

Building a Positive Environment: Reflecting on Interventions in the Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Research indicates the positive outcomes of keeping a teaching journal to reflect on and develop teaching beliefs and practices (Richards & Farrell, 2005). This article reflects on a teaching journal that was kept for 11 weeks on a class with low participation and communication skills. With the combination of a teaching journal, action research, and peer coaching, various interventions were made and reflected on to continuously find ways to create a more positive environment in class. Issues emerging in the teaching journal were identified, and action plans were collaboratively made through the peer coaching process. Results of these interventions were analyzed and reflected on to create further interventions as necessary.

INTRODUCTION

There are a variety of ways for teachers to explore and develop their teaching beliefs and practices. For example, Richards and Farrell (2005) discuss the benefits of collaborative professional development, journal writing, peer coaching, audio recording, video recording, and peer observation. This article focuses on using a mix of two of the professional development activities along with action research - journal writing and peer coaching.

As part of my first year professional development project, I kept a teaching journal on one class for 11 weeks. Out of the 14 lessons offered throughout the semester, I wrote journal entries from Week 2 to Week 13. Teaching journals not only provide a space for reflective teaching, but also help teachers to explore, evaluate, and investigate their own beliefs (Richard & Farrell, 2005). The process of writing offers them a simple way to be more aware of their observations, thoughts, and patterns that may be emerging in class. Spalding and Wilson (2002) mention that “reflective thinking begins with a state of doubt, hesitation, or perplexity and moves through the act of searching to find material that will resolve, clarify, or otherwise address the doubt” (p. 1394). Indeed, the entries in my journals show doubt and hesitation regarding my teaching approaches and how I tried to resolve some situations.

An approach, or a research method, often used with journal writing is action research. Action research is a form of qualitative research used in various contexts to illustrate meaning in problematic situations, and intervene with action to improve interactions or practices (Burns, 2005). In language teaching, it could be classroom management, affective aspects of students, or a particular teaching area of interest for the teacher. Action research is a concurrent flow of two parts, which are action and research. The “action” is when planned intervention takes place, which is often preceded by the researcher’s reaction in dealing with the problem or question. The “research” involves analysis and reflection after data has been collected in the action stage (Burns, 2005, p. 58). Later, another cycle of action and research may take place depending on the circumstances of the context. Unlike other qualitative research, action research accepts the variables in the context to find explanations inclusive of them rather than control the environment (Burns, 2005, p. 65). Therefore, emerging themes is a crucial aspect of action research because it can declare the direction or topic of the research. The action research approach I took were built around my initial feelings and impression of the class, identifying themes and issues through my teaching journal, planning an action with my supervisor, intervening the issue with the plan, observing the students’ reactions, and analyzing the outcomes after class.

In addition to journal entries and reflecting on classes every week, I had formal and

informal meetings with my supervisor, hereafter referred to as Brian, to discuss and follow-up on the project. In Week 3, he observed my video-recorded class, and in Weeks 10 and 11, we had meetings to follow-up on the issues that were emerging in class. These interactions turned out to be opportunities for peer coaching where Brian provided me feedback and suggestions to address the problem in class. Peer coaching is a type of teacher collaboration in which one teacher takes on the role as a coach or critical friend to offer constructive feedback and suggestions to the other teacher (Richards & Farrell, 2005, p. 143). Farrell (2001) defines critical friends as, “people who collaborate in order to improve the quality of teaching and learning” (p. 369). It is important to note that each teacher involved in this process has the responsibility for their own professional development. In other words, even though the critical friend will offer suggestions and feedback, it is up to the other teacher to take action and make decisions. In our case, Brian took on the role of the coach as I confronted the issues emerging in my class.

The context of this paper, English Discussion Class (EDC), is a mandatory class for freshmen at Rikkyo University. The class focuses on fostering communicative English skills in micro-discussion classes. The class meets once a week for 90 minutes in Spring and Fall semesters, and participate in 10-16 minute English discussions using function phrases they learn every week. Students are placed into classes according to TOEIC scores and grouped by major. The teacher is more like a facilitator than the authoritative figure in class, and the majority of class activities are student-centered to encourage students to speak in English as much as possible.

After the first week of introduction classes, one of my Friday classes stood out to me the most. This class consisted of eight students from the College of Economics - two females and six males. Their TOEIC listening scores ranged from 165 to 230, which fits in Level III (low-intermediate) in EDC. I will refer to them by pseudonyms hereafter to maintain their anonymity. All but one of the students, Xin – an international student from China - were Japanese. However, his Japanese seemed to be good, and he communicated with other students without any problem. My first impression of them was that they were extremely quiet, slightly unmotivated, and awkward in terms of how they interacted with each other. They were so quiet that I could barely hear them speaking, and the neighboring classes would overpower them during practice activities and discussions. I decided to keep a teaching journal for this class because of how I felt in class - I felt uncomfortable and incompetent as a teacher because I could not seem to help them be engaged with the class. The strategies I tried in the first few classes to break the ice did not seem to work, and it felt as though the students were not invested in the class at all. I wanted to help the students to achieve something in some way, but to also learn as a teacher how to react and respond to this kind of situation. I decided to keep a teaching journal to reflect on emerging themes or issues in class.

DISCUSSION

Identifying problems

In Lesson 2, I observed that the students were extremely quiet and showed very little reaction to whether they understood my instructions or not. A fluency activity, based on Nation’s 4/3/2 technique (1989), is one of the first warm-up activities that students do to speak smoothly in English. In a class of eight, students line up facing each other with four on each side - one side being the listener, and the other side the speaker. Then, with time constraints of three minutes, two minutes, and one minute, speakers answer prompts given by their teacher to different listening partners. After the three rounds are done, students change roles and repeat the activity. I observed in the first round of fluency activity that all students playing the listener role were very quiet and showed no signs of verbal or non-verbal reactions. Active listening through reacting to what is being said is crucial in communication to not only show that you are respectfully listening, but to

also encourage the speaker to keep on talking. Although I repeatedly gave them feedback to provide active listening reactions, such as *uh-huh, yes, I see, okay*, none of the students responded to my feedback after each round of the fluency activity.

Furthermore, during the 10 and 16-minute discussion stages, there were numerous moments when the discussion would stall and result in dead silence. After taking into consideration that the students may need time to feel comfortable with each other, I provided feedback and strategies to cope with these kinds of situations. For example, I suggested that they use more reactions, or use joining discussion phrases (*Can I ask a question? Can I say something? Does anyone want to comment?*) and connecting idea phrases (*What do you think of my idea? Do you agree with me?*) to invite other members into the discussion. Haruka, one of the female students, and Yoshi, one of the male students, were two of the most active students out of the eight. They usually had reactions and would try to facilitate the discussion, either by starting to contribute to the discussion or asking questions to others. Koji and Yoji, both male students, were quiet for most of the part, but tried to engage in tasks and discussions when I encouraged them to. On the other hand, Shun, Xin, Toshi, and Shiho were extremely quiet and some seemed to have low motivation. For example, Toshi would often say *mendokusai*, which means “troublesome” or “bothersome” with a negative feeling during class. Seeing that students had difficulty communicating, and the class did not have the best atmosphere, I started to plan interventions to encourage a more positive atmosphere.

Trying to build teacher-student rapport

One of my core teaching beliefs is in rapport building with the students to create a more comfortable and friendly atmosphere. After meeting them for the first class in mid-September of 2017, I felt the strong need to create a positive and safe environment for the students. Frisby and Martin (2010) examined how rapport in the overall classroom environment contributes to behavioral and learning outcomes. They reported how interpersonal relationships between the teacher and students can positively relate to student engagement and learning (p.158). Since this class was the first period of the day, I made an effort to be in the classroom at least 15 minutes before the bell rang to connect with the students. During Weeks 2 to 6, my journal entries have at least one instance every week that illustrates how I tried to build rapport with students before or after the class through small talk. For example, in Week 2, I tried to talk to Koji and Toshi about their week and commute to work. My journal entry states, “even though they lagged in their response. I wanted to build a rapport. I’m not sure how effective it has been.” In Week 3, I talked to Haruka after class about a restaurant near the school as well as her club activity. In Week 6, I asked questions to Shun about his dog and talked about his club activities as “he shyly smiled and laughed.” All of the interactions were positive, and I built a strong desire to focus more on rapport building to create a positive learning environment. Unfortunately, from Week 3 onwards, the majority of the students were absent or were starting to come to class 10-45 minutes late. This made it difficult to promote rapport building amongst the students with poor attendance, and required more instances from me to warn them about their attendance issues. In addition, students would race out of the classroom to head to their next class, which did not leave me with many post-lesson opportunities to build rapport with the students as much as I would have liked. Frisby and Martin (2010) reported that the rapport among classmates is not significantly related to their learning or acquisition. Rather, students benefit more from relational experiences with the teacher in class (p. 157). However, due to the irregular attendance of the students, I decided that I should take a different approach to improve the classroom environment.

Meeting the students half-way

During Weeks 2-5, I observed that I had misjudged the students’ English levels in Week 1. My

judgement was based on TOEIC listening scores, which are given to teachers before classes start, and on my classroom observations during Week 1. In Weeks 2 and 3, I noticed how little Shiho understood my instructions during class. She constantly used Japanese to reconfirm the activity instructions with peers sitting next to her, or quietly observed what her peers were doing before she started doing the activity herself. Even after I asked her to tell me if she did not understand, she rarely asked in front of the class unless I sat next to her to check if everything was okay. In Weeks 2 and 3, Toshi and Shun repeated the word *wakaranai*, or “I don’t know” during the class. I also noticed a slight difference in motivation between the two students. Even though Shun would say *wakaranai* many times, he usually said this to signal to me that he needed help understanding the instructions. Shun’s level of focus and energy fluctuated throughout the semester, but he would make attempts to try to finish the activity. On the other hand, it seemed as though Toshi used *wakaranai* as a signal he had given up. For example, in Week 4, Toshi frustratedly said, “Ahhhh... *wakarnai!* Next!”, and completely gave up on his turn to speak during the practice activities and discussions. I intervened between activities to re-explain what to do, but it always took several minutes to clarify. I also observed other students whispering *wakaranai* to each other until Week 5. What was challenging was that students never responded when I asked, “Do you understand?”, and would never ask if they did not understand. Gauging whether students understood my instructions was difficult because students would look at me silently with no reactions. Furthermore, explaining to students individually after explaining it to the entire class disrupted the flow of the activities.

In Weeks 4 and 5, Brian and I met to discuss about my video-recording observations. I brought up the issue of checking understanding with the students, and he suggested asking Instruction Checking Questions (ICQs) instead of “Do you understand?” ICQs are valuable to use after the presentation stage of teaching when you would like to identify if the students have grasped the instruction or target language. For example, you might ask, “Do you work with a partner?”, “How many times do you have to use the phrases?”, or “What do you ask your partner first?” Brian shared his experiences on using ICQs in his classroom, and offered constructive feedback on what I could possibly control during class. As Richards and Farrell (2005) suggest peer coaching should be non-judgmental, and the teacher should be open and willing to ask for suggestions (p. 149). I started using ICQs from Week 5 with hopes to make the situation better, but this took up more time in class because students would fall silent after I asked them the question. My journal entries from Week 3-5 illustrate my frustration as I tried to tackle on the issues, but failed to make positive changes in class. For example, “Students are not present in class, and I think that is what makes it harder for them and for me. As a teacher, it’s difficult to tell them my needs when I’m not sure if they understand me... and I’m sure it’s difficult for them to be engaged when they’re not fully invested in the activity.”

From Week 7, I started to modify my activities with simpler English instructions and pictures, or Japanese translation on handouts when necessary. Though this seemed to alleviate stress and frustration of the language for students, it did not improve the extremely quiet atmosphere in class. After class in Week 7, I decided to observe and focus more on the rapport and behavior of the students in class to create a more positive environment.

Increasing students’ awareness in non-verbal communication skills

As I started to observe students’ behaviors more closely and reflect on my past journal entries, I noticed the frustration Haruka and Yoshi sometimes showed when there was a lack of reactions during the discussion from their peers, who were usually very quiet, rarely initiated the discussion, had poor or disengaging body posture, and often had zero to little eye contact. Haruka and Yoshi often asked “Is that clear?”, or tried to engage in eye contact with others during discussions.

During class in Week 9, Haruka clearly showed her frustration by asking one of the students with an annoyed tone in her voice, “Are you listening?” As a teacher in the class, I felt the need to confront and discuss this issue with the students. As such, at the end of class in Week 8, I had students reflect on their accomplishments and what they could improve for a better discussion class in pairs. What was interesting was how all of the students reflected on how they were learning many phrases, but pointed out their need to react more frequently. I brought this to the students’ attention and also mentioned that they may also need to consider being more cooperative with each other. Discussions are more meaningful when students react to each other’s ideas, and that aspect was hugely missing in their reactions.

In Week 10, Brian and I had a meeting to follow up on how the class was doing. Unlike our meeting in Week 4 and 5, I was more aware of what was happening in class and how I was reacting to the situation. As Farrell (2001) points out, teachers usually need time for actions and emotions that happen in class to sink in before they voice their opinions (p. 372). During the meeting, Brian asked me questions about what was happening in class and listened, while I slowly came up with solutions for the class. I proposed that I wanted to try an activity to focus more on helping the students to develop their non-verbal communication skills. As a critical friend, Brian offered constructive feedback and suggested that I utilize a checklist for the students.

In Week 11, I incorporated an activity to raise students’ awareness regarding the types of non-verbal communication, and allowed them time to reflect upon whether they were able to use them during class. During the activity, there were only four students present (Haruka, Koji, Shun, and Xin), and two students (Shiori and Toshi) joined before the extended discussions. First, I gave each pair of students a sheet of paper with pictures that illustrated “good” and “bad” communication skills (see Appendix A). Students were instructed to identify good and bad communication skills, and justify their ideas. Later, during the practice stage in class, students were given a checklist of non-verbal communication skills to check for themselves (see Appendix B). After assessing themselves, students switched their checklists with their partners, and were instructed to evaluate their partners’ communications skills. Students also provided each other with oral peer feedback on what they thought their partner did well, and what they may want to improve for the following discussions. After all of this was done, I also emphasized and confirmed their peer feedback comments to the entire class. Most of the peer feedback content focused on poor eye contact and the lack of reactions. Although Shiori and Toshi were unaware of the non-verbal communication skills activity the class did during the discussions, the students did much better in terms of showing respectful communication manners to their peers. They had more eye contact and reactions, and Haruka rarely asked, “Do you understand?”, during the discussion. I used the same checklist the following week with all but Toshi present in class, and observed more students referring to each other by names, laughing, and joking. The communication seemed to flow more easily with increased eye contact and grasping the right timing to join discussions. Rather than quiet and awkward moments of silence taking over the classroom, it was filled with students’ reactions of acknowledgement and encouragement to speak. Although I would have liked to use the checklist with all of the students present in class, I believe the students who were present were able to benefit out of it.

CONCLUSION

Different types of interventions to improve the class environment and student behaviors had different results. The most positive outcome from these interventions was how students became more aware of their own behaviors affected the class environment. The nature of EDC lessons requires students to be proactive members throughout the class. Therefore, when students did not make the effort or were unaware of their behaviors affecting the class, it was difficult for the

teacher to change the existing issues. The reflection process through journal writing, action research, and peer coaching enabled me to realize that it is not only the teacher who contributes to the improvement of class. A bigger contributor may be when students are empowered to take control of their own learning and atmosphere building with their peers. Students' performances, primarily in non-verbal communication skill in Week 11 and 12, illustrated examples of how big of a difference the usage of communication skills could make in the class. Students' acknowledgements of their peers through eye contact and reactions contributed greatly to a more positive and safe environment for students to discuss cooperatively. Checklists and peer feedback seemed to be effective when trying to raise students' awareness of their own behavior. In addition, having a peer coach, or a critical friend, allowed me to obtain a clearer vision of my own teaching, and find solutions for the issues in class.

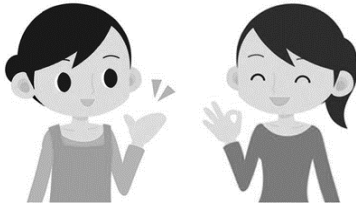
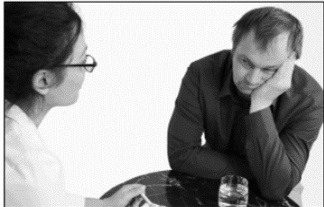
Going forward, it may be beneficial to investigate students' perceptions on rapport building and the benefits of good non-verbal communication usage in class. As Frisby and Martin (2010) claim, student-student rapport is influential in encouraging classroom participation. Looking into understanding what kind of student and/or teacher behaviors hinder or encourage classroom participation and learning may be beneficial.

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APPENDIX A

Do these pictures show good or bad communication skills? Why?



Body language?
Eye contact?
Facial expression?

APPENDIX B

Your name: _____

Communication Skills	You	Your partner (_____)
Did you have your head up while talking to your partner?		
Did you have eye contact?		
Did you have a good posture?		
Did you have reactions? (NOT silent)		