

Reflecting on How to Manage Individual Differences in a Discussion Class

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the ways in which to manage a student in an English Discussion Class who exhibits confrontational behavior towards the opposite sex in classroom speaking activities, whilst also displaying superiority in English ability over their classmates. A teaching journal was used from lessons 5-9 of a 14-week course, providing a tool for reflection on how I navigated the class. Journal notes were made immediately after the class, to ensure that precise recall of the lesson's events were noted. After outlining my initial reactions and beliefs regarding this student's behavior, I explain the interventions I carried out in the class in order to minimize the impact of the student's actions and create awareness for all of the students of their impact. Finally, I will reflect on how I felt those interventions improved the class atmosphere and facilitated a healthy environment for English discussions to take place.

INTRODUCTION

The location of my teaching post and of this reflective journal is Rikkyo University, in Tokyo, Japan. The students are all participating in the English Discussion Center (EDC) module, a 14-week English Discussion course wherein students are required to discuss contemporary topics using a variety of marked language functions. The main goal of the course is to encourage maximum output from students, which is likely a different style of lesson that they have experienced before. The classes consist of 8 or 9 students, and students are placed appropriately with other students of a similar English competence. The class in which this reflective study takes place is a high Level II, with students averaging between 480-679 in TOEIC listening and reading scores. Ideally, 10 and 16-minute discussions take place in every lesson, and should be balanced, interactive and co-constructed by all participants.

There are also activities including 3/2/1 fluency, where students talk as much as they can to a different partner from three minutes to one minute on a topic; discussion skill presentation and practice, in which students familiarize themselves with the discussion skill of the lesson and practice with partners; discussion preparation, which involves student-student interaction sharing ideas before the commencement of a four-people discussion. Due to the format of these lessons, a collaborative environment is key to the flow and achievement of the lessons' goals, which strives for balanced and interactive discussions, whilst also teaching the students how to interact appropriately in the group whilst conversing in English (Hurling, 2012).

In former teaching positions, I have taught in mostly high schools in Japan, where my principal role was to motivate the students and provide native-like examples of pronunciation. I feel that having a sense of chemistry in the class is very important. Being sensitive to the needs of each class is something I feel that I am able to grasp quite quickly. I concur with Kerdikoshvili (2012), who argues that principles of classroom management are closely related to principles of learning and motivation.

In the first class of the semester, I prepared an activity in which students said two truths and a lie as a means of breaking the ice and getting to know each other. This has always been a fun activity with very little need for intervention on my part, from doing an example. The class consisted of five female students and three male students. However, almost immediately in this class I had to intervene to a surprising development. One of the male students who was doing his presentation of three sentences to three girls practically yelled out "you don't know Linkin Park?"

Are you serious?” whilst simultaneously glaring at me for support or validation. I was slightly dumbfounded at this, and I believe that I gestured to him to calm down and explained that maybe not all students know this American rock group. I also noticed that the male student was grimacing and displaying bored body language as the female students were reading their sentences, giving the impression that the content of the sentences were inferior in substance to his. I was made rapidly aware of the fact that I had a student with some behavioral issues in class. At the end of the class, a female student who has also in his previous class in the last semester, said “you always make fun of my English!” I had to calm them both down and after class I talked to them and asked them if this was going to be a problem, to which they both answered no.

I made name cards before the start of term and issued them in the first lessons. Students were able to see each other’s names immediately and this helped foster good relations between them. At the start of each class, I shuffled the cards and gave students their random seat allocation. By doing this, the classes were smoother, and students could refer to each other by their names comfortably. It has been suggested in previous research at Japanese universities by Sakui & Cowie (2012) that teachers can have limited impact on a student’s attitude and personality, but since this student’s behavior wasn’t conducive to creating a collaborative environment, it was very important that I addressed his attitude in class in order for the lessons to run smoothly. Therefore, I decided to observe his behavior and interaction with other students during classes, and how I intervened to make these interactions smoother.

Teaching journals is a method of charting progress and lesson activities. Farrell, (2007) argues that writing regularly in a teaching journal can help teachers shed light on their own thinking, survey their own beliefs and practices, become more conscious of their teaching styles, and be better able to monitor their own practices. I had previously used this method in a former teaching post at a Junior high school, in which I was reflecting on the usage of technology in class. From my experience, I have come to realize that this method is effective in collating my feelings immediately after a lesson has taken place. I specifically chose a class in which I had a break after, which enabled me to recall fresh memories and events of the classes, and what interventions I used to remedy them.

DISCUSSION

Below is a list of some of the behaviors that were exhibited by the student during lessons 5-9 of a 14-week course. The student’s comments have been paraphrased:

- Complaining it is cold in class. Wearing his hoodie up and mumbling in Japanese under his breath. Covering face with hoodie whilst disagreeing with a girl during discussion preparation activity.
- Gesticulating towards a female student and saying “why?” aggressively during the 3-2-1 activity but displays a much calmer disposition talking to a male student.
- Repeating with surprised tone to female student during 3-2-1. Leaning forward dramatically.
- Dramatic yawn and bored disposition when listening to female partner, with hood up.
- Hostile intonation when asking a female in a discussion “why do you think so(name)?”
- Reacting in Japanese “eeee” after female has given an opinion in a discussion.
- Answering before a female student can answer “you have no idea?”
- Hostile intonation when asking a female in a discussion “how do you know about that (name)?”
- Facial grimacing when female students are talking in a group discussion.
- During discussion, suddenly exclaims: “I’m an honest person, as you can see”

Gender Dynamics

It was clear that the male student behaved differently towards the female students. There could be many reasons for this behavior – perhaps it was an effort to be “edgy” or “cool”, or perhaps he felt threatened by the presence of more girls than boys in the class. Or, it could simply be deemed as childish or immature.

Some of the effects of his behavior on the female students I noticed included that the female students would become subdued and distant when they were partnered with him for speaking activities, giving the bare minimum content in perhaps a way of limiting his antagonistic responses. However, they would then become energized when they moved on to speak to another partner and spoke much more freely. I also noticed that female students were defensive in their intonation when speaking to him, for example, using an unnecessarily loud rising intonation towards him when asking a question, perhaps mimicking his earlier responses in the discussion. Female students also had apprehensive faces during seat changes when I was switching students from different tables before a discussion began. Further, I noticed that female students who were partnered with him for a pre-discussion task then performed relatively poorly in the following discussion, perhaps as a result of being distracted by being paired with him and not properly forming their ideas for the forthcoming discussion.

The other male students in the class were very cooperative in class and participated well. Although he did not speak to them in a rude way, it was clear that they were aware of his behavior and sympathized with the female students.

Individual Differences

It appeared to me that he was very comfortable with using the discussion skills, and that he was at a slightly higher proficiency level than others. After he gave an interesting point or used a skill in a good fashion during a discussion, I noticed that he would often glance at me to seek non-verbal praise.

In MacIntyre, Clement, Dörnyei and Noel's (1998) conceptualization of willingness to communicate (WTC) in a L2, some of the variables they mention that are needed to sustain WTC in L2 included self-confidence, communicative competence, intergroup climate and intergroup motivation. Since the majority of this group was female, and the other male students were far more, submissive in class, I do believe that together with his self-confidence and ability, this created ideal conditions for this student to display his feelings of superiority in class sometimes. Bearing in mind the fact that intergroup motivation was another variable highlighted as important to main WTC, I was aware that I needed to keep the other students' motivation elevated by making appropriate and timely interventions.

Interventions

The management of students' participation and engagement with others in micro relationships in class has been claimed to be the primary role of teachers (Murphey et al, 2012). The simplest way of intervening in class to minimize his behavior was to use the name cards at my disposal. According to Jacobs (2006, p. 32), teachers deciding the groups or partners is the most recommended option to follow in most of the cooperative learning literature.

Each lesson, I remembered who he was placed next to at the start of the class, and who he was partnered with for pre-discussion tasks. I used the name cards to ensure he was next to a different person for the next class and partnered with different people for pre-discussion tasks and the discussions themselves as a means of sharing the load amongst the students.

When giving scaffolding or feedback to the class about their discussions, I often highlighted some of the problems that occurred because of his demeanor. For example, if he used

an unnecessarily loud reaction or rising intonation, I would point out that this may cause anxiety in the speaker, and therefore they may become inhibited in the discussion:

A: "In my opinion, smartphones are bad for young children."

B: "Why do you think so, (name)?" (rising intonation)

I was careful not to repeat the sarcastic tone uttered by the student, in line with Scrivener (2012), who argues that this has the potential to upset students in ways that instructors cannot see.

I also often highlighted the importance of body language and listening skills during the discussions. As he was often gesticulating wildly and putting his hood up, whilst moving around in his seat, I highlighted that this could be distracting to other speakers. As he sometimes started to answer a question for a student during the discussion, I made it clear the importance of thinking time and silence as a listener in a discussion:

A: "I think that advertising is bad for society"

B: "How do you know about that? You don't know, do you?"

I believe that these feedback strategies created awareness and the other students appreciated the fact that I pointed these issues out. By pointing these examples out, promoting co-operation in the class was achieved, which has been recognized by Dörnyei & Guilloteaux (2008), as one of the key elements to achieving motivation and participation in class.

I also took the time to build some rapport with him. Like myself, he is an avid soccer fan. Usually at the end of each class I would talk to him for about 2-3 minutes about the latest soccer news. He would usually initiate the chat and seemed to enjoy displaying his English skills and soccer knowledge in front of the other students. This certainly helped me create a certain bond with him, and I noticed that his demeanor in the lessons improved gradually. Establishing rapport and recording subtle behavioral patterns, such as noting that the student would often start lessons grumpily, were important. Making some light-hearted quip about any topic early in the class helped counter this, whilst also offering encouragement and using facial expressions to lighten the mood. With instructor-student rapport now seen as more and more of an integral component of a positive classroom experience (Webb & Barrett, 2014), I was conscious of the importance of also building rapport with the other students in the class, in order avoid possible feelings of favoritism towards him.

After Lesson 6, I noticed a change in the student's behavior. He seemed to settle down and become more cooperative in class, and his interactions with other students became much more manageable and rewarding. It seemed that my efforts to provide him with awareness about how his reactions or demeanor impacted on the discussions or other students did pay off. He appeared to still be frosty at the start of each lesson, but his demeanor would then thaw after about 10-15 minutes. I also got the impressions that the other students familiarized themselves with his behavioral patterns and used strategies to combat him, such as using humor in their utterances towards him.

In reflection, I feel that the most effective strategy I employed was giving feedback that highlighted the impact of student's utterances and behavior on their classmates in discussions. I felt that this created awareness for the students as to whether they participated appropriately or not. Since this was a high Level II class, the student who was the focus of the study clearly understood the points I was making and did adjust his behavior. Changing partners often and sharing the load were also important. I was especially careful to remember who he had been partnered with for pre-discussion tasks, to make sure that he was partnered with different students

in the proceeding lessons. The use of scaffolding, with the use of arrows to symbolize unnecessary raised intonation or volume, was also effective.

CONCLUSION

Since the members of this class were motivated and clearly enjoyed discussing topics in English, this student's disruptive behavior especially in the earlier part of the semester, did not impact on the class to a damaging degree. If the class had not been so motivated, I believe that I would have needed to have taken more drastic steps to modify his behavior. The journaling process has been enlightening, as I was able to refer to specific occurrences in class, and also to find a pattern in the student's behavior. Keeping a collaborative environment is key in a small discussion class. The challenge of managing a demanding student in my class has been an interesting one and has improved me as an EDC instructor.

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