Testing Target Language Through Motivation and Materials
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ABSTRACT

This paper reflects on the use of target language skills used by two classes of students over the course of five weeks in the English Discussion Course (EDC) at Rikkyo University. It speculates whether class materials, feedback, and/or encouragement from the instructor were decisive factors in the overall amount of target language produced. These speculations are based on a personal teaching journal, teaching experience, and various readings.

INTRODUCTION

EDC courses are student-centered and topic-based. In regular lessons, students are graded on *Attendance*, *Participation*, *Quiz* scores (based on short homework readings), and their use of target *Discussion Skills* and *Communication Skills*. In three designated discussion test lessons, their ability to use these target skills is assessed again under more controlled conditions. The discussion skills and communication skills have a listener Side, meaning that they elicit responses, and a speaker side, meaning they produce responses. The communication skills fall under three categories - *Comprehension* (*Active Listening* and *Checking Understanding*), *Paraphrasing* (*Paraphrasing Others* and *Paraphrasing Yourself*), and *Clarification* (*Asking for Explanations* and *Asking for Repetition*).

Over the course of five weeks I kept a teaching journal where I recorded how many students used communication skills in light of three conditions: 1) I supplied them with cards, 2) self-check lists), or 3) no materials or scaffolding, as well as the phrases I used generally as reminders before beginning the next activity or discussion. The purpose was to see if certain materials or phrases increased the use of target language produced during discussions or prep activities. I wanted to see how motivated the students were as described as in the following excerpt from Crookes and Schmidt (1991):

> When teachers say that a student is motivated, they are not usually concerning themselves with the student's reason for studying, but are observing that the student does study, or at least engage in teacher-desired behavior in the classroom and possibly outside it. (p. 480)

The two classes I chose to observe were quite different in both their language abilities and general attitude toward the course. This choice was intentional as I wanted to see if materials would motivate these different classes equally, or if it ultimately did not matter what materials were used (meaning intrinsic motivation was likely more pertinent than extrinsic). A description of the classes from my teaching journal is as follows:

> Level 2: This is an intermediate class with a total of seven students. They are very outgoing and have a good rapport with each other. Many have mentioned that they want to practice English and learn more English even outside of the classroom. I rarely have to remind them to use the CSs (*Communication Skills*) or DSs (*Discussion Skills*).

> Level 3: This is a low intermediate class with a total of eight students. They are somewhat less motivated. I think the material is not challenging enough for them or it just doesn't strike their interest as they tend to act bored in class.

I noticed that the majority of the time both classes of students were checking understanding occasionally during discussions or preparation activities but more so for discussion tests. However, it was often not enough for them to get full points for their discussion or discussion test grades. I was curious to see if the introduction of cards and explicit encouragement would make a difference in their scores.

The cards included phrases for checking understanding, paraphrasing others, paraphrasing yourself, asking for explanations, and asking for repetition. I did not include active listening since the majority of students used such utterances in regular lesson discussions and in discussion tests.

DISCUSSION

Oxford and Shearin (1994) discussed a study performed to find motivational reasons for a group of American students studying Japanese. These included, but were not limited to, "receiving intellectual stimulation, seeking personal challenge, enjoying the elitism of taking a difficult language, showing off to friends, developing greater cultural tolerance through language study, aiding world peace, satisfying curiosity about cultural 'secrets'" (p. 12) as well as wanting to make friends in Japan or believing Japanese would be useful for their careers. From this type of study it is clear there is a kaleidoscope of second language (L2) motivation. With this in mind, I was curious to see how my feedback and encouragement (or lack thereof) given to one class of motivated students and another class of slightly motivated students would be construed and the effect it would have.

Highest Use of the Communication Skills

On June 11th (the 9th week of the course and a discussion test lesson), I was personally very energetic and generally in a good mood. I wrote in my journal:

> It was raining today and many of my students seemed tired. There were also train delays and it was the day of the discussion test. I put the CS cards out as usual, reminding the students that the more CSs they use the better their score would be for the test.

It seems fair to argue the reason for the higher amount of communication skill use was because the students knew they had to use them for the test that day (see Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1. Communication skills use for level 2 in week 9

Number of Cards (CS)	Number of Students D1	Number of Students D2 prep
1	6	0
2	1	4
3	0	3
4 or more	0	0

Table 2. Communication skills use for level 3 in week 9

Number of Cards (CS)	Number of Students D1	Number of Students D2 prep
1	0	0
2	2	1
3	4	1
4 or more	0	4

Lowest Use of the Communication Skills

On June 18th (the tenth week of the course) I decided to experiment and see if the students would use the Communication Skills without any reminders or cards. I felt that after ten weeks of being told to use the Communication Skills and having the phrases readily available on cards or lists for them that they would have absorbed it and the phrases would be produced automatically. What actually happened took me by surprise (see Tables 3 and 4).

Both classes used Japanese extensively throughout the lesson, something they had never done before and while I might have expected a bit from Level 3, I certainly did not think Level 2 would. In my journal I wrote, "Perhaps it's because it's week 10 and they're getting comfortable with each other, the class, or they're just tired?" In hindsight it could have also been because in the previous lesson they had completed their second discussion test. Possibly they were more extrinsically motivated by the idea that their Communication Skill use would have a direct impact on their score than in a regular class. I cannot say that they did not have the need to check for understanding or clarification because they would not have used Japanese in the discussions.

Table 3. Communication skills use for level 2 in week 10

Number of Cards (CS)	Number of Students D1	Number of Students D2 prep
1	0	3
2	1	0
3	0	0
4 or more	0	0

Table 4. Communication skills use for level 3 in week 10

Number of Cards (CS)	Number of Students D1	Number of Students D2 prep
1	1	0
2	0	0
3	0	0
4 or more	0	0

Crookes and Schmidt (1991) stated that "even the straightforward framing remarks initiating an activity or the presentation stage of a lesson deserve to be assessed in the light of motivational considerations" (p. 488). Perhaps this is why in the June 18th, week 10 lesson, without the cards or explicit motivating statements by the teacher, the students did not use the communication skills, or it could have been that after ten weeks of class the was simply losing motivation because they had just completed their second discussion test and were anxious for the semester to be over. In previous lessons, on June 11th for example, where I explicitly reminded the students or incorporated the communication skills into the feedback and stressed how important they were the communication skills were used more frequently, and also more throughout the lesson. This is reflected in what Oxford and Shearin (1994) suggested in that, "a student might demonstrate a particular motivational orientation but not be highly motivated to implement it" (p. 13).

In the final journal entry, July 2nd (the 12th week of the course), I decided to experiment with the materials to see if it had any effect on the language output. The cards, which students would occasionally use competitively, were replaced with check-lists. I explained to the students to put a checkmark next to the communication skills they used so they could make a goal for the

final discussion. This was not effective, however, as can be seen in the Table 5 and Table 6 below. It appeared that the closer to the end of the semester the less the students were using the communication skills. This leads me to believe the students were burning out and gradually losing motivation.

Table 5. Communication skills use for level 2 in week 12

Number of Cards (CS)	Number of Students D1	Number of Students D2 prep
1	3	0
2	0	1
3	0	0
4 or more	0	0

Table 6. Communication skills use for level 3 in week 12

Number of Cards (CS)	Number of Students D1	Number of Students D2 prep
1	3	2
2	0	0
3	0	0
4 or more	0	0

CONCLUSION

Oxford and Shearin (1994) suggested motivation is key in sustained foreign language learning. Research shows that motivation directly influences how often students use L2 learning strategies, how much students interact with native speakers, how much input they receive in the language being learned (the target language), how well they do on curriculum-related achievement tests, how high their general proficiency level becomes, and how long they persevere and maintain L2 skills after language study is over.

From my teaching journal, class materials, and encouragement from the teacher seemed to have an effect on the language produced, but when taken away to see how the classes might use the communication skills naturally they tended to not use them. This could be because the students were not encouraged as much as in previous lessons, the communication skills were not stressed enough in feedback, the students had become too comfortable with each other, they forgot, or they did not have a legitimate need to use them during their discussion or practices. However, it is clear that when the language was clearly and explicitly incorporated into feedback or as a reminder before an activity that the students used the language more.

It is vital that foreign language instructors realize how valuable their phrasing, feedback, and encouragement is linked to student motivation in the class, which in turn determines a variety of outcomes in the students, such as grades, willingness to use the language outside of class, or maintaining their proficiency over time.

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