Student-Centered Self-Monitoring for Equal Participation

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ABSTRACT

Reticence or unbalanced participation in the context of English as a foreign language (EFL) education in Japan has been an enduring challenge that most teachers face regardless of class size. Therefore, this study examined the effectiveness of using plastic chips as a means to visualize all students' performance in helping raise students' self-consciousness toward equal participation in a small-size discussion to seek ways to encourage two types of Japanese EFL students, both dominant and reticent ones, to self-monitor and acquire the social skills necessary to conduct a more constructive, balanced discussion. Over nine weeks, four out of six classes showed desirable outcomes with this activity, and further data analysis indicated that this type of consciousness-raising activity has a relatively short-term effect for most classes.

INTRODUCTION

According to Hurling (2012), in order to achieve one of the main goals of having an extended discussion of 16 minutes among three to four participants in English Discussion Class (EDC), "such discussions must be balanced, interactive and constructed by all participants" (p.1-2). Since a positive correlation between active participation and higher academic achievement is irrefutable, it might be safe to say that the success of students' performance in a small group setting like EDC relies heavily on their active participation, namely equal participation (Tsou, 2005; Shaaban, K. & Ghaith, G., 2005).

However, in such a small group an interactive learning environment can also have "the potential to reinforce a severe educational and social problem" if some problematic students are either academically or socially excluded from the interactions (Cohen et al., 1998). Yamauchi (2013) attempted to counter a similar negative trend with reticent students in EDC, whose inactive participation in discussions tended to affect other participants negatively, and suggested the importance of building teamwork among students where peer support could occur naturally without teacher intervention. Munby (2005) also examined turn-taking mechanisms in particular in EFL small group discussion activities at a Japanese University and observed ineffective turn-taking that lead to highly uneven participation. While reticent students seem to be a trend in EDC (Doe et al., 2013), overly confident, talkative students can dominate discussion and cause a further imbalance in participation (Munby, 2005). This can also create an unproductive learning environment.

This problem is not unique to the Japanese University EFL context. A number of studies have addressed East Asian students' reticence or low participation more generally as a problem with cognitive, psychological, sociocultural factors, as well as negative previous learning experiences (McGuire et al., 1996; Osboe et al., 2007; Saito & Ebsworth, 2004; Tsou, 2005; Williams & Andrade, 2008). Tsou (2005) points out that few of these studies present possible remedies to avert this enduring issue. However, because most studies report on this issue in a prevalent teacher-fronted, large-size EFL classroom setting, many suggest that it may be beneficial for EFL educators to ponder this undesirable tendency of East Asian EFL learners in a small-size EFL classroom setting (Osboe et al., 2007; Saito & Ebsworth, 2004; Shaaban & Ghaith, 2005; Tsou, 2005; Williams & Andrade, 2008). Therefore, this activity was designed to contribute to this body of research by monitoring and evaluating students' imbalanced participation in the EDC environment, which has notably fewer classroom participants compared to the studies cited above.

PRINCIPLES

The main goal of this activity was to help promote the awareness of all kinds of students including both dominant and reticent ones towards equal participation in order to balance their participation in a small classroom environment. Many studies in applied Cooperative Learning (CL) have dealt with a problem with students' unequal participation and found relatively positive outcomes (Cohen et al., 2009; McGuire et al., 1996; Shaaban & Ghaith, 2005). Shaaban & Ghaith (2005) also report on CL's effectiveness in ESL/EFL contexts and discuss equivalent goals with this activity, namely facilitating equal participation, creating positive attitudes towards other learners, encouraging solidarity among team members towards the same goal, and setting a supportive learning environment. McGuire et al. (1996) summarize nine key elements of a cooperative lesson: Positive Interdependence, Team Formation ("Cooperative groups usually consist of 2-4 members"), Accountability, Social Skills, Structures and Structuring, Distributed Leadership, Group Autonomy, Group Processing, Face to Face Promotive Interaction (p.61). Although all nine elements are important, Positive Interdependence, Structures and Structuring, Accountability, Social Skills, Group Autonomy, and Group Processing in particular were purposefully and carefully incorporated in designing this activity.

First, Positive Interdependence assures every member of a group of success by giving the same goals, sharing the resource, competing for a reward, forming an identity, and having a role or outside enemy. In this activity, all students in groups would be explicitly aware of equal participation as a joint goal by looking at plastic chips that they share as resources. In this way, they are able to self-monitor their level or participation. These chips were used as rewards and called 'idea coins' so as every learner could understand its concept easily. As its name implies, each coin represents one speaker's idea that has been contributed to the group during a discussion (which also integrates the Structures and Structuring element). Also, by having two groups compare and compete against a better result of an activity in class and rewarding them with class recognition, they should be able to form independent group identities. Second, the element of Accountability that takes into account both individual and group grades would also be achieved by using tangible, quantifiable plastic chips as individual performance assessment as well as calculating the distribution of the chips at the end of an activity. Dishon and O'Leary (1984) encourage teachers to emphasize the explicit teaching of social skills since social skills in students' native language and a foreign language do not transfer naturally (McGuire et al., 1996, p.61). As the positive effectiveness of explicit teaching of communicative competence was often mentioned in other studies (Kubota, 1995; Williams & Andrade, 2008), the author hoped that the use of tangible, quantifiable chips would help students visualize how equally or unequally each student was participating in a discussion, indirectly pushing all students to be aware of equal participation. Lastly, the elements of Group Autonomy and Group Processing were also promoted in this activity where students were encouraged to answer reflective questions in order to encourage students to be self-aware of both desirable and undesirable behaviors.

TASKS AND MATERIALS

Tsou (2005) argues that facilitating turn-taking in conversation leads to greater student-to-student interaction and overall academic performance. Therefore, monitoring students' active speaking turns can benefit the students with more interactive participation and higher performance overall. As shorter turns are easier for all participants to retain and respond to, a desirable turn should not exceed more than two minutes. This is based on the assumption that during a 10-minute discussion with three or four participants, all students should be able to take at least two speaking turns. The activity detailed here requires 20 plastic chips ('idea coins') per group of four as tangible rewards for contributing an idea to the group. In order to conduct this

activity smoothly, it is recommended to have these chips in a container for ease of use. Second, two to three reflective questions tailored to this activity should be prepared to purposefully instigate student-centered performance evaluation; for smooth transition, it is recommended to prepare those questions on paper provided at the outset of the activity. In addition to these materials provided to students, the instructor should informally track students' progress through observation during the activity and provide appropriate feedback. (For a sample observation sheet, see APPENDIX 1.)

PROCEDURE

Of 14 weeks of general EDC semester, this activity was planned during Weeks 1 to 5, followed by the first Discussion Test 1(DT1), implemented during Weeks 6 to 8, followed by the Discussion Test 2 (DT2) in Week 9 and Discussion Test 3 (DT3) in Week 13. The activity was not implemented between DT2 and DT3, though data was collected in DT3 to observe the possible long-term effects of the activity.

The steps of implementation are:

1. Make a copy of DT1 Score Sheet for future reference.
2. Present and model the procedure of the activity before you start a regular 10-minute discussion.
3. Conduct the discussion. In Weeks 6 and 7, remind students to collect 'idea coins' as they discuss.
4. After the discussion, students will be asked to answer three reflective questions that include: '**How many** "idea coins" did you collect?'; 'As a group, did **everyone** share ideas?'; 'As a group, did everyone share ideas **equally**? Why?' for a couple minutes. The instructor will monitor the reactions or comments toward this activity.
5. The instructor asks for and write the number of idea coins that each person has collected next to each name on the board as shown below, and calculate the range of idea coins (the range = the maximum number of idea coins minus the minimum number of idea coins) for each group. Emphasize "the smaller the range is, the better" for equal participation and using students' self-reflection, give brief teacher-fronted feedback. Figure 1 illustrates this concept. (Student names are pseudonyms.)

   Figure 1

Group 1		Group 2	
Asca	5	Hiroaki	3
Mana	3	Yurika	1
Keita	2	Naoki	5
Ken	4	Chie	0
Range=5-2=3		Range=5-0=5	

6. Keep the record of numbers on the board by the end of the class for future reference.
7. After Discussion Test 2 (DT2) and Discussion Test 3 (DT3), make a copy of Score Sheet for future reference.
8. Analyze the data.

VARIATIONS

Based on student level, discussion quality, and student need, you can adopt this activity in many ways. For lower levels, you can adopt this activity by minimizing the number of reflective questions or adding extra practice in pairs. For higher levels or outperforming groups, you can

challenge them by not only focusing on equal participation but also the quality of other students' behaviors. For instance, rather than focusing on the number of 'idea coins,' you can add 'question coins' or 'comment coins' to facilitate other positive behaviors for equal participation. In addition, you can restate or change reflective questions based on student level or reaction towards this activity as a way of specifying what they have done successfully or poorly for equal participation. Lastly, if you want to raise awareness of equal participation spontaneously in your lessons, you can also consider conducting this activity not every lesson, but during review lessons, or after discussion tests.

DISCUSSION

Initially a total of 48, which fell to 43 university freshman students (20 male, 23 female) due to insufficient attendance, participated in this study. Since this imbalanced participation issue was observed across levels, six different EDC classes from three different proficiency levels were chosen: two high-intermediate level II (14 participants), two intermediate level III (22 participants), and one high-beginner level IV (7 participants).

For the data collection, two kinds of quantifiable data were analyzed: the number of ideas or comments (speaking turns) in three discussion tests and the number of 'idea coins' through informal observational notes during regular classes, as they signified the parameters of content as quantified on a test. Those data were analyzed in three ways:

1. The first data analysis was a comparison among three discussion tests' results to find out if the range of participation turns was decreased or increased (Table 1). The range of participation turns was calculated by counting the number of ideas or comments on each test (the range = the maximum number of ideas or comments minus the minimum number of ideas or comments) for each group.
2. The second data analysis was a comparison between the ranges of participation turns in the Discussion Test 1 (DT1) and that of regular lessons (RL) to see if there were any correlations between the test performance and performance during practice (Table 2). Since there was a time gap between 16-minute discussion of DT1 and 10-minute discussion of experimental regular lesson discussions, the comparison was conducted by looking at participation rate per minute.
3. The third data analysis was a comparison within three regular lessons to identify the pure effect of this activity without factoring in test anxiety (Table 3).

When comparing the range of participation turns in DT1 with that of DT2 and DT3, both desirable outcomes and undesirable outcomes were observed. Furthermore, two types of desirable outcomes were observed among different groups: short-term improvement (ranges decreased from DT1 to DT2, but this trend did not continue to DT3) and long-term improvement (ranges decreased from DT1 to DT3). As you can see in Table 1, four out of six classes apply to this positive outcome including both short-term and long-term improvement (Class 1, 2, 3, and 6). By comparing only the average participation turns from DT1 to DT2 and DT3, however, only the comparative participation turns from DT1 to DT2 show an improvement, which could imply that there was short-term improvement immediately following the implementation of this activity only. (Note: This activity was conducted after DT1 and before DT2.) On the other hand, this activity also produced undesirable outcomes by increasing the range of participation turns from DT1 compared to both DT2 and DT3. In Table 1, you can see that two out of six classes performed this outcome (Class 4 and 5). In other words, the expected benefits of this activity on equalizing participation among dominant and reticent students were observed only short-term, which implies this activity's transferability from regular lessons to a testing environment is

limited to the short-term and may be exacerbated by test anxiety, though further research would need to confirm this effect.

Table 1
Range of Ideas and Comments in Discussion Tests

	DT1	DT2	DT3	Average	Outcomes
Class 1	3	1.5	4	2.8	short-term improvement from DT1 to DT2
Class 2	2	2.5	1.5	2.0	long-term improvement from DT1 to DT3
Class 3	3.5	2.5	3.5	3.2	short-term improvement from DT1 to DT2
Class 4	3	3.5	9.5	5.3	undesirable increase
Class 5	1.5	3.5	2.5	2.5	undesirable increase
Class 6	6.5	2.6	2.3	3.8	long-term improvement from DT1 to DT3
Average	3.3	2.7	3.9	3.3	

Table 2 reveals the relationship between the results of regular lessons and the discussion tests. It was assumed that if the regular lesson participation rate per minute were shorter than that of DT1, the outcomes of this activity would be positive because the decrease of the participation rate per minute could indicate the success in raising students' awareness towards equal participation in regular lessons. The data shows positive results of this activity in regular lessons. While the average DT1 participation rate per minute was 0.21, the regular lesson participation rate per minute was 0.1. This shows that overall students participated more equally during the regular lessons than DT1, which implies most students were aware of participating the discussion equally compare to DT1 with the implementation of this activity. The most successful class was Class 6. While the average decrease of all six classes was 0.11, this class's participation rate decreased by 0.34.

Table 2
Range Comparison between Discussion Tests and Regular Lessons

	DT1 Participation Rate/min	RL Participation Rate/min	DT Outcomes
Class 1	0.19	0.1 – decrease	Desirable
Class 2	0.13	0.1 – decrease	Desirable
Class 3	0.22	0.07 – decrease	Desirable
Class 4	0.19	0.1 – decrease	Desirable
Class 5	0.09	0.2 – increase	Undesirable
Class 6	0.41	0.07 – decrease	Desirable
Average	0.21	0.1 – decrease	

Table 3 shows more detailed learning effects during the regular lessons excluding one powerful external variable: test anxiety. Two following hypotheses can be considered:

A. If groups had successful learning experiences during the regular lessons (identified by a range of less than 1 for equal participation and are indicated with * in Table 3), the outcomes in the discussion tests would be positive.
B. If the range of distribution of 'idea coins' in Lesson 7 (L7) or Lesson 8 (L8) decreased compared that of Lesson 6 (L6) (highlighted in Table 3), this expected performance in the regular lessons would lead to the desirable outcomes in the following discussion tests (DT2 and DT3).

For hypothesis A, only Classes 2, 3, 4, and 6 had successful learning experiences (2 times each). Nevertheless, it shows that regardless having or not having those successful learning experiences, Class 1 outperformed while Class 4 underperformed during all DTs. For hypothesis B, three classes (4, 5, and 6) decreased the range of 'idea coins' distribution compared with L6. However, both Class 4 and 5 undesirably performed in DT. Thus, this hypothesis does not prove this activity effective. Nevertheless, comparing the average range of 'idea coins' between L6 and L7, the average ranges decreased the most, and so are considered successful learning experiences as defined in hypothesis A above. This can be worth noting as a short-term effect of this activity.

Table 3

Range of 'Idea Coins' within Regular Lessons

	L6	L7	L8	DT Outcomes
Class 1	1	1	1	Desirable
Class 2	0.5*	0.5*	2	Desirable
Class 3	0.5*	0.5*	1	Desirable
Class 4	2	0.5*	0.5*	Undesirable
Class 5	2.5	1	2.5	Undesirable
Class 6	0.5*	0*	1.5	Desirable
Average	1.17	0.58*	1.42	

Notes: The symbol * indicates relatively successful learning experiences
The highlighted sections indicate the range of L7/L8 decreased from L6.

CONCLUSION

The above quantitative data results show relatively desirable outcomes for this research. The comparative analysis among three discussion tests indicates that four out of six classes improved their performance, particularly for a short-term from DT1 to DT2. In addition, the comparative analysis of participation rates between DT1 and the three regular lessons showed students were more aware of equal participation during the regular lessons than DT1. The last comparative analysis among three regular lessons also suggest that the activity had a short-term effect from Lesson 6 to 7, which was the first and second time this activity was implemented and practiced, although successful learning experiences during the regular lessons did not correlate with the outcomes in the discussion tests.

Therefore, it might be safe to say that this activity could be applied in a small-size EFL classroom to combat typical East Asian students' reticence or low participation. Nevertheless, from its considerable short-term effects for a majority of classes and the contradicting relation between the regular lessons and the discussion tests, this activity does not necessarily need to be implemented regularly. In other words, this activity is recommended to implement in regular lessons when you want an instant, short-term, result for better participation behaviors. Based on these initial observations, this activity should be modified to capture the short-term benefits and attempt to transfer them to a testing environment in addition to creating a more lasting impact on equalizing participation.

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APPENDIX

1. Sample Monitoring Note

	Day ( ) Period ( )		Level ( )				Major:			
Name	DT1		Lesson 6		Lesson 7		Lesson 8		DT2	DT3
	Indv	Group	I	G	I	G	I	G	I G	I G
Groups	DT1		Lesson 6		Lesson 7		Lesson 8		DT2	DT3
1										
2										
Effect in D2										