Exploring Students' Responses to Teacher Feedback in EDC Classes
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ABSTRACT

This paper explores students' different responses to teachers' feedback in an English discussion class and tries to explain why students increase or decrease the use of target language skills after receiving feedback. Many factors are involved in how students act on feedback and if they will use the target language skills more frequently in the subsequent discussions. It is suggested that teachers should take into consideration students' learning styles and observe students' performances closely in the classroom in order to adopt different ways of giving feedback and allowing time for students to internalize language skills as it may facilitate progress after a few weeks' practice.

INTRODUCTION

English Discussion Class (EDC) is a required course for all first-year students at Rikkyo University with the aim to "improve their speaking fluency and communicative ability" (Center for English Discussion Class, 2018, p. 5). Each class normally has eight students and lasts for an hour and a half. In each regular lesson, one discussion skill (DS) is introduced and students should learn to use it in discussions. Defined as "a communicative discussion behavior" (Center for English Discussion Class, 2018, p112), each DS is exemplified with a number of functional phrases that aim to help students hold deeper and more interactive discussions.

In the first half of the lesson, teachers introduce the new DS and explain why and how to use it, followed by 10-15 minutes for students to practice. At this stage, the major task of teachers is to check students' understanding and mastery of the DS and give feedback when necessary to make sure students understand the functions of the DS and be able to use it in discussions. In the second half of the lesson, two group discussions (D1 and D2) are set up where four students of a group are organized to discuss a few academic topics using the DS. D1 usually lasts for 10 minutes, during which teachers are allowed to intervene when they notice any problem students have in incorporating the DS in discussions, while in D2, which lasts for 16 minutes, teachers should refrain from providing any help or instruction. In an ideal situation, students should use the DS at least once in both D1 and D2 and they are assessed and graded based on their ability to do that.

Feedback is an essential concept in most theories of learning (Tonekaboni, 2016). The effects of feedback on second language learning have always been a focus for researchers and teachers working in this field. Feedback is defined differently in specific contexts. In Iwashita's (2003) study, feedback refers to teachers' response to what the learner has said in conversation, which can be either positive or negative. Negative feedback usually takes the form of recasts and negotiation. In Ravand and Rasekh's study (2011), feedback is defined as various techniques used to respond to student writing. Though researchers have investigated the relationship between feedback and second language learning from different perspectives, most of the studies show positive results. Mackey (2006) and Lyster and Ranta (1997) provide evidence that interactional and correctional feedback promotes grammatical development. According to Leng (2014), feedback is an important process for the improvement of writing skills. Mackey (2006) notes that corrective feedback which provides helpful interactional processes is claimed to be helpful in language learning.

In the context of EDC, feedback serves several functions, such as citing students' ideas to show them their opinions are valued and giving praise on good performance in order to "maintain

their confidence and motivation" (Center for English Discussion Class, 2018, p. 97). Between D1 and D2, teachers should give feedback to "make students aware of their strengths, weaknesses, and progress" (Center for English Discussion Class, 2018, p. 97).

Teachers in the EDC program are expected to spot students' problems using the DS in practice activities and D1, if any, and give instructions on how they can use the DS to develop a deeper discussion and remind them of missed opportunities to use it when they give feedback, in the hope that students feel more comfortable using the DS in D2 and also show a higher frequency of use. However, sometimes after receiving feedback and more detailed instructions, students fail to have better performances in D2 as expected. This paper will look into the possible factors that account for students' performances in D2 and try to explore the reasons for students' increase or decrease of DS use after receiving feedback.

In the EDC program, students with a wide range of English proficiency are divided into four levels based on their placement test score with Level I as the highest and Level IV as the lowest. From my 12 classes, two Level III groups were chosen for observation. Class 1 is a normal Level III class where students participate well in discussion but do not seem to enjoy it very much. They are fully aware of the lesson goal of integrating the DS in discussions and they steer straight toward the goal. Often they are content with their ability to use DS without showing passion to exchange more ideas and develop deeper discussion. They are effective in terms of achieving lesson goals. Class 2 is also a Level III, where students typically show greater willingness to communicate with others and passion for discussing in English. Rather than being content with the ability to use DS, they focus more on exchanging different ideas and getting to know more about each other. From informal observations for the first few weeks, it is often the case that after receiving feedback, Class 1 shows higher frequency of DS use than Class 2. The different learning style between these two classes stood out to me, therefore I decided to choose them for observation and keep a teaching journal from week 5 to week 9 to keep track of the progress of these two classes and explore what factors are involved in students' change of performance after receiving feedback.

DISCUSSION

It was assumed that Class 1 would constantly keep higher frequency of DS use than Class 2 throughout all the following lessons. However, it did not turn out to be what I expected. In fact, it is more meaningful to compare individual students rather than classes because students' performances varied each week and each one seemed to have different reasons to account for and some of the reasons can be very personal.

In general, students showed different responses to feedback. Some students did well in practice but used the DS less frequently or even failed to use it after receiving feedback while some students did not use any target phrases in D1 but was able to use it in D2. For those who decreased DS use in D2, maybe it was because the discussion situation has changed and they were not able to see the proper opportunities to use it. For those who increased DS use in D2, maybe feedback gave them a clearer goal to focus on and they strived to achieve the goal next time. Many factors were involved in it and the situation changed from student to student and from lesson to lesson.

The Nature of Questions

In some cases, D2 questions do not provide as many chances as those for D1 for students to use the new DS properly. From D1, it can be told that students understand the functions of the DS and the appropriate circumstances were provided where they can use the phrases. The reason why they used it less frequently in D2 or even failed to use it could be that they did not see the proper

opportunities. For instance, in lesson 11 comparing phrases were introduced and students were required to compare different ideas and discuss which is better or worse by using target phrases such as *"Which is better – A or B?" "A is better because…"*. One question for D2 was "Is it possible to end poverty?" This question was related to the topic of poverty but was hard for students to see the chances to ask the comparing questions. To test students' mastery of the target DS, discussion questions should not be designed in a way which would hinder students from showing their abilities. Teachers should adapt questions to be more suitable for the purpose of eliciting students' use of DS.

The Nature of Feedback
Due to reasons such as L1 influence or other factors related to second language acquisition, some feedback might be easier than others to be digested and acted on. For instance, in lesson 8 after D1 I gave two corrective feedbacks. One was that students should try to use a full sentence to tell the sources of their information. Often they just said it in broken sentences like *"from Internet"* or *"from personal experiences"*. I asked them to say it in full, formal sentences such as *"I learned it from the Internet"*. Another feedback was a reminder to summarize before moving on to the next topic. In D2, students did well at summarizing but still kept the habit of telling sources of information in incomplete sentences, which could be related to the fact that the subject of a sentence is often omitted in their L1 of Japanese. Therefore, whether students take in the feedback partly depends on the nature of feedback. Some feedback may take more time than others to be absorbed. Teachers should expect that and allow enough time for students to correct their language use.

Written Feedback VS Oral Feedback
From my observation, written feedback which provides students with a record of what they did well and what needed improvement is usually more effective than oral feedback which is gone in a second. Sometimes, I wrote students' utterances on the board to show them good examples of using the DS or things they can do to improve, which is an efficient way to get messages across. When I did not see students having big problems using the DS in D1, I would use feedback as an opportunity to praise them to keep their motivation in discussions. In such cases, I usually give oral feedback to cite their uses of the DS instead of writing it on the board, and often without anything to see on the board students would stare into space and it is difficult to tell if they are listening or not. Therefore, I would argue that written feedback should be adopted when it is necessary to give corrective feedback because at least it is more effective in getting students' attention.

Repetition of Key Points in Feedback
Generally speaking, students' performance is better when key points are repeated several times. Language learning requires mastery of skills, which can only be built with practice. Repetition reinforces awareness of what students are expected to do. It also takes time for them to integrate the new DS into their language repertoire. It is often the case that students felt more at ease using the DS in the following weeks after the first week they learned the DS.

However, constantly reminding them to use the phrases does not always turn out to be effective. It could be that too much repetition makes students feel upset or bored. One time, I tried to intervene in D1 to remind them of using the DS but one student gestured me to stop. It is obvious that they fully understood what the lesson goals were and it is only a matter of time for them to develop a habit of using DS.

Students' Personality and Language Level

As stated above, Class 2 not only participated well but actively. One of the students showed great passion for discussions. He was outgoing and light-hearted, who enjoyed sharing ideas in English. Thanks to him, the dynamics of the class has always been lively. One problem of extrovert students like him is sometimes they were so engaged in discussion that they tended to forget the lesson goals. For this student in particular, he often forgot to use DS no matter how hard I emphasized that in feedback. Compared to him, other students who show less passion for discussion would use DS more often. The reason could be that they were more clearly aware of what they should do and switched their mind as goal-oriented.

Another situation that most teachers of the EDC program have seen in their classes is sometimes students at high levels (Level I and high Level II) tended to use DS less frequently than students at relatively low levels (Level IV). One of the reasons behind it could be that low level students had greater reliance on DS while high level students were able to express ideas more freely in their own way.

CONCLUSION

There are many factors involved in whether students increase or decrease DS use after receiving feedback. It is hard to summarize a rule that would apply to every class and every student to guarantee they would take in feedback and improve performance. What works in one class may not work in another. Teachers are suggested to observe students closely in classroom, take into account their language level and learning style, and adjust ways of delivering feedback. In addition, teachers should understand that it takes time for language to be internalized and enough time should be given for students to act on feedback.

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