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著者	Ogawa Erina, Yabuno Karen Mattison
雑誌名	経営論集
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Using Relaxation Techniques to Motivate Students in the Language Classroom

Erina Ogawa and Karen Mattison Yabuno

Abstract

Hypnosis is a powerful motivational tool used by top athletes to achieve goals and improve performance. By combining visualizations and positive affirmations with a deep state of relaxation, hypnosis allows information to bypass the critical faculty and penetrate the subconscious mind. This allows athletes to overcome mental resistance and to perform with ease. This study examined whether using similar techniques in a language-learning classroom would improve student motivation and test performance. Relaxation techniques were used to create recordings focused on increasing concentration, confidence, and memory and recall. Each recording was played in the classroom for the two-week period immediately preceding an examination. While the students gave positive reviews to the recordings in a post-course survey, the trends in test results were not statistically significant. This may have been due to a limited sample size and limited exposure to each recording. Despite these and other limitations, this study shows that relaxation techniques may provide a unique and interesting way to motivate students in the classroom.

ヒプノーシスはエリート選手が目標に到達する、またパフォーマンスを改善するのに用いられる強力な動機付けのツールである。深いリラックス状態で視覚すること、肯定することを組み合わせて、情報がクリティカルな能力をバイパスし、潜在意識に到達することを可能にする。これは精神的な抵抗を克服し、簡単にパフォーマンスを引き出すことを可能にする。この研究では、大学生のモチベーションとテストの結果への有効性を計るため、普通は語学教室では使われていないリラクゼーションテクニックの三つのテーマ「集中力を高める、自信がつく、記憶力を高める」のテープを作って、それぞれ二週間、テストの前に教室で聞かせた。測定結果に大きな違いは見られなかったが、学生からの感想は好評であったため、実施人数、出席率、実験回数、そしてテープの質の改良をすることで、ユニークな教室でのモチベーションテクニックとして効果が見られると思う。

1. Introduction

Language learning is supported by key foundations, such as the ability to concentrate on what we are learning, the ability to recall what we have learned, and the confidence to apply what we have learned. These can be developed at the

subconscious level using hypnosis. Hypnosis is a state of focused concentration and relaxation that allows us to bypass the critical faculty¹⁾ to access the subconscious mind (Elman, 1964). The subconscious mind stores information, makes associations, and holds beliefs we have about ourselves (Simmerman, 2007). When we access our subconscious mind, we can release negative beliefs we have about ourselves and transform these beliefs into positive ones (Barnett, 1989).

Hypnosis has been used for educational purposes such as reducing test anxiety, improving memory and recall, and acquiring new skills or habits. A quick search of the internet will reveal an abundance of self-hypnosis materials for such purposes. Studies such as those by Campbell and Schumann (1981) look at the use of hypnosis for improving second language acquisition, particularly with regard to pronunciation. However, this and other studies took place outside of the classroom environment.

A traditional classroom environment does not include the use of hypnosis techniques, but there are other methods of bypassing the critical faculty and penetrating the subconscious mind. Authority, peer pressure, heightened emotion, and repetition can also bypass the critical faculty (Simmerman, 2007). These four methods are routinely used in the language-learning classroom. The teacher is the authority figure in the classroom. The classroom environment in general, and pair or group work in particular, activates peer pressure. Activities in the classroom that are perceived as fun or frightening heighten the emotion. Students hear, say, read, and write phrases, grammar rules, and vocabulary words repeatedly. However, the fifth way of bypassing the critical faculty - using techniques from the hypnosis profession - is not routinely used.

This research introduced relaxation scripts to develop concentration, memorization, and confidence to the classroom and measured student performance on a series of tests. The objective was to see whether student performance changed by incorporating this fifth method.

2. Methods

Erina Ogawa is a university lecturer (hereafter referred to as teacher-researcher) and Karen Mattison Yabuno is a clinical hypnotherapist (hereafter referred to as clinical-researcher). The two researchers sought to test a variety of relaxation scripts with two classes of students (hereafter referred to as “experimental classes”) and measure performance on subsequent tests compared to two control groups: a control class with the same teacher²⁾ and teaching materials (hereafter referred to as “control class”), as well as two other second-year reading classes taking the same general reading tests with a different teacher and teaching materials (hereafter referred to as “second control group”).

All five classes were compulsory second-year university TOEIC Reading classes geared towards improving student test scores on the TOEIC Test. Students self-select their classes, which are roughly scaled according by TOEIC score. The students in the five classes are in the mid-range of approximately 20 classes and had roughly the same L2 ability. Classes met for two 90-minute classes a week for a total of 14 weeks.

First, the researchers discussed the areas in which students were most likely to need improvement and support. A Japanese-English bilingual pre-course survey (see Appendix A) was developed and administered by the teacher-researcher to 83 students in two first-year English classes and 68 students in two second-year English classes at the end of the first semester of the 2009 academic year. Later, the second-year classes were chosen to be the experimental classes for this research as there were no other first-year classes available as control groups. Students ranked the six topics they most wanted to improve on a six-point Likert-type scale. Almost half of the students (71 of the total 151 respondents) chose Confidence as their first choice (see Table 1).

Table 1: Pre-Course Survey Results

	1st Choice	2nd Choice	1st or 2nd Choice
Confidence	71	23	94
Concentration	11	31	42
Motivation	23	35	58
Memory Recall	30	45	75
Test Performance	13	18	31
Time Limits	1	4	5

Second, the clinical-researcher wrote a relaxation script for each of the top three topics chosen for this research, henceforth referred to as Concentration, Confidence, and Memory Recall³⁾. The scripts began with relaxation techniques instructing the listener to take a few deep breaths to focus the mind. A full hypnotic induction with deepeners⁴⁾ was not used.

The relaxation instructions at the beginning of each script were the same, while the rest of the scripts focused on the specific topic of the recording. After the teacher-researcher translated the scripts into Japanese, they were checked by a native speaker. The clinical-researcher then made recordings, which were also checked by a native speaker.

Recordings were made on a hand-held MP3 recorder and played in the classroom on an iPod attached to speakers. Each recording was played in the classroom for the two experimental classes but not in the control class. The

recordings were kept to five minutes in length to minimize the difference in teaching time between the experimental and control classes. Aside from the recordings, the teaching material and teaching style were the same for both groups.

Third, four separate general reading tests⁵⁾ were administered to each student during the course. The tests were designed specifically by Molloy (2009) to test general reading comprehension in the five second-year reading classes. The first test was delivered in the first class and served as a level check so that student improvement over the semester could be measured effectively. For each subsequent test, roughly one-quarter of the students in each class sat each test version. The tests were randomly rotated so that each student sat each test only once and in a different order to most of the other students. A common scale was used to isolate gains due to student improvement from those due to test design. Therefore, an improved test score indicated an improvement in a student's general English reading ability and not the difficulty level of a particular test paper⁶⁾.

The classes met twice a week for 14 weeks. Recordings were played during the first five minutes of the three class sessions immediately preceding each test (except for the first level-check test) and on test days themselves, which were at equal intervals until the winter break. No recording was played in the two classes immediately following a test to allow for a break between each of the three topics.

The two researchers decided that Concentration would be the most useful topic for the beginning of term when some students find it difficult to focus on study following the summer break. Confidence was therefore introduced as the second topic rather than the first. Memory Recall was chosen for the end of the course to assist students in remembering what they had learned over the course.

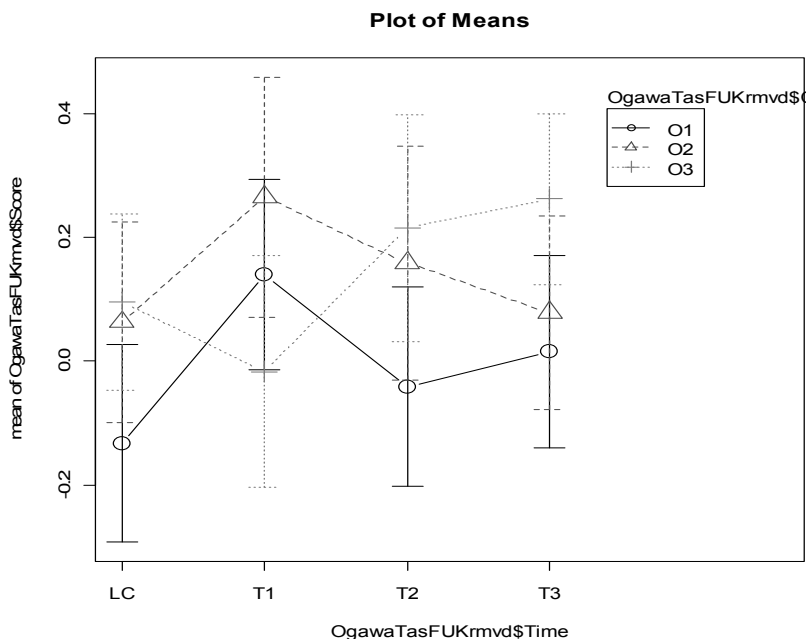
Listening to the Concentration recording was a mandatory activity in the experimental classes. However, for reasons explained in the discussion below, participation was optional for the Confidence and Memory Recall scripts (a total of eight sessions). Students who did not wish to listen to these recordings were informed that they could enter the classroom after the recording had finished (five minutes late) with no academic penalty. After participation became optional, approximately two-thirds of each experimental class continued to listen to the recordings but exact numbers and names of attendees are unknown (see discussion below).

Finally, a post-course survey (see Appendix B) was conducted at the end of the course in the experimental classes to determine the students' perceived value of the usefulness of the relaxation scripts. This Japanese-English bilingual questionnaire asked students to rank the usefulness of each recording on a six-point Likert-type scale, ranging from "very useful" to "not useful at all." Students were also asked to write comments about each recording.

3. Results

The test scores from the two experimental classes were compared with both control groups. The results of the second test (the one following the Concentration recording) showed an apparent increase in average test scores in the two experimental classes and an apparent decrease in the control class. This trend was reversed after the third test and remained so after the fourth test. Graph 1 illustrates these patterns of average test scores for each class. However, these trends are not statistically significant when put through an ANOVA program, and a one-way ANOVA showed no significant differences between the groups.

Graph 1: ANOVA Results



N.B. The X-axis is test occasion, and the Y-axis is test scores on a logit scale.

The post-course survey brought positive feedback (see Table 2). The 59 respondents⁷⁾ from the two experimental classes included students who only listened to the first recording as well as students who listened to all three recordings. As a result, some students rated recordings they did not listen to at all or did not listen to all four times. Each student rated the usefulness of each of the three topics, bringing the total number of responses to 177. Approximately 73% of all comments were positive: 82 responses were “somewhat useful,” 32 were “useful,” and 15 “very useful.” Conversely, 35 responses were “somewhat not useful,” 9 were “not useful,” and 4 were “not useful at all.”

Table 2: Post-Course Survey Results

	Concentration	Confidence	Memory Recall
Very Useful	6	5	4
Useful	19	5	8
Somewhat Useful	19	31	32
Somewhat Not Useful	10	14	11
Not Useful	3	3	3
Not Useful At All	2	1	1

Comments about the Concentration recording were generally positive and included such remarks (translated from Japanese) as: “I could concentrate in every class,” “I could warm up before class,” “I could concentrate a lot because the MP3 was played at the beginning of class,” and “My concentration has improved.” The Confidence recording brought mixed results, such as: “I gained lots of confidence to try” and “The words [from the recording], ‘Everything you have ever learned is in your brain’ made me decide to try hard” versus “I didn’t gain confidence” and “I’m still useless.” Memory Recall⁸⁾ also brought mainly positive comments, such as: “The words sink into my brain easier than before” and “My memory has improved. Thanks to you, I did okay in my vocabulary tests.”

4. Discussion

During the playing of the first MP3 recording, some of the students in each class were clearly actively participating, but their ability to concentrate was impaired by whispering, staring, and other distracting behavior of some other students. The teacher-researcher felt the benefits of the exercise would not be gained if students could not concentrate fully on the recordings. Therefore, after some consideration, the researchers agreed to make listening to the subsequent recordings a pre-class activity to provide the students who wanted to participate the peaceful environment in which to do it. Those who did not wish to participate would arrive five minutes later and attendance was recorded after the recordings were finished. As a result, the names and exact numbers of students who listened to the last two recordings are unknown.

No statistically significant differences were found between the two experimental classes and the control class. While it is possible that the students who listened to all three recordings may have had a consistently positive increase in their test scores, this cannot be determined since attendance records during the recordings are unavailable. Overall, the Concentration recording received more favorable feedback in the post-course survey than the other two topics. This has several implications.

The students may have been most interested in the Concentration topic because it came at the start of the semester. Another possibility is that Concentration was particularly appealing because it was the ability students needed to develop the most. After listening to the recordings became optional, the students' perceived value of the recordings may have decreased.

To change thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, hypnosis (or relaxation) recordings should ideally be listened to twice daily for a few weeks (Tebbetts, 1987). This is because the effects of hypnosis (or relaxation) are progressive and cumulative. In this experiment, each recording was played only four times over a two-week period. While there may have been some benefit to each recording, the research may have produced clearer results if students had listened to one recording on a daily basis for the two weeks prior to each exam or if only one recording had been used for the duration of the course. Even with limited exposure to each recording, the students may perform better in subsequent courses as a result of hearing positive suggestions over the course of the semester. The long-term effects of this experiment are unknown.

5. Conclusion

The object of this experiment was to see whether student performance changed by introducing relaxation techniques to the classroom, specifically in the areas of concentration, confidence, and memorization. While not statistically significant, average test scores increased after listening to a recording on Concentration and then decreased after listening to recordings on Confidence and Memory Recall. The cause of this apparent initial increase and subsequent decrease is unclear.

Limitations to this research have become apparent. Given the limited sample size, the trends in test results were not statistically significant. Each recording was heard a minimal number of times, which limited its effectiveness. The change in participation policy may have affected student attitudes towards the second and third topics. Furthermore, as individual student results cannot be isolated, it cannot be determined which students benefited the most following the first topic and were subsequently absent during the recordings of the other topics. Sound quality of the recordings may also have been an issue.

Despite these limitations, such recordings may be beneficial to students. Students gave favorable ratings to all three recordings in the post-course survey. Concentration was the only topic all students heard, and it received the most positive feedback. Concentration was also the only topic which may have led to an increase in average test scores.

This apparent initial increase in test scores following the Concentration recording and the positive responses by students in the post-course survey show

promise. A larger sample size, consistent attendance, consistent use of one recording, and higher quality recordings may bring a statistically significant positive result. Further research in this area could show that incorporating all five ways of bypassing the critical faculty would result in higher test score performance.

Notes

- 1) The critical faculty is a selective thinking mechanism that functions as a gatekeeper between the conscious and subconscious mind. As a gatekeeper, the critical faculty determines what information will be accepted into the subconscious and what information can be retrieved.
- 2) The two experimental classes had 43 students and 39 students, and the control class taught by the same teacher had 38 students.
- 3) Although Motivation ranked third in the survey, it was excluded as a topic because motivation for learning English or studying in general varies considerably among students. Motivation would also be difficult to assess in the classroom or within parameters of this research.
- 4) A hypnotic induction typically includes suggestions that the listener's eyelids and/or body are becoming heavy and relaxed. The relaxation is then usually deepened by further suggestions that the body or a part of the body, such as the eyelids, is immobile. In this research, the listener was asked to take three deep breaths and close their eyes, which is a common relaxation technique.
- 5) Approximately 155 students took each test.
- 6) For further discussion on this test system, please see Molloy (2009).
- 7) Approximately 63 students in total from the two experiment classes sat each test.
- 8) Some of the comments in the Memory Recall section of the survey referred to other aspects of the class rather than the recording and are therefore not relevant to this research.

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Appendix A

English Study Survey _____ Class/クラス _____ Name/名前 _____

Which of the following would you most like to improve? Please rank them 1=want to improve the most, 2= want to improve the second most, and so on. あなたの英語の勉強について、どの力を一番つけたいですか? つぎの中から一番つけたいものに1、二番目に2というように順番を決めてください。

Confidence in English Ability 英語に対する自信 _____
 Concentration for English Study 英語の勉強をする集中力 _____
 Motivation to Study English 英語を勉強する気持ち「やる気」 _____
 Memory Recall of English Words/Grammar 英語の文法・単語の記憶力 _____
 Being Calm about Test Performance 英語テストの結果についての安定感 _____
 Being Calm about Time Limits of Tests テストの制限時間についての安定感 _____
 Other (please state specifically) その他 (詳しく書いてください) _____

Appendix B

English Study Feedback _____ Class/クラス _____ Name/名前 _____

How useful to you were each of the three motivational recordings we listened to in class? Please rate each one by circling the most appropriate number: 1=very useful, 2=useful, 3=somewhat useful, 4=somewhat not useful, 5=not useful, 6=not useful at all, and write a comment for each one. 授業で聞いた三つのモチベーションのMP3はあなたにとってどのくらい役に立ちましたか。番号を一つずつ選んで、それぞれについてコメントを書いてください: 1=とても役に立った、2=役に立った、3=どちらかという役に立った、4=どちらかという役に立たなかった、5=役に立たなかった、6=全く役に立たなかった。

Concentration for English Study 英語の勉強をする集中力
 1 2 3 4 5 6
 Comment/コメント:

Confidence in English Ability 英語に対する自信
 1 2 3 4 5 6
 Comment/コメント:

Memory Recall of English Words/Grammar 英語の文法・単語の記憶力
 1 2 3 4 5 6
 Comment/コメント:

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