Reflecting on Student Performance and Classroom Dynamics through Journal Writing

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ABSTRACT

As part of on-going professional development, an English Discussion Instructor at a private university in Tokyo kept a teaching journal during her second academic semester. The purpose of this reflective paper is to present the findings from these journal entries, particularly in regard to student performance and classroom dynamics. Incorporating ideas from social-cultural perspectives, observations of multiple classes showed the intertwined relationship between student performance and classroom dynamics (i.e. interaction), and how student motives and goals played a vital role in enhancing learning and participation. The paper concludes with a brief reflection by the author, who saw journal writing as an effective method of reflective teaching.

INTRODUCTION

Since fall 2017, I have been teaching English discussion at the English Discussion Center (EDC) at Rikkyo University. The course is compulsory for all first-year students and spans two 14-week semesters. The classes are divided into four levels, with Level I classes being the highest level (TOEIC score range: 680 or above) and Level IV four classes being the lowest (TOEIC score range: below 280). The main principles of the English discussion classes are the following:

- all teachers follow a strongly unified curriculum, which ensures students across all levels and departments are taught the same content using the same textbook, the same teaching methodology (based in Communicative Language Teaching), the same assessment criteria and methods, and provided with the same learning experience;
- all classes have no more than nine and no fewer than seven students;
- the course is highly student-centered, which means students typically spend between 50 minute and one hour of each 90-minute lesson speaking English with their peers and with teacher-talk reduced to a minimum;
- teachers play the role of a facilitator and offer applicable feedback to students;
- classes are conducted in English only;
- and while students are expected to discuss various topics such as peer pressure, urbanization, gender equality, and crime and punishment, assessment is based on the students' use of the target discussion and communication skills, and not explicitly on the content of the ideas or their critical thinking skills.

In addition to teaching discussion classes, as part of professional development, I have been working on teaching-related projects each semester. In my first semester, I wrote a self-reflection regarding the ways in which I attempted to alleviate anxiety in my classes, as I felt that due to the nature of the course (requiring a high level of participation from students by sharing their opinions, reasons, asking questions, and other skills required by the course, in English, to their peers), the classes were naturally anxiety-inducing for some/many students. Reducing tension in the classroom by fostering a positive and friendly atmosphere seemed to mitigate the effects of foreign language anxiety among students. Although my beliefs have mostly remained the same since my first semester, I kept a teaching journal during my second teaching semester, from April to July 2018, where I recorded my observations of my classes as well as my thoughts and feelings; doing so enabled me to notice the changes in my beliefs and attitude in my second semester. The purpose of this reflective piece is to present such changes, and reflect on not only my students' performance and classroom dynamics but also on my transformation as an English discussion teacher. In

particular, the paper focuses on how students at the EDC learned through interaction, and how student motives and goals played a vital role in enhancing learning and participation. As teaching journals are subjective in nature, this paper is based purely on my personal account, and as such, the ideas and opinions expressed in this paper are not meant to be generalizable.

Being a novice teacher, I have felt that reflecting on my own teaching is crucial in understanding my own beliefs and practices. Ho and Richards (1993) suggest that keeping a journal can provide teachers with the opportunity to describe and explore their own teaching practices. As such, I kept a teaching journal in my second semester, which became the basis of this paper. While certainly there are benefits to carefully planning the structure of one's teaching journal, for this project, I used a free-style approach to writing where I wrote down everything I felt or noticed from my observations of my classes. I did this for all of my 13 classes, from the second lesson to the final lesson of the semester. The main reason why I did not focus on one particular class is because I wanted it to be an opportunity for me to see what I naturally ended up writing about. The second reason is because I wanted to focus on aspects of my classes that were frequent and most common throughout my classes. Therefore, the approach I took in keeping a teaching journal was more organic rather than controlled. Consequently, the actions I took in response to certain events that happened in my classes were also spontaneous in nature, involving a series of decision-makings to what Schön (1983) refers to as *reflection-in-action*. As Murphy (2014) explains, "… reflection-in-action involves the online, real-time decisions teachers are continually making while teaching" (p. 615).

Before I begin to reflect on my teaching journal, I feel it is important to give a brief overview of my background as my identity has had a significant impact on not only the way I teach and on the way I interact with my students, but also on my students' perception of me. I was born in Japan but moved to the U.S. at the age of six where I was first put into an English Language Development class and later transferred out into regular, English-immersion type classes. I did not move back to Japan until I was fifteen years old, but I stayed mostly in Japan until I went back to the U.S. to work on my Master's in TESOL at the age of twenty-five. As such, being bilingual has always played an important role in my identity, and it has been no different in my teaching career. My teaching contexts prior to Rikkyo University have ranged from one-on-one tutoring at a university writing center, teaching English as a Second Language to a large group of adult students at a community college, teaching test preparation courses (TOEFL and IELTS), to teaching online English retention classes to Japanese returnee students all over Japan. In all teaching contexts, regardless of the students' L1, I always played the role of a bilingual teacher who did not neatly fit into the traditional native-speaker or non-native speaker categories. Aside from my linguistic, educational, and cultural background, other parts of my identity that are perhaps relevant are that I am a cis, able-bodied female. These facts are essential in understanding the experiences that I have gone through since all teachers undergo experiences in ways that are unique to their identity. This is certainly something that I realized as I was writing down my thoughts into my journal. Having completed my second semester at EDC, it is my belief now that despite the unified curriculum, the experiences of EDC instructors are unique to each teacher as no teacher is exactly the same, and no combination of students is the same.

DISCUSSION
Teaching Goals
One of my main goals in my first teaching semester was to alleviate anxiety and increase student confidence (Morita, 2018). Looking back, I feel that perhaps this was also my attempt to develop my own confidence as an EDC teacher. In my second teaching semester, my goals stayed broadly similar but changed slightly. These were to:

- foster a learning environment where students develop a positive attitude about sharing their ideas in English;
- create opportunities for students to bond with each other;
- improve students' confidence as English users;
- and of course, reduce anxiety.

I learned from the first semester that the bond created among students seemed to correlate greatly to their motivation and their participation in class. Classes in which students got along seemed to naturally form a classroom environment where students helped each other more, were less hesitant about asking questions, had higher attendance, and less anxiety. Therefore, I consciously attempted to create and maintain a friendly atmosphere and encourage the building of friendships, particularly in the beginning of the semester. Since this was their first semester at Rikkyo where everyone was new and did not know each other, I felt that, as a teacher, I played a vital role in doing so. A key aspect of this role was being an encouraging and empathetic teacher. This was easy to do as the program encourages teachers to give not only negative but positive feedback and praise, and as the main aims of the course are to develop students' speaking fluency and communicative ability (Hurling, 2012), feedback and error correction rarely, if at all, cover grammatical or lexical accuracy. I made this clear from lesson 1, and it seemed to help alleviate some of the fear that students had about making mistakes. In terms of the way I presented myself, I tried to smile often, make eye contact with every student, take advantage of humor when appropriate, and in general, tried to model behavior that I wanted students to imitate, such as using the communication skills taught on the course (e.g., using Active Listening such as reacting to other speakers and checking understanding where necessary), and giving words of praise and appreciation whenever possible.

Issues in the Classroom: Lack of Output and Use of L1

Having kept a teaching journal for the entire second semester, I noticed that I had mainly focused on two main areas: students' areas for improvements and issues that arose in class, and the students' exceptional performance. The following are what I felt were the most common problems in the classroom: lack of output and excessive use of the students' L1 (Japanese).

In a few of my classes, there was at least one student who barely met the lesson aims due to a lack of output. In EDC lessons, students are graded on their participation, which implies taking an active, verbal role in the lesson, so although students could be participating through body language, they are not given credit for such actions. Lack of verbal communication had a negative effect on students' assessment since that was a large component of their grading criteria. In my first semester, I tried to devise ways to resolve the issue by being selective when pairing and grouping students so that quieter students had more opportunities to talk. I also tried to provide students with opportunities for group reflection on their performance post-discussion. I took a similar approach in the second semester, but I noticed one change in my belief and attitude toward the shyer students: in most cases, the lack of verbal output from these students was largely due to their personality, and pointing out the need for a balanced discussion - in other words, reminding quiet students to talk more, could potentially make students feel ostracized if done carelessly. This is because I saw that shyer students were often aware that they were not speaking enough and because the classes were small in size, it was easier for them to feel like they were being put on the spot.

Another issue that arose across many of my classes was the students' overuse of their L1. While I believe that students' L1 can be used to maximize learning opportunities for the students and research in psycholinguistics shows that code-mixing is a natural phenomenon of bilingualism/multilingualism (Traxler, 2012), an excessive use of L1 can be a problem because it

takes away students' opportunities to negotiate for meaning in English, which is also a significant component of their assessment at the EDC (Hurling, 2012). Through observation of my classes, one thing that seemed to be at the core of the students' reasons for using Japanese in the classroom was to save face. The students' fear of making mistakes and not being understood by others seemed to amplify their use of Japanese. Below are instances in which students used a Japanese word or phrase, followed by an English translation, if a repair was made by the speaker or listener(s) afterwards, as shown in Table 1:

Table 1. Examples of repair from Japanese to English

Japanese word/phrase	Students' Translation	Possible cause(s)
iyokuteki	Activity→active	Lack of vocabulary
saigai	Disease→desert→disaster	Lack of vocabulary
seishitsu	N/A	Lack of vocabulary; lack of effort
kore douyu imi?	N/A	Anxiety from not being able to understand

Note: Arrows indicate the process of students' translation

In most cases, lack of vocabulary and an attempt to save face seemed to be the leading cause of L1 use; specifically, when I asked my students why they used Japanese, the responses I received were because they did not know the English equivalent. However, there seemed to be other causes for excessive Japanese use, including:

- lack of effort;
- too much excitement;
- anxiety;
- difficulty in expressing the words or phrases into English because they were abstract entities, a direct translation in English did not exist, or the idea/word itself did not exist at all in English.

There were two classes in particular that stood out in their excessive use of Japanese in class: my lowest-level class (Economics majors with TOEIC scores below 280), which was comprised of seven male students and one female Chinese student, and one of my highest level classses (Literature majors with TOEIC scores ranging from 480 to 679), which was made up of two male students and six female students. In terms of classroom dynamics, the Level IV class was a mix of strong characters and personalities, so I was concerned in the beginning of the semester that they may not get along well, although this changed as the semester progressed. The students also showed a lack of confidence in their English ability, as was expressed by them in the first lesson when I heard them asking each other how low their TOEIC scores were. On the other hand, my Level II class got along very well and generally seemed more confident and motivated about communicating in English. Despite the difference in their levels, both groups often used Japanese in class not only to each other but also to me when asking questions. However, their reasons for using Japanese seemed to differ. While my Level IV class seemed to use Japanese primarily because they lacked the linguistic repertoire to express themselves, my level II class seemed to use Japanese not only when they lacked vocabulary, but also as a way to bond or when they wanted to talk about matters that were unrelated to the discussion topics. In other words, using Japanese seemed to be a way for them to communicate "off the record".

Because the two classes differed greatly in terms of level, gender balance, and group dynamics, I took a different approach to deal with this issue. For my Level IV group, I occasionally

asked students to translate the meaning of certain ideas and phrases in their textbook that they had difficulty understanding by asking them, "what does *patient* mean in Japanese?" or offering translations of certain vocabulary words that they frequently mis-translated or that they could not translate or paraphrase themselves. By doing so, students were able to use the more appropriate term in their subsequent activity without the worry of fossilization occurring, and in general, students' fear of making mistakes seemed to gradually decrease throughout the semester because they knew that I was there to support them if they needed help. With my Level II group, I was confident that they had the linguistic repertoire to paraphrase and express themselves in more situations, so my approach was to clearly state during class or in post-discussion feedback to use English only. When doing so, I always tried to give them encouragement by telling them to speak English because I knew they could do it and offering suggestions on how they could have translated or paraphrased a Japanese word or phrase. If that did not work, I told them I would start deducting points from their lesson grade if they continued to use Japanese. The latter, although simplistic, often appeared quite effective in keeping students on track as it reminded them that this was an English discussion class and they were being assessed on their ability to communicate in English. This was also a good reminder for me that students will often push boundaries, and it is the teacher's duty to make sure those boundaries and expectations are clear.

My decision to take the actions I took in regards to the students' L1 use in class was greatly affected by my own identity as a bilingual teacher. In a journal entry halfway through the semester, I wrote about my feelings of conflict that I had as an English language teacher who saw the benefits of an English-only classroom, but at the same time, felt it unnatural and impractical that I could not utilize my skills and knowledge as a bilingual teacher. My feelings regarding this was particularly strong when teaching my lowest performing classes. Research in translanguaging shows that I may not be alone about my beliefs regarding L1 use in the classroom; García and Wei (2014) state that research in translanguaging classrooms shows that when students' prior languages are used as a resource, communication in the L2 increases.

The Overachievers

While there were certainly a few students who did not perform as well as the others, there were also students who went above and beyond what was required of them. For example, in one of my most dedicated classes (Level II, Psychology majors), which consisted of four male and four female students, I found out later in the semester that almost all of them, particularly Sakiko, Mina, and Kei (pseudonyms), prepared responses to discussion questions before every class. Sakiko would even script her entire fluency activity response, usually about a page long, even though that was not required. In my journal, I wrote about how this class seemed more motivated than my other classes, but it also seemed to be because the students were not only hardworking but also anxious about speaking English. I realized this because in the case of Sakiko, her face would turn red every time she was put on the spot to speak, would only speak when spoken to, and even expressed her opinion that she was not good at talking to people. Although I was slightly worried about her wellbeing and performance in the class at the beginning of the semester, I was pleased to see that the other students were very patient with Sakiko; the other three female students befriended her, and helped her by giving her opportunities to speak and making her feel comfortable. By the end of the semester, I saw that she was participating more actively, by asking more follow-up questions, and in general, she seemed more relaxed as she stopped scripting everything she had to say and instead spoke more spontaneously.

Overall, as the course progressed throughout the semester, the students in this class seemed to become less anxious and more confident about communicating in English. Two of my male students, who seemed slightly nervous in the beginning of the semester, shared their feelings about

the course in the final lesson. Kei confessed, "This class's classmates were all friendly, so I wasn't afraid to speak in English. I wasn't afraid of making mistakes with grammar and so on." Mina also shared a similar sentiment, saying, "I don't feel scared anymore about making mistakes in discussion class." It seems that many of them began the course with a fear of making mistakes and being judged by their classmates and teacher, but their fears alleviated once they realized they were not being punished for lexical or grammatical mistakes and they felt comfortable about sharing their opinions with each other.

Motives and Goals

The highly motivated students who excelled and improved the most seemed to have specific motives and goals, although they varied depending on the individual. Lantolf (2000) states, "Students with different motives often have different goals as the object of their actions despite the intentions of the teacher" (p. 12). For example, students who wanted to become English teachers or those who were also interested or planning to study abroad appeared more intrinsically motivated than their peers. For the rest of the students, their goals, if they had any, seemed to be more extrinsic: a desire to pass the course, to get a good grade, or to be socially accepted by their peers; in other words, high achievers seemed to have goals that were more intrinsic, while others had goals that were more extrinsic. Having students set clear motives and goals then became imperative to nurture students into becoming self-regulated learners. However, I now feel that it does not really matter what the motives and goals are, as long as there is one. For students who do not have much motivation in learning English, it may be easier for teachers to encourage students to find a different purpose for attending and participating in class, such as being able to make friends or being able to share their opinions with others. It could also be something as simple as because the class is fun or because the student likes the students and/or the teacher. Indeed, I could tell that many of the students enjoyed the classes, and particularly towards the end of the semester when fatigue began to set in and motivation levels appeared to decrease, the motivation for students to come to class seemed to become a social one.

In addition to sustaining student motivation, because attendance and participation is a significant part of their assessment, I made it a goal early on in the semester to make sure attendance and participation remained high. If a student did not show up on time, I often asked my students where that student was to show that I cared if students did not show up without any notice. It was also my intention to foster a team-like dynamic where the class was a team rather than a set of individuals. This seemed to work well particularly among groups that exemplified collectivistic traits over individualistic ones. Indeed, students who seemed to see discussion as teamwork often encouraged and policed each other for attendance and participation. The following are some of the phrases they used in class:

- No Japanese!
- You have to come to class next week.
- Why weren't you in class last week?
- Chantoshiou (Let's do this well/properly)
- This is our last discussion, so we should talk more!

Evidently, at the end of the semester, particularly in lesson 14, many students expressed that they had much fun speaking English and that they do not want to change classes next term. How emotionally invested some of the students were to the class was a little surprising, but it showed me that, for many students, being able to engage in social interaction became the driving force, or motive, to attend and participate in class. Overall, my classes in my second teaching semester did not pose many problems behavioral or performance-wise, and in general, students seemed to develop relationships that transcended the classroom.

CONCLUSION

As the examples and accounts presented in this paper have been based purely on my observations and speculations, it seems risky and naïve to attempt to measure the impact that I truly had, if any, on the students' generally positive attitude toward the classes. One thing that seemed to be true is that students in my classrooms were learning through interaction and seemed to be getting more than just English speaking practice; perhaps, this is what socioculturalists refer to as the participation and (re)construction of selves (Lantolf, 2000)

A friendly classroom atmosphere and a closer relationship between teacher and students seemed to foster good relationships among students, thus alleviating tension and anxiety, and increasing motivation and participation. However, while overall student participation, including with shyer students, seemed to improve throughout the semester, the relaxed environment also seemed to decrease motivation to use the target language for some students who did not feel sufficient pressure to perform better. Although they certainly seemed to enjoy the lessons, I began to question whether I could have done more to push students by exerting more authority on my part. Feeling too comfortable in the classroom also seemed to increase student behavior that could be perceived as attempts to cross teacher-student boundaries. Finding and maintaining a good balance of being friendly and approachable yet stern and authoritative seems to be an area that I need to continue to work on as a teacher. Finally, as keeping a teaching journal helped me generate thoughts and ideas that allowed me to reflect on not only student performance but also on myself as a teacher, I find it worthwhile to continue the reflective practice of journal writing. As Murphy (2014) neatly summarizes, "The rewards of reflective teaching can be discovered only through the process of continuing on our journey" (p. 615).

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