Bullying Versus Playful Aggression: Evaluating Student Dynamics in an EFL Classroom

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ABSTRACT
Rikkyo’s English Discussion Class (EDC) is a student-focused course intended to increase students’ English fluency, English communication skills and confidence in speaking English. The presence of bullying in such a classroom could potentially have a very negative impact on all three areas. This paper examines my efforts to monitor a potentially negative relationship between three students, my observations and my actions (or lack thereof) in one EDC class.

INTRODUCTION
Classroom bullying is a major issue in Japan, with some cases requiring intervention from police and other social agencies. In some extreme cases, students take their own lives as a result of bullying (Yoneyama, 2008). Bullying can have an impact on the classroom as well; Lacey & Cornell (2013), for example, find a link between bullying and classroom achievement. In a communicative language classroom, where student participation is central to assessment, and teacher talking time is limited, bullying will almost certainly inhibit a student’s participation, and negate any potential benefits of the course.

One difficulty an EDC instructor may face is identifying what exactly bullying is. Doll, Song & Siemers (2008) write, “The peer aggression research shows that bullying anchors one extreme of a continuum of peer aggression, where the continuum ranges from jostling or playful aggression at one end to repeated intimidation or bullying at the other.” (p. 162). The fact that bullying exists on a continuum makes the boundaries of the definition unclear. At what point does play become ijime? Though I have lived in Japan for over a decade, I still do not feel fully attuned to Japanese classroom culture. As both Kikkawa (1987) and Matsunaga (2010) point out, many cultural differences exist between forms of bullying in Japan and the west. In my position, as an outsider/observer of Japanese culture, those boundaries of bullying and playful aggression are hazy at best.

Despite these difficulties, it is clear from the literature that teachers have a role to play in the prevention of bullying. Doll, et al. (2008) say: “Teachers who are sensitive to their students respond swiftly and judiciously to bullying incidents thereby protecting students from bullying and proving a class-wide sense of security and comfort.” This security and comfort can help facilitate fluency development in the classroom, a core tenant of EDC. Doll et al. continue: “Teacher monitoring is an especially important protection against bullying... Conflicts are less likely to occur if teachers can heed the early warning signs of conflict, such as verbal intimidation, voices getting louder and tense physical reactions.” (pp. 167 - 168) So, central to my job as an EDC instructor is monitoring interpersonal relationships and discouraging bullying if it arises.

Finding sources dealing with bullying among university students has been challenging. A majority of the researchers referenced herein have looked at bullying among primary and secondary school pupils. For example, Atlas & Peppler (1998) looked at children ages 6 - 12; Roland & Galloway (2002) looked at primary school students; and Mahady Wilton, Craig & Peppler (2000) looked at grades one through six. While the advice and experiences described in these projects may not be a perfect fit for Japanese university students, the authors may still have some useful advice for dealing with bullying in the classroom. However, Dörnyei and Malderez (1997) offer some helpful advice for the foreign language classroom that aims to create an
atmosphere not conducive to bullying. Yoneyama (2008) talks about bullying in the context of Japan, and Matsunaga (2010) provides some advice for a culturally sensitive approach to addressing bullying in a Japanese context, defining specifically how such an approach would differ from a western context. Helpfully, Matsunaga’s research was conducted at the university level. A useful approach to confronting bullying in Rikkyo University classes can be triangulated from these disparate sources.

Two girls (hereafter F1 and F2) and one boy (hereafter M1) are central to this case. Interactions seemed playfully vicious; however, real venom may have lain beneath. Their interactions were often antagonistic. Usually, F1 and F2 teamed up against M1, though M1 also initiated some negative behavior. If there was in fact bullying happening, it was hard to discern who was responsible. Whether or not their classroom jostling had any negative effects on their own performances, I noticed it had a negative effect on my own. In short, the behavior distracted me as I was trying to distribute my attention among all members of the class. In this paper, I will reflect upon my handling of the relationships between these students, and whether the accusations and apparent hostilities were banter or something more sinister. I will compare my own behavior to what is recommended in the literature, and consider how I might deal with such situations should they arise again in the future.

**DISCUSSION**

This investigation was sparked by F2’s comments in the second week of class. In a discussion, she announced that some of her male classmates’ actions were “ijime.” I interrupted the discussion to find out what had happened; she maintained that their actions were bullying, while accused students indicated that they had merely disagreed with her. She showed no outward signs of distress. I did not feel I had a good grasp of the situation or the interpersonal dynamics between the students, so I avoided making any specific statements or giving lectures about bullying. However, I did resolve to continue monitoring the situation to see if anything further arose. Eventually, I identified three students who seemed to be involved in bullying-type incidents with each other far more often than the other students. All three students, as well as their classmates, seemed to have some familiarity with each other that extended beyond the EDC classroom. Coming from the same major, all seemed to have some dealings with each other in other classes or social functions. F1 and F2 were physically affectionate with each other, for example, and another student had received the nickname “Peko chan” at some point, outside of the EDC classroom.

Observing them over the course of the semester, I noticed several things about their relationship, some indicating problems, others contradicting my initial assessment. The main topics I consider here are abusive language and patterns of behavior,

M1’s personality made determining the actual nature of the interactions difficult. He has a very deadpan sense of humor and makes unusual jokes. He rarely smiled, remaining stern-faced even when making statements like “When I was a child, I wanted to be a turtle when I grew up.” I believe (though I am not certain) that these statements were jokes intended for the amusement of his classmates. Everyone, even those working with other partners, all laughed at this statement, which momentarily disrupted the fluency activity. In one practice activity, working as a pair, F1 asked M1 a question about boyfriends. He responded using the word “boyfriend”. F1 said, “Boyfriend?” M1 said “Boyfriend.” The implication was that M1 is a homosexual, though he had previously made statements about having a girlfriend. M1 handled the exchange well outwardly, and did not seem perturbed by the questions, judging by his participation in the two extended discussions.
I failed to notice any escalation over the semester, nor did I notice any calming. Each week was different from the last, and I saw no patterns of behavior emerge. One week may have been civil, while the following week may have witnessed a lot of abusive language. I saw evidence that the students actually had a good relationship.

Abusive language was one issue that occurred quite often in class. M1 and F2 especially used phrases like “shut up” and “you’re crazy” during discussions, though neither seemed particularly distressed at the other’s use of these terms. However, outward appearances could be deceptive. Certainly the language itself disturbed me and prevented me from properly evaluating students’ use of the day’s function, among other things. Though I did not directly intervene and confront any individual students about abusive language, as this would interrupt the discussion (running counter to our directives as EDC teachers) I did make general statements to the class that such language was not appropriate for a formal discussion. I reiterated these statements in my typed comments uploaded after class for the benefit of the students. Of course, I cannot be certain that the students read those comments.

During the warm-up fluency activity and function practice phases of the lessons, the three students antagonized each other with sarcastic questions, suggestive statements and rude language. Some nice gestures were overly exaggerated, making me suspect they were insincere, such as statements like “oh you are so smart” or “oh you have so many friends”.

However, beyond all the sniping and abuse, I saw some evidence that the students were in fact on good terms. I never assigned seats in class, and these students sat in different chairs each week. As students arrived at different times each week, they would grab what chairs were available. On several occasions, I saw M1 sit next to F1 and F2 even though other seats were available at the other table. In addition to this, all three students would initiate casual conversation with each other before the bell rang. I did not notice anything out of the ordinary about these discussions, though they were in Japanese (a language I speak imperfectly). The pleasantries they exchanged seemed genuine, in contrast to the sarcastic pleasantries I heard them exchange in English in other lessons. I did monitor them a bit, due to my interest in their interpersonal dynamic, though not closely as I was preparing for class. Students had used nicknames to address each other, like “Peko” and “Kenchan.” In the casual chats described above, students revealed familiarity with each other’s lives that they would not have been able to glean simply through interactions in my class alone. They also encouraged each other when they were struggling to express themselves. In one final discussion midway through the course, F2 was having difficulty finding words to express herself with. M1 encouraged her by saying “Come on! Fighting!” This was presumably a direct translation of the Japanese expression “ganbare.”

CONCLUSION
By the end of the term, talk of “I hate you” had gradually morphed into statements like “I love you.” While the level of appropriateness of discourse was not always as high as I was aiming for, I saw no evidence of actual bullying in the classroom, and no evidence that the play I did witness was affecting students’ performance in class. All spoke equally, and all initiated actively. Over the course of this project, I learned a bit about what to monitor and how to deal with the issue of bullying if it does arise in future classes. However, I am still left with questions about how to deal with the issue if it arises in an EDC class, and doubts as to whether I would have the time and resources to effectively deal with a more clear-cut bullying situation.

Atlas and Pepler (1998) define a bully as someone who initiates aggressive action and say that the interaction involved in bullying is not mutual. The challenge for me in this class was determining whether or not the aggression in this classroom involved mutuality or not. Early on, I had difficulty seeing evidence of mutuality, though this changed as the course progressed. M1
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seemed to be initiating the negative behavior nearly as often as F1 and F2, and while mutuality may have been lacking when I examined each class individually, it was present when I looked at the semester as a whole. Ultimately, I could not say definitively that the behavior I witnessed was in fact bullying, nor could I say it was not.

Doll, et al (2008) describe the continuum of classroom behavior, which includes bullying at one end. They write: “Rough and tumble play includes the same verbally and physically aggressive behaviors that might comprise bullying but differs in that it is not intended to inflict harm, manipulate or dominate the other child. Instead, rough and tumble play occurs within reciprocal interactions, where friends take turns jostling each other both for entertainment and to strengthen the friendship.” (p. 162). This is something I do not feel comfortable assessing in my own classroom. Where does a teacher draw the line between “jostling and playful aggression” (with an emphasis on playful) and outright bullying? Even after the semester’s end, I do not feel comfortable making a judgment about my students’ in-class behavior, and I do not feel confident that my own assessment would align with the students’ perceptions of the same behavior.

However, I feel that my cautious approach at the beginning is justified. Hale (2012) illustrates a situation in which a teacher’s intervention in a student conflict can inadvertently reinforce one student’s power and undermine another, thus negatively affecting the interpersonal relationship of the students. While this is not necessarily a bullying situation, clear parallels can be seen. This position is seemingly at odds with the swift and judicious response advocated by Doll, et al. (2008), who seem to be writing about younger students. For example, they describe the importance of recess for promoting good student relationships. Instituting a recess hour does not seem to be a realistic option for a university. Taki (2003) has similar advice, advocating a student-centered, whole school approach rather than an individual case-by-case direct intervention.

Matsunaga (2010) describes three types of support available to bullied students (esteem support, network support and emotional support) and finds that while Japanese students have a positive association with emotional support, they have less positive associations with esteem support and network support. Emotional support, defined by Matsunaga (2010) as “a set of behaviors that convey affection, concern, and empathy,” (p. 317) is something I cannot say with certainty that I consistently provided in class. One possible area of inquiry is how to provide such support more consistently, and how to incorporate it into my curriculum.

If it had in fact been bullying, it is difficult to say whether I could have made a difference, even if I could supply the emotional support described above. Kikkawa (1987) describes the teacher’s limitations in dealing with bullying: “bullying is not a simple problem which occurs in relations between bully-student and bullied-student, but it is a complicated problem which must be solved by means of the development of the social environment of the class, that of the school, and that of the home as well as that of society.” (p. 29). In light of this, it is difficult to determine what exactly I can do in my role as teacher, limited as I am in terms of time and flexibility of curriculum. The nature of EDC does not leave teachers with much space for dealing with such problems in class. We have a limited amount of time to conduct a number of activities deemed essential for the course, and jettisoning these activities for the purposes of bullying prevention is not realistic and may even be counterproductive.

In conclusion, I do not feel I made any serious missteps in this particular class, though at the same time I do not feel that I can say with confidence that I dealt with the situation as effectively as I could. I feel I need to know more about recognizing bullying, and consider different ways to intervene indirectly if the need arises. The resources I have discovered describing the creation of an egalitarian, bullying-free classroom are helpful, though I believe the course itself has been designed with at least some of these principles in mind, as they are in place already. I agree that it
is important to eradicate bullying from the classroom, and I feel confident I will be able to handle the issue more effectively should it arise again in the future.

REFERENCES