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# Using Teacher Interviews as a Tool for Motivating Students

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## Abstract

The Sojo International Learning Center (SILC) is the teaching and research center where English classes are held at Sojo University. This article reports on a SILC Pioneers' Educational Chat (SPEC) conducted during the 2020-21 academic year. The purpose of this particular SPEC was to introduce SILC teachers to an activity that is used during the Self-Directed Learning (SDL) unit in the curriculum for second-year students. During the SDL unit students are taught how to manage their own learning by making goals and creating learning plans to achieve these goals. Students need a sufficient amount of motivation to accomplish this. One possible source of motivation could come from the use of role models. At the beginning of the SDL unit students complete an activity in which they watch a video of a Japanese professor speaking English and giving advice to students on how to study English. The SPEC described the process of conducting interviews in English with Japanese professors from other departments at Sojo University, and then creating an activity using these video-recorded interviews as a tool for motivating students to study English on their own. This report will outline the main points discussed during the SPEC.

SILC (Sojo International Learning Center) は、崇城大学において英語の授業を行う教育・研究センターです。本稿では、2020-21年度に実施されたSPEC (SILC Pioneers' Educational Chat) について報告します。今回のSPECの目的は、SILCの先生方に、2年生のカリキュラムであるSDL (Self-Directed Learning) ユニットで使用されるアクティビティを紹介することでした。SDLユニットでは、学生は目標を立て、その目標を達成するための学習計画を立てることで、自分の学習を管理する方法を学びます。そのためには、十分な動機付けが必要です。モチベーションの源としては、ロールモデルの活用が考えられます。SDLユニットの冒頭では、日本人教授が英語を話し、学生に英語の勉強法をアドバイスしているビデオを見るところというアクティビティがあります。SPECでは、崇城大学の他学部の日本人教授に英語でインタビューを行い、そのインタビュー映像を使って、学生が自ら英語を勉強する動機付けのためのツールとしてアクティビティを作成する過程を紹介しました。本報告書では、SPECで議論された主な内容を紹介します。

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## Introduction

As part of the second-year English communication curriculum at Sojo University, students are required to complete a unit which focuses on self-directed learning (SDL). Sometimes referred to as “self-access learning”, the effectiveness of SDL in various areas of education has been studied for many years now (Gardner & Millner, 1999) and specifically in English language learning (Benson, 2009; Ciekanski, 2007). The goal of this unit is to encourage students to be self-directed learners by teaching them how to set achievable goals for learning English and how to create learning plans which move students toward achieving those goals. The unit employs a three-step cycle which students are encouraged to follow. First students set clear, achievable goals, then students create a detailed learning plan on how to achieve those goals, and finally students write a reflection which reports on the success of their plan and how they intend on progressing toward their goals. This cycle of goal setting-planning-reflecting is then repeated over a number of classes.

One challenge of introducing this type of activity to students is that it requires a certain amount of intrinsic motivation for it to be truly effective. Intrinsic motivation is generally defined as being internal to the learner, i.e. the learner pursues knowledge because it brings them joy or are genuinely curious about a topic (Dornyei, 1994). Generally speaking, students at Sojo University lack this type of motivation for studying English as it is a compulsory course which is not directly related to their major. Other studies (Fryer et al., 2014) have shown that students in similar contexts typically study English for extrinsic reasons. Students may not view English as being important for their future (Morita, 2013) and see it simply as a hurdle they must overcome in order to graduate. Many students also feel that English is difficult and that Japanese people in general are not good at English (Matsuda, 2011). These are all challenges that teachers face when trying to convince students that self-directed learning is a worthwhile undertaking. One possible way to address some of these challenges is through the use of language learning role models. If students can see someone they know and respect speaking English in a reasonably competent manner perhaps it will inspire them and give them some confidence that they may be able to develop their own language proficiency. The aim of the project described here was to provide students with an opportunity to get language learning advice from people who could serve as a role model, namely professors from their own university.

### **Method**

This part of the report will outline the main steps of the project as discussed in the SPEC. There are three components which will be discussed in detail. First, the process of planning and conducting the interviews will be explained in step-by-step fashion. Next, the process of editing and creating the final video which students will watch will be explained. Finally, the activities that students completed upon watching the video will be outlined.

#### ***Conducting the interviews***

The first step in conducting the interviews is to identify potential candidates to be interviewed. This simply entails drawing up a list of professors, or perhaps administrators, from other departments throughout the university who are known to have some basic English communication skills. The goal for this particular project was to get at least one professor from each department to sit down for an interview conducted in English where they are asked about their English language learning experiences. The reason it was important to get at least one professor from each department was because the goal is to have videos which are department specific. In other words, students in the Mechanical Engineering department would watch an interview with a teacher from their own department with whom they are likely to be familiar, thereby increasing the connection students had to the language learning role model.

Once the list of potential candidates is compiled, the next step is to contact them, describe the goal of the project and what is being asked of them, and ask if they would be interested in taking part in the project. It is useful to have a basic form letter written which can be used and then customized to each potential candidate via email. It is also a good idea to provide some details about what is being asked of them, namely a 20-30 minute videotaped interview conducted in English where they will be asked to describe their English learning experience. A short list of possible questions is helpful to include as it allows the candidates to gauge whether they would be comfortable answering them. It is also important to emphasize that the candidates do not need to have perfectly crafted responses spoken in a highly proficient manner. In accordance with the recent push for Global Englishes and English as a lingua franca (ELF), it is perhaps preferable to have far from perfect English so as to present students with role models who speak English in a way that is attainable (Jenkins, 2006).

This particular step, while seemingly simple, is an important one and can be challenging. Professors are often busy and may not have time to get involved in such a project, especially if they are unfamiliar with the person making the request. They may also be reluctant to have their own students watching them speak English in a less than proficient manner. It may be

necessary to send a follow-up email or an offer to meet casually first before conducting the interview. Even if professors are happy to participate it can at times be difficult to schedule a time to conduct the interview. These are all challenges one should keep in mind when attempting such a project.

Once an interview has been successfully scheduled there are a number of things to consider. First, a location to hold the interview needs to be decided. There are many possibilities for this, including the interviewee's office, a classroom, or even an outdoor location on campus. Any place that offers good lighting and is not too noisy should work well. Depending on the quality desired for the production, a basic video camera, or perhaps even a smartphone, can be used to record the interview. For the project that this SPEC was describing, it was not necessary to have a very high quality video with professional editing as the final product. Rather, a simple video with minimal editing was adequate, with the focus being on the message that was being relayed.

The final step, after all the planning has been completed, is to actually hold the interview. There are a few important points to remember while conducting the interview. First, it is perhaps best to start the interview with some casual small talk to create a relaxed tone to the interview and to give the interviewee a chance to warm up. It is possible that they have not used English for quite some time and may appreciate a chance to activate their English muscles, as it were. It is important to remember that the 20-30 minute interview will be edited down to about 4-5 minutes, so it is perfectly fine to allow for some extraneous conversation that will not be used. After a brief chat to get warmed up, one can move on to the questions about the interviewee's language learning experience. As mentioned earlier, the interviewee should be provided with these ahead of time so as to be able to prepare some responses, but should also be encouraged to speak as spontaneously as possible. Some possible questions include:

- When and how did you start to study English?
- Tell me about your experience learning English in junior high school and high school?
- How was this different from studying English at university?
- Were there any study methods that worked particularly well for you?
- Do you think English is important for students after they graduate from university?
- Do you have any advice for students in terms of learning English?

This is not an exhaustive list, and through the course of a natural (as opposed to scripted) discussion, there are many other questions which might present themselves. One important lesson learned by doing a number of these interviews is to allow the interviewee to give long, extended responses. The interviewer should resist the urge to interrupt with a number of follow-up questions and just allow the interviewee to talk freely. In addition to allowing for more in-depth and insightful responses, this technique also makes the editing process much easier if there are fewer interjections to cut out.

### ***Editing and creating the video***

Depending on the level of familiarity one has with video editing, this can be one of the more time-consuming aspects of the project. The objective here is to cut a 20-30 minute interview down to about 4-5 minutes of usable material. The first step in doing this is to load the video into a movie editing program, such as iMovie, and cut the video into hundreds of smaller clips which can be used or discarded. At first this is done by simply segmenting the parts of the video where the interviewee is speaking versus where the interviewer is speaking. The final video should only have clips of the interviewee speaking. Therefore, all of the clips where the interviewer was speaking could be deleted. After that it becomes a process of deciding which parts of the interviewee's responses are best suited for the final product. In

order to do this well it requires multiple viewings of the video clips to choose the most appropriate ones, and then carefully clipping and editing them into a seamless movie.

After all of the clips have been chosen and edited into a roughly 5 minute video it is recommended that a few steps are taken to enhance the final video which students will watch. First, Japanese subtitles are useful as the entire video is in spoken English and it is important that students understand what is being said. It is also beneficial to have some simple special effects that are relatively easy to insert using the movie editing software. Adding some background music can also be a good way to enhance the final video.

While this may sound like a simple process, if one is not experienced at using movie editing software there is a considerable learning curve. It can take several hours to edit the raw footage into a 4-5 minute final product that students watch.

### ***Getting students to watch the video***

Perhaps the simplest way to get students to watch the video would be to play it for them in class. Some obvious pitfalls of this approach are that the students might not listen carefully or engage with the video in any significant way if there is no check on comprehension. For the project described in this SPEC, the video was embedded in an activity on the university's Moodle platform called SILC Online. A short description of the activity follows.

The first step in the activity is to simply watch the video. The students are instructed to relax and watch the video and are told there will be some simple comprehension questions after watching the video. The activity is set up so that students can go back and watch the video as many times as necessary to answer the questions, but most students are able to answer the questions after only one viewing. The questions are intentionally kept simple and serve as a basic check on comprehension as well as highlighting important points to take away from the video.



**Figure 1.** Video as it appears to students in an online activity

Perhaps the most important post-task activity that students complete is writing a short reflection. The aim of this task is to push students to think a little more deeply about the messages conveyed in the video. Students are told they can write their reflection in English or Japanese, and are given some prompts to help them focus their responses.

What did you think about the video? Write a short reflection (25-50 words). Think about these questions:

- Did you like English in high school?
- Are you interested in English now?
- Do you think English is important?
- What was Inokawa sensei's best advice?

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**Figure 2.** Reflection question as it appears to students in the online activity

### Conclusion

This report has described a project which was presented to SILC teachers in a SPEC during the second semester of the 2020-2021 academic year. At the time the SPEC was presented there was very little data available pertaining to student responses to the reflection activity described earlier. Therefore, this project was presented as a teaching idea or learning activity under development rather than a completed research project. Now that more data has been collected, and will continue to be collected, it is possible this idea will become the basis for more in-depth research. For now the aim is to describe the framework for the project and provide some insight and advice for anyone who is interested in implementing a similar activity.

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