

“No Speak English!”: Motivation and Low-Proficiency Learners

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ABSTRACT

This reflective paper uses data collected from teaching journals the author maintained throughout the semester to trace the motivation and resulting behaviour of two low-proficiency learners in the English Discussion Class. It looks at the initial low level of motivation these students had, and the effects of certain strategies the author employed at different stages of the lessons during the semester to help motivate these students. This paper is a reflection on how effective or ineffective these strategies were and concludes with strategies one could try in the future to increase motivation in low-proficiency learners.

INTRODUCTION

The English Discussion Class (EDC) is mandatory for first-year university students who are placed in classes based on their department, major and English proficiency. They are placed in four different levels as per their TOEIC scores with I being the highest level of English proficiency and IV being the lowest. Most classes have an average of eight students to ensure maximum speaking opportunities for all students, provide more attention to individual class needs, and also help conduct more balanced discussions in smaller groups. These classes aim to equip students with discussion skills to share their opinions and communication skills to help negotiate meaning in discussions. The lessons are fairly structured, usually starting with a fluency activity, followed by target language presentation, practice, and two discussions (each preceded by some preparation for content generation and further skill use in context). Students usually do most activities in pairs and the discussions in groups of three, four, or five, depending on the attendance in class each week (Hurling, 2012). As an instructor in this course, my role is more as a facilitator helping students use the target skills to effectively express their ideas and negotiate discussions with other students in English.

With the aim of professional development, I was tasked with maintaining a reflective teaching journal during my second semester of teaching at EDC. As Farrell (2007) notes, there are many benefits to keeping a teaching journal, particularly in terms of being able to evaluate your own teaching practice and look more closely at student performance and patterns emerging in one’s teaching. It can be very difficult to remember details from a lesson, especially since we teach the same class multiple times over in a week, and I found that keeping a teaching journal allowed me to focus on some specific aspects in my classes and see how those played out throughout the semester. Murphy (2014) talks about different kinds of reflection, one being “reflection-on-action” which allows one to retroactively look back on what took place in the lesson and how they might change things the next time they teach the same lesson or group of students. While writing these teaching journals, what stood out to me was the level of motivation—often very low—and in turn the behaviour patterns among specific students in classes with low proficiency in English.

My first class with one of the two students I discuss in this paper, Student B, said to me, “No speak English!” He was part of a very low Level IV class I was teaching and I observed throughout the semester that his level of interest in the class and motivation to perform kept going down. Deci and Ryan (1985) talk about “amotivation” where a student is already convinced they cannot perform well, and while my student was already questioning his ability to use English, each lesson progressively showed a drop in his level of engagement (as cited in Dörnyei & Ushida, 2011). My other student, Student A, was not as vocal about his lack of motivation or lower

proficiency. Part of a lower Level III class, he was often more quiet, started out seemingly less motivated, and sometimes showed some bursts of interest, but mostly remained quiet and detached from the class in general. In this case, he seemed to be “demotivated” which Dörnyei and Ushida (2011) believe is a drop in motivation due to certain external factors, and not necessarily a lack of self-esteem. In this paper, I look at both students’ performance and behaviour throughout the semester based on the information gathered from my teaching journals.

DISCUSSION

There are multiple factors that play into a student’s performance and motivation during a lesson. Their level of interest in the topic, the skills being studied, or any future goals they may be able to facilitate through this class are major factors (Dörnyei, 2003). Nevertheless, there are many other “individual differences” we have to take into account, such as extrovertism/introvertism, self-esteem, peers, or willingness to communicate (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 2014; Dörnyei, 2005). In this discussion I focus on the students’ initial behaviour, some strategies I tried to help increase their motivation, and finally the effect these strategies had on the students.

Student A - Quiet and Unmotivated to Use English

Student A was part of a Level III class I taught with TOEIC scores ranging from 430-435 with all students sharing an L1, Japanese. The students had a low speaking proficiency overall, but got more comfortable with speaking English throughout the lesson as the semester progressed. Student A, however, was the exception in this class. From the very beginning I noticed that he avoided looking at me or making eye contact at any time. He also used Japanese throughout the lesson and spoke the bare minimum in English. It started with a standard EDC fluency activity where students talk about three to four questions, repeating their answers over three rounds with a decrease in time in each subsequent round. The first round is for three minutes, and despite having four questions each lesson with prompts and time to prepare, I found that A hardly spoke for one out of the three minutes. Whenever I looked at him, he would try to hide behind the person in front of him in the fluency line or simply look at the floor. When he was done answering the questions, he would chat with his partner in Japanese. As a listener, he showed no reactions to his partner, and often looked around the room or at the floor. When the listener finished speaking, he would strike up a conversation in Japanese with them. I found this pattern continuing throughout the lesson in all the activities. During discussions, he would always present his opinion in his L1 and most often, other students would translate the idea for him. I found that when he was working with other students in pairs, it always prompted more L1 use from both over English. His participation at the bare minimum level during discussions also tended to rub off on other students who became quieter, used more Japanese, and produced shorter utterances. Thus, it was his use of his L1 and lack of motivation to use English, which affected other students negatively, that led me to focus on him during my journaling process.

My very first journal entry was during the first Discussion Test lesson. Students go through a review session in the first half of the class, and take the test in the second. In the first half, students practiced the skills for the Discussion Test with a partner before a practice discussion. In the initial practice, I found A was again using Japanese very often, asking them to translate instructions, vocabulary, and even ideas he or his partner presented. During the practice discussion, with one student being absent, A was in a group of three with another relatively quiet student, and one very energetic and motivated student. I hoped that the latter student would present a good example of how they could show more reactions and be more involved in a discussion, but very quickly this student became quieter and also started using Japanese when A did. Forsyth (2014) talks about how majority behaviours can tend to affect the minority in groups, and it was clear that

the more extroverted and motivated student did not receive enough stimulus to remain enthusiastic. During the discussion test, however, I think there was enough extrinsic motivation for all to perform better and participate well because they were being scored on those aspects (Noels et al., 2003). While still a little quiet, I found A participated a lot more, used English throughout, and while his ideas were not original or very clear, he was definitely more engaged with the group as a whole. His performance in the test gave me hope that he would be more engaged, which I talked to him about when giving feedback after the test. I could also see that he had the potential to use English to express his ideas and definitely seemed more relaxed with the other students and my presence at his point in the semester.

Nonetheless, after Lesson 5, A came late almost every lesson. He would miss the quiz and it seemed like he was always trying to avoid speaking during the fluency activity. In an effort to push him to talk further in English and avoid using Japanese, I started pairing myself with him in the first round of fluency whenever possible. Every week I would have the question, “What was interesting or surprising in your homework reading?” and each time A would answer that he did not do the reading. I would ask him to answer the other questions, and it seemed as though he was often just waiting to run the clock out by trying to think of an answer for over a minute. Unfortunately, his lateness meant that he missed my examples and the preparation time to come up with ideas. He also refused to try to understand what needed to be done until the instructions or questions were translated for him in Japanese by other students. Even in Lesson 12, he was still using Japanese or running the clock out. Even when I had him speak after he heard other students, he did not produce any clear utterances in English. I noticed that when I was further away from him, he would start chatting with his partner in Japanese instead of answering the fluency questions. Overall, it seemed as though he stopped preparing for the lesson entirely—he did not study for the quiz, did not review the skills, or check his class comments. I often have students check comments in class and hoped it would encourage him to log in more often, but given his lack of punctuality, it became a difficult practice to continue.

I had a little more success during practice activities done in pairs. Here too, A continued to ignore my instructions, waiting for someone else to translate them for him. He also asked his partner to translate the practice questions and never gave his idea first. He always had his partner start with their opinion, refusing to change even when prompted by them. I even tried using templates for scaffolding, and also encouraged changing listener and speaker roles with each question, but A still resisted starting whenever he could. The only times he would start were when I paired myself with him to prepare for discussions. Even throughout these practice sessions, I found that he did not make an effort to understand how and when he had to use different skills, particularly when it came to asking questions—asking for opinions, reasons, examples, or possibilities. The students he was partnered with always prompted him to use the skills step-by-step. Earlier, when doing these practice activities, he would always use Japanese, and in turn his partners would end up using Japanese for the most part as well. However, over the course of the semester I started stressing that during activities or discussions students must use only English. I encouraged them to paraphrase or ask their partners for translations by using “How do you say ___ in English?” Most students responded well to this, and made an effort to use English, taking comfort in the fact that they could always ask their classmates or me to help with translating difficult ideas. While A did not use these skills, I started pairing him with students who had a higher proficiency and were more motivated to learn. As a result, they always called him out on his Japanese use, telling him that “no Japanese, only English” is allowed in the classroom. Once he had fewer opportunities to use Japanese, he was pushed to use more English, though he was still doing the bare minimum and was prompted by his partner constantly to ask questions. I think

as a whole, the maximum level of participation and engagement I saw from A was during pair activities.

Unfortunately, it was much more difficult to help A be more engaged and motivated during discussions. He was always very quiet, the last person to speak for every question being answered, and always agreed with everyone or repeated someone else's idea as his own. As I mentioned earlier, when he was in a group with more active students, instead of them encouraging him to be more active, often the morale of the group came down and they were quieter and less expansive with their ideas compared to the other group. The group that A belonged to also had the added need to help him through each step of the discussion when he was sharing his ideas, and also to encourage him to ask questions. Since A always spoke last, he avoided asking others any questions at all, but as I started stressing the importance of a "balanced discussion" where everyone got equal chances to speak and ask questions, the students tried to make sure A spoke second or third at least once during the discussion so he could ask some questions. While his use of Japanese did not decrease, particularly when expressing his own ideas, he became more involved with asking at least a few basic questions (e.g., opinions, reasons). It was only during Discussion Tests that he would try to use English or self-correct his Japanese utterances, but he still avoided using communication skills such as paraphrasing or clarification unless prompted. Additionally, when giving feedback for their performance during discussions, I would often ask students to raise their hands if they used a specific skill. I found A raised his hand even when he did not use the skills. In order to make him more accountable I started using cards, check sheets, peer observation, and asking students to talk to each other about what they did well and what they could improve. Not only did it promote more honesty among students, it helped them "notice" their target language use more closely, particularly when these tools were used during the first discussion (Schmidt, 1990). It also pushed A to use more skills and gave him fewer opportunities to hide his lack of participation and skill use.

All in all, I think he was one of the more challenging students I have had to teach in this course and a lot of different factors contributed to it. Firstly, I don't think he was very motivated about the course in general—he prepared very little, was regularly late to class, and showed very little interest in participating or hearing what his classmates had to say. Secondly, I think he had a lower proficiency level than all other students because he struggled to express his ideas in English. Although I think a large part of that was his lack of motivation to try and use English—when pushed during Discussion Tests, he was still able to articulate his ideas to a large extent even without any preparation. Also, I think the fact that his peer group was able to perform fairly well during the lesson and stick to using English without seemingly too much difficulty could have contributed to demotivating him during class. There were moments, however, when he would ask me with some enthusiasm to say things "one more time" so he could try to understand my questions or feedback. I did not see a lot of progress with him by the end of the semester, but I think I did succeed in having him become more open and more comfortable with my questions and feedback.

Student B - Disruptive and Unmotivated to Use English

Student B was part of a Level IV with TOEIC scores averaging at 150. They were the least proficient students I taught, again sharing Japanese as their L1. I remember being very surprised at their lack of proficiency in English when I first met them, especially because some students struggled to even read some basic questions in English. There was one female student who was clearly more comfortable with English and always came well prepared to class. Four other students were very motivated, but needed a little support with translation or repetition of instructions and the target language for them to understand. Student B was one of two students with the lowest

proficiency in class. Just like Student A, he was not very motivated about being in the class or trying to use English. However, unlike Student A, he was more boisterous and disruptive in the classroom, often leading me to stop my instruction and ask him to pay attention or stop talking. I chose to focus my journaling on this student because he surprised me with his continued lack of discipline and no desire to use English.

My first journal, as with Student A, was during Lesson 5, the first Discussion Test lesson. B was very good friends with his classmate, G. When B and G sat together they often chatted and joked around in Japanese, paying very little attention to what was going on in the lesson. As the two weakest students, not only did they bring each other down further, they also disturbed everyone else with their talking and laughing. During the review session for the Discussion Test, I could see that both students were unprepared. Neither had they looked at the test questions and thought of answers as everyone else had, nor had they reviewed the skills. When paired with others for practice, B's lack of preparation was clear and he used Japanese throughout practice to try and understand my instructions and the activities. He also had to have his answers translated to English. B and G were both becoming more of a hindrance during this lesson because of their lack of preparation and they were quietly trying to copy answers to the Discussion Test questions from other students. During the practice discussion, I separated them and found that G actually performed much better when away from B. B's group of three on the other hand had very minimal interaction as one student would help B go through the discussion step-by-step, providing him answers to questions and prompting him to ask the necessary questions to the next speaker. Throughout, unless speaking, B was silent and distracted, making it essentially more of a pair discussion rather than a group. During the Discussion Test itself, the groups were shuffled, and I still kept B and G separate. G really excelled on his test and came up with some of his own ideas, clearly showing the negative influence B had on G's performance during class whenever they were together. B on the other hand, despite getting a good score, relied entirely on prompts from his group members. Overall, it was clear that B was not interested or motivated to improve his discussion skills, but he did try to use only English throughout the test.

Throughout the semester there were specific activities during the lessons where B's actions really stood out. One of them was the fluency activity in the beginning of class. I would ask all students to come prepared with ideas for fluency and the practice and discussion sections of the lesson so that they would not spend too much time trying to translate all their utterances. Not once during the semester did B prepare for any part of the lesson. However, the most trying was the fluency activity because the onus was on one student to keep talking for three minutes in the first round. Initially I gave the students one minute to discuss the questions in Japanese to make sure they understood the questions, and they would then get another two minutes to write down some ideas. B never prepared during this time - he would talk to other students or stare at his questions, but when the time came to talk, he still had not tried to understand the questions, let alone have something to say about them. I started working with him to help him write ideas for the questions initially, but he only gave one- or two-word answers. I tried to have stronger students speak first so that he could listen to their ideas and understand how to answer the questions, as well as share some of his own ideas in a similar fashion. However, he never paid any attention to his speaker. Once, he tried to copy someone's answers word for word and give them as his own, but it made no sense because the answers did not align with his own ideas and experiences. Eventually, I started having him start the fluency along with G and another student in an effort to push them to prepare more. Even then B would simply try to echo what other students were saying. I found myself asking pairs to go to different corners of the room so that B would then present his own ideas. Once, in Lesson 12, B simply turned to an open window and spoke his fluency answer out loud. It was very clear that this activity was difficult for him, and he was not motivated to try and

perform well either. Perhaps, there was also some frustration at not being able to present his ideas. Nonetheless, despite scaffolding during the preparation stage, I found fluency continued to be a challenge even at the end of the semester.

While fluency was perhaps the most challenging activity during the lesson, I found that doing practice activities and discussions was also a difficult task with B. He paid almost no attention to my teaching of the target language or skills for the week, or to my instructions on how to go about the activities. When I asked him if he understood what I said, he would simply smile, give me a thumbs-up and say “Okay!” However, when he started the activity, it was clear that he had no idea what needed to be done. I tried pairing him with different partners and even tried a practice with three people to see what would help me get the most from B. I realised that doing an initial practice with G was not an option because neither understood the task very clearly. So, I partnered them with different students to work with them each time and found that they were more focused when paired with other students. Still, I found that B did the bare minimum, used Japanese with his partner very often, and only did what he was prompted to do, not necessarily understanding what he was saying or asking, let alone why he was doing it. During discussions as well, I found that groups with B were often quieter, had more two-person interactions when someone was helping him through the discussion, and used a lot more Japanese in general. B did not help matters either with lack of preparation or effort during the lesson. Often, he would repeat someone else’s answer word-for-word, or use the target phrase with the word “smile.” It resulted in sentences like “In my opinion, smile. It’s because smile.” It did not look like he was trying to make an effort to voice his opinions and often his group did not understand what he was trying to say, which resulted in more Japanese use to try and encourage B to share an idea. In the end, no matter how much scaffolding I provided in English and Japanese or how many group combinations I tried, it ultimately came down to the fact that he was not prepared for the discussion and put no energy into participating or voicing his ideas.

Besides his general lack of participation or motivation, another major issue I had with B was his disruptive behaviour in the classroom. As I mentioned earlier, B was constantly distracting other students, especially G. He would talk to G or his partners in Japanese, and joke with them about unrelated matters. Their conversations disturbed and distracted other students, while also having B and his partners fall behind themselves. B also had a tendency to talk to others while I was giving instructions, presenting, or giving feedback. It resulted in B’s entire table not listening to me at all, or me reprimanding B for talking, or us losing time because I would stop talking until everyone was paying attention. Other students in the class nicknamed B “problem child” after he was reprimanded over and over for being disruptive towards me and a cover instructor when I was unable to teach the class once. The students were also always listening, waiting for B to talk so they could call him out on his use of Japanese, often saying, “[B] used Japanese. Minus point!” I did try to use the incentive of getting full points if he did not use Japanese or disrupt the class, but it was quite clear that B was not concerned about his grade. Ultimately, even by the end of the semester I was unable to contain his discipline issues.

While B got along well with his classmates, he was clearly not motivated and kept mentioning that he could not use English and could not have a discussion. He seemed to be “amotivated” even before the course began. There was one point in the semester when I was teaching students paraphrasing, and one of the sentences when paraphrased was, “In other words, I am a serious student.” When B repeated this phrase, the entire class burst out laughing, and it was obvious B was affected by this reaction. He spent the entire class asking others in Japanese why they laughed at that statement. His lack of discipline might also have been a mask to hide any anxiety he felt over his low proficiency. However, he still did not increase his participation, put in any more effort, or even cut down on his disruptive behaviour. Nonetheless, it appears as though

he wanted to be taken seriously. I think his motivation was also affected by being in an environment where he was unable to keep up with his classmates or understand what was taking place in the classroom. I wish he had progressed further and that I could have helped him put in more effort and perform better, but I think his unpreparedness and casual attitude towards the course and the classroom really let him down. It was evident that his self-esteem was also very low when it came to English, because he constantly made it known that he could not speak in English. As a whole, along with Student A, he was a challenging student to try to get through to, and to teach effectively.

CONCLUSION

As a whole, many of my students were motivated and enthusiastic about learning. However, I think the two students discussed above reflect how difficult it can be to motivate students to participate and perform in a context that they are not interested in or lack confidence in their abilities. I definitely wish I could have done more to create a more positive and engaging atmosphere for them. I do wonder if sometimes using Japanese myself, or paying more attention to them, or even just praising them more when they achieved something small might have gone a long way in motivating them further. A large part of my struggle was the negative effect they had on other students' performance by continuing L1 use, disrupting their learning, or creating an unstimulating atmosphere for discussions that stopped me from being more positive with them. In the future, if I do encounter similar students, I think helping them set small goals that they could achieve in each lesson would help (Dörnyei, 2003). For example, using English throughout a discussion, or asking at least five questions, or showing at least five reactions during discussions. These were some strategies I employed with other classes that met with a fair amount of success, and I think I could try to make them part of my lesson structure. I would also think carefully about grouping students so that they get along well, and also motivate each other along the way. In the end, these two students have given me a lot to reflect on and have pushed me to try and think about different ways to make my teaching more engaging and approachable to all students.

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