Strategies to Deal with Reticent Classes
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INTRODUCTION
According to Richards & Lockhart (1996) reflective teaching goes hand-in-hand with critical self-examination and reflection that leads to better decision-making, planning and action. Therefore, I decided to keep a learning journal to document my teaching experience over the course of my second semester in the EDC. By doing so, it would lead to more effective planning and strategies through deep self-reflection. In this reflection piece, I will be focusing on one particularly difficult class of lower level three students. First, I will provide a general background description of the situation of the class at the beginning of semester two and chronicle observations of pivotal lessons: Lesson 5 (Initial State); Lesson 7 (Worsening); 8-9 (Remedy Process); and Lesson 10 (Turning Point). The second part of this reflection will investigate the strategies I have taken to try to modify student behavior and encourage autonomy and motivation that led to a turning point in Lesson 10. Lastly, based on the lessons learned from this so-called 'problem class', I will suggest some strategies that could be taken in the future to improve the quality of my teaching and the learning experience.

DISCUSSION
Background
The group I am observing is from my Thursday 9:00 class. They are from the Science stream and almost all of them are quite reticent and reserved. They seldom interact with each other before and after every class, which suggests that there would be many group dynamic issues in the discussion class. Moreover, there are a few students who constantly absent themselves from class (i.e. Shoyu, Hichu, Mayo) and when they are present, they could not follow the lesson as they have not reviewed the textbook or materials from the class they have missed. In addition, the girls and the boys are painfully shy when put together in a group and sometimes they would not speak if the opposite gender is present. Furthermore, there is a student (i.e. Azuki) who takes a long time to put his ideas into words and it always brings down any potential momentum or excitement built up by the initial discussion. However, there were a few bright sparks in the class though. Out of the eight students, three students (i.e. Yuzu, Tako, Yokan) always took the initiative to begin the discussions and also lead the discussions. Despite their efforts, sometimes they are also exhausted by their less positive classmates and give up trying. When that happens, the discussions stall.

There are a few issues I have identified in this group: 1) poor group dynamics; 2) shyness interfering with the willingness to communicate; 3) general lack of communicative ability (even in Japanese). I have also identified a few positive aspects of this group that I could build upon: 1) stronger students always take the initiative to lead the discussions; 2) students are motivated to get good grades; 3) with a lot more scaffolding and 'hand-holding', weaker students usually willing to put in an effort to communicate their ideas.

Observations
The following are four pivotal observations I have made. The first lesson (Lesson 5) describes the initial state of the class and problems encountered. As I did not take much action to rectify the problems in class, the problems exacerbated in Lesson 7 (Worsening). Lesson 8-9 (Remedy Process) shows how student behavior changes while I introduced some new strategies to counter

some problems I have identified. Finally, in Lesson 10, there was a turning point as the results of my strategies bore fruit.

Lesson 5 (Initial State)
Mayo did not talk at all for both discussions. Shoyu came to class after missing or being late for a few classes and he does not know which functions to use and does not make an effort to contribute to the discussions. He is the first one to always say "No", whenever someone asks "Does anyone have a question or comment?". To make matters worse, Azuki takes a painfully long time to put his ideas into words and it drains the energy from the discussions. The more proactive students, Yuzu, Tako and Yokan tried to contribute ideas but were constantly rebuffed by the weaker students who do not comment whenever someone asks for a comment or question.

Lesson 7 (Worsening)
This class was an exhausting one to teach. The weak students continued to shut down the discussions with a summary 'No', every time they were asked for a comment or question and simply sat in silence until someone speaks. For example,

A: I read in a book that some sports stars work very hard to be good players.

B:…

C:…

D:…

A: …Does anyone have a question or comment?

B: No.

C: …No.

D: …

(Discussion stalls)

There were no questions or agree/disagreeing with different ideas. Despite that, the stronger students still tried their best to contribute ideas but eventually, they got tired because they were the only ones doing the discussions.

After this class, I consulted my PM and we came up with a new way to approach the students. I would make cards that students could discard when they use a particular function. This is will give them a focus and also generate a sense of accomplishment when they manage to use all the functions. Moreover, I will make it a rule that students do not say 'No' every time someone asks for a question or comment. In other words, they have to ask a question or agree/disagree with their classmates opinions. In particular, I would focus on the basics, such as agreeing and disagreeing and supporting their ideas with reasons, examples and experiences.

Lesson 8-9 (Remedy Process)
Over the two lessons, I have implemented the function card game and also encouraged agreeing and disagreeing in the lessons. Feedback was based on the card game as usually most students have difficulty using a particular function or communication skill. I would do a formative feedback and make students use the function again and again till they are familiar with it.

For example, in Lesson 8, they were not reporting enough information in Discussion 1. Therefore, I gave formative feedback asking them to report information they heard about some popular Japanese pop and traditional culture in other countries, using the question, "What did you hear about Japanese pop/traditional culture overseas?" And I also provided them with a sentence structure to help them report information.

A: (Question)

B: I heard/read/saw that (karate is very popular in America, there are many famous karate masters there).

A: Where did you hear that?/ How do you know about that?

B: I heard/read/saw it (from a friend).

By giving them this formative feedback practice, students later recycled their ideas and successfully integrated the function use of reporting information in Discussion 2.

Lesson 10 (Turning Point)
Best lesson so far. I have implemented the function card activity from Lesson 8 and students enjoyed it as it gives them a sense of accomplishment after they use the cards. I can also give them formative feedback when I see that a particular function is not being used. Moreover, my feedback focus getting students to agree and disagree was successful as students keep agreeing and disagreeing and there were no longer awkward silences.
Here is an excerpt from the lesson when everyone took turns to agree and disagree:

A: From smoker's point of view, it is okay because they want to relax.

B: I partly agree with you. If smokers want to relax, they can play sports like basketball or soccer."

C: I agree with you. Smoking is bad for health…from other people's point of view.

D: I partly agree with you. In my opinion, smoking is bad for health, but it's their choice to smoke…from my point of view."

By agreeing or disagreeing, students could find a way to connect their ideas with each others' ideas and have a meaningful and extended discussion. In my feedback, I praised the students to reinforce the point that their discussion was successful because they were agreeing and disagreeing consistently.

STRATEGIES TAKEN
Function Cards
I made use of function cards, basically small cards with the names of functions printed on them e.g. "paraphrase", "possibilities" etc and whenever students use the function, and they turn the cards face down on the table to indicate that they have used the function. These cards worked better than I expected as they give students a visual indicator on what functions they have used and what functions they need to use. Moreover, some students treated the activity as a race so

they competed against each other to use all the functions so it turned out to be a fun but also meaningful activity. For example,

A: I think I want to introduce karaoke to foreign people. *I heard* (turns over "report information" card) in other countries, they sing karaoke but they sing on stage.

B: *Do you mean*, in other countries, other people look at you when you sing karaoke? (turn over "paraphrase" card)

C: Can I make a comment?

A & B: Sure.

C: I agree with you (turns over "agree/disagree" card). I think singing is fun all over the world. Foreign people will enjoy singing karaoke.

As students compete to use all the cards, a sense of competition makes the discussions fun and the students are also unconsciously reviewing the functions by trying to integrate them in their speech. Which, I believe, could have same the same effect as "self-check" sheets.

Mixing group members

At the beginning of the semester, I made a mistake of not mixing the boys and girls because they were painfully shy when I put them together in pairs or groups. Therefore, they continue to remain reserved and unable to participate in the discussions whenever they are put together. However, I realised that if I continue to put them together, they would have no choice but to open up and speak to each other. This is something fundamental that I should do but I did not trust the students' ability to adapt. Therefore, during the first half of the semester, the discussions are painfully slow and sometimes students did not even speak at all. That changed after Lesson 8 when I started mixing students in groups and pairs. There were initial bouts of shyness but eventually they started to warm up to each other and conversation started to flow. Hence, I learned a valuable lesson. That is, to trust the students' ability to adapt to new situations and be less protective of them. Ultimately, they will go out to society to work in the future and being shy cannot be an excuse to not communicate well.

Feedback

At the beginning of the semester, I was giving a lot of feedback, mostly teacher-fronted. The feedback was disorganized because I tried to give feedback on too many aspects of the lesson. Therefore, after a really bad Lesson 7, I decided to focus on two or three points and then go straight into a formative feedback exercise if time allows. By doing so, I have noticed that students are more focused and they could concentrate better. For example, a typical function focused feedback with a formative practice would be like:

> *Me: Ok, you reported information from your classmates a lot. For example, Yuki said "I heard that Obama done many good things for the American people"..."I heard that Lady Gaga, gave money to the Tohoku earthquake victims...". Good, but I want listeners to ask the speakers "Where did you hear that?". Ask the speakers to report information, where they heard the information. Now, I want you to talk to a partner, partner A, please report information about Ichiro with "I heard that Lady*

Gaga..." and partner B ask partner A "Where did you hear that?". Partner A will say "I heard from...".

However, after Lesson 10, I realised that students are getting bored with the function focus as the feedback was predictable and repetitive. Therefore, in future lessons, I need to think of a way to make feedback more varied but still retain a focus on function usage.

CONCLUSION

I will continue to make use of function cards in the future as it has been successful in my other classes. Through my use of the function cards from Lesson 8 - 14, I have noted that the cards works best during the review lessons because the cards enable students to visualise all the functions they need to use and helps them focus on function usage. In other lessons, the goal is for them to automatize the use of a particular function so the function cards might serve as a distraction rather than a tool if we were to use the function cards in non-review lessons. Moreover, introducing the function cards during the review also makes the function card activity as reinforces their learning and gives them a sense of achievement. For example, in one of the higher level 3 classes, I introduced the function cards in the second review. Here is a short excerpt from the class:

A: In my opinion, if (turns 'if' card over) I have a foreign friend, I would introduce Japanese traditional culture to them. For example, calligraphy, I heard from TV (turns over 'report information' card, Japanese kanji is interesting to foreigners. Do you have a question or comment?

B: Do you mean that foreign people like kanji because it is beautiful? (turns over 'paraphrase' card)

A: Yes, I mean (turns over 'paraphrase' card) kanji is art to foreign people. Can I ask a question?

B: Go ahead.

A: If you have a foreign friend, do you introduce kanji or another culture to them? (turns over 'follow-up question' card and exclaims 'よし！' he has used 4 functions within the space of 1-2 minutes).

C: Can I make a comment? (eager to speak and use the functions faster than A)

A: 待って, Wait, me first! (cuts in and tries to speak first)

The activity unexpectedly became a friendly competition that is both fun and meaningful to help students review the functions. The fun happens because the students have automatised the functions, not struggling to use them. Therefore, this function card activity is best used as a review activity

I will continue to mix students together and probably also develop a system that could maximise interactions by getting students to sit with a different partner in every activity. I also find that constant movement prevents students from spacing out and movement keeps them alert and attentive. Movement is also good for students who have a more kinesthetic learning style.

Feedback is the area I need to improve upon the most. In my classes, my feedback was probably overtly focused on function use. This could be detrimental because the feedback is repetitive and it serves more as a reminder than something that expands their knowledge or some aspect of their English to improve upon. Therefore, sometimes it is quite natural that students start to tune out whenever I give a function feedback. In the future, feedback should be still focus on function usage but it should be focused on how they used it well and in the right contexts as a form of positive reinforcement. Moreover, the lack of function use could also indicate that the students do not understand how to apply them in the right contexts.

Feedback focusing on other aspects of language such as proper word usage and useful expressions are also quite interesting to some students because this is something they cannot learn from a textbook. For example, a student mentioned "I am a quit person." In my feedback, I mentioned the slight spelling differences leading to a big meaning difference "I am a quiet person" versus "I am a quit person" (I am a person who quits easily). There was clear interest in the feedback as it was something new, interesting and also something they can apply in their lives.

Moreover, giving feedback on something extra-curricular also adds variety to the lesson. I experimented with giving extra feedback on top of the normal function focused feedback in a few different classes and students showed interest in the correction of their errors and also useful expressions they could use.

However, from my experience, such feedback is more practical in the higher-level classes because they quickly automatized the function usage and there is spare time for additional feedback. Hence, in the coming semester, I would also like to experiment with giving feedback on other aspects of language as long as the students have grasped the function usage. Probably, I would be able to find out what other feedback students are interested when I do so.

In the lower-level classes, although function usage can be encouraged through feedback, an overt focus on the lessons function could also have a negative effect. Therefore, the focus could turn to what functions they have not automatized from the previous lessons that would be crucial to help them have better discussions. For example, in Lesson 7 (Media), some students did not agree and disagree and a formative feedback on agreeing and disagreeing after D1 actually led to a more successful D2.

On a final note, my second semester revealed a few major aspects of my teaching that could be further improved, notably in the area of feedback and also improving classroom dynamics. In particular, I have learned that the more student-centered our feedback is (i.e. function cards and feedback backed by formative practice and varied feedback that are useful to students' general communication abilities) the more effective the feedback is compared to teacher-centered feedback. Therefore in the coming semester, I will continue to work on the future strategies I have developed to ensure that all feedback is learner-centered as possible and group dynamics is ensured through constant movement by mixing students up. Moreover, as my limiting belief in students' potential to adapt to new classmates is removed, I found that adapting two maxims actually would improve my teaching - 'to believe in the students' ability to adapt and to always make feedback student-centered. As Richards (1996:294) suggests, 'if teachers are guided by their teaching both by personal maxims as well as by general instructional considerations…personal maxims might provide a useful perspective for teachers to examine in the course of their own professional preparation, as they explore both their own thinking-in-action as well as that of other teachers".

REFERENCES

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