Dialogic Reflective Journaling as a Way to See More

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ABSTRACT

This short reflection paper describes an experiment in reflective dialogic journaling and its beneficial impact on handling a particularly challenging learning environment. The paper explains the structure of weekly journal entries and proceeds to examine in detail how the combination of consistent personal reflection and subsequent written dialogue between two teachers enhanced the understanding of problematic classroom situations.

INTRODUCTION

Engaging in reflective practice for professional development through different means and especially by keeping a written account of my teaching has been an area of the utmost interest for me for over four years. For this reason I was enthusiastic about the prospect of continuous focused journaling during my second term as an instructor for English discussion class (EDC) at Rikkyo University. The initial idea for this reflection project was threefold: (1) act on the goals I set for myself at the end of the first semester in the program; (2) experiment with a new format of reflective journaling; and (3) the primary goal of this project, i.e. observe students' classroom behaviour and/or performance, analyze it, and initiate changes accordingly. The goals, stated at the end of the first semester, related to my teaching beliefs and included finding opportunities for a more reflective dialogue with students, experimenting with micro-writing activities in class, giving individual students more focused attention, and above all, working to nurture a positive and supportive classroom community.

After meeting all groups of students that I was assigned to teach in the fall semester, I quickly came to identify the class that would become the subject of my journaling based on Thomas Farrell's (2016) idea of *critical incidents*. According to Farrell, one of the purposes of reflection in English language teaching is to examine critical incidents, which pose "a particular anomaly for a teacher (...) and can cause teachers to perceive dissonance between their beliefs and theories and actual practice…" (Farrell, 2016, p. 102). One particular group of eight students posed what I perceived as multiple issues that would make it challenging for me to feel comfortable teaching this group. The main areas of concern that I noted down after Lesson 1 of the course were: group dynamics, low proficiency level, low motivation, lack of active response to teacher instructions (and to the teacher in general), and students' reluctance to engage in communication with each other either in Japanese or in English. The class appeared to be a rare accumulation of potential critical incidents that would occur repeatedly throughout the term, thus making it a critical case in and of itself. It seemed like a suitable occasion to meaningfully apply my goals stated above, bearing in mind the priority of nurturing a supportive classroom community responsive to each other and to the teacher.

As for the format, having had a substantial experience keeping reflective journals, I was looking for a more demanding and interactive way of reflecting. I chose to experiment with dialogic journal writing, which as a type of collaborative reflection serves a means of further challenging the teacher's thinking and reflective enquiry (Farrell, 2007). Collaborative journal writing due to its two-sided nature enhances the reflector's experience and broadens the understanding of observed classroom situations. In addition to writing regular personal entries about my class, I invited a colleague to act as my journal companion, who would read the entries and pose questions to help analyze the practice and even trigger some insights to further impact my choices both in lesson planning and teaching. Another idea critical to my decision to have a "second pair of eyes" in this project is the research evidence that data obtained from journal entries serve mostly as a reflection of what the person journaling *perceives* as being important (Mercer, 2005-6). Following this idea, I felt the involvement of a third party - my colleague - could enrich the reflection by clarifying my own perspective.

The structure of my journal remained consistent through Lessons 3 to 12 of the course and was shaped by my previous experience of reflective practice using a variation of the Experiential Learning Cycle originally designed by Kolb (Kolb, 1984), which asks the reflecting teacher to describe the event, theorize about its causes, and make an action plan. First of all, observations of every lesson were noted in-action during class time. They were later transferred to an online document under the following sub-categories:

1) What happened in class? (factual detailed descriptions of the events in class)
2) How did we feel about it? (notes on the emotional characteristics of the lesson)
3) What does all that mean? (theorizing about the causes)
4) What comes out of it? (making an action plan)

Finally, my colleague would read the entry and leave 3-5 questions related to the events that I described and to my emotional perception of the class. Answering the questions gave me an opportunity to consider classroom challenges from a different perspective.

DISCUSSION

In the second week of the course, the students' performance coupled with the general feel of the learning environment raised a number of issues that both constituted and blurred the focus of observations. While I would like to focus this article on my attempts to remedy three major problems that the students encountered (namely, the use of Japanese, persistent confusion, and difficulties building rapport), it is worth mentioning that the initial list of challenges I found myself faced with was quite substantial. Based on the overwhelming quantity of various challenges that the class presented, in week 3 of the course I came up with a preliminary list of ways to employ in order to fix these issues: help students in discussion time as needed; reduce student speaking time for fluency activity; reduce instructional teacher talking time to a minimum; focus on the communication skills, specifically on checking understanding and negotiating the meaning; be firm about Japanese use; proceed at a slower pace than usual.

As the course progressed, at different times there arose opportunities to implement this or that measure from the list, however it proved impossible and not always necessary to do so consistently. In the next part of this article I would like to give a more detailed overview of the actions taken on the three classroom challenges that, from my perspective as a teacher, most notably affected the learning process for this group of students.

The Use of Japanese

In the first classes of the term, the use of Japanese presented a big problem. A few students kept resorting to Japanese during most stages of the lesson, either to painlessly and quickly communicate the meaning of their ideas, or to sort out tasks, or to ease the discomfort of having to have discussions in English. My immediate response was to be openly strict about it: in the beginning of class I wrote clear class goals on the board, one of which stated the need to "speak 100% English." Explicitly bringing their attention to the shared goal seemed to help minimize the use of Japanese and there was no acute need to continue this practice on a regular basis. However, as the course progressed, an interesting pattern started to emerge: when the students were instructed to speak solely in English, the atmosphere in the classroom grew increasingly tense and stifled. As soon as they felt a "permission" to discuss certain things in Japanese, they could feel visibly more relaxed and communicate more actively. Noticing that, I decided to change my attitude towards the use of the mother tongue in this particular group. If their feeling of ease and comfort, or rather a lack of such, was what consistently prevented a satisfactory learning environment, then I as a teacher should provide an opportunity for that ease and comfort to happen. With this in mind, I loosened my rules and stopped aggressively promoting an "English only" classroom. Ample time was given to negotiate meaning and clarify tasks before beginning speaking activities in English. Interestingly, by the end of the term the few students who were usually the most frequent and energetic Japanese speakers in the class, started to police each other and remind of "English only" rule without my explicit commentary on that matter.

Confusion

Another recurrent issue specific to this class was their confusion over tasks and provided instructions. By *confusion* I mean, for instance, being silent for 30-40 seconds at the beginning of any speaking activity. Although confusion would appear at the beginning or during 10 and 16-minute discussions as well (not knowing how to proceed with the discussion flow, misinterpreting discussion questions or another student's communicative intentions, etc), most often the first 30-45 minutes of class would create most pauses and, for me, subsequent breakdowns in the lesson plan. The reflective journal entries turned to this problem regularly, both describing the varying nature of these confusions, trying to analyse the reasons behind them and find the ways to help students in each of different instances.

Because of the repeated confusion and silences, the factual timing for activities rarely coincided with the planned range, which caused me to feel stress about not meeting my goals. It was after Lesson 7 of the course that I came to one simple way of dealing with this issue. The core problem was not students being "slow", but rather the mismatch between the standard timing of the lesson stages and this group's own learning flow. Through trial and error, a few ways of dealing with this problem were proven valuable, such as: (1) modelling activities with students as much as possible instead of providing instructions, not harbouring expectations that the students would jump into a speaking activity straight away; (2) presenting the target language and desired related interactions in a heavily scaffolded way on the whiteboard and leaving it there for the duration of the whole class, noticing that they refer to it for help. Another crucial shift in attitude happened thanks to the journaling experience, which enabled me to take a distanced look at what was happening when the students were pressed for time. I saw the benefits of not only adjusting my teaching methods but also, on a personal level, of being more patient with their confusion. When the partners in a speaking activity fell silent, I was more prepared to wait for them to figure out what comes next before jumping to their rescue. They needed more time to start and I was prepared to give them that time. Through the written discussion with my colleague, I arrived at some interesting ideas about assisting the students, one of which was to include a separate planning stage so that the students could organize themselves before beginning the discussion, ensuring together as a group that everyone is aware of the upcoming discussion flow and their strategies. Another idea had to do with eliminating a possible reason for a stumbling minute at the beginning of a long discussion, for example ensuring that group discussion questions were worded in the way that mirrored clearly the content of the previous preparation activity. Taking care of that later helped the students to be more on board with the discussion flow and their roles in it.

Building Rapport

Finally, a crucial issue that bothered me in this particular class was the rapport among the students and that with the teacher. The tension regarding interpersonal interactions and relationships exhibited a tangible mismatch of personalities, reluctance to communicate and thus develop a learning community. The situation was also aggravated by the fact that the learners did not talk to each other even in Japanese prior to the start of the lesson and often sat in silence in between tasks during class. This was my first encounter with such shy, disengaged, and disinterested behaviour, especially disheartening since I always seek a certain level of personal connection with learners. The involvement of my colleague by way of asking questions without being personally emotionally invested in this teaching experience once again triggered an important shift in attitude towards this problem. I was reminded of the true significance of a teacher's affectivity that concerns "'intergroup behaviour' in the classroom, the smooth functioning of which relies on teacher empathy" (Benesch, 2012, p. 8). That said, subconsciously labelling this group as troublesome, challenging and strange forced me to see our classes through the blurred lens. I became overly annoyed and frustrated when these learners could not perform the way other students did. I started taking precautions against activities that would put them in uncomfortable situations (such as eliciting ideas from them or activating schemata for the lesson topic by asking the whole class some questions). I slowly came to realize that part of the reason the class instilled discomfort and fear in me was my own anxiety and that the communicative situations that I labelled as challenging for them were, in fact, uncomfortable for me.

I turned to micro-writing reflective activities in order to alleviate the tension. At the end of the lesson I distributed post-it notes and asked the learners to write what was easy and difficult for them in that particular class. This simple activity revealed the biggest issue that the majority of the students struggled with, namely having group discussions. I kept observing the tendency - while they felt relatively comfortable and open talking to their partners in pairs, same students stiffened in an unproductive stupor as soon as group discussions commenced. Contrary to my original intention to be careful with the groupings in order to not cause extra discomfort, it proved useful to do the exact opposite and have them change partners for speaking activities. Mixed groupings forced them to interact and by doing so they improved their communication and slowly, at their own pace, succeeded at building the rapport.

CONCLUSION

The case described in this article highlighted for me once again three vital truths about a language classroom:

1. Teachers should remember that a classroom is a complex entity, and that it is, first and foremost, the people in it (learners and a teacher) with their distinct personalities and histories, which affect a communicative learning environment.
2. In this complexity, emotions play a big part and teachers should both take them into consideration and distance themselves from their effect.
3. It is the teacher who is responsible for taking the steps to establish the rapport.

In the future, I would like to keep these in mind before deciding to "fix" certain classroom issues. A way to make the learning experience work for both students and the teacher is to see students for what they are as a whole and teach people in the class, not only the target language of the course. It is important to step back and take a reflective, as well as reflexive, look at what makes the challenging classroom challenging in the first place.

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