

Instilling in Students the Drive to Be a Self-sustaining Learner in an E-learning Class

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Abstract: This study attempts to investigate if and to what extent introducing methods on how to learn English to students influences their out-of-class learning. The study took place in a university e-learning class in the metropolitan Tokyo area in Japan in 2014. At the beginning and in the midst of a class, the teacher set aside a segment to present a number of learning strategies as well as tips on how to keep motivated, using PowerPoint slides, English songs and video footage. The aims of the segment were to 1. give students clues for them to be autonomous learners, 2. give them a change of pace, and 3. give a human touch to an otherwise dry e-learning class. Data was collected through questionnaires with five-point Likert scales and free writing answers. The analysis of one of the dependent variables, students' reading aloud habits, indicates that not a few students seemed to have realized the usefulness of reading aloud among other strategies and started to add the activity to their repertoire. What is worth noting is that reading aloud was only one of the strategies introduced in the class and the teacher had students practice reading aloud only once. Just like whether input becomes intake while listening to a foreign language is determined by various factors, students reacted to the same stimulus (information on a certain learning strategy) differently. It seems that what students need is to be exposed to as many learning tips as possible in order to raise the possibility of encountering a strategy that is suited to them and can be set aside for a future learning use.

Keywords: *e-learning, out-of-class learning, autonomous learners, the Learning Style Model by Kolb (1976), a change-of-pace segment*

Introduction

In tandem with the advancement of technologies, the number of universities with e-learning classes has increased. According to the survey done by the National Institute of Multimedia Education in 2005, 36.3 percent of the responding universities in Japan had incorporated e-learning classes, with 69.3 percent of those being national universities. E-learning is also referred to by terms such as web-based learning and distance learning. Researchers define the term e-learning differently, but the current study adopts the definition that Naidu (2002) proposed: educational processes that take advantage of information and communications technology in order to facilitate asynchronous as well as synchronous learning and teaching activities. The class the current study took place in has both asynchronous and synchronous aspects. In the classroom, the teacher in the

main classroom transmits information including announcements, English songs and video footages to the two separate classrooms (synchronous aspect). At home, students can access web-based materials the university offers (asynchronous aspect). There is also a semi-synchronous aspect: in the classroom, after students are assigned to solve units for the day, they start at the same time, but proceed at their own pace. This is where a problem sets in: some students complain that this is something they can do without coming all the way to university. People say tastes differ, but what makes some students fond of a certain way of learning and others indifferent to it? Hu, P. J., Hui, W., Clark, T. H. K., Milton, J., Ma, W., and Tam, K. Y. (2005) conducted longitudinal research to determine which of four learning styles that Kolb (1976) categorized (accommodator, diverger, converger and assimilator) benefits most from e-learning. The results indicated that assimilators, who are typically good at inductive reasoning, showed the greatest improvement regarding objective learning achievement, perceived learning effectiveness and learning satisfaction. Accommodators, who place values in getting involved through live experiences, exhibited less positive attitudes toward e-learning. Thus, it seems like any type of classroom activity is liable to run a risk of being demotivating to certain types of learners. With the aim of making the class more appealing to as many types of students as possible, the teacher in the current study started setting aside the segment to introduce learning tips to students in an entertaining way using PowerPoint slides, English songs and video footage. The teacher also hoped that it would serve as a change of pace as well as a motivator for students to become autonomous learners. As for learner strategy training like this, there are researchers who make dubious claims about its effectiveness and say that there is no verifiable evidence that the awareness of strategies leads to L2 learning success (Rees-Miller, 1993). It is true that if, after introducing only one strategy, no students showed any reaction to it, the explanation would be seen as a failure. However, if you increase the number of strategies that are introduced, the number of students who are inspired might increase. Macaro (2006) states that “successful learning is no longer linked to the individual learner’s frequency of strategy use, but to his or her orchestration of strategies available to him or her,” and that “strategies do not make learning more efficient; they are the raw material without which L2 learning cannot take place (p.332).” It is totally up to the students whether they like the strategy or not, and the mission of teachers mission be to show the students as many strategies as possible so that students can add some of them to their repertoire, either at the present or in the future. Dörnyei (2001) claims that the influence of teachers as well as students’ knowledge and use of learning strategies are two of the motivational influences that impact the motivation of students. The teacher in the current study put his heart and soul into creating fun and insightful PowerPoint slides to provide students with knowledge of strategies so as to motivate them to want to improve their out-of-class learning.

With respect to reading aloud, one of the ways to improve English proficiency introduced in the current class, two strategies were invented to help struggling learners acquire suprasegmental features of English; assisted reading (Heckelman, 1969) and repeated reading (Dahl, 1979; Samuels, 1979). Assisted reading provides students with an opportunity to read a passage orally with a teacher, while repeated reading helps

students read a passage repeatedly to develop both fluency and accuracy. It was found that repeated reading led to improved speech pausing and intonation (Dowhower, 1987), and Herman (1985) found that the improved skills through repeated reading were transferred to previously unread materials. Kuhn and Stahl (2003) support assisted repeated reading, a combination of assisted reading and repeated reading, where students read a passage repeatedly with audio material that serves as scaffolding. Underhill (1994) states that reading aloud helps acquire stress-timed patterns of English.

Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin (1996), on the other hand, criticize that the controlled texts for reading aloud is different from the spontaneous speech we hear in our daily life. Chun (2002) cautions suggests that teachers not spend too much time on listening and imitating to prevent students from getting bored. Gibson (2008), acknowledging criticisms, say that as long as teachers handle the strategy with sensitivity, reading aloud will be useful in helping students acquire prosodic features of English. Kuhn and Stahl (2003) mention prosody as a primary element of fluency and it includes “appropriately chunking groups of words into phrases or meaningful units (p4),” to gain which is one of the purposes of reading aloud activity.

Study

Method

This action research took place in a university e-learning class in the metropolitan Tokyo area in the 2014 fall semester. English e-learning is one of the required courses for freshmen. The students in the current study took lessons in three separate PC rooms, each of which holding approximately 40 students. The main classroom had the teacher in it, and the other two had teaching assistants. A system enables simultaneous transmission of the teacher’s voice, music, graphics and moving images. To be fair, the teacher had the students change classrooms on a rotation basis so that they got to see the teacher once every three weeks. The main material used in this course is web-based English listening and reading comprehension quizzes, and the mid-term and final exams are web-based TOEIC-style tests. Some students have heard that this course is a tedious torture through the grapevine from their seniors.

The original number of registered students was 126 and the data of those who were present both at the first and the final class was used for this study: 101 freshmen (39 males and 62 females). It should be noted that the aim of this study is not to discuss and judge the pros and cons of web-based classes nor investigate which type of learners benefit from them most, but to analyze how the ten-minute introduction of various learning tips will change the out-of-class learning of the students. At the beginning of the semester, a questionnaire with 12 Likert scale items (see Appendix A) was administered. For a period of three months, the teacher, in order to bring some variety to the class, motivate students to be autonomous learners and add a human touch in contrast with web-based materials, set aside a segment at the beginning and in the midst of each lesson to show PowerPoint slides concerning English learning, English songs and video footages. The contents

presented in the classroom varied from 1. phonetic characteristics of English (stress-timed rhythm, liaison, schwa, the flapping sound of intervocalic /t/ and /d/), 2. introducing SLA research findings that students find relevant, 3. the importance of meaningful use of English in their daily life (followed by tips on choosing books for extensive reading), 4. how to memorize new words in a vocabulary book efficiently, 5. various ways of reading aloud and the efficacy of it, 6. the benefits of speaking English slowly, 7. useful websites (e.g., TED, a website where you can watch thought-provoking talks and performances), 8. what to do for a change of pace during study, 9. showing movie excerpts (starting with the Japanese dubbed version, followed by the English audio with Japanese subtitles, the English audio with English subtitles, and the English audio with no subtitles), and 10. fill-in-the-lyrics quizzes while listening to famous English songs. For instance, in regard with introducing reading aloud in the classroom, the teacher not only demonstrated various types of the activity (repeating, overlapping, eye-shadowing and shadowing, etc.) but also ushered students into the world of second language research. By doing so, the teacher aimed to make students believe the credibility and usefulness of the learning strategies that were being introduced. At the end of the semester, the same questionnaire as the one administered at the beginning with some additional questions was administered.

Measures

The dependent variable, students' learning habits regarding reading aloud, was measured, using questionnaire item five (I incorporate reading aloud into my out-of-class learning).

Data Analysis

Students' habits of reading aloud as measured by Survey 2 ($M = 2.63$, $SD = 1.09$) was higher than as measured by Survey 1 ($M = 2.0$, $SD = 1.07$), $t(100) = 6.39$, $p < 0.0001$, two-tailed, $d = 0.58$ (a medium effect size). The comparison between the first and second questionnaire indicates a clear positive shift in the habits with 41 students going up one point, 10 students two points and five students three points on the Likert scale. On the other hand, there were 10 students whose responses were no different from one on the Likert scale.

The Overall Trend of the Class

In response to the new questionnaire item added to the second questionnaire (See Appendix B) "I got motivated through lectures on how to study English, the greatest number of students, 48 (47.5%), responded with "Agree," and 25 students (24.8%) with "Strongly Agree." The phrases most frequently referred to as useful in the free writing part (See Appendix B) in the second questionnaire were "ways of learning" (56 students, 55.4%) followed by "video footages" (43 students, 42.6%), "how to memorize words" (29 students, 28.7%), "graded readers" (25 students, 24.8 %), "English songs" (23 students, 22.8%), "listening" (nine students, 8.9%) and "phonetics/pronunciation" (seven students, 6.9%).

Changes

Below are excerpts from the free writing answers of the students (all pseudonyms) whose change in response in the second questionnaire in regard with questionnaire item five (“I incorporate reading aloud into my out-of-class learning”) was worth studying closely. The free writing part has two questions; 1. “What did you find useful in the e-learning class?” and 2. “Could you describe any changes, if any, that occurred in you the past three months?”

The Change in Kanna

In response to questionnaire item five, in the first questionnaire, the answer was “Never,” but it was “Often” in the second questionnaire. In the free writing part in the second questionnaire, responding to the first question, “What did you find useful in the e-learning class?”, Kanna wrote, “Getting to know about TED. I found it really entertaining when I watched it at home. Also, it was good to learn various ways of learning in the classroom. Now I can study English with more pleasure.” Responding to the next question, “Could you write any changes, if any, that occurred in you the past three months,” Kanna wrote, “My mindset changed from having to study to wanting to study.”

The Change in Ken

In response to questionnaire item five, in the first questionnaire, the answer was “Never,” but it was “Often” in the second questionnaire. Responding to the question, “What did you find useful in the e-learning class?”, Ken wrote, “Honestly, I would often get fed up with the fact that I did not know how to study English. However, I was happy to learn some ways of learning (such as listening to English songs and watching videos) that were different from what I had done sitting at my desk. I got motivated. Because I have been busy this semester, I did not have much time to study. But I am determined to set aside time to study English.” Responding to the question “Could you describe changes, if any, that occurred in you the past three months?”, Ken wrote, “My motivation to learn English has sprouted.”

The Change in Haru

In response to questionnaire item five, in the first questionnaire, the answer was “Never,” but it was “Often” in the second questionnaire. Responding to the question, “What did you find useful in the e-learning class?”, Haru wrote, “The PowerPoint slides the teacher showed us every week introducing ways of learning as well as recommended English books were of great use as a reference. Thank you very much.” Responding to the question “Could you describe changes, if any, that occurred in you the past three months”, Haru wrote, “I have always been obsessed with the idea that I have to (There were dots on “have to” for emphasis) study English. Now, I think I will be better off having fun learning English. I will find something that I can continue studying with and devote my energy to it.”

The Change in Yuria

In response to questionnaire item five, in the first questionnaire, the answer was “Never,” but it was “Often” in the second questionnaire. Responding to the question, “What did you

find useful in the e-learning class?”, Yuria wrote, “Every week, I was looking forward to the time to watch videos and listen to English songs. I would check out the information on them at home and it was fun.” Responding to the question “Could you describe changes, if any, that occurred in you the past three months”, Yuria wrote, “I learned to cherish the day. The extensive knowledge of English the teacher has never failed to surprise me and it influenced me a lot. Now, in my daily life, I often find myself stop and wonder “What is this called in English?” I learned not only English but also a way to shift my thoughts to things around me.”

The Change in Saki

In response to questionnaire item five, in the first questionnaire, the answer was “Never,” but it was “Often” in the second questionnaire. Responding to the question, “What did you find useful in the e-learning class?”, Saki wrote, “I liked it that the teacher introduced tips on learning English, subdividing them into how to improve listening, how to read fluently, how to increase vocabulary, and so forth. They were what I had not heard of before, looked easy to try my hand at, and were really intriguing.” Responding to the question “Could you describe changes, if any, that occurred in you the past three months”, Saki wrote, “It used to be that I was never able to get out of my mind the preoccupation that English is merely a tool to pass entrance exams. Therefore, and naturally, I disliked reading difficult English sentences and have avoided doing it since entering university. However, the teacher, with an interesting approach and easy-to-understand explanation, introduced English songs and manga. It brought out my desire to learn English. I would like to continue studying little by little.”

The Change in Masako, Shin and Rie, who started attending the class reluctantly

There were three students who explicitly admitted to their initial suspicions about why they needed to take the e-learning class. However, after three months of taking the class, they all expressed their satisfaction with the “how to learn” segment in the class. Masako wrote, “Before taking this class, I was unconvinced as to why I had to come all the way to university on Saturday to take an e-learning class. However, it turned out to be fun because I was taught the phonetic knowledge (such as unstressed vowels) and effective ways of learning English (how to brush up vocabulary and how to improve listening). Also, it was fun to learn some trivia such as native speakers’ way of saying this and that. I came to feel I was happy to have come to university on Saturday.” Shin’s comment was sharper than Masako: “As for the e-learning class itself, like everybody else probably did, I thought it was not worth taking it because you could do it at home. I really think so. Nevertheless, the segment the teacher provides in the intervals of each lesson, introducing ways of learning and English songs, was really interesting. They were what I can make use of for my out-of-class learning.” Rie also made a candid comment on e-learning: “I was not able to make sense out of coming to university early in the morning to do something I could do at home. However, watching movie footage with Japanese and English subtitles alternately was fun. With the activity, I felt myself absorbing English. Before, I had no idea as to how

to learn English in a fun way. Now I have a feeling that I can make learning fun by listening to English songs while reading their lyrics.”

Conclusion

In the current study, the teacher incorporated a short, “change of pace,” motivational segment into an e-learning class, with featured topics ranging from how to improve listening and speaking using reading aloud, learning phonetic characteristics of English with a help from PowerPoint slides, getting learning opportunities through media such as books and movies, to how to memorize words without getting bored. Overall, the underlying theme common to all the topics was how to have fun learning English. As for the reading aloud habits, there were 56 students out of 101 whose points on the Likert scale increased by one to three points. Even the three students who initially showed hatred towards e-learning, mostly because of the asynchronous nature of the lesson, completed the free writing part of the questionnaire with positive comments, saying that the motivational segment was effective. Considering the somewhat dry aspect of a class where students work on a computer, the segment that the current study tried incorporating might have served as some spice. It seems to have had an impact on some types of students, who otherwise could have stopped coming to the classroom. However, it is true that there existed students who showed little or no reaction at all. It might show that such learner training has little or no impact on certain types of learners, or it is just that people interpret things differently in general. To judge which types of learners react to and benefit from such learner training would call for refined, longitudinal quantitative research.

In a study done by the author in a TOEIC listening class in 2013, where students engaged in assisted repeated reading using TOEIC transcripts, students’ listening behavior (listening to English without translating into Japanese) as measured by Survey 2 ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 0.95$) was higher than as measured by Survey 1 ($M = 2.14$, $SD = 0.70$), $t(13) = 2.41$, $p < 0.03$, two-tailed, $d = 0.84$ (a large effect). In another study in a TOEIC vocabulary and grammar class in 2012, students’ learning habits (reading aloud at home) as measured by Survey 2 ($M = 3.22$, $SD = 0.74$) was significantly higher than that measured by Survey 1 ($M = 2.4$, $SD = 1.07$), $t(44) = 5.36$, $p < .0001$, two-tailed, $d = 0.9$ (a large effect). In both cases, assisted repeated reading was introduced in the first class, and from then onwards, the teacher set aside time to have students read aloud TOEIC transcripts. In this current study, in contrast with those previous studies, although a talk about phonetic characteristics of English was occasionally followed by a word or two about the importance of reading aloud, the teacher explained various types of reading aloud and demonstrated how to do them only once. In fact, the free writing answers of the students in changes section of this paper, none of them mentioned the term reading aloud per se. Those students, synthesizing the information presented in the class, seem to have come to a conclusion that reading aloud is what they needed to do. It is interesting to notice that while some learning strategies, such as reading aloud, were popular despite the fact that they were featured once or twice, other strategies, even if they were introduced many times, did not

attract so many people. If, as Macaro (2006) claims, what is crucial for successful learning is to have many strategies available and to orchestrate them, considering the fact that not all the “input” becomes “intake” and it is students who determine whether to accept the strategy or not, teachers might want to present as many learning tips as possible in the classroom to reinvigorate the out-of-class learning of students in parallel with the day’s contents.

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Appendix A

~Listening~

1. I feel confident in listening to English passages.

「英語を聴くことに自信がある」

Strongly agree Agree Slightly agree Disagree Strongly disagree

2. I know how to improve my listening comprehension.

「リスニング力を上達させるための方法を知っている」

Strongly agree Agree Slightly agree Disagree Strongly disagree

3. I translate into Japanese while listening to English.

「英語を聴きながら日本語に訳してしまう。」

Very often Often Sometimes Rarely Never

4. I have a hard time comprehending linked words.

「英語の音の繋がりを聴くのに苦労している。」

Very often Often Sometimes Rarely Never

5. I incorporate reading aloud into my out-of-class learning.

「自宅学習の中で音読を取り入れている。」

Very often Often Sometimes Rarely Never

~Reading~

6. I feel confident in reading English passages.

「英語を読むことに自信がある」

Strongly agree Agree Slightly agree Disagree Strongly disagree

7. I know how to improve my reading comprehension.

「リーディング力を上達させるための方法を知っている」

Strongly agree Agree Slightly agree Disagree Strongly disagree

8. I read English books and/or newspapers to gain information (for pleasure).

「情報を得るため（楽しみのため）に英語の本や新聞を読んでいる。」

Very often Often Sometimes Rarely Never

9. When I read, I move my eyes from left to right, without having my eyes go backward and forward.

「英語を読む際、目をキョロキョロさせることなく、語順通りに左から右に読んでいる。」

Very often Often Sometimes Rarely Never

10. ~I read chunk by chunk instead of reading word by word.

「単語ひとつひとつではなく意味の区切りで塊（かたまり）として読んでいる。」

Very often Often Sometimes Rarely Never

~Others~

11. I try to add new English learning strategies to my repertoire.

「英語に関する新しい学習方法を試してみることがある」

Very often Often Sometimes Rarely Never

12. I like studying English.

「英語を学ぶのが好きだ」

Strongly agree Agree Slightly agree Disagree Strongly disagree

Appendix B (The questions added to the second questionnaire)

~e-learning~

13. I got motivated through using NetAcademy.

「Net Academy を利用することで英語を学ぶやる気が出た」

Strongly agree Agree Slightly agree Disagree Strongly disagree

14. I got motivated through lectures on how to study English.

「英語学習法についての講義を聞いて英語を学ぶやる気が出た」

Strongly agree Agree Slightly agree Disagree Strongly disagree

~Free writing~

What did you find useful in the e-learning class? Please feel free to write any comments (in much detail as possible).

「この授業で役に立ったことは何ですか？ご自由に（具体的に）お書きください。」

Could you describe changes, if any, that occurred in you the past three months?

「この授業を通じてご自身の中に起こった変化がもしあれば、ご自由にお書きください。」
