"*I Can't English*": Reflecting on Motivation and Participation Within a Discussion Class Context

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ABSTRACT

This paper details how the use of a teaching journal assisted reflections on and responses to issues that arose within a low-motivation, low-ability class with poor participation in an English discussion course. The process of journaling allowed me to record and analyze problems which had occurred in class, and to consider various methods of dealing with or minimizing these in future lessons. While not all of my interventions were successful, reflection upon my journal entries demonstrated the benefits of maintaining a positive focus, adapting feedback approaches, and reconsidering my stance on L1 use, and revealed that a combination of these factors gradually improved the class atmosphere and increased student participation overall.

INTRODUCTION

As this journal was undertaken while teaching an English Discussion Class (hereafter EDC), a short summary of the class and its aims may provide useful context regarding the expectations placed on both students and teachers. Hurling (2012) describes the EDC as a mandatory course for all first-year students designed to develop fluency and communicative competence in English, and aims to develop students who will not only "have the ability to discuss contemporary topics with peers in English" (p. 2) but who will also "value discussing topics in depth using English" (p. 4). Each class involves a group of predominantly Japanese students and takes place only in English to maximize L2 practice, with students negotiating meaning between themselves when communication breaks down by paraphrasing, checking understanding, or clarifying, all of which are skills taught and regularly reviewed in the spring semester. The assessment system also discourages students from relying on their L1 to repair communication breakdowns as excessive L1 use is penalized. Hence for students, actively participating in English is crucial for success in and enjoyment of the course, and from a teacher`s perspective establishing a comfortable learning environment in which students feel able to freely express their opinions regardless of ability level is key. As the course is mandatory for around 4,500 to 4,700 students each year, not all students possess intrinsic motivation to acquire an L2, and hence varying levels of motivation can be observed in some classes. The lack of motivation within the Japanese university system has been covered in detail by Ushioda (2013), whose observation that "students' sudden release from [university entrance] examination pressures means that they no longer have an unquestionable rationale or motivation for studying hard" (p. 10) seems particularly relevant for first-year students freshly released from this long-standing motivational force. Consequently, students who had little intrinsic motivation and now lack the pressure of entrance exams may become further demotivated, as students who began their university English courses with low motivation usually remain quite poorly motivated (Ushioda, 2013).

In the fall semester of the 2018 academic year I had initially encountered great difficulties with a demotivated class and hoped that journaling might signal solutions. Farrell (2007) establishes journal writing as a problem-solving device since by reviewing journal entries and by reflecting on the information recorded, teachers can accumulate information to deepen their understanding of teaching and find patterns or problems to investigate in more detail. This style of 'reflective teaching' was further described by Murphy (2014), who suggests that retrospective review of journal entries helps to form action plans for what to do differently in future. In short, journaling could allow me to consider issues retrospectively and use hindsight to formulate

potential solutions to enact in following weeks. Therefore, over the course of one semester, I decided to make notes on my impressions of student behavior, participation, and English use; the actions I had taken to build rapport and improve problems; and the effects that these actions had.

DISCUSSION

The First Lesson

With TOEIC scores between 350 and 370, I had expected before the first lesson that this group would have relatively limited English communicative ability, however it was their attitude that presented the biggest barrier during the lesson itself. One student began the semester by succinctly announcing "I can't English", and then spoke only in his L1 or lapsed into silence for the rest of the introductory activity. I attributed his reluctance to communicate to nervousness at first, but throughout the first lesson most students participated poorly and seemed disinterested and reluctant: they made little eye contact with me or with each other, spoke minimally in English, rarely reacted or responded to other's ideas, frequently fell silent or switched to their L1, and later repeatedly talked over me when I was giving feedback or instructions. These conditions were not conducive to effective communication and meant that the students were not fulfilling key requisites of the course. For my part it was challenging to maintain control and impossible to establish a comfortable yet productive learning atmosphere, meaning that I was also failing in my own role.

My initial impression after the first lesson was that it had been a rough start. However, after the second lesson I recognized that I would need to take greater actions than first predicted to achieve the standards of participation, motivation, and English use that I had found in the vast majority of other classes. As a result, I decided to embark on a journaling project to chart my progress over the rest of the semester.

After the second lesson, I identified areas which would require action: students' use of their L1, talking over my instructions and feedback, low motivation, and poor participation. These issues were interconnected and formed a vicious circle. Students seemed to have little intrinsic motivation to improve their English and participated minimally; as they lacked motivation to improve or participate they often ignored or talked over feedback and instructions. Not knowing what to do next made it harder for them to participate, consequently feeling less capable of understanding English or less motivated to use the L2. Finally, in attempts to bring their behavior to something approaching acceptable limits, my feedback to the group was frequently negative, compounding and sealing this negative feedback loop.

Two aspects of motivation that appear relevant to my journal entries after the second lesson are *competence* and *relatedness*. These are described by Noels (2013) as being necessary for engendering motivation, in which "competence refers to a learner's ability to effectively carry out the activity and rise to challenges, and relatedness refers to a sense of security and connection between the learner and other people who value them and their learning efforts" (p. 20). In practice, to motivate these students I could increase relatedness by building rapport with them and encouraging group bonding, and improve their perceived competence by praising any successes, aiming to increase confidence in their own abilities and their desire to take on greater challenges. Many of my subsequent journal entries analyzed progress towards these goals.

Quantifying L1 Use

One area that early journal entries covered was how much Japanese was used by students in the classroom and strategies I employed for reducing this. In early lessons, I reviewed useful phrases for paraphrasing and repeatedly reminded students of these as an attempt to counteract high L1 usage with little discernable effect. In the fourth lesson I tried increasing their awareness of how

much Japanese they were speaking so that the students could recognize the extent of the issue. I tallied 24 separate instances of L1 use by four students during a ten minute discussion. To dissuade their over-reliance on Japanese and build awareness of course aims, after the activity I explained the tally chart to illustrate the importance of staying in English and reminded them that continually speaking Japanese would affect their grades, both in the lesson and on the course. However, in later activities some students continued to use a high proportion of Japanese, suggesting that the extrinsic motivation of grades alone would not be sufficient to prevent this behavior.

Journaling the previous lessons helped me to formulate an alternative. By reading back over previous entries, I noted that Japanese had been used by students for various functions, from small talk and building relationships to explaining my own instructions. Some of these functions were beneficial to the lesson, as research carried out in a similar context has shown that allowing students to use their L1 to check instructions or lexical items can improve later performance in their L2 (Kean, 2018). As Dörnyei (2009) suggests that "the social environment affects every aspect of human functioning, including language acquisition and use" (p. 235), I explicitly recommended that students greet their classmates and use Japanese before the start of the fifth lesson, hoping that this would improve relationships and help them feel relaxed together, as well as reduce off-topic chatting during class. I also allowed very brief small talk at some stages of the lesson, such as while I was collecting papers or when students were moving to join a new table. The students made more eye contact during this class and began addressing one other by name, implying that they felt greater relatedness with each other. In Lesson 6 I decided to ignore on-topic instances of L1 use *before* activities in which students were explaining instructions or vocabulary that others had not understood, particularly anything that could be relevant for the next discussion. However, I consistently reminded them to use English, particularly during sections of the lesson in which they were assessed.

In the eighth lesson of the semester, my compromise between the 'English only' policy of the EDC and this particular group of students' abilities and levels of motivation appeared to start paying off in terms of risk-taking and how quickly students began activities. In subsequent lessons, I continued to overlook on-topic use of Japanese at the start of activities and felt that this led students to greater success with the target language (TL), fewer instances of L1 use, and greater risk-taking with the L2 in later stages of class. Encouraging students to talk before class (in English or their L1) helped to build rapport and foster a more comfortable learning atmosphere, as well as evoking a sense of teamwork in which students could feel supported and encouraged by their peers which seems essential for the 'relatedness' aspect of motivation. Allowing L1 use to clarify my instructions before activities commenced also ensured students' comprehension of tasks, which reduced the risk of potential confusion or uncertainty and removed one reason why they may not previously have remained in English.

Motivation and Participation

In their 2008 paper, Dörnyei and Guilloteaux clarified a point which many teachers may have instinctively felt, in that "the teacher's motivational teaching practice is directly related to how the students approach classroom learning" (p. 70). While not all student motivation can be causally linked solely to a teacher's style - the wide array of learner types means there might be some students whom remain amotivated despite the best intentions of their tutors - it seems logical that certain strategies and practices would better engender motivation than others. These practices are outlined below:

- *Signposting*: stating lesson objectives explicitly, retrospectively summarizing progress
- *Scaffolding*: providing strategies and/or models to help students complete an activity

- *Promoting co-operation*: explicitly encouraging students to help one another
- *Personalization:* creating opportunities for students to express personal meanings (e.g. experiences, feelings, opinions)
- *Effective praise:* offering praise for effort or achievement that is sincere, specific, and commensurate with achievement
- *Elicitation of self or peer correction:* encouraging students to correct their own mistakes, or to correct peers
- *Process feedback:* focusing on what can be learned from mistakes made

(Dörnyei & Guilloteaux, 2008, p. 63-64)

I was curious what effects these motivational practices could have on my demotivated class. As a simple way to evaluate my own motivational teaching practice, I used these suggested practices as a checklist, ticking off some examples of these which I had previously or regularly used prior to Lesson 6, and making notes of others to incorporate into future lesson plans. Some instances of these are explored in greater detail below.

Signposting

I wrote simple, clear goals on the board, for instance in Lesson 6, in which the target skill was discussing other people's viewpoints, goals for one discussion were "1. Give your <u>and other</u>'s opinions; 2. Use the full question 'How about X's point of view?'; 3. Summarize" and praised achievement of these in post-discussion feedback. Setting goals helped to improve students' awareness of expectations at each lesson stage, and in feedback I referenced to what degree they had succeeded with these to increase their perceived competence. I focused on progress made towards long-term goals like "using 100% English" in the discussion on a weekly basis, and tried to be constructive rather than critical if the students did not achieve goals. If students achieved a goal quickly, I made a more challenging variation for the next task. For example, in Lesson 6 I gave the following feedback:

> [In the last lesson] many people forgot to summarize when they finished talking about one idea. However, today this group [indicated which students] gave a great summary at the end of your discussion about why social media is important. Next time, let's try to have two people summarize the discussion.

I also encouraged students to set their own goals for lessons immediately before or after tests, notably on things which they found difficult or thought would be important. For example, I began Lesson 9 (the second of three formally assessed discussion tests that semester) by eliciting various goals that had been chosen by students such as "I want to ask for other viewpoints", "I want to react to others more", "I want to check understanding after I speak" and listed some on the board, placing ticks beside these goals when I heard any student achieve them in pre-test activities.

Scaffolding

I provided conversation flow-charts to help students understand TL during initial activities. Students could follow patterns to recognize how phrases could be connected. This increased TL use and turn-taking as there was less hesitation while listeners decided what to say next.

I also modeled activities to the class, but if one group of students had not listened or understood, I modeled again at their table. Modeling a short discussion by taking one role while student/s took another (for example, I asked questions and they answered, then vice versa) to

clarify use of TL both improved students' competence at completing tasks, and avoided use of their L1 to clarify. I was concerned that it could be embarrassing for this particular group of students to admit that they did not understand in front of the whole class, so I hoped that my willingness to repeat and explain instructions to smaller groups showed that I cared about each student's participation and helped me to build rapport with them.

Promoting co-operation

In feedback, I often praised examples of students translating or negotiating meaning to increase co-operation, whether a stronger student paraphrased another's statement more clearly (for example, "Do you mean victim's family suffers from crimes too?") or a less-able student translated a single word (e.g., "death by overwork is '*karoshii*', work too much"*).*

In many early lessons, I also showed them missed opportunities to practice communication skills, such as paraphrasing or asking for repetition, by writing a brief exchange on the board and eliciting ways to add to it. For instance, in Lesson 7 communication broke down between four students:

> A: "Ichiro [Suzuki, a Japanese baseball player] is a good role model because he encourages many people. Do you understand?"
> B: "No" …. [Silence]

In feedback, I asked "How can we help B?" and suggested some ideas, e.g. "B could ask 'what is role model'?", "A could repeat", or the "other two students could offer to help". Highlighting missed opportunities seemed to increase students' awareness of how they could deal with breakdowns besides switching to their L1 by employing communication skills, and showed them when, how, and why they could offer assistance.

It seemed that encouraging students to help each other reduced the need for L1 use and appeared to increase risk-taking with their L2, as students could help each other to express ideas in more detail by providing additional vocabulary. I perceived that this also helped to build rapport and relatedness within the class as students became more comfortable relying on each other for assistance. Therefore, it appeared that promoting co-operation advanced progress on the three main goals of reducing L1 use, improving participation, and increasing motivation.

Personalization

As preparation for group discussions, students are typically presented with various ideas to consider developing in the discussion itself. I suggested that students could also add their own options to these preparation tasks, for instance, to think of "other things that make you feel pressure" in Lesson 7. EDC lessons are centered around students developing and elaborating on their opinions regarding social issues, so encouraging student-generated topics made the discussions more personalized and less predictable.

When giving feedback, I aimed to reference examples of "funny, deep, or interesting ideas" given by each group. For instance, in Lesson 11 one of the least motivated students asked "How about from someone with no friend's point of view?" which made others laugh and helped them to discuss an alternative viewpoint that had not been considered so far. I praised this idea in feedback and explained why it had made the discussion better. I later heard other students trying to think of original or funny viewpoints.

I felt that receiving feedback on content made students feel that their opinions were valid and their learning efforts recognized, which may have contributed to the relatedness of the group. Furthermore, praising 'funny, deep, or interesting ideas' may have encouraged risk-taking in their

L2 as students sought to add depth to their discussions.

Elicitation of self or peer correction and process feedback

After the first discussion in Lesson 5, I asked each student to *self-report* on their performance. This was done by having students raise their hands to answer binary questions and tally how many said 'yes' e.g. "Did you ask others a question? Did you summarize the discussion? Did you help others to explain their ideas?". As students needed to actively participate in feedback, they couldn't switch off or talk over me. I felt that stronger students could see their achievements while quieter or weaker students could recognize what they needed to do next. All students could therefore gain some insight into their individual level of achievement. I kept feedback only positive: I praised what students had achieved and avoided explicitly pointing out failures, instead encouraging them to try to achieve everything on the list in the next discussion.

After a discussion in Lesson 6, I gave a similar list of binary questions to be discussed in *group feedback*. This helped students who had participated minimally in the discussion to see that their peers had contributed more, and several students became noticeably more active in the second discussion. Allocating time for student-centered feedback may also have increased their awareness of their individual contributions to the activity and enabled me to keep any additional teacher-fronted feedback brief, which I believe helped students to stay focused during feedback.

I also experimented with an activity known within EDC as a *fishbowl activity*, in which half the class (typically four students) have a five-minute discussion while the other half observe. Each listener is required to focus in particular on one of the discussion participants and take notes on their performance. After the discussion, listeners give individual peer feedback to their partner, then their roles are reversed and the process is repeated. In their feedback, students gave each other direct and detailed advice: "You never asked a question", "you didn't give a reason, and try saying 'OK/ I see' more", "you need to speak more". In a brief discussion about the experience afterwards, some students said it was 'strange' to have a group only listening, but the majority agreed after one student said 'it was useful' to hear their individual strong or weak points. During peer feedback everyone had stayed in English and listened carefully. Unprompted, some students wrote down their weak points to use in the next discussion, which I praised and encouraged everyone to do. I believe that giving students a chance to evaluate this activity helped them to recognize the value of feedback and built rapport.

Group and pair work

Mixing the pairs and groups, and moving students around the room over the course of a lesson ensured that students had opportunities to talk to all of their classmates as opposed to working only with those sat nearest them, which I felt improved rapport and relatedness within the group.

In early lessons I set up groups to ensure that the students whom I perceived to be the least motivated were spread out, assuming that this would result in better participation all round. In Lesson 6 however, I deliberately put four of the seemingly least motivated students together for one discussion and monitored particularly carefully, then asked them to consider some leading questions by which to measure their success in group feedback.

In feedback, the more active group self-reported that they had achieved most of the goals for the discussion, whereas the others openly responded that they had spoken and helped others far less often, which had made it harder for them to talk for the entire discussion or achieve any of the discussion goals. I thanked both groups for being honest and gave the different responses as examples of why trying hard was important, not just individually but for the group as a whole, to which many of the weaker students nodded agreement.

I hoped that allowing the students to discover this for themselves via group-work had made

this feedback more memorable, and noted that three of the weakest students participated noticeably more actively when the groups were re-combined for the final discussion of Lesson 6.

CONCLUSION

The process of journaling helped me to notice and follow up on problems related to language use, participation, and motivation. Encouraging group bonding, allowing some lesson-focused use of their L1, and adding a greater range of motivational teaching practices improved the atmosphere and increased student participation. Looking back on previous journal entries revealed that standards of behavior and L2 risk-taking appeared to improve in subsequent lessons. While not all of my interventions had immediate effects, by recording my attempts I could better reflect on the needs of this group of students and assess which measures had been successful in achieving my goals, then use these reflections to plan the next lesson. Hence by keeping a teaching journal I could see which strategies I had tried, which had worked, and to what extent.

Although the motivational teaching practices covered in my journal might not work with every group of students in future, journaling made me more aware of specific group needs and demonstrated that using a wider range of practices may prove useful when dealing with demotivated students in future. Focusing on one class in detail provided some insights into motivational practices, yet to better understand which practices are the most successful for improving participation, a wider scale study could investigate which practices have the greatest effects in multiple groups. Testing a range of these motivational practices with various classes (possibly against control classes in which none of Dörnyei's practices are used) could also allow for a more comprehensive assessment of their results.

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