

Reflections on Facilitating L2 Use and Student Motivation for Low-level Learners in an EFL Class

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a reflection on how facilitating second language (L2) use affects student motivation in a low-level English Discussion Class (EDC) at Rikkyo University. Based on teaching journal entries from Fall Semester (September 2019 to January 2020), various scaffolding strategies and their observed effects on student motivation are discussed. The implemented strategies largely focus on the issue of first language (L1) use in the classroom, but other forms of scaffolding, such as the use of patterns to encourage use of discussion and communication skills, are also included.

INTRODUCTION

EDC is a 28-week compulsory course for all first-year students at Rikkyo University. In the EDC, discussions are defined as “the extended exchange of ideas on a single topic for 16 minutes, between three or four participants” (Hurling, 2012, p. 1-2). During these extended group discussions, students are required to speak strictly in English without the instructor’s support or L1 use (Center for English Discussion Class, 2019a). This policy applies for group discussions in regular lessons and discussion tests. There are three discussion tests each semester in which student are also tested in groups of three to four members (Hurling, 2012). In the course, students learn target discussion skills, such as Different Viewpoints (e.g., How about from X’s point of view?) and Closing Topics (e.g., So, we agreed that...), as well as communication skills, including Clarification (e.g., Can you repeat that?) and Checking Understanding (e.g., Do you follow me?). Discussion skills help students “share ideas, ask questions, and organize the discussion,” and communication skills “help everyone in the group express their ideas clearly and understand other people’s ideas,” especially when there is a communication breakdown (Center for English Discussion Class, 2019b, p. 1).

In addition to cognitive and practical objectives (e.g., hedging opinions and using simple sentences and grammar to communicate complex ideas), the EDC also has softened affective objectives, which includes enjoying discussing contemporary issues and appreciating the importance of negotiating meaning (Hurling, 2012). The classes are divided into four levels, with Level I being the highest (TOEIC score of 680 or above) and Level IV classes being the lowest (TOEIC score below 280). As part of the EDC program’s professional development, all first-year instructors are required to keep a teaching journal during their second semester, focusing on an aspect of student behavior in one or multiple classes.

For this project, I chose to keep a teaching journal for a Level IV class that I struggled to teach the most during the semester. The class consisted of seven male students and one female student from the College of Tourism. One student was automatically placed in this course because they missed the placement test, and the TOEIC scores for the other seven students ranged from 40 to 215. The instructors who taught them in Spring 2019 informed me that the students had very limited vocabulary and/or had behavioral issues in class. During the first few weeks of class, I was overwhelmed by having to constantly manage behavioral problems, such as students yelling across the room to each other in Japanese. One student in particular consistently distracted the other students, consequently derailing the lesson; however, they failed the course by Lesson 7 due to multiple absences. Since then, the other students were able to better focus on the lesson, but I still faced challenges relating to heavy L1 use (i.e., Japanese) and student motivation. Therefore, I wanted to have opportunities to critically reflect on my teaching methods and develop strategies

to mitigate issues that occur in class (Farrell, 2007). By reflecting on the lessons, I aimed to explore strategies to help facilitate more L2 use and observe their effect on student motivation.

Over the course of 10 weeks (Lesson 4 to Lesson 13), I kept a teaching journal using Google Docs as the “master file” so I could easily edit and add notes from any device. Although the timing varied, I wrote in the journal approximately two to three weeks after the lessons. I relied on my class notes that included student examples/utterances and indication of what they did well or needed to improve in the next lesson. For Lesson 5, I used my smartphone’s Voice Memos to verbally process and record my reflections a few hours after class. This was a spontaneous decision, but I tried this method to see if it would help me retain more details. After listening to the recording, I wrote down the main points on the Google Doc. For each journal entry, I took note of how I paired students, any changes I made during the lesson, and observations regarding L1 use and signs of increased or decreased motivation. The structure of the journal entries was a combination of free writing and listing (bullet points). It is worth noting here that I was absent for Lesson 11, and another instructor covered my class for that day. I included the instructor’s class notes in the teaching journal to keep track of consistent patterns.

DISCUSSION

Initial Observations

During the first four weeks of the semester, through informal observation, I found that the class had the lowest English proficiency out of the 13 classes I taught that semester. At the end of the first lesson, a few students remarked in Japanese that before learning more discussion skills, they needed to first understand what I was saying in class. Hearing *muzukashii* (difficult) throughout the lesson became commonplace, and some students had difficulty recalling the definition of high-frequency vocabulary including “some.” Such struggles often led to sighs of defeat or side conversations with classmates. These observations were telling of how their low linguistic and strategic competence raised their affective filter, and much scaffolding would be necessary.

Initially, I attempted to facilitate L2 use in class by simply reminding students to “stay in English.” From my experience, this reminder is usually effective for higher-level classes, as they simply need to be redirected to the task at hand, but it was not the case for this class. I assumed this was primarily attributable to their misbehavior or unwillingness to learn, especially when students were being disruptive during the first few weeks of class. However, a student once commented that they were not able to stay in English because they simply did not have the vocabulary. This compelled me to consider whether there is a more balanced way of viewing and managing L1 use in class.

Sert (2008) claims that while there are different functions for code-switching (i.e., switching from one language to another in the same discourse), such as reiteration and floor-holding, it occurs largely due to a lack of linguistic competence or fluency in the target language. Furthermore, code-switching “builds a bridge from the known to the unknown” and could be beneficial when used efficiently in language teaching (Sert, 2008, p. 5). A consideration for allowing L1 use in the classroom is that there is often a need for more L1 support for beginner levels, such as 1st-year Japanese university students with low English proficiency (Carson & Kashihara, 2012; Ford, 2009). Although facilitating L2 use is imperative, when students are struggling with basic English vocabulary, it seems far-fetched to impose the goal of engaging in discussions about contemporary issues without falling into any L1 use.

Furthermore, as important as the practical and linguistic aims of the course are, I also value the affective aims of the course, which includes enjoying using English to learn more about themselves and others (Hurling, 2012). Ford (2009) notes that allowing L1 use in the classroom can result in “providing a sense of security to learners and reducing affective barriers” (p. 64). As

an instructor, I wanted to convey that I am there to support their learning experience, not to penalize them. After considering these factors, I began exploring ways to balance facilitating L2 use while supporting students in their L1 when appropriate, along with other forms of scaffolding.

L1 support

The first action I took was providing vocabulary support with L1 translation. Starting Lesson 4, I either gave students a vocabulary list with the Japanese translation created by the EDC program managers or wrote the vocabulary words and translation on the board. By doing so, I noticed that during the practice stage, students were able to discuss the topics quicker as they did not have to spend time trying to understand what the questions meant.

Another way I implemented L1 support in class was including the Japanese translations of key terms while giving instructions. Oftentimes, I would explain words by providing examples. However, I occasionally code-switched when I knew students in higher-level classes also did not understand the word. I also playfully used Japanese to give hints when deemed appropriate. For example, during Lesson 4, when a pair of students were trying to recall one of the discussion skills that included the phrase “I agree,” I came by their desk and gave them a hint by saying *sansei* (agree). This was done during a short review activity, so I discerned that doing so would not impede the EDC’s English-only policy for group discussions. I also wanted to communicate that learning does not always have to be so serious; although I do want to facilitate L2 use, there is always room for some humor. I noticed that by providing this support, the students appeared to be more relaxed. Sert (2005) claims that “code switching is used by the teacher in order to build solidarity and intimate relations with the students” (p. 3). Although solidarity and good rapport are not quantifiable, I took note of how the classroom environment significantly changed from chaotic and disruptive to calm and supportive. This change was evident especially when I observed that some of the students who were the instigators of disruptive behavior became the reliable ones who took initiative to help their classmates. For example, they often helped their struggling classmates by clarifying what the discussion phrases mean.

There were, however, some challenges with providing L1 support in class. When I first started providing more vocabulary and L1 support, some students became lax about using Japanese during the group discussions. At this point, I had been focusing heavily on vocabulary scaffolding that I forgot to remind them of the importance of staying in English. Additionally, when a student was struggling to respond to my question, another student commented in Japanese that it was okay if they did not know how to say the answer in English because I would translate for them. I was taken aback by this comment; as much as I want to show that I empathize with their struggles of learning a second language, I did not want to be a crutch to their learning experience by being a translator, negating the need for communication skills. As a result, I had to remind them before the start of group discussions that they needed to stay in English unless they were asking their group members for the English translation. As a point of feedback, I also regularly reminded them that they can use communication skills and simple English to help bridge understanding. By testing these strategies, I realized that there is a fine line between being too strict, which could lead to demotivation, and being too lenient, which eliminates opportunities for using communication skills.

Modeling

Although providing L1 support was useful for helping students discuss topics more efficiently and building better rapport, my journal reflections indicated that L1 support alone is insufficient for facilitating L2 use. As an example, for Lesson 8’s topic, “Gender in Japan”, I wrote the Japanese translation for key phrases such as *danjofubyoudo* (gender inequality) on the board, as well as on

the class materials that students use for pair discussions. Although the students maintained their discussions in pairs, once the group dynamic changed to three or four members, the room fell silent for the first few minutes. I wondered what went wrong—was it the lack of vocabulary? Did they suddenly forget the discussion phrases? After observing the students' interactions during the group discussion, I saw that the students had difficulty adapting to the new group dynamic. In other words, they were comfortable sharing their ideas and practicing using the discussion skills in pairs, but they did not know how to apply what they practiced when there were additional members. After the group discussion ended, I hastily attempted to model the discussion with two other students in front of the class. As it was the first time executing this, I made the mistake of only involving two other students while the others seemed confused about what was happening. This instance led me to reflect on how crucial it is to model activities, especially when there is a shift from a pair activity to a group discussion

Another form of modeling that I implemented was providing patterns to help aid students in using the discussion skills and communication skills. Below is an example of a pattern I used during the practice stage of Lesson 7, where students were practicing asking about and giving sources of information (e.g., Where did you hear/learn/see that? How do you know about that? I saw... I heard... I learned...):

Person A: Read Question + Ask for Opinion

Person B: Give Opinion + Reason/Example

Person A: Ask for Information (Exp: *How do you know about that?*)

Person B: Give source (Exp: *I saw.../I learned.../When I...*)

This type of simple pattern I used with my Level III and Level IV classes was especially helpful for this class. Although the students often struggled to explain their ideas, the patterns provided enough structure so they could understand the functions of the discussion skills and have a clear set of goals for the lesson. However, much like my challenge with balancing L1 support in class, providing too much structure through the patterns caused a cognitive overload for the students. During Lesson 13, which was the final test lesson, I instructed students to follow a pattern that included all the target discussion skills from the semester. I also included organizational questions students learned in the previous semester, such as “Who would like to start?” It was the same pattern I used for all my other classes, and I assumed that giving them sufficient structure will help prepare them for the test. However, both during the practice stages and the actual test, some of the students struggled trying to recall the phrases for organization questions. For example, multiple students misallocated their time by attempting to recall the exact verbiage for the phrase “Would anyone like to stay something?” This made me realize that with any form of scaffolding, balance is important.

Simplifying instructions

As a way of facilitating L2 use without having to rely on L1 use, I also simplified instructions, both written and verbal. For instance, I often used the same questions for a fluency activity I conduct at the beginning of class, regardless of the class level. The fluency activity serves as a warm-up activity for the lesson, and the questions are based on the homework reading assignment. Most of my other classes did not have difficulty answering the questions, but this class consistently struggled to answer the questions and spoke in Japanese half the time. Granted, this was largely because the majority of the students did not do the homework reading, but I wondered if simplifying the verbiage would help facilitate L2 use. In Lesson 12, which was about crime and punishment, I simplified the set of fluency questions. For example, I changed “If someone breaks

a law, should they always be punished? What if no one gets hurt?” to “What are examples of crimes? What are examples of punishments?” with the goal of activating schema without cognitive overload. Although this did not elicit as many details as the original question, the simplification was effective as students did not quickly revert to Japanese and talked as much as they could.

It is important to note here that there is a limit to how much instructors can simplify and adapt materials due to the unified EDC curriculum. As an example, all instructors must utilize the same set of questions for the discussion tests that are held three times each semester (Hurling, 2012). In other words, although I can simplify questions for the warm-up and practice stages, students are ultimately assessed equally across all levels. Considering this gap between the students’ proficiency at the assessment standards, the best solution seemed to be a combination of all the aforementioned scaffolding methods. Therefore, in addition to simplifying instructions during the warm-up and practice stages, I made sure to continue providing vocabulary support and discussion patterns so students would be ready for the group discussions and assessments.

CONCLUSION

Although this was a challenging class to teach, through reflective journaling, I was able to critically reflect on my teaching methods and apply various interventions to facilitate L2 use. The interventions yielded various results, and there were several outliers, such as a student who constantly spoke in Japanese despite what I said or how others were behaving. However, through trial and error, I found that the underlining factors for beneficial scaffolding were balance and timing. For example, regarding L1 support, strictly enforcing an L2 only rule could be debilitating for low-level learners, but being too lenient with L1 use could result in missed opportunities for developing communication skills and fluency (Sert, 2008). As such, through my journaling practice, I began to establish boundaries for myself for how and when L1 is used in class; nevertheless, I also recognized that instead of trying to attain the perfect balance, it is more imperative to adapt to the students’ needs (Ford, 2009; Carson & Kashihara, 2012). Moving forward, I want to continue the process of reflective journaling and learn to adapt to the needs of different classes. In particular, there are two areas I would like to further explore.

One area for further exploration is being more detailed about tracking my interactions with students. No matter what the instructor’s stance is regarding L1 use in the classroom, encouraging the use of English can be done in a sensitive manner while extending empathy (Ford, 2008). This mindset can also extend to building good rapport with students. For example, I can keep track of my interactions with students before the start of the lesson and take note of how they respond. From my experience as an English-Japanese bilingual, one benefit has been casually conversing with students in Japanese before and after class. I would like to see whether journaling about these interactions would benefit my interventions for facilitating L2 use during the lessons.

Another area of further exploration is to directly survey low-level students to assess how much of the lesson they understand and include the responses in my journal. For example, after class ends, I could quickly ask the students in Japanese about what percentage of teacher talk they understood. For a more formal survey, I could have students fill out a short form at the end of the lesson. Although I could generally discern how much students understand based on the students’ comments or behavior, directly asking students could be more efficient.

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