Addressing Poor Behavior and Role of Motivation in Classroom Dynamics

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ABSTRACT

Most of the students who study at higher educational institutions are expected to portray mature behavior and take responsibility for their studies. Entering a university is, supposedly and ideally, a thought-out and voluntary act. However, this is not an ultimate truth. Working with freshman students still involves some effort on the teacher's side to manage disturbing behavior and boost motivation to ensure effective learning environment for the whole class. In this paper I will reflect on poor classroom behavior and shifts in motivations in one of the classes I taught in the spring semester at Rikkyo University as an English Discussion Class (EDC) instructor. This reflection is based on the observations made in a form of regular teaching journal entries over a 10-week period.

INTRODUCTION

Reflective language teaching has been an effective tool for many educators in regulating and improving their classroom procedures. This approach is meant to help teachers "gain awareness of their teaching beliefs and practices," and learn "to see teaching differently" (Gebhard & Oprandy, 1999, p. 4). One of the means to help teachers reflect on their practice is to write down the entries in a teaching journal, which in turn can assist teachers "in gaining a deeper understanding of their work" (Farrell, 2018, p. 137). At the Center for English Discussion Class (EDC), keeping a reflective teaching journal is imbedded in the professional development for all first-year instructors in their second semester of teaching.

EDC is one of four required English courses for all freshman students at Rikkyo University (Hurling, 2012). All students are divided into four levels of ability based on their TOEIC listening and reading scores—Level I (TOEIC 680 or above), II (480-679), III (280-479) and IV (below 280). They are then placed into EDC classes consisting of seven to nine students of the same level and belonging to the same college (Centre for English Discussion Class, 2019). The course consists of 11 regular lessons and three discussion test lessons. Due to obligatory nature of the course, it is natural that some students are more motivated than others, and therefore, will show different attitudes in class and form groups with different dynamics. In the chosen class, I investigated negative influential behaviour within the framework of the classroom management and co-dependence of motivation and group dynamics.

As this was my first experience writing a teaching journal, I thought it would be difficult for me to choose one class or focus point for my journal entries. This concern was based on the assumption that in the first (Spring) semester most students would try to do their best and would not cause any significant problems in class with regards to behavior and classroom management. I was keeping short notes about each class starting from the second week of the Spring semester. The notes were made in a Word document and were separated by date and class. It did not take me long time to notice that one class in particular demonstrated some reoccurring behavior patterns which I thought were worth observing for my project, as they sometimes hindered the class from reaching the lesson's goals. It was a level IV class which I taught during the second period on Saturdays. The class consisted of one female and seven male students with a different level of proficiency and motivation. Among the challenges I came across when teaching this class were poor behavior and constantly changing group dynamics. The latter was caused by some of the students coming for class late and, therefore, joining the rest of the group at different stages of

the lesson, which brought a certain disruption and changed the atmosphere in class, causing the drop in motivation among the students.

DISCUSSION
Managing poor behavior
According to Scrivener (2012), "classroom management is the way that you manage students' learning by organizing and controlling what happens in your classroom" (p.1). It is needless to say that the main goal of classroom management is to ensure efficient learning process in which both students and the teacher are able to reach the objectives of the lesson. Many factors, such as classroom layout, clear instructions, establishing rapport, knowing the students and the ways they interact with each other, and establishing behavioral norms can contribute to the successful classroom management. In this paper I will mainly focus on the last one—establishing and managing appropriate behavior.

The class I was focusing on had two students, who fell under the description of *informal student leaders* in class (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003, p.112). Informal leaders are quite easy to identify in class. They act confidently and tend to change the way other students behave in their presence. Their moods and opinions become contagious and often affect the rest of the class (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). Unfortunately, the two leaders in my class were leading with an ill example. From the first lesson they caused disruption and erratic behavior in class. Scrivener (2012) recognizes three groups of behavior: poor, unacceptable and serious offences. Considering this categorization, my students were definitely showing the signs of belonging to the first, and, at times, to the second group. Poor behavior includes the following parameters: coming late to lessons, using mobile phones, repeatedly using L1 when asked to use English, continuing to be noisy or disruptive when asked not to and deliberately behaving in a way that distracts or annoys other students (Scrivener, 2012). All of these were present in the leaders' behavior in the classroom in the first few weeks. The situation was worse, when both of them were in the same discussion group. They would completely neglect the task and start discussing something completely unrelated such as their clothes, accessories, families and relationships and the rest of the group would follow. Their behavior had a negative effect on other students' performance in class because they either followed their lead or were deprived of the opportunities to participate in the discussions.

Scrivener (2012) suggests that most modern approaches to classroom management consider positive reinforcement and focus on the achievements to be more effective when dealing with challenging classes. However, when the negative tendencies in my class prevailed, I found it very difficult to concentrate on the positive. As our second lesson was about to finish, I tried my best to focus on the successful use of the discussion skills and emphasized the areas which needed some enhancement on the students' side. While I was giving the feedback, I had to interrupt myself a few times in order to attract their attention to my words. After I was done with the feedback, I could not stay positive any longer and scolded them for their behavior. After the class, feeling totally out of my depth, I turned to my program managers for help. I was advised to plan the seating arrangement for this class beforehand in order to keep the two influencers separated. Another advice was to send them both an email with the reminder of the rules of the class. As their English level was low, one of the program managers offered to translate the content of the email into Japanese.

After I had taken the measures suggested by the program managers, I noticed that the situation in class improved slightly, enabling me to shift my attention to noticing the positive behavior, such as students succeeding in using the discussion skills, generating some interesting content and using English to communicate their ideas. The situation was not eliminated completely,

but it was significantly alleviated on the days both of the students or even one of them were not in class.

Writing about this event in the journal helped me look deeper into the reasons of my initial outburst in class during the second week, as it allowed me to "step back for a moment and reflect on [my) work" (Farrell, 2007, p.107). There was no doubt that my lack of experience in dealing with erratic behavior caused this frustration. However, at the same time, I cannot say that the approach of maintaining the desired good behavior was always effective in my classroom. At times, I still relied on exercising appropriate authority as I still felt responsible for the outcome of the lesson.

Motivation and its effect on classroom dynamics
After the two students described above stopped attending the class, I hoped to see a significant positive change in the students' performance. With regards to behavior, there was a definite improvement. However, the overall situation was still far from being perfect or desirable. For instance, the attendance deteriorated. After the second discussion test (the ninth lesson), I had four to five people in class on average and half of this group seemed to show little interest in what was going on in class.

Dörnyei (2014), when writing about motivation, says that "interest…is clearly a motivational concept" (p.520). In the same article he refers to Noels' (2001) two motivational dimensions: *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* motivation. The first one comes from the learner's desire to "perform a behavior for its own sake (e.g. to experience pleasure or to satisfy one's curiosity)," while the second one is mainly dictated by "receiving some extrinsic reward such as good grades or to avoid punishment" (Noels, 2001, as cited in Dörnyei, 2014, p. 520). When I looked at six remaining students after the eighth lesson, I made an assumption, based on their behavior and attitude in the classroom, that three of them were intrinsically motivated, two of them were extrinsically motivated and one was demotivated. When discussing the topic, Becoming Independent, one of the intrinsically motivated students said that his parents never insisted on his entering the university, that it was his decision because he wanted to study, and that he enjoyed studying English in particular. The other two intrinsically motivated students showed general interest in the subject and spoke in English even during the pauses between the activities. For instance, in the ninth lesson, after they had completed their group discussion, they asked for a permission to discuss their favorite food, using target discussion skills. From my perspective, it was an indication that they liked using English for communication. To my opinion, the main difference in performance between the intrinsically and extrinsically motivated students was the extent to which they were psychologically present during the activities. The students that I considered extrinsically motivated also participated in the activities, but they switched to Japanese a lot more often. They tended to give short answers during group discussions because they often did not pay much attention to what their partners were saying and, therefore, could not add to or argue with the previous speaker. For example, they would close their eyes when their classmates were speaking, rest their heads on the desks, or look away. When their classmates asked for their opinions, they often asked them to repeat the question or the idea which they had just shared. Thus, I was under the impression that they were less interested in the class. The last student was a true enigma for me. Up until the fifth lesson, he had seemed to be extrinsically motivated, but after that his performance dropped drastically. He started to show up late for classes and leave the classroom every week in the middle of the activities for quite a long time to use the toilet, showed little interest in discussion topics and seemed annoyed when he was paired with most of his classmates. This attitude in most cases discouraged his classmates from asking him questions and overall, had a negative effect on the group's performance. As one of the students in this class

shared in an informal conversation in the final lesson, apathy from the classmates is very difficult in having a good discussion.

Motivation in a foreign language classroom depends on many factors. It can be affected by the previous learning experiences, the attitude to learning foreign languages posed by the learners' families or peers, whether the learner sees speaking a foreign language "as something pleasurable or…largely irrelevant" (Harmer, 2014, p. 91). In my case, the problems in the classroom arose not from the motivation, but rather from "unmotivation" (Sakui & Cowie, 2012, p. 205) of some students. Demotivating factors, especially at the Japanese school or university, can be the compulsory nature of the learning, students' attitudes and personalities and teacher-student relationships (Sakui & Cowie, 2012). I wish to think that only the first two demotivating factors influenced my classroom, but it may be the rapport that I failed to establish with some of the students in the observed class.

CONCLUSION

Every time we meet new students, we start from a clean slate. As teachers, we are always hopeful that all of our students are hardworking, positive and cooperative. When the reality does not meet our expectations, we become disappointed, a bit discouraged and sometimes, frustrated. However, knowing the right tools and techniques for successful classroom management, as well as reflecting on the teaching process, can mitigate such factors as poor behavior and classroom dynamics. Taking preventative measures can help teachers focus on encouraging the positive behavior. It takes some proactive thinking, which can be achieved with the help of teaching journals. This reflective tool proved to be quite powerful in making informed decisions and understanding the inner processes in the classroom. Farrell (2007) also suggests that making regular teaching journal entries "allows teachers to observe patterns and trends that they may not ordinarily see" (p.112). However, it cannot always eliminate the need for some traditional school approaches because positive reinforcement does not work for all classrooms (Scrivener, 2012). Some students can still portray immature behavior and pose significant problems both for teachers and other students. In these instances, exercising appropriate authority can be performed.

One of the most complex phenomena, affecting the process of a foreign language learning is motivation. There are numerous factors contributing to learner's motivation. In this paper I examined two motivational dimensions: intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Based on my journal entries, I noticed that intrinsic motivation seems more powerful and, in a long run, is more likely beneficial for the learner. I have also looked at possible internal (student's attitudes towards English, personality traits and teacher-student relationships) and external (class size, student levels and the nature of the course) factors of "unmotivation" (Sakui & Cowie, 2012) in Japanese compulsory English courses.

In the future, when I have low-motivated classes, I will try to spend more time trying to build a rapport during the lessons by commenting more on their ideas during the discussions rather than waiting for a perfect moment before or after the class. I am also interested in using the questionnaire designed by Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) to find out more about the students' feelings towards the class.

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