bring up their own ideas in the interaction with peers and teachers. The approach could effectively stimulate students' learning initiative, self-awareness and creativity, and could improve teaching effectiveness. In addition, according to the newly revised Chinese National Curriculum for Middle Schools (2012), teachers are encouraged to design activities to participate all students in the class by applying participatory approaches. Teachers are suggested to implement task-based and problem-solving approaches to ensure all students could have equal chances to participate in the class.

However, this objective fails to be implemented fully in most middle schools in Hohhot City, especially in the target English classes of No. 19 and No. 38 Middle Schools. Both schools are ordinary urban middle schools in the Xincheng District of Hohhot. Most English classes still follow teacher-centered strategies, rather than student-centered or CRC-based approaches. The English teachers have received basic trainings on the new curriculum reform and have been equipped with basic concepts and strategies of participatory teaching and learning. However, most teachers still lack the knowledge and experiences in how to improve efficiency of English language teaching through enhancing students' participation in class.

Therefore, this research aims to enhance junior middle school students' participations and performances in English classes in No. 19 and No. 38 middle schools in Hohhot. By implementing the CRC-based participatory teaching methodology, more students could benefit and could improve their performances in classes. And more importantly, the traditional teacher-centered classes could be transformed to classes that are more student-centered and CRC-friendly [3].

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Identifying Stakeholders and Target Groups

The first thing before carrying out the research is to identify the two target schools, the stakeholders and target groups. The basic information of the two target schools could be seen in the table below. The Stakeholders of the project include the principals and deputy principals of both No. 19 and No. 38 Middle Schools, fellow researchers from English Teaching and Research Section of Xincheng District and teacher trainers from School of Foreign Languages of Inner Mongolia Normal University (IMNU). The target groups include six English teachers and around 520 students from eight classes of Grade Seven and Eight from No. 19 Middle School. And two English teachers and around 260 students from four classes of Grade Seven from No. 38 Middle School.

No. 19 Middle School	No. 38 Middle School
Urban junior middle	Urban junior and senior middle
65 students/class	54 students/class
More applicants (Popular)	Less applicants (Less popular)
Strong support from the principal	Strong support from the principal

*Fig. 1 General Information of the Two Target Middle Schools*

### 2.2 Observing English Classes

#### (1) Designing Observation Tools

In order to better monitor the target teachers' implementation of PA in classes, the author designed a class observation sheet. The observation sheet was designed based on the careful research on existed observation tools and the good consultation with the target English teachers from the two middle schools and professors from IMNU. In addition to this observation sheet, we designed a checklist for teachers to assess and evaluate students' participation and performance in classes.

#### (2) Observing Classes At Both Target Middle Schools

The author went to No. 19 Middle School on Oct. 16 and 23, Nov. 6, 12 and 22 of 2019 to observe all the six target teachers' classes. And went to No. 38 Middle School on Oct. 17 and 24, Nov. 8, 14 and 24. All the target teachers also need to observe each other's classes. While observing all these classes, they all filled out the observation sheets and had discussions with change agents after each class.

#### (3) Observing Demonstration Class Given by Zhang Wei At No. 19 Middle School

On Nov. 6 of 2019, Ms. Zhang Wei, one of the target teachers was selected by the school to give a demonstration class of PA in a city-level teaching contest. Over 30 contestant teachers from all over the city attended the contest and finally Ms. Zhang won the first prize in the English Group. In the following week, we invited Ms. Zhang to give a demonstration class to all target teachers. All the teachers were excited to see the effective interactions between the teacher and students, and they were inspired by the class.

### 2.3 Assessing Outcomes

#### (1) Conducting Interviews with Target Teachers

The questions are mainly about the changes after taking the training and participating in the project. To be specific, the questions are about the major benefits of implementing PA and major difficulties met in classes. The results of this post-test interview will be compared with the results of pre-test interviews to investigate changes in target teachers understanding and knowledge about PA.

#### (2) Carrying out Questionnaire Surveys to Target Students

The major purpose is to test target students' feelings and understanding about the changes taken place in their English classes. On Dec. 26, the author went to the two target schools to pass out the questionnaires. One

ordinary class from Grade Two from each school was selected. All students filled up the 12-item survey. 131 questionnaires were collected and analyzed.

### (3) Summarizing Results of Observation Sheets

During the Fall semester while target teachers were piloting in using the PA in class, all teachers observing the classes were asked to fill out the observation sheets. At the end of December, the author collected 19 copies of the sheets and analyzed them, in the hope that the results could be used as another indicator to prove the changes in students' participation and performance.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Stakeholders and Target teachers' Awareness Towards CRC and Knowledge about CRC-Based Participatory Teaching and Learning Approach is Raised

*First*, through such activities as coordination meetings and network meetings, demonstration class and workshop principals and administration staff obtained direct and clear information about the project and more importantly, acquired basic knowledge about CRC and CRC-based participatory teaching approach.

*Second*, target English teachers knew basic theory and knowledge about CRC. Activities as listening to lectures about CRC and school education, reading related books and articles about CRC, and exchanging insights with experts in workshops ensured target teachers good opportunities to update information and refresh knowledge about child rights. The changes could be seen clearly in the results of the two interviews as shown in the following charts (See Figure Two). In the pre-test interviews, when the eight target teachers were asked whether they have heard of or knew anything about CRC, only three teachers have heard about CRC and five knew CRC but had very vague knowledge of it. One teacher told us "I heard of CRC before, but I don't know what it is about exactly." However, in the post-test interview, when the teachers were asked the same question, all eight of them expressed that they had a clear understanding of child rights after participating in this project. One teacher said, "I learnt more about the Convention. As a middle school teacher and a mother, I knew how to secure my students' equal rights in making decisions by themselves."

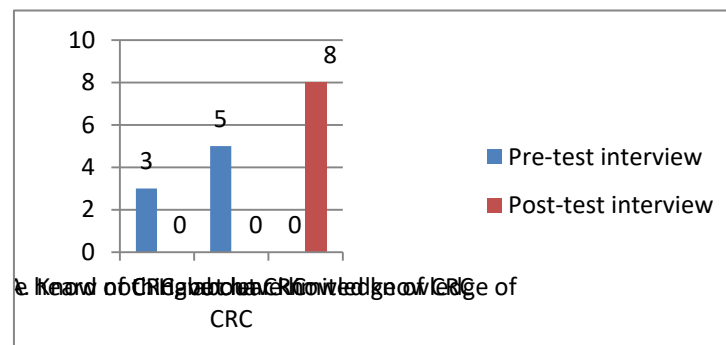


Fig.2 a Comparison of Target teachers' Knowledge about Crc in Two Interviews

*Third*, target teachers knew how to implement participatory teaching approach in their classes. In the second phase of the project, teaching strategies used in present classes were fully observed and major problems were thoroughly examined. Before making any changes to the present class, it was significant to know where to start and what should be changed. Through a careful examination of English classes in these two schools and through interviewing the teachers and students, the problem of low ratio of students' participation caused by teachers' dominant lectures surfaced. In the third phase, through such activities as reading related research books and articles about participatory teaching approach, attending training workshops, implementing in class and exchanging insights with experts in workshops ensured target teachers good chances of improving their skills and experiences in implementing the approach.

By comparing the results of the two interviews conducted on target teachers, the changes could be shown clearly. In the pre-test interview, seven teachers were inconfident in applying this approach skillfully in the class. Although they believed it was very important to give students chances to express their opinions and practice their English, the pressure of finishing course content in limited class time hindered them from applying PA in class.

Most teachers would spend more time in lecturing course content rather than in trying others teaching strategies. Therefore, they did not care about doing research on PA and practicing the strategy in their classes. While in the post-test interview, teachers raised a different voice. All eight of them were excited and confident when they were asked to introduce their participatory activities in class. Some teachers designed group projects for students to research and present on the traditional Chinese festival Mid-Autumn Day. Some teachers assigned group tasks for students to perform role-plays on “What will you do if a UFO arrives”. Some teachers designed a vocabulary contest in which all the groups of students competed heatedly to win a good prize. Consequently, it could be summarized that the target teachers could design and apply PA activities according to their students’ levels, teaching environment and teaching objectives.

### 3.2 Teachers Successfully Implement the Participatory Approach in the Experimental English Classes

Teachers started to implement more pair work activities and group activities according to different teaching objectives in classes to enhance students’ participation. The demonstration class given by Mr. Li Zhiyuan from No. 19 Middle School was a good example. Mr. Li introduced the topic of lesson by implementing lots of group activities, role plays and even dramas, thanks to which the class was highly student-centered. Students had more chances to express their ideas and feelings and to practice their English. Students were attracted and highly concentrated on the class content in the class. Therefore, it was shown that both teachers and students benefit from the participatory class.

In addition, the results of the post-test questionnaire given to students indicated that teachers’ implementation of PA yielded to positive achievement. First, students’ overall talk time in class is improved. As Figure Three shows, more than 55% percent of students believe their average talk time in each English class is improved to 20-30 minutes (The normal class is 40-minute long). Students could have more chances to raise their voices and to express their opinions. Second, students’ language skills get progressed. When students were asked to choose which skills were improved in the last year, 95 of them believed their speaking skills were improved (See Figure Four). 77 students thought their collaborative skills were improved. 52 students even believed that PA class could be helpful in improving their performances in final exams.

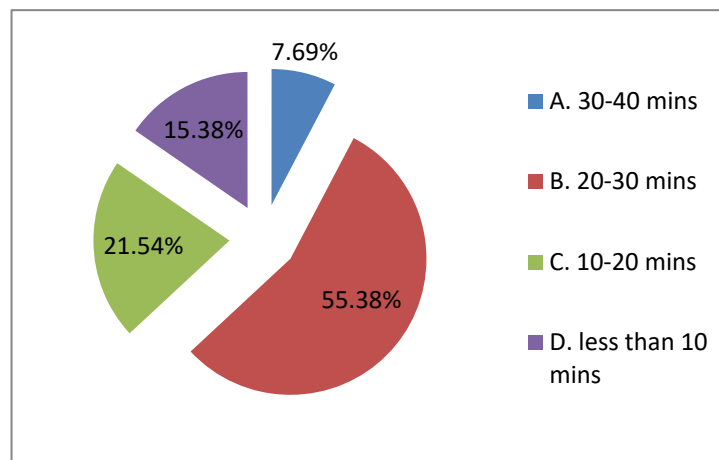


Fig.3 Three: “Students’ Average Talk Time in Class”

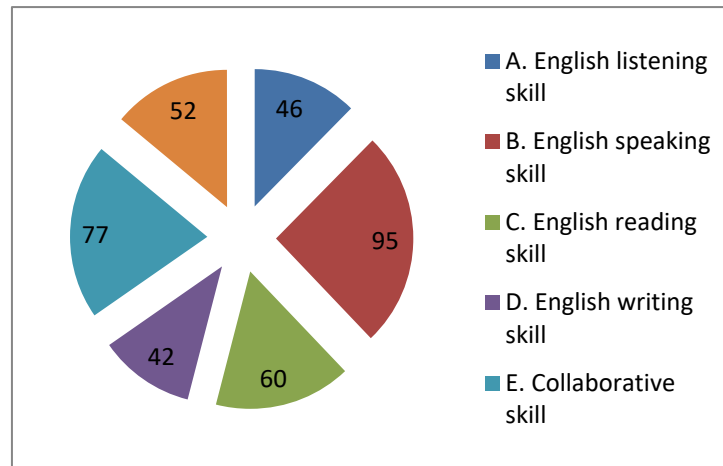


Fig.4 "in Pa Class, Which Skills Are Improved?" (Multiple-Choice Question)

### 3.3 Students Become Interested and Active in Participating in English Class Activities

Firstly, through all the class observations and the analyses of the observation sheets, it is happily found that target students could participate actively in pair-work and group work activities designed by teachers. They were active in participating in such activities. They could decide their roles by negotiating with group members. They could present their own opinions and cooperate with peers skillfully to finish group projects.

Secondly, according to the results of the questionnaire given to the students, 80% of students became interested in participating in class activities in the past year (See Figure Five). Interests are best teacher. Accordingly, students' overall performances improve tremendously. One target teacher said in the post-test interview, "The positive effect of PA is especially obvious on the inferior students. Through different pair and group tasks, they started to speak in the class confidently and became active in learning English."

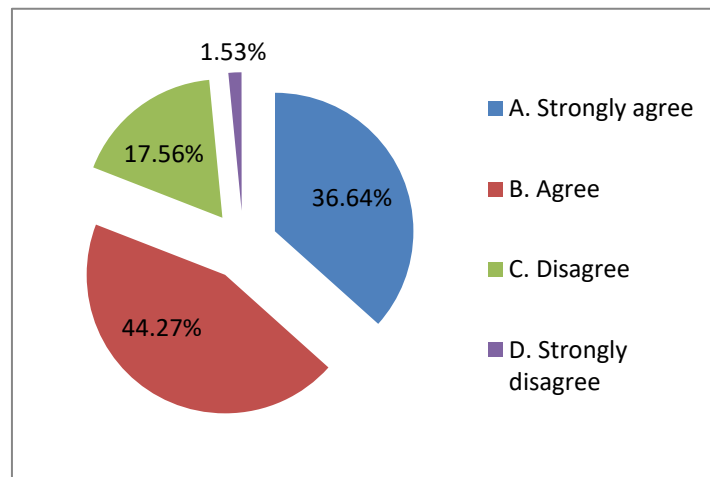


Fig.5 "You Become Very Interested in Participating in Class Activities."

### 3.5 The Scale of Implementation of Pa is Extended to Other Subjects

In addition to realizing all the commitments proposed to be done in the project plan, an unexpected outcome was achieved. Based on thorough investigations and careful discussions with us, the principal of No. 19 Middle School was so motivated and inspired by our project that he decided to launch a large scale of teaching reform within the school with regard to implementing the CRC-based participatory teaching methodology to all the subjects. The school has established a committee to draft the blueprint of the reform plan. Specific plans and actions will be implemented from March the 2015.

#### 4. Conclusion

Although some significant progress stimulated by the activities has been made, there is still a long way to go to bring fundamental changes to the target classes. There are still salient difficulties and challenges to be faced.

Monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of participatory approach in target classes and assessing the increase and quality of students' participation in a short period is difficult. The implementation of the research lasts only one year. It is difficult to go through the whole process of teacher training, implementing the participatory approach, monitoring teachers' use of the approach and evaluating effectiveness of the approach in such a limited period of time. Any mistakes or failure in one step would affect the practice of following steps. Moreover, it is challenging to assess whether and how well every student participates in a certain class, especially to classes with over 60 students. In addition, there are no existing reliable and suitable tools to evaluate and assess students' participation in class.

Implementation of participatory teaching approach in Chinese classrooms still faces lots of challenges. To begin with, the big class size, limited class time and pressure of unified exams all might hinder teachers to carry out participatory activities all the time. Furthermore, the existing local beliefs about language teaching and learning emphasize more on memorization or understanding and analytical ability. The teachers tend to be respected as the source of knowledge, and much time tend to be spent upon explication of the structure of language and the usage of words through detailed textual study. In addition, traditional teaching methods still play a dominant role in Chinese language classrooms as a result of the backwash effect of exams, teachers' limited exposure to and experience of new methods, and the negative response of students, parents and administrators to new methods.

Enhancing the sustainability of in-service teachers' training requires long-term and continuous collective efforts. Target students will take entrance exams to senior high school one or two years later, both teachers and students might go back to the traditional teacher-centered lectures again while facing the pressure of harsh unified exams. Steps to enhance the prospect of the project's longer-term sustainability require efforts from both the project team and the levels beyond it. Otherwise, the previous efforts might be in vain and the changes could not take place sustainably.

To summarize, the author believes that successful innovation depends on realistically grounded knowledge and actions relating to specific social, cultural and educational context. On one hand, CRC concepts and participatory approach need adaptation. On the other hand, local perceptions and practices also need upgrading to meet the new need of this new age. More importantly, this research highlights longer-term sustainability rather than the instant effect.

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