

Motivating the Unmotivated: Classroom Management and Motivation in English Discussion Class

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses observations made over one semester of a university-level English discussion class. It focuses on a “problem” class who, due to motivation and classroom management issues, were displaying a range of negative classroom behaviors. Using notes from a teaching journal, I begin by outlining the issues that I faced, before exploring potential underlying causes and the steps that I took in response. Finally, I informally evaluate the success of these actions, and posit further potential remedies for dealing with such classes in the future.

INTRODUCTION

As part of ongoing professional development, first year teachers in Rikkyo University’s English Discuss Class (EDC) program are asked to use a teaching journal to critically reflect on an area of student or teacher behavior that interests them. The benefits of journaling are clear: as Ho and Richards (1993) put it, “journal writing can be an opportunity for teachers to use the process of writing to describe and explore their own teaching practices” (p. 8). Moreover, I hoped to become a better teacher by being more aware of the “day to day behaviors and underlying attitudes, alongside outcomes and the decisions that all teachers need to make,” (McDonough, as cited in Farrell, 2007, p. 108). Specifically, I applied the following three cognitive dimensions that are typically linked to reflective teaching: *reflection-on-action*, *reflection-in-action*, and *reflection-for-action*: i.e. thinking about my teaching after, during, and before classes (Schon, 1983).

With this in mind, I spent the first few weeks of the Fall 2016 semester informally observing my classes for areas to explore, and one group stuck out immediately. Generally, students in previous classes that I had taught in the same course appeared motivated, well behaved, and demonstrated generally positive attitudes to English learning in general and EDC in particular. However, from week one, my Friday first period class presented me with a number of challenges. I shall list a few of them here: chronic lateness, absences, frequently requesting washroom breaks, checking cellphones, sleeping in class, repeated L1 use, not preparing for class, and not engaging with the topics. Wadden and McGovern (1991) use the term “negative class participation” to describe such occurrences. That is, any classroom conduct that harmfully affects the learning and classroom experience. Of course, such “problem” classes are nothing new. Indeed, teachers in any context will have experienced these issues to an extent, and Finn (2014) details similar issues specifically in EDC, but the intensity of the negativity, from the very first class, surprised me and stung me into action.

My initial reflections revolved around a simple question, “why?” Why are these students, individually and collectively, behaving in such a way? Why are they resistant to my go-to techniques of dealing with such problems? Typically with a late student, briefly but firmly mentioning it after class, one-on-one, will resolve the problem. Similarly, with persistent use of L1 during L2 activities, it is often enough, having ensured the students understand the task and the target language, to simply remind them to use the L2 as much as possible. However, in this class, five out of eight members in particular seemed resistant to my first attempts at remedy, and the negative class participations persisted.

I considered what I perceived as a lack of engagement in the topics, a reticence to speak English openly in class. Here, Thompson (2001) has talked about how Japanese students in particular have gained a reputation for quietness and shyness in the classroom, which stems from

deeper values in Japanese society, a society in which, “tentativeness is preferred to assertiveness, hesitancy to momentum” (p. 297). This in turn influences their ability to answer, in particular, “what do you think of...?” question types (Thompson, 2001), the types of question that EDC often employs in its activities. However, I quickly discounted this as an explanation. This particular set of students might have been hesitant to discuss the topics given to them, but they seemed to not lack assertiveness when using their L1, or when talking before and after classes.

Therefore, I decided to explore other areas. Much has been written about the role of motivation in the classroom. For example, Aoki (2013) notes that individual motivation can be a barrier to effective learning in an EDC context. Whilst “motivation” in language learning can be tricky to define (let alone observe) Crookes & Schmidt’s (1991) interpretation seems suitable for the purposes of this discussion: “When teachers say that a student is motivated, they [...] are observing that the student does study, or at least engages in teacher-desired behavior in the classroom and possibly outside of it” (p. 480). It seemed clear, then, that if I could discover ways to increase this group’s motivation, I could reduce the incidences of negative class participation, and consequently improve students’ learning outcomes.

DISCUSSION

Examples, causes, and effects of negative class participation

I started a more formal journal process in weeks five and six of the fourteen-week semester, mainly observing instances of negative class participation as outlined above. I elected to focus on the following three examples: attendance issues (including absences and lateness), persistent L1 use, and perceived lack of interest in topics. I chose these as my informal journal notes recorded during the first four weeks of class indicated that they were the biggest barriers to successful lessons, and therefore addressing them could have the biggest effect on the class.

Starting with the first of these, attendance issues, week five provides a representative example of the challenges I was facing. At the scheduled start of class, only two of eight students were present. Two more students arrived within the first fifteen minutes, and one more came after around forty minutes. Such a pattern was observed more often than not, which presented a number of issues. Chief among them is that in addition to the obvious effects on the late/absent students themselves, these instances also actually impede the whole class, as Wadden and McGovern (1991) point out. Another key issue was that many parts of my lesson plan necessitated more than two students (such as a 3/2/1 fluency activity and group discussion). Additionally, effective use of some of the target language itself required several students to be present (for example, asking turn-taking questions).

Moving onto L1 use, I observed that students frequently continued using their native language (in this case, Japanese) at various times throughout the lesson. While, as Ellis and Shintani (2014) note, relatively little attention has been paid to L1 use in the classroom by the learners themselves, it is often simply assumed to be detrimental to a student’s L2 learning as it takes away time for L2 practice. Ellis and Shintani (2014) do however discuss several specific ways learners may positively employ their L1 in the L2 classroom. One is task planning/organizing what they want to say in the L1 to achieve more coherent final output in the L2. Another is metatalk, that is, talk about the activity itself, rather than content. As Brooks and Donato (1994, as cited in Ellis and Shintani 2014) note, even in cases when the teacher clearly explains the task goals, learners will often still engage in confirmation metatalk between themselves in the L1.

However, from my observations, these explanations did not wholly fit. My journal indicates the following common L1 uses: private conversations started before class continuing into the lesson; students engaging in private conversations about unrelated topics during English

discussion times; students starting to discuss the topic in L2, but quickly resorting to L1. I could understand enough of the learners' L1 to confidently argue that they were rarely task planning or engaging in metatalk. Rather, they appeared to be using their L1 primarily for social reasons. This may suggest that students were not fully engaged with the class or topics themselves, an idea supported by other journal observations I made. For example, during the first weeks of semester, students reported during classroom activities that they hated English and loved only Japan, they didn't find topics about foreign cultures interesting, and that they had no interest in studying abroad. While it is difficult to judge the tone of such statements (indeed, it is entirely possible that the students were joking), considering that similar comments were recorded throughout the semester, and on several discussion topics, they seemed to be representative of an underlying problem. These comments, many explicitly referring to a lack of interest in cultures and people outside Japan, appear to support the relationship between achievement and integrative motivation (which we can broadly define as wanting to learn a language to get to know the people who speak it) suggested by Masgoret and Gardner (2003). In an analysis of 75 studies to explore the relationship between achievement and motivation, they found conclusively that, in particular, "integrative motivation promotes successful second language acquisition" (p. 201). As suspected, motivation could indeed be a key to changing this class' behaviors.

Despite the negativity of my observations so far, I would say that three of the eight students in this class generally showed a genuinely positive attitude. However, I was concerned that if I did not act fast to "save" this class, these "good" students could be affected, too. As George's (1995) theory of group affective tone argues, collective mood states can gradually take over a group, within which one positive action leads to further positive actions from others in the group. However, the opposite is also true: if the unmotivated learners outnumber the motivated, a negative affective tone can set in, potentially creating a vicious circle of negative class participation (Kelly, 2001).

Turning negatives into positives

From week seven onwards, I instigated changes aimed at turning this class around. My first challenge was to re-establish and maintain appropriate classroom behavior from the students. I began by focusing on my classroom management, defined as the "actions taken to create and maintain a learning environment conducive to successful instruction" (Brophy, 1996, p. 5). In order to act appropriately, I needed a framework to decide just how "bad" this class was. Scrivener (2012) categorizes three levels of misbehavior in classrooms.

- 1) Poor behavior (talking over the teacher, being late, using L1, etc.)
- 2) Unacceptable behavior (missing lessons, cheating in tests, arguing in class, etc.)
- 3) Serious offences (violence, hurting others, illegal activities, etc.)

Using this guide, most of the actions fell into the least serious category, "poor behavior." Noting this, I next took some small steps to address the biggest problems. I found that the simplest things I did were perhaps the most immediately effective. Firstly, using a variety of voice tones to control the class. Scrivener's (2012) work reminded me of things that I had, at best, taken for granted, and at worst, half forgotten. He writes how using different tones for different purposes can be effective. For example, I found that using a personal, kindly tone in one-to-one interactions with a student helped me communicate with individuals more effectively. Additionally, using a more authoritative tone when speaking to the whole class helped to maintain their attention during teacher-fronted parts of the lesson. Another mistake I made was perhaps trying to be *too*

authoritative when pointing out negative class participations, which can lead to a breakdown in student-teacher relationships. I found that using what Wadden and McGovern call “a good stare or moment of silence” was very effective when students were either talking over me or using L1.

Having made inroads into re-establishing full authority of the group, I set about addressing the motivation of the group. I feared that it may be difficult to increase a student’s integrative motivation where none appears to exist. However, it should at least be possible to “find ways of letting students’ natural motivation (whatever that may be) to start emerging again by allowing them to make decisions about their study, to redirect the work in small ways towards what interests them – in short, by making the class more learner centered” (Scrivener, p. 117). Considering that a student-centered approach underpins the EDC philosophy, I asked myself if I was ensuring that my lessons were as student-centered as possible. While the topics and target language are largely fixed at EDC, I could at least offer “small bursts of democracy” (Scrivener, p. 115) by, for example, offering students binary choices about activities (“do you want to work in pairs of by yourselves?”), providing students with a “menu” of questions they can discuss (within, of course, that lesson’s remit), and always encouraging questions from the students so they feel involved in the class.

A related step I took was to consider my feedback methods. Noting the classroom management issues I initially had, my instinct was to be reluctant to give more control or responsibility over to the students themselves. So one thing I found myself unconsciously doing was shifting towards teacher-fronted feedback, rather than student-centered feedback. This was a mistake in that it alienated the students further from their learning process, which was compounded by the fact that it increased the number of teacher-fronted activities, giving the students another opportunity to ignore or talk over me. In the following weeks, I instead gave the students self-check sheets about their target language use, which they were to fill in in pairs. This was a qualified success. I found that their analysis of their strong and weak points were largely accurate, and they completed the student-to-student feedback using English, so the students were at least more critically engaged in the learning process and had an extra chance to use English. However, this did not translate into noticeable improvement in target language use in subsequent activities or lessons, possibly due to a lack of underlying motivation.

Overall, the tentative measures I took in identifying and addressing classroom management and motivation issues had success. Certainly, some elements of the poor behavior decreased and the overall mood of the group improved substantially. I am confident that student opinions of this class (and indeed, of my own teaching) would be considerably more positive at the end of the semester than they would have been towards the start of the semester. However, the fact remains that perhaps the two clearest metrics of “success,” attendance and student grades, did not significantly improve.

CONCLUSION

I have discussed above several examples of poor classroom behavior, their possible reasons, and various attempts I made to fix them. Considering these observations, and taking into account Finn’s (2014) and Aoki’s (2013) writings as my start point, I put forward the following ideas towards effective classroom management in an EDC context.

Firstly, be mindful of effective classroom management techniques from the start. Finn (2014) talks about the potential benefits in EDC of setting clear behavioral expectations and communicating them to students via posters and/or handouts in the first lessons. These can be referred to as necessary in future classes. On reflection one mistake I made was, based on previous university level classes I had taught, complacently making assumptions about the levels of positive behavior I could expect in all other classes. This experience reminded me that classes and individual student’s behaviors must be evaluated on an ongoing and case-by-case basis. Posters

and handouts for this purpose might include attendance expectations, prohibition of L1 use, etc. As lessons continue, attention should be paid to other areas of classroom management, such as voice control and effective transitions. As Scrivener (2012) notes, research suggests that anti-social behavior often “correlates with activity transition points, lulls and pauses” (p. 233).

Secondly, ensure the class is as student-centered as possible in order to arouse as much motivation as possible in students. Even within a relatively controlled setting such as EDC, small bursts of democracy can empower students. This should include, but not be limited to, student-centered feedback wherever appropriate.

However, the biggest takeaway from my journals is that it would have been easier to address these problems before they arose. Finn (2014) also notes the difficulty of retroactively solving issues in an EDC context.

Concerning further research, there is much that I have left undiscussed. I have explored here motivation only in terms of a student’s motivation. Yet it is also logical, as Dörnyei points out, that teacher motivation, that is, “the nature of the teacher’s own enthusiasm and commitment,” (2001, p. 3) is closely tied up with student motivation. Might my own projections after those first four “bad” weeks have affected this group’s learning outcomes? Additionally, is it possible that I neglected to build sufficient group cohesion, beyond simple “get-to-know-each-other” activities in the first class? As Evans and Dion (1991) among others have noted, group cohesiveness typically leads to increased group performance. These are all aspects that I intend to explore in future research.

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