

Reflecting on a Lack of Progress

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ABSTRACT

Teaching journals are a mandatory part of many education programs for a reason; reflection can help teachers learn more about their teaching practice and their students' needs and engage in simple classroom-practice experiments. In this paper, I will describe the process of journaling, and my attempts to assist two students who were reluctant to speak during group discussions. I will describe their behavior, my assumptions about possible causes, interventions taken based on those assumptions, and the results thereof. Finally, I will discuss suggestions for similar students in future classes. Though the interventions made did not seem to lead to appreciable changes, the process of journaling was a valuable one.

INTRODUCTION

The English Discussion Course (EDC) at Rikkyo University is a mandatory, skills-focused English course dedicated to teaching students discussion skills focused on discourse competence (e.g. giving an opinion) and communication skills focused on strategic competence (e.g. paraphrasing others), as well as increasing English fluency. The skills taught can enable students to engage in discussions with greater fluency, and also to overcome breakdowns in communication. Each EDC term consists of a minimum of 13 100-minute lessons, most of which include two extended group discussions, contributing towards a minimum of 60 minutes of peer-to-peer interaction time in each lesson. Finally, class size is limited to a maximum of nine students to help encourage student relationships to develop.

By ensuring plenty of student-to-student talk time and by keeping class sizes small, I believe that student relationships can be deepened, and motivation to attend and to engage deeply can be fostered (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Yet even in supportive and engaging atmosphere, some students remain unwilling to communicate. This is a frequent topic of discussion among the teachers who work in this program.

Therefore, willingness to communicate (WTC) is a common topic for EDC faculty professional development (PD) projects. As a second semester instructor, I was asked to begin writing a journal, to reflect on my teaching practice. Journaling is an integral part of many graduate level education programs, as I experienced in my Teaching Practicum at Teachers College Columbia University. During the course, I was required to reflect upon a given class and then create a lesson plan for the class based upon that reflection. Subsequently, I recorded myself teaching it, and then reflected once more upon the course. This was a helpful, if demanding, part of my teacher training. As Farrel said in his 2007 article, reflecting can help us gain a deeper perspective on our practice and help us plan for future classes. For my journal, I chose to write in the stream of consciousness style recommended by Richards and Farrell (2005) (as cited in Farrell, 2007) to better focus on my feelings about the class, as well as interventions taken, as soon as possible after the class. Richards and Farrell recommended writing on the same day, summarizing and analysing what happened, and this is what I did. Following those guidelines, I used Google Forms to create a simple survey which included the following questions:

- How were classes today?
- What issues emerged today?
- What did you do to overcome them?
- What will you do next time?

For the first week of the project, I completed the survey after all of my classes, journaling for about ten to 15 minutes per day. Typical issues that were noted in the first week included my stress level, the level of student motivation, willingness to communicate, and classroom behavior. Though, overall, my journals showed that I was feeling tired, I also consistently rated my classes as going well (an average of 4.25 out of 5--with five representing the best possible).

After the first week, I considered which class and what topics to focus on. This was a difficult decision because, as mentioned above, I was generally satisfied with the classes. However, there was one class with two students who were refusing to communicate in the group discussions, which was causing me frustration.

DISCUSSION

Dörnyei and Kormos, in their 2000 paper on the role of social and individual differences in language outcomes, described the impact that affective filters and relationships can have upon learning. Their research found that “positive disposition towards the course will have a positive effect on task-engagement” and that groups with feelings of isolation from each other will have worse output. Additionally, Deci and Ryan (2000) state that strong feelings of relatedness, or closeness to classmates, encourages student motivation. Therefore, I try to make my classroom environment one that is incredibly welcoming and one in which friendships are encouraged to develop. I do this by playing music before class and during certain tasks, to help provide a sense of privacy by making it harder to hear their classmates, and to make the classroom one that feels more fun. I also try to include warm up questions about difficult topics to encourage them to share their feelings and experiences with their classmates. Finally, each semester begins with an activity designed to help learners find similarities (see Appendix). I believe that by doing these things, I can foster student motivation and improve overall performance - and possibly also help create life-long learners.

However, in my journal, I focused on one class where this did not achieve the desired results. The class consisted of eight students, seven girls and one boy. Overall, the class completed tasks as asked, and to a high standard, but was consistently slow to start. I noted in my first entry that the students were “a bit flat” and there was “no smiling,” and that this had made me feel uncomfortable. Yet I also noted that they did well in discussions overall. However, there were two students, whom I shall call Boy A and Girl B, who did not do so well, and I choose to focus on what could be causing their poor performance during discussions, as well as my attempts to intervene.

In most classes, there were two group discussions, one of 12 minutes and one of 16, and in my journal, I noted that in the first two weeks both Boy A and Girl B were consistently the last to speak in both discussions, and that they spoke only enough to use the weekly Discussion Skills once and then were silent. I also noted that they were somewhat more active during the pair work leading up to the discussions, though were still somewhat less likely to ask questions or respond verbally than as well. In short, they were becoming quieter during the discussions and their grades were suffering because of it.

In addition, I noted two interesting things in my first journal about their class. Firstly, Boy A had attended Rikkyo High School in Ikebukuro, a private all-boys institution, and that he had mentioned he was uncomfortable talking with girls. Secondly, I noted that Girl B had mentioned that she felt nervous talking in groups. I wondered if they could both be feeling anxious or if it were possible that they were just less motivated, given their apparent lack of interest. I decided to try and find ways to foster their motivation and to reduce their nervousness.

Interventions

The first intervention I tried was during the third lesson, the first lesson I journaled about. In that first entry, I noted that both Boy A and Girl B had been nearly silent during the discussion and that this was a trend for them. I wrote that I worried that I had not clearly set expectations regarding how much students were expected to speak during discussions. However, I also was concerned about doing so indirectly, so as to not make the two students feel singled out (i.e. I did not want to point to the two students directly and say “You did not speak enough.”). Therefore, after the first discussion, I asked students to create a pie chart showing how much each of the four students in the group had contributed to the discussion, mentioning that 25% was ideal. I wrote in my journal that both students stated that they were aware they had not spoken enough. In the following discussion, Boy A asked one question, which was an improvement, but Girl B asked none.

The next intervention I tried was to ask both students privately to try and ask two questions during the discussions. I did so at the end of the class as they were leaving to reduce the risk of embarrassment. Also, I had hoped that by setting a simple and attainable goal they would be more likely to remember it and to achieve it, and in doing so feel more confident. However, in the following class, which was a test class, neither student asked any questions during the test.

My third intervention was to increase the amount of praise given during the practice phase at the beginning of class. In week five’s class, I praised Boy A and Girl B, while also praising others to avoid drawing too much attention to Boy A and Girl B, for questions asked in practice. In the discussions, both students did speak more and the number of communication skills they used increased; however, they still refrained from asking questions. In my notes, I wrote that I felt as if I was reaching the limit of what I could do to encourage them on my own.

Therefore, in week six, I decided to try and engage the other students more in encouraging each other. As stated previously, one of the prime mechanisms by which teachers can foster student motivation is relatedness (i.e. feeling connected to those around you) and I wanted to try and foster this by getting students to support each other by asking for more examples, both to improve their own grades and to encourage their classmates (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Therefore, after the second discussion, when I had noticed that Girl B had not given any examples, I used that to illustrate why we should ask more questions. I pointed out Girl B had stated her opinion and given a reason, but that another student had then changed topics before she was able to give an example. Finally, I added that asking for examples was the DS of the week and that when students ask, they give others an opportunity to use the skill and, thereby, also raise both their own score and their classmates’. Sadly, in the following week’s journal, while students did encourage Girl B to speak, she did not.

The next intervention I chose was a result of reading about willingness to communicate in Gregersen & MacIntyre’s 2014 book “Capitalizing on Language Learners’ Individuality.” In it, they wrote that putting learners with similar personality types together might help increase WTC. I decided to place Boy A and Girl B together, hoping that they might find each other kindred spirits. In fact, Boy A had his best discussion up to that point. However, EDC mandates that we change groups between discussions and my notes showed that in the second discussion he barely spoke. This was frustrating, as my journal shows, and I even asked him why his performance had decreased. Boy A said he was “tired” and shrugged. Furthermore, my notes show that Girl B showed no improvement and seemed particularly anxious/upset.

My final intervention was another suggestion from Gregersen & MacIntyre 2014, from the section on anxiety. They suggest that one tool teachers can use to reduce anxiety is deep breathing. In between two tasks, I had students to take a deep breath and, in addition, I put on peaceful music during the practice and preparation phases of the class. However, once more, in the practice discussion Boy A and Girl B avoided questions. Worse, Girl A seemed more anxious, coughing

and clearing her throat when asked questions. However, in the test that followed, Boy A did slightly better, using more DS than before, and Girl B did use more CS.

CONCLUSION

In retrospect, it seems clear that none of my interventions were clearly beneficial, but neither were any obviously detrimental; Boy A and Girl B's performance was generally the same throughout the course with some variation day to day.

One conclusion I can draw from my journal is that expending so much energy to support two students is frustrating and that trying to make an avowed introvert act more extrovertedly is difficult. My journal makes this apparent with numerous entries in which I talk about not wanting to give up, about not being sure if what I am doing is working and worrying that I am doing something wrong.

In fact, I think my main error was not trusting both students to know their own feelings. Boy A told me that he was nervous talking to girls and Girl B told me she was nervous talking in groups. Instead of focusing on general strategies to reduce student anxiety, I could have sought specific strategies to help him feel more comfortable speaking with girls and her to feel more confident in groups.

Going forward, if I have another male student who seems nervous talking to girls or a student who seems anxious, I will follow the advice about putting students with similar personalities together and I will try and help students find more similarities between themselves and their classmates, regardless of gender or personality type.

In conclusion, it may not be possible to change a students' preferences regarding classmates' gender or to change a student's personality in a 14-week course, but we can do what I tried to do with these interventions: try to help make things a little easier and a little more relaxed.

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APPENDIX – Sample handout for fostering student relatedness by finding similarities



Introduce yourself

Talk about what you like. Use today's new phrases. Try to find 10 things you both like.

Your favorite music

- Your favorite sports
- Your favorite foods
- Your favorite TV shows
- Your favorite fashion brands
- Your favorite places
- Your favorite movies
- Your favorite celebrities/famous people
- Your favorite video games (PS4, Nintendo Switch, etc.)
- Your hobbies

I like...	We like...	She/He likes...
	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10	