Autonomy and Personalization in an English Discussion Course

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the effects of allowing an increased level of task-personalization for highly proficient speakers of English enrolled in English Discussion Class (EDC), a compulsory course for all first-year undergraduates at Rikkyo University in Tokyo, Japan. It is widely accepted that allowing students to explore topics that are of interest and relevance to them can increase student motivation and engagement in class. Over the course of a 14-week semester, students were asked to bring in topic-related information to lessons, based on their own experience and interests. This was then incorporated into various stages of the lesson. This activity was intended to encourage students to form a personal connection with the lesson content and help ground the textbook topics in students' own reality, as a means of increasing student engagement and investment in class activities. This task was trialed three times at different points throughout the semester with varying levels of success.

INTRODUCTION

All first-year undergraduate students at Rikkyo University take part in a compulsory English language program consisting of three or four separate courses, depending on the level of the student. These courses are: English Discussion Class (EDC), presentation class, e-learning class, project English, and reading and writing class (Rikkyo University Center for English Discussion Class, 2018). The English Discussion Class involves small groups of students (between seven and nine) meeting once a week for 90 minutes. Students are grouped into four different levels based on their score on the TOEIC reading and listening test. Level I represents the highest level of students, with TOEIC scores ranging from 680 to 990. Many of these students have spent time living abroad in English-speaking contexts, and so speak at an extremely high, sometimes near-native level of English. This paper will explore the notion that allowing these especially high-level students more control over the content of the lesson can help to increase their level of engagement and investment in the classroom.

For every level in EDC, lessons each week follow a similar format. They begin with a 3-2-1 Fluency activity, intended to improve fluency and activate schemata (Nation, 1989). Then, students are either presented with new target language, or review language from previous lessons. After this, students engage in two extended group discussions. Each extended discussion is broken down into two stages: "preparation" and "discussion" (Brereton, Lesley, Schaefer, & Young, 2018). The preparation stage allows students to generate ideas with a partner, before partners are separated and groups of four are arranged for the main discussion task. This paper will explore the effects of allowing high-level level 1 students (TOEIC 795-810) to generate their own content for the 3-2-1 Fluency activity and second extended discussion.

Typically in EDC lessons, discussion preparation activities consist of a pre-made list of examples or ideas, about which students are asked to form value judgments. For example, in the first discussion in the 11th lesson of the spring 2018 semester, the ultimate goal of the discussion is for students to discuss which technologies are most important in daily life. To prepare for this discussion, students are presented with a list of technology (see Appendix A). They are then asked to select their top three, before discussing their choices with a partner. The rationale behind feeding students ideas in this way is that, in order for students to develop their fluency, the cognitive load should be lightened so that they can focus on language production (Nation, 1989). In other words,

asking students to simultaneously generate content and language creates too much of a cognitive strain, and given that the aims of our lessons revolve around developing fluency and discussion skills, it makes sense for us to focus more heavily on language output, rather than idea generation. This is especially important given that the vast majority of the thousands of students who participate in EDC are not anywhere near native-level proficiency, and so require the extra scaffolding to help them meet the aims of the course.

However, as the level of the students gets higher, this rationale becomes less justified. For students who have spent portions of their lives immersed in English-speaking environments and have achieved a high level of spoken English proficiency, simultaneous content generation and language output is less of a tall order. In fact, it could be argued that feeding students ideas and not allowing them to come up with content of their own could even have a negative impact on the lesson, as students could become less engaged if the ideas they are fed do not necessarily reflect their own opinions or areas of interest, and therefore may result in communication that is not meaningful or authentic.

This paper presents an activity intended to combat this potential negative effect which is based on two principles as presented by Jack C. Richards in his article, *Teachers' Maxims in Language Teaching*. The first principle is the maxim of involvement; that is, follow the learners' interests to maintain student involvement. As mentioned previously, the way EDC lessons are structured in the textbook does not encourage students to explore their own interests. Creating more opportunities for this could be motivating for higher-level students who do feel they are capable of doing this. The second principle is the maxim of empowerment: give learners control. This is somewhat related to the previous principle. EDC lessons are typically very structured and don't give students many opportunities to control the content of their discussions. Higher level students may find this style of class to be demotivating, repetitive, and possibly patronizing. (Richards, 1996).

By adjusting various stages of the lesson to incorporate these maxims, I believe that high-level students could become more engaged and invested in the lesson topics, and the activities that surround them.

DISCUSSION

While the maxims that Richards discusses in his article are not widely referred to by other authors, they can be seen as being related to broader and more widely-referred to terms such as learner-autonomy and personalization, which in turn are very much connected to motivation. The importance of allowing for personalization and autonomy as a means of motivating students has been noted by several authors as being especially relevant to teenage students (Harmer, 2007; Ur, 1996). The average EDC student is 18, turning 19, when they join the program. It is important to note that students in this age group toe the line between adolescence and adulthood, and so pedagogical principles which relate to both teenagers and adults can be relevant. Allowing students to explore content which is relevant to their lives or their interests could help to increase overall engagement with the topic, and in turn increase engagement with other aspects of the lesson, such as target language usage and participation in classroom activities.

Learner-autonomy is generally considered to be a positive thing, regardless of the age-group or teaching context. Not only are autonomous learners more capable of managing their own learning both inside and outside of the classroom, but they are able to bring their own experiences and interests into the classroom in a productive way, bridging the gap between abstract, theoretical language learning and its real-world applications. Alm says:

If learners see no value in an activity, they will pursue it only reluctantly, or not at all.

However, if the activity is of interest to them, if it reflects personal interests and it allows them to make choices, they are likely to engage in the activity. (Alm, 2006)

Allowing for personalization is another way in which students can be encouraged to connect more deeply with lesson content. Below is a definition of personalization relevant to the current context:

Personalisation happens when activities allow students to use language to express their own ideas, feelings, preferences and opinions. Personalisation is an important part of the communicative approach, since it involves true communication, as learners communicate real information about themselves… Personalisation is important for several reasons. It makes language relevant to learners, makes communication activities meaningful, and also helps memorisation. (British Council, BBC, 2006)

As mentioned in the previous section, the way the EDC course is designed does not typically encourage a large amount of personalisation, and has instead been intentionally designed that way in order to align with the course aims and assist students in achieving those aims. For students who are high-level English speakers, and who are able to meet the aims of the course without a huge amount of strain, allowing a higher level of personalisation could help to elevate their classroom experience by encouraging "true communication" and making activities "meaningful".

The task that I incorporated into my lessons encouraged learners to explore lesson topics in a way that allowed them to find some type of personal connection, either by linking it to their own experience, or their own interests. It also allowed them some control over individual lesson activities, in that their own content was used to construct the discussion preparation and discussion questions for the final extended discussion task. In this sense, I believe this activity fostered autonomy and personalization in the classroom, and in turn helped students to feel empowered and involved in the learning process.

PROCEDURE

Typically, EDC students complete a short reading task for homework, which is included in their textbook and presents topic-related information and vocabulary which might be useful for students to incorporate into their discussions throughout the lesson. This activity was set alongside this reading task, with students asked to write a few sentences about an example related to the upcoming lesson topic. They had the option of either researching an example they were interested in, or simply writing about an example based on their own experience. By keeping the task short and simple, I felt it increased the chances of all students completing it. It also meant it would comply with EDC guidelines, which dictate that students cannot be given more than thirty minutes of homework in a week.

This activity was trialed with one class on three different occasions; prior to lessons 6, 7 and 11. These lessons were selected as I felt the topics best lent themselves to the activity, in that students would be able to find real-world, relatable examples that could be incorporated into the lesson without having to make any major changes to the textbook content. This specific class was chosen as all the class members seemed to be highly motivated students, and therefore likely to complete an additional homework task with some level of seriousness.

In lesson 6, students were asked to bring in examples of places they had lived or were interested in and describe an environmental problem faced by that place. They were provided with a worksheet (see Appendix B) which contained two examples to use as templates (one based on

research and the other based on experience). Prior to lesson 7, after they had already completed the task once, they were asked to complete a similar task based on the topic of urbanization, this time without a worksheet. The rationale for this was that they already knew how to do the activity, and so did not require the extra scaffolding the second time around. However, after seeing a drastic reduction in the number of students who completed the task, for the third attempt I reverted back to using a worksheet (see Appendix C), on which students wrote about examples of emerging technology.

Given the failure of the second attempt, I was only really able to implement the activity properly in lesson 6 and lesson 11. For each of these lessons I added an extra question to the 3-2-1 Fluency activity which asked students to talk about the example they wrote about for homework. This gave students a chance to summarize and share the information they had brought in with other students in the class. We then returned to the examples they had brought in for the second extended discussion. For preparation, students discussed their examples with a partner. For the discussion itself, the student-generated examples formed the basis for the discussion. In lesson 6 (The Environment and You), each member of the group presented their example of an environmental issue, and the group worked together to try to trouble-shoot the problem. In lesson 11 (Technology: Past, Present, and Future), the examples of emerging technology that students had chosen to write about were compiled on the whiteboard, and the discussion groups were told they had $1,000,000 of research money to allocate. They could choose to give it all to one project or give smaller percentages to a variety of projects. Essentially, in both lessons, the student-generated ideas replaced the ones that would usually be fed to them by the textbook

VARIATIONS
This activity could potentially be used with lower-level students, but may require additional scaffolding to ensure that it does not take students too long to complete. Rather than writing full sentences, students could be asked to write down some key words relating to their ideas. Another alternative is that students could be provided with a form to fill out, which could elicit short answers, but still allow for a higher level of personalization within the lesson.

Out of the two stages in which I incorporated the student-generated content, the 3-2-1 Fluency stage could potentially be more achievable for lower-level students (Level III or IV). In this context students would be able to share their own ideas with minimal pressure; it's a fairly one-sided activity which does not require complete comprehension from the listener in order to meet its aims. Incorporating student-generated content into the second discussion requires students to explain their own ideas, understand each other's, and respond appropriately, all of which could create a significant amount of cognitive strain and have a detrimental effect on their ability to focus on their fluency and use of target language, which are the main aims of the course.

CONCLUSION
Although I attempted to trial this activity on three occasions, it was only really successful on two of these occasions. The second attempt, in which I did not provide students with a worksheet, resulted in only one student completing the task. I believe this was a result of two factors. Most importantly, students did not remember to complete the task as they did not have a written record as in the previous week. Another factor could have been that the task felt less clear without the scaffolding that the worksheet provided, such as my own example which acted as a template and indicated how long I expected their passage to be.

Based on the two occasions (lesson 6 and lesson 11) on which a majority of students completed the task, I would say that this activity had an overall positive effect on student engagement and investment in class, particularly in relation to the group discussion stage. In lesson

6, students discussed the examples of environmental problems they had each brought in. After the previous five lessons in which students had become accustomed to the usual lesson flow, they seemed to find the concept of introducing their own idea to be fun and novel. Given the make-up of the group (a lot of returnees who had lived and gone to school in cities all over the world), students were able to contribute a lot of interesting examples of environmental problems they had witnessed first-hand. They all seemed to enjoy playing the role of "expert" when it came to the topic they had introduced and were able to respond authoritatively and informatively to their classmates' questions and suggestions.

In lesson 11 students introduced examples of emerging technology they thought were interesting. The discussion task involved them working together to allocate a research fund to the examples they thought would have the greatest benefit for society. On this occasion, it was interesting to note how invested students were in their own contribution. On this occasion, the discussion took on some debate-like qualities, with students strongly arguing for their own example. This is not really something we encourage in the EDC, as the idea is for students to have collaborative and interactive discussions rather than debates. In this instance, students became so enthralled by their discussion/debate, that a lot of the target language they were being assessed on was neglected. In this case it was a little difficult to determine the success of the task, or how it could have been adapted to yield a better result. Students were definitely engaged, highly interactive, invested, and on task, but ultimately one of the two major lesson aims (developing discussion skills through use of target language) was not met.

Having only trialed this activity on a few occasions, and with just one group of very high-level, highly motivated students, I would be interested to see how it could work on a wider scale, particularly if it were adapted for lower levels. Ultimately, having students generate their own content can only be a positive thing, provided it does not compromise their ability to meet lesson aims. Student-generated content allows for topics to be grounded in students' own life experience, and therefore becomes more relatable and relevant to them, increasing the chances of meaningful communication. It can also give students an increased sense of achievement if it is able to increase the authenticity of the discussion, in that the opinions and ideas students present in discussions reflect their genuine feelings and experience.

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APPENDIX A – Discussion Preparation Activity

Discussion 1: Technologies in Daily Life

💬 **Preparation**

✤ *Which technologies are most important in daily life? (Choose __three__.)*

____ Televisions
____ Lights
____ Microwaves
____ Washing machines
____ Cars
____ Air conditioners
____ Smartphones
____ Refrigerators

✤ *Discuss your ideas with a partner.*

APPENDIX B – Student Homework Worksheet (Lesson 6)

Lesson 6: The Environment and You

Before next week, think of a city that you have lived in, or are interested in. Based on research, or your own experience, identify at least one environmental issue that is faced by that city.

Example 1 – Brisbane, Australia
People drive too much in Brisbane. Almost everyone owns a car, and many families own more than one. As a lot of people commute to work, many people drive long distances every day. Brisbane has a decent public transport system, but people still prefer to drive. One reason for this is that people don't want to walk to the bus stop or train station. Another reason is that people feel more comfortable in their cars – they can listen to music, control the temperature, and they don't have to worry about crowded trains or buses.

Example 2 – Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
Ho Chi Minh City has been developing at a rapid pace for the past decade. As a result of this development, on average people are becoming wealthier. This means that more people are buying cars and motorcycles, leading to heavy traffic congestion and Co2 emissions. The air quality is so poor that it causes major health issues. People are also buying more products, especially fast food and snack items, which leads to an increase in garbage from all the packaging. The city hasn't developed a good waste management system yet, so a lot of the garbage ends up on the street or in the waterways.

Your idea:
_____

APPENDIX C – Student Homework Worksheet (Lesson 11)

Lesson 11 Research Task - Technology: Past, Present, and Future

Before next week, think of a new type of technology you are interested in, or you think will be beneficial for society. You can choose from the examples below or use your own idea.

Examples	Less Realistic Examples
drones commercial space travel wearable technology (e.g. smart watches / Google Glass) cloning artificial intelligence self-driving cars the internet of things 3D printing virtual reality clean meat	time travel teleportation mind control telepathic communication immortality

Your choice(s):

1. **Why are you interested in this technology?**

2. **How do you think this technology could change our lives?**

3. **What stage of development is it in? Do humans have access to it now? Will we have it in our lifetime?**