

Self-Reflection Activity to Promote Learner Autonomy in University Students

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ABSTRACT

This paper will introduce a self-reflection activity implemented to try to promote learner autonomy in students during the 2019 fall semester at Rikkyo University's English Discussion Center (EDC). Taking from Holec's (1981) definition of learner autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning," I explore how to use this activity as an extension of that. Also this paper observes whether giving students this opportunity to take charge, reflect on their performance, and make goals for the following class would help increase motivation to achieve these goals that they set for themselves.

INTRODUCTION

At Rikkyo University, all first-year students are required to take courses in the English Language Program, one of which includes discussion classes under the English Discussion Center (EDC). In this course, classes are divided into four separate levels depending on their TOEIC reading and listening test scores. Level I classes consist of students with scores above 680, Level II with scores from 480 to 679, Level III with scores from 280 to 479, and Level IV with scores below 280 (EDC Instructor Handbook, 2019). Each class consists of between seven and nine students, and meets weekly in 100-minute classes where students are taught target language phrases and that they practice using in two group discussions. The two main types of phrases students are taught are *Discussion Skills* (phrases that are commonly used in group discussions, both as a speaker and a listener) and *Communication Skills* (phrases that are commonly used to help check for understanding amongst the others in the group and fix miscommunications during discussions). The objective of this course is for students to, "learn how to interact appropriately with others in order to learn a variety of different opinions, cultures and beliefs from both native and non-native speakers using English" (Hurling, 2012). In the spring semester, students are taught skills that are used to help construct their opinions and to help organize speaking turns, while in the fall semester course students are taught more challenging skills to help them think more critically in discussions. (See Appendix B for fall semester Discussion Skills and Communication Skills). Throughout the semester, after learning two new Discussion Skills and a review lesson, they have Discussion Tests, where in two separate groups, students hold a discussion in front of the instructor demonstrating the correct usage of the two newest Discussion Skills they have learned.

At Rikkyo University's English Discussion Center (EDC), teachers who are in their second to fifth year are given the opportunity to conduct a Professional Development Project (PD Project), where they can research and explore different teaching principles, whether it be through a classroom activity or classroom research. As a second-year instructor, we are told to develop a classroom activity based on a teaching principle of our choosing. Influenced by my previous paper on self-reflection, I felt drawn to do an activity based on self-reflection as a practice. I was also interested in the idea of learner autonomy and wanted to connect these two principles.

The structure of a typical EDC lesson is split up into six parts: 1) Quiz, 2) Fluency, 3) Target Language Presentation, 4) Target Language Practice, 5) Discussion 1, and 6) Discussion 2 (Hurling, 2012). At EDC, instructors give feedback at the end of each discussion, listing points that the groups did well and actionable points that they could improve on. In Discussion 1 students practice using the new Discussion Skill in a 10-minute group discussion with the phrases not

available to them. By Discussion 2, students are expected to use the Discussion Skill in a 16-minute group discussion from memory. According to Shute (2007), in feedback, “goals must be purposely meaningful and easily generated, and the learner must receive performance feedback about whether or not the goals are being attained”. Thus, instructors at EDC are trained to give feedback that is actionable and can be achieved in the final discussion of class.

During my first year at EDC, at the end of Discussion 1 I would, together with the students, help them make goals for the next discussion. According to research, goal-focused feedback can adjust the learner’s view of intelligence by helping them see that skills can be practiced, effort is essential, and mistakes are a part of the process (Shute, 2007). Yet I noticed that whenever I gave feedback and helped the students set goals, some classes often neglected to remember these goals. Or, in contrast, they would create goals that could not be achievable in the next discussion. (i.e. “speak English more fluently,” “use more vocabulary,” etc.)

Thus, I thought that if the students themselves reflected on what they did well and what they needed to practice, it would be better coming from within themselves rather than from the teacher. Little (2003) says that “if [students] are reflectively engaged with their learning, it is likely to be more efficient and effective, because [it is] more personal and focused”. Thus, I wanted to implement this self-reflection activity to see if goal-making, not dictated by the teacher but from themselves, would help motivate students to work on the goals. Through this activity I wanted to see if giving the students the opportunity to reflect on their own performance and set goals for the next class would increase the chances of them achieving the goals they set on their own.

PROCEDURE

This academic year, I did not have any Level IV students, as all of my classes were Level I through III. I decided I would only try this activity with my Level II and III classes (eleven classes in total) because I felt it would be the most useful and meaningful for them.

When creating a goal-setting worksheet, I wanted to make sure that it was simple and easy enough for the students to understand. What I wanted students to reflect on and think about was one Discussion Skill or Communication Skill (see Appendix B) that they used well in class, and one that they could not do as much and wanted to try to practice more in the following week’s class (See Appendix A). I decided to limit the goals to only the Discussion Skills or Communication Skills because those were measurable and achievable goals that the students could accomplish from week to week, unlike bigger and more difficult to achieve goals.

Initially, I had students write what they did well and their goals for the second discussion after completing the first. However, since I formatted the worksheet to be completed from week to week, I decided to have the students write this after the completion of Discussion 2. Then, the following class, I would hand it back to them before they began Discussion 1. During that following class after Discussion 1, one of my group feedback questions I had the students answer was “Did you achieve your goal from Week ~?” I observed that whenever the students got to this question, they almost always said they forgot about it, or skipped over answering the question entirely.

I only had them use these goal-setting papers during the regular and review lessons, but would pass their papers back to them during the practice before the Discussion Test to remind them of what they wanted to practice. During the Discussion Test lessons, I would have students look back on what they wrote down from the previous review class and mark whether they achieved their goal or did not by putting a star (meaning they achieved their goal) or an “x” (meaning they could not achieve their goal).

DISCUSSION

After carrying out this activity in class and observing the students as they filled out their papers, I noticed that as the weeks went on, I was not sure if this was the best self-reflection activity. I would notice that some students would stop and think about what skills they performed well during class and a weak point they wanted to work on for the following class. However, a majority of students would: a) copy down one of the skills learned in class and a random skill for a goal the following week, b) choose the listener side of the skill (asking questions) if they did well in the speaker side (responding to the questions asked by the listener), or c) copy down the opposite of what they had written down the previous week. This was contrary to what I was hoping for, which was for students to take the time to actually reflect on how they did in the discussions, rather than not thinking and only writing down whatever was easiest to get the task done.

From these observations, I cannot say confidently that this activity was successful. For some students, it seemed like it did help remind them of what they had wanted to work on from the previous week, and they would try to achieve it in the first discussion. On the other hand, in one of my Level III classes, in the middle of the semester, a student asked another student what this paper was for. Hearing that, I was a little discouraged because I had thought the activity was straightforward, but it could also have been a result of students simply not paying attention to my instructions. Also, towards the end of the semester it seemed like this had become just another activity the students had to do, without putting any serious thought into what they were writing down.

Another observation I made was that this activity proved useless if the students failed in coming week after week. For example, I had several students who would miss a week of class, and during the time of asking if they achieved their goals from the previous week, they could not answer if they did or did not. Also, sometimes I would forget to bring their papers, even though a prior worry was that the students would fail to bring their papers on their own.

Despite my failed efforts in creating an activity for students to track their own progress and promote motivation for improving, I observed something interesting. After the first discussion, I had the students talk in their groups of three to four about what went well in the discussion and what they wanted to do in the next discussion. Oftentimes, the students were aware of which skills they used frequently and which ones they did not at all. They set their own goals for themselves and during the second discussion, were successful in doing so. This made me realize that maybe it was less about the students writing down and reflecting for the next class, but that simply reflecting on the discussion with others verbally, immediately after the discussion, was sufficient. Perhaps the dynamic of having the students tell me the goals they wanted inhibited them from making clear succinct goals for themselves, as they had to share in front of the whole class, as opposed to just the others in their group.

Through these observations, I have realized that maybe what is more effective is still giving students the space and initiative to reflect, but further taking a step back as the teacher and allowing them to take ownership of what they did well and what they wanted to improve on and share with each other. Maybe the activity was less about writing it down but more about talking it through with someone, which is what I had observed in a previous paper about reflecting as a teacher through a teaching journal. Through the process of keeping a teaching journal, where I wrote about observations from each of the classes I taught in the fall semester in my first year PD Project at EDC, I found that, "if I were to have discussed [my reflections] with a peer, I think it would have provided that level of accountability, space, and environment to explore more of the 'why' behind my actions," (Mikamo, 2019). As I was writing the reflections, I would not put as much thought into it because I would be the only one reading it later. However, I concluded that if there were someone to keep me more accountable, I would have put more effort into the

reflection itself. There is no reason that this is not transferrable to students learning as well. I believe that this also translates to any kind of self-reflection and could have proven useful with students as well, as they are processing out loud and reflecting on how they can improve for the next activity and having someone to keep them accountable.

VARIATIONS

If I were to implement this activity again in future classes, I would perhaps place this activity after Discussion 1 and still have students talk in groups. However, after talking in their groups, I would have them write it down and set goals for the second discussion. This has been done by teachers before, but as is common with students, they tend to forget what they learned from the previous week. Yet maybe what is more important is that they reflect what they did in class that day, rather than from week to week. Also, maybe this would be more effective if it was a class that met more frequently, rather than just once a week. I originally hoped that the goal-setting paper would help them see and track their progress, but because there were holidays in-between classes or sometimes students were absent, it was really difficult to track. In a way, perhaps this activity was me, as the teacher, being too involved instead of promoting learner autonomy, which was the original goal.

In practicing learner autonomy, it “requires insight, a positive attitude, a capacity for reflection, and a readiness to be proactive in self-management and in interactions with others.” (Little, 2003). Perhaps creating a different activity that created more of a need to interact with others would have encouraged more proactivity in this self-reflection through peer reflection. Also, if students are made to make their own goals, it can “(provide) learners with information about their progress toward a desired goal (or set of goals)” (Shute, 2007). For self-reflection it does not have to be a difficult or complex activity, but the simple act of sharing with a peer and having their thoughts heard could be enough reflection and motivation in itself.

CONCLUSION

Based off of my observations, I would say that what is perhaps more effective in goal-setting amongst learners is for them to verbally discuss when and how they used the target Discussion Skill, and giving examples of specific instances, first in partners or groups and then by writing down a skill that they could not use in Discussion 1 for Discussion 2. By doing the activity alone, I observed that it really depended on the student and their motivation to participate in the activity. However, if students have to verbalize what they did well and what they want to practice, there is the accountability of their partner or group. In future classes, I would like to try this activity again, but with a little bit more time after group feedback, maybe in pairs, to discuss and reflect about each student’s performance. If students have to talk to each other in pairs, it is a much more collaborative task with students taking the time to listen to each other share their ideas, thus increasing the likelihood of them achieving the self-reflective task (Philp, Adams, Iwashita, 2014).

If I were to do another activity where they have to track their goals from week to week, I would include more space for them to reflect, such as a section to add notes aside from the space to create goals that they made for themselves that week. A few students in some of my classes would add extra notes themselves, like whether they used the listener side of the discussion skill, but wanted to work on the speaker side, or adding more details while using a certain discussion skill. I think if there was more allowance for notes like this, there would be potential and room for students to reflect more deeply.

I would be interested in experimenting with different ways to track their goals. For example, maybe it could be in something small, like a simple check mark on the side of the sheet in a column marking whether or not they could achieve the previous week’s goal or not. I think in

asking them verbally, it had little to no effect, but I think in having to mark it themselves, it would track more of their progress and ideally motivate them to try harder.

As a teacher, I would hope that any classroom activity would help promote learner autonomy and the teacher's final goal should be "helping students to find ways to improve their language abilities without the constant support of the teacher". (Narasaki, 2015). Ultimately, students will not always have the help of the teacher, whether that is in using English outside of the classroom, or even in their other subjects. However, if teachers can equip students with the tools to reflect and also learn how to share their thoughts and progress with others, this could really increase learner autonomy in the sense of self-reflection.

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APPENDIX A – Goal Setting Worksheet (Front and Back)

Name: _____

Goal-Setting – Fall Semester

Week 2: The Globalization of Japanese Culture

Today, _____ I _____ used _____ well.

Next week, I want to focus on _____ more.

Week 3: Japanese and Foreign Customs

Today, _____ I _____ used _____ well.

Next week, I want to focus on _____ more.

Week 4: English in the World

Today, _____ I _____ used _____ well.

Next week, I want to focus on _____ more.

Week 6: Social Media

Today, _____ I _____ used _____ well.

Next week, I want to focus on _____ more.

Week 7: The Influence of the Media

Today, _____ I _____ used _____ well.

Next week, I want to focus on _____ more.

Week 8 Gender in Japan

Today, _____ I _____ used _____ well.

Next week, I want to focus on _____ more.

Week 10: The Aging Population

Today, _____ I _____ used _____ well.

Next week, I want to focus on _____ more.

Week 11: Money

Today, _____ I _____ used _____ well.

Next week, I want to focus on _____ more.

Week 12: Crime and Punishment

Today, _____ I _____ used _____ well.

Next week, I want to focus on _____ more.

APPENDIX B – EDC Discussion and Communication Skills

Semester 2 Discussion Skills		Communication Skills		
1. Connecting Ideas (p. 8)		1. Comprehension (p. 24)		
Asking Others to Connect	Connecting to Others' Ideas	Reactions	Showing If You Understand	Checking Understanding
What do you think of (my/ name's) idea?	(I agree.) As (you/ name) said,...	I see. Okay.	I understand.	Do you understand?
Do you agree with (me/ name)?	(I'm sorry, but I disagree.) (You/ name) said..., but...	Right. Sure.	Sorry, I don't understand.	Do you follow me?
		Uh-huh. Really?	Sorry, I don't follow you.	Do you see what I mean?
2. Closing Topics (p. 16)		2. Paraphrasing (p. 54)		
Checking for More Ideas	Summarizing	Paraphrasing Others	Paraphrasing Yourself	
Is there anything to add?	So, we agree that...	Do you mean...?	I mean...	
Is there anything more to say?	So, we disagree about (topic).	So, are you saying...?	What I'm saying is...	
	So, some/most of us think...	So, in other words...?	In other words,...	
3. Different Viewpoints (p. 38)		3. Clarification (p. 84)		
Asking for Different Viewpoints	Giving Different Viewpoints	Asking for Explanation	Asking for Repetition	
How about from (X)'s point of view?	From (X)'s point of view,...	Can you explain?	Could you repeat that, please?	
How about from the point of view of (X)?	From the point of view of (X),...	What do you mean?	Could you say that again, please?	
4. Sources of Information (p. 46)		What does (X) mean?		
Asking about Information	Giving Information			
Where did you read/see/hear/learn that?	I read/saw/heard/learned...			
How do you know about that?	According to...			
	When I...			
5. Balancing Opinions (p. 68)				
Asking Others to Balance Opinions	Balancing Your Opinions			
What are the advantages/disadvantages (of...)?	One advantage/ disadvantage (of...) is...			
Are there any (other) advantages/ disadvantages (of...)?	Another advantage/disadvantage (of...) is...			

(Fearn-Wannan, Kita, Sturges, & Young, 2019, p. 99-100).