

Dialogical Feedback as a Tool for Diminishing Students' Anxiety and Acting on Their Needs

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the reasons for implementing a Dialogical Feedback activity in an English discussion class and its impact on students and the teacher. It is based on the principle of taking into account learners' individual differences and aims to reduce anxiety, one of the critical affective variables under the scope of individual differences, as well as to provide students with extra support. The activity involves collecting reflection papers which include students' comments on the lesson and the difficulties they faced, and possibly some questions regarding the material covered in class. The teacher then writes a reply addressing the problems mentioned by students and hands it out to the class. At the end of the semester, students' complete a progress check sheet to evaluate their progress. The activity received a positive evaluation from students and seemed to achieve its goal in reducing anxiety and creating a positive classroom environment.

INTRODUCTION

Different students show a different degree of success in second language learning due to individual differences (ID) defined by Ellis (2004) as "the cognitive and affective factors that lie inside the learner" (p. 525). These fall under Brown's (2007) Principle 9 stating that instruction needs to take into account individual differences in learners. In his explanation for this principle, Brown mainly focuses on two ID factors, learning strategies and intrinsic motivation, arguing that teachers should assist students in developing the range of the learning strategies at their disposal and enhancing their intrinsic motivation.

Motivation is one of the main issues EDC teachers face due to the compulsory nature of the course. Each EDC teacher teaches approximately 100 students per semester, and each of these students has their own L2 learning background and both negative and positive experiences with L2 learning. All students are introduced to the same functional language items which are presented using the same technique (i.e., inductive approach). The classes they attend have the same structure (with some minor alternations) and consist of more or less the same activities that can be found in the EDC textbook they are using. However, considering students' individual differences and their previous L2 learning experiences, it is hardly possible to guarantee that, despite getting more or less the same teaching, all of them undergo the same learning process. Taking into account Guiora's (1984) words about language learning itself being "a profoundly unsettling psychological proposition" (p. 8), one can expect a wide range of anxieties to arise while students are trying to handle English discussion class, a highly communicative course that differs significantly from English classes offered at Japanese high schools. Therefore, one needs to uncover students' anxieties and suggest some strategies to reduce them to ensure a more effective learning process.

The Dialogical Feedback activity was designed with these ideas in mind. Being a modified version of a One-Minute Paper activity (Cross & Angelo, 1993), it aims at identifying students' anxieties and difficulties and providing them with advice on overcoming these anxieties (e.g., giving additional explanations on some language points students did not understand fully, advising on test preparation techniques). The ultimate goal of the Dialogical Feedback activity is to comfort students by acknowledging their learning difficulties and anxieties and create a positive classroom environment by addressing them and providing extra learning support.

DISCUSSION

Individual Differences in SLA

The interest in ID among educators emerged in the second half of the 20th century. The main question behind this interest was an urge to understand what makes some people more successful language learners than the others. This will be briefly summarized in the section that follows.

Naiman, Frohlich, Stern, and Todesco (1978) were able to identify five major variables that were believed to contribute to the success of language learning: personality characteristics (introversion and extroversion), classroom behaviour, general learning style and aptitude, attitude (later considered by Gardner as part of motivation), and specific learning techniques (learning strategies).

Studies in language aptitude have started as early as in the 1920s and aimed to identify if there was “a specific talent for learning foreign languages” and if this talent was *innate*, *relatively fixed* or *amenable to training*, and, most importantly, could be used as “the basis for prediction of language learning success” (Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003, pp. 590-591). Studies in learning styles, on the other hand, did not seek to change the styles but focussed on their influence on language learning and possible accommodations that could be made in the classroom to ensure that learners with specific learning styles cannot be prevented from success in language learning.

Learning strategies, or strategic investment, are of particular interest to us since one of the desirable (but not ultimate) goals of the Dialogical Feedback activity is to hint at thinking of different strategies which could assist in overcoming stated difficulties or even anxieties. Oxford (1990) defined learning strategies as “steps taken by students to enhance their own learning” (p. 1). She considered them to be of extreme importance since they could be used as a ‘tool for active and self-directed involvement’, which, she claimed, was “essential for developing communicative competence” (p. 1). Ultimately, she argued, appropriate use of various learning strategies would result in improved foreign language proficiency and greater self-confidence. Oxford (1990) also provided a detailed taxonomy based on the division of learner strategies into direct and indirect (p. 16). Direct strategies were further subdivided into memory, cognitive, and compensation strategies, while indirect strategies consisted of metacognitive, affective, and social strategies (Oxford, 1990, pp. 16-17). We will look at some of these types of strategies in further depth later.

Research on motivation posed following questions: what serves as the driving force for learning a language? Or, in other words, “why does an organism behave as it does?” (Gardner, 1985, p. 50). Motivation is tightly linked with goal-orientedness, i.e., when an individual is motivated they put more energy into achieving the goal; however, when an individual is not motivated, they tend to stay inactive and, therefore, do not achieve the goal. Gardner and Lambert (1959) proposed two broad categories: an *integrative orientation* (a positive disposition toward the L2 and L2 group) and an *instrumental orientation* (based on some potential pragmatic gains of L2 proficiency). This dual model is still widely accepted and its integrative aspect – the *integrative motive* – has become the most researched (Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003).

Further research in motivation resulted in multiple theories, i.e., expectancy-value theories and goal theories. The first group of theories claims that two key factors influence motivation for language learning: “the individual expectancy of success in a given task [and] the value the individual attaches to success in that task” (Dörnyei & Skehan, 2003, p. 613). Goal theories considered a sense of purpose to be the main component of goal-orientedness and stressed the voluntary nature of goal-setting and goal-pursuing. Finally, they distinguished between *intrinsic* (self-initiated) and *extrinsic* (initiated by external sources) motivation and claimed that autonomy is ‘the essence of motivated action’.

All of these variables are tightly connected. Learners can – and should – be supported by appropriate learning strategies. Their use leads to increased motivation, which leads to further and

more active employment of learner strategies, which, in its turn, leads to even greater motivation, language proficiency, and self-confidence. However, not all learners are motivated enough, and many teachers are familiar with the situation when no motivational strategies work. What hinders the process in this case? What prevents learners from becoming motivated?

In the 1970s, many researchers started talking about affective variables, an umbrella term that covered a whole range of categories that had to do with personality. One of the first noticeable personal differences were *extroversion* and *introversion* (Naiman et al., 1978), or “*reserved vs outgoing personality*” (Chastain, 1975). Later, Chastain (1976) talked about two subcategories of learner variables: *intrinsic* learner variables and *extrinsic* ones. Within intrinsic variables, there was an *affective* variable, or *foreign language anxiety*, according to Scovel (1978), “one of the most important affective variables identified in learning tasks” (p. 131). What exactly is foreign language anxiety and why is it so important to consider it?

Foreign Language Anxiety

MacIntyre and Gardner (1994) defined language anxiety as “the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning” (p. 284). Initially, two constructs were identified: *trait* and *state anxiety* (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). According to Horwitz et al., trait anxiety is a “stable predisposition to become anxious in a wide range of situations” (p. 93). They noted that this type of anxiety seems to have little effect on the language-learning process; however, state anxiety – an “immediate, transitory emotional experience with immediate cognitive effects” (p. 93) – has a negative influence on the language-learning process. Indeed, for foreign language learners, any task is a potential source of anxiety. MacIntyre (1995) stressed that task performance itself and difficulties arising during this performance could provoke anxiety.

Horwitz et al. also offered another classification of anxiety consisting of communication apprehension, fear of negative social evaluation, and test anxiety (or apprehension over academic evaluation). They reported that students were “very self-conscious when they were required to engage in speaking activities that expose their inadequacies”, and these feelings often lead to “fear, or even panic” (p. 128). As a result, they were sensitive to both peer and teacher evaluation of their oral performance. Von Wörde’s study (2003) supported the statement that social anxiety represents one of the most serious challenges for foreign language students: “Many of the anxiety-provoking factors reported by the participants appeared to be generated by various speaking activities normally encountered in a language class” (p. 5). Thus, communication apprehension and fear of negative social evaluation have a high chance of being provoked by the EDC course, which is a highly communicative course taught in small groups of seven to nine students. Such class sizes allow teachers to monitor each student more closely than it could be in larger classes. Therefore, we might suppose that there is a stronger feeling among students of being put under the spotlight, which no doubt provides fruitful conditions for the development of anxiety.

It is also important to take into consideration cultural features when talking about anxiety, especially communication apprehension and fear of negative social evaluation. King (2014) noted that Japanese university students show a “significant trend towards silence” (p. 232), and this silence is a kind of withdrawn behaviour shaped by socio-cultural values, norms, and expectations of social reticence and reserved behaviour, both of which receive a positive evaluation within Japanese society. He interviewed 11 students, and all of them admitted to have a fear of being negatively evaluated by their classmates and teachers because of making mistakes or expressing opinions that are too different or difficult for others to understand. Anxiety research suggests that language learners experiencing social anxiety end up under double pressure: in addition to all those negative emotions that make them too occupied with the impression they make, they have

to communicate in a foreign language in which they often cannot express their ideas clearly and elegantly enough, which, in its turn, makes them even more anxious. As von Wörde (2003) put it, “[...] language learners have a dual task. They must not only learn the new language but perform in it as well” (p. 5).

An intensive research into foreign language anxiety led to an extended taxonomy of individual differences introduced by Ellis (2004): (1) abilities (intelligence, language aptitude, memory); (2) propensities (learning styles, motivation, *anxiety*, personality, willingness to communicate); (3) learner cognitions about L2 (learner beliefs); and (4) learner actions (learner strategies) (p. 530). Therefore, anxiety was finally accepted as one of the critical affective variables constituting individual differences.

Anxiety as an Emotion and Ways to Diminish Anxiety

It is very important to understand that anxiety is an emotion, and like any emotion, it can be difficult for students to control. Moreover, the language-learning process itself is not just a cognitive process, but also a “cognitive and emotional struggle” (Swain, 2013, p. 205). A foreign language classroom is an arena for multiple social interactions, and while social interactions cause a great range of various emotions and feelings to arouse, social interactions that have to be carried out in a foreign language serve as an even stronger trigger for them. It is essential to understand that language learning does not only depend on emotions, but it can also influence them. As Swain (2013) said, cognition and emotions in second-language learning are inseparable and “cannot be ignored in understanding language learning processes” (p. 196).

However, it does not mean that anxiety and other negative emotions are the only emotions that are present in foreign language learning. On the contrary, many other emotions are involved in this process, such as joy, happiness, satisfaction, pride, relief, etc. Moreover, negative emotions can have a positive effect on learning, and this statement is supported by research and two other classifications of anxiety: *debilitating anxiety* and *facilitating anxiety* (Alpert & Haber, 1960, in Scovel, 1978). While debilitating anxiety is that type of anxiety we have discussed above – an anxiety that discourages learners from pursuing task performance and stimulates them to adopt avoidance behaviour, – facilitating anxiety motivates them to approach the new task. This statement implies that we, teachers, can use facilitating anxiety to improve L2 performance in the classroom; however, the border between these two types of anxiety is vague, and such actions would require adequate expertise that many teachers lack. Therefore, it would be easier and more efficient to focus on diminishing debilitating anxiety, which exactly was the primary goal of the Dialogical Feedback activity.

While there is a considerable body of research on anxiety proving that anxiety is a measured variable, there are not that many practical implications which could help in reducing anxiety among foreign language learners. Horwitz et al. (1986) were some of the first researchers to provide some pedagogical implications for dealing with anxious students and they mentioned two ways: helping learners cope with anxiety and providing them with less stressful learning environment. To be more specific, they proposed relaxation exercises, advice on effective learning strategies, and journal keeping.

Some effective learning strategies that could help students cope with anxiety, as mentioned above, were described by Oxford (2002) as part of the indirect affective strategies and “serve to regulate emotions, attitudes, and motivation” (p. 121). They include lowering your anxiety by using relaxation techniques, encouraging yourself, and taking your emotional temperature. She also pointed out that discussing their feelings with someone else was very important for language learners to manage their emotions (Ehrman, Leaver, & Oxford, 2003, p. 317). The Dialogical Feedback activity allows students to express their emotions in writing. Since Japanese learners

generally do not feel comfortable talking about their feelings to other people, letting them keep matters private seemed to be a wise choice. However, admitting that some difficulties exist in writing them down even without discussing them with anyone, the process is nonetheless beneficial for learners, especially when they know that there is someone (i.e., teacher) who is going to help with these difficulties. Such kind of activity is also a good way to evaluate one's learning, a useful metacognitive strategy proposed by Oxford (1990).

Von Wörde's findings (2003) supported Horwitz et al.'s advice for less stressful learning contexts: the participants of her study said that having a relaxed classroom environment was "paramount in reducing anxiety" (p. 7). By that, they meant that teachers should try to create a low-stress, friendly and supportive learning environment. As we saw earlier, anxiety and stress go hand in hand, and therefore, by reducing one factor, we can suppose that the other one is reduced as well. Moreover, von Wörde insisted that teachers should be "sensitive to students' fears and insecurities and help them to confront those fears" (p. 12). By reading students' answers to the questions asked in the Dialogical Feedback activity and replying with some advice and words of encouragement, a teacher can shape that supportive learning environment. Furthermore, by providing additional explanations on the material covered in class, they can reinforce the material and ensure higher retention, which is particularly important in the EDC context.

The Dialogical Feedback activity helps students express their feelings, both positive (reflecting on the good points of that day's lesson) and negative (reflecting on the difficulties and worries that arose in the lesson). Potentially, this can motivate them to take some learner actions to overcome those difficulties. The teacher's reply, advice, and encouragement, as a compulsory part of the Dialogical Feedback activity, can equip them with some practical tips they could use and which hopefully will help them feel more relaxed. I strongly believe that dialogue between teachers and their students is the key to establishing a comfortable and supportive learning environment. Finally, feedback is one of the key parts of the EDC lesson, and it is usually structured around students' performance and content they produced during discussions. However, what determines the performance we see? How do we know why students performed this way and not another? We cannot guarantee that all students took our presentation, explanations, and consecutive feedback the same way. Therefore, there are some weak zones that teachers are not aware of. The Dialogical Feedback activity aims to identify such zones and ensure that students can improve them. Finally, this activity allows for an individual approach to each student group and, one can say, each student as it makes every student's voice heard and acted on.

PROCEDURE

The Dialogical Feedback activity is a slight modification of the One-Minute Paper activity (Angelo & Cross, 1993) aimed at eliciting "timely student feedback" (p. 147). It was used as a weekly activity from the first lesson of the semester when explanations were given about how the activity was to be conducted, what things that students might write, and in which language. It is important to stress that the activity was anonymous, i.e., the teacher did not know who wrote anything, but everything was read by the teacher, and the reply was handed out in the following lesson.

In lessons 1-12 of the fall semester, students answered two questions offered to them on a Dialogical Feedback slip (see Appendix A). Responses were written in English or Japanese depending on the students' preference. Question 1 in all lessons was always about positive experiences (e.g., "What was good about today's lesson?"), and question 2 was always about difficulties or anxieties (e.g., "Is there anything you are worried about?"). Specific question wording would change from week to week, but the positive/negative approach was maintained throughout. After students answered the questions, the teacher collected their responses, analysed

them, and wrote a reply with some advice (see Appendix B). The reply was then posted on the EDC website as part of the weekly online class comments. Thereafter, a hard copy was distributed to each class just before the beginning of lessons 2-5, 7-9, and 11-13 (i.e., all lessons apart from those immediately following discussion test lessons, i.e. lesson 6, 10, and 14). The teacher then highlighted some important points mentioned by students (e.g., how or when to use the new discussion skill or how to prepare for the discussion test) and provided some additional explanations, advice, and words of encouragement while students were looking at the reply. Students were encouraged to read the rest of the response at home after the lesson. They were also encouraged to attach the reply to an empty page in their textbooks. The whole procedure took no more than 3-5 minutes of lesson time.

In lesson 14, students did a Progress Check activity (see Appendix C). The teacher prepared a list of top-10 difficulties mentioned by students through the semester. Students had to look at this list and circle 'yes' or 'no' for the following questions: "Did you have this problem at the beginning of this semester?" and "Do you feel like you still have it?". After that, they shared their thoughts in pairs and answered some additional questions about EDC (e.g., "Have you enjoyed English Discussion classes?", "Do you feel you have made some progress?" etc.). In most cases, each student had at least some difficulties that they had overcome by the end of the semester, and this Progress Check activity made that progress more visual. Some students admitted that they would come to the first lessons with the feeling of apprehension or even negative attitude towards EDC lessons, but, as time passed, they started enjoying the class despite some difficulties and felt that they were supported by their teacher. Moreover, according to a questionnaire conducted at the end of the fall semester and students' comments to it, the Dialogical Feedback activity was evaluated positively by the students. They found the experience of reflecting on good points and difficulties to have been beneficial for their learning and development, and that their teacher's replies had helped them improve their performance, boost their confidence, and create a positive atmosphere.

The One-Minute Paper activity was previously researched in the context of EDC by Tsushima (2015); however, there are some differences in approach with the current study. Firstly, Tsushima implemented this activity with only one group that she described as "especially quiet and unresponsive" (p. 194). However, learners in all kinds of groups can have difficulties and thus need support. Even though students in more active and responsive groups do not hesitate to ask questions during the lesson, the timing does not always allow for that. The weekly Dialogical Feedback activity provided an opportunity for these students to share their worries and ask questions, which they indeed need as much as quiet and unresponsive learners.

Secondly, Tsushima conducted the One-Minute Paper activity three times only in lessons 4, 7, and 11 following Angelo and Cross' remark on the danger of overusing the Minute Paper if one does not want students to develop a negative attitude towards it. While this is a fair remark, due to the nature of the EDC course, where students learn two skills in a row and then have to figure out how to combine them with other skills they have previously learnt, the earlier any difficulties are identified, the better. The earlier students receive practical advice and additional explanations, the higher is the chance that they will perform better in further lessons, especially discussion test lessons. It is essential to identify the sources of anxiety promptly and act on students' needs expeditiously.

VARIATIONS

The Dialogical Feedback activity was designed to be implemented on a weekly basis to ensure that any issues and potential anxieties are identified at an early stage and are dealt with promptly. However, it can, of course, be used on a more judicious basis, for example, at the end of review

lessons only, if one wishes to focus specifically on test preparation and decrease test anxiety.

Secondly, the questions are subject to change depending on what kind of problems the teacher anticipates being raised. By asking different questions, one can narrow or widen the scope. In this study, both narrow-focussed and more opened questions were posed (e.g., “Was there anything difficult today?” and “Is there anything you want to learn more about?”), and while the answers to the narrow-focussed questions were rather predictable and typically related to the target phrases learnt that lesson, certain answers were quite surprising. For example, some asked about effective ways to learn vocabulary or useful sources to practise listening. While these are out of the scope of EDC’s curriculum, it is still important for teachers to be receptive to requests for help.

Finally, the manner in which the teacher responded to students’ reflections can be varied. Instead of answering the whole class and listing issues that students mentioned, one could try replying to each student individually in a private student-teacher journal. While this kind of reply would take a more considerable amount of time for a teacher to produce, it could potentially form a stronger student-teacher connection and be more beneficial for learners.

CONCLUSION

I implemented the Dialogical Feedback activity in the course of a whole academic year and found to be beneficial for both students and myself as a teacher. It allowed me to identify some weak points in my instruction that resulted in difficulties and caused some anxiety to my students. Thanks to my students’ reflections, I was able to see both the strengths and weaknesses of my lessons and provide additional explanations and support when needed. I noticed that many students seemed to become more willing to communicate their worries over time and their reflections became more emotional and detailed. I could also see students following my advice, which resulted in better task performance and seemingly reduced anxiety.

There were some limitations though. While most groups, especially those with lower proficiency, seemed to find the activity beneficial (indicated by their replies to the questionnaire), some students in higher-level classes did not seem to see any value in it and were reluctant to provide any reflections. One possible reason could be that they did not need that much assistance from me as their teacher, or that their general attitude towards the class was fairly non-committal, or because I, as their teacher, failed to articulate the importance of this activity well enough.

The effectiveness of this activity could be assessed more formally via questionnaires. Potentially, at the beginning of the academic year, a survey could be conducted to measure the initial levels of anxiety and motivation. Another survey could then be conducted to see if the Dialogical Feedback helped to reduce anxiety levels and raise motivation. Otherwise, a questionnaire similar to the one mentioned above could be distributed to a wider range of students.

As Swain (2013) said, teachers should “listen to learners’ struggling to help them achieve their goals” (p. 205). This means we have to “recognise their emotions and use them to help us understand when – and how – it is appropriate to intervene”. This might be achieved by implementing the Dialogical Feedback activity. Asking your students to write about their impressions – both positive and negative – and share their worries is perhaps one effective way to get the full picture of what is going on in the classroom. By recognising students’ difficulties and providing them with the necessary support, we can ensure a smoother and more relaxed language learning process, which they no doubt deserve to have.

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APPENDIX A – Dialogical Feedback Activity Questions

<i>Write the answers. You can write in English or Japanese. It's anonymous (匿名), so you can be honest.</i>
1) What did you like about today's lesson? Why?
2) Was there anything difficult today? What and why?

APPENDIX B – Teacher's Sample Feedback Given to Students

<p>1. Some of you said they had some difficulties with sentences in English: either too short, or chaotic, or not clear enough.</p> <p><u>Lina's reply:</u> I see. What I can say is that you are just learning English, so it is totally natural that sometimes something goes wrong - don't let it upset you! If you think your ideas are not clear or smooth enough, make sure to use the communication skills we learnt to check if everyone can understand you. You might also want to paraphrase your idea - maybe this time it will sound clearer and smoother? Also, there is nothing wrong with short sentences! As one of your classmates said, short sentences are easier to understand, so they are more classmate-friendly :)</p> <p>2. Two of you said they couldn't give more details about their opinion.</p> <p><u>Lina's reply:</u> I see. You don't necessarily have to give many details about your opinion. However, if you worry about that, you can try writing down some ideas at home. At home, you will have more time to think about your ideas than in the lesson so you will be able to come up with more details.</p> <p>3. Finally, one of you said they couldn't understand English sometimes.</p> <p><u>Lina's reply:</u> It happens! I also don't understand everything I hear. Even when you talk in Japanese, I am sure it sometimes happens that you can't understand something - maybe because the speaker speaks too fast, or because their speech is not very clearly structured. The main thing here is to make sure that you try to solve the misunderstanding by admitting it (<i>Sorry, I don't understand</i>) and asking the speaker to repeat (<i>Can you please repeat that?</i>). You can also try paraphrasing what the speaker said to see how much you understood.</p>
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APPENDIX C – Lesson 14 Progress Check Activity**Progress Check**

♣ *Here are some problems you mentioned at the beginning of this semester. Have a look and answer the questions by circling yes or no.*

Problem	At the beginning of this semester	Now
1. I can't speak smoothly.	<i>yes / no</i>	<i>yes / no</i>
2. It's difficult to say what I think in English.	<i>yes / no</i>	<i>yes / no</i>
3. I can't speak quickly.	<i>yes / no</i>	<i>yes / no</i>
4. I can't speak clearly.	<i>yes / no</i>	<i>yes / no</i>
5. I can't use discussion skills naturally.	<i>yes / no</i>	<i>yes / no</i>
6. Paraphrasing is difficult.	<i>yes / no</i>	<i>yes / no</i>
7. It's difficult to discuss ideas from different points of view.	<i>yes / no</i>	<i>yes / no</i>
8. It's difficult to remember the phrases.	<i>yes / no</i>	<i>yes / no</i>
9. I can't think of new ideas quickly.	<i>yes / no</i>	<i>yes / no</i>
10. Summarizing is difficult.	<i>yes / no</i>	<i>yes / no</i>

♣ ***Discuss with your partner:***

- Which problems did you have at the beginning of this semester? Which problems do you think you still have? Which problems don't you have anymore?
- Do you feel you have made some progress?
- What did you learn in English Discussion classes?
- Are the English Discussion classes similar to your high school English classes?
- Have you enjoyed the English Discussion classes?
- Were the English Discussion classes this semester more difficult than last semester?