

Behavioral Engagement and Disaffection in Academic Discussions: A Reflective Teaching Journal Inquiry

Joseph P. Vitta

ABSTRACT

In this report, I reflect on lower proficiency (A1 to A2 on the Common European Framework) students' behavioral engagement and perceived disaffection with academic discussion tasks. Of interest was how each construct may have manifested itself in the learners' behavior. It was observed that production of content outside of the language prompts used for the discussion and active listening with follow-up questions were the chief ways in which learners may have demonstrated task engagement. Conversely, not following the discussion and only offering utterances reflecting linguistic units on the prompting page(s) appeared to show students' disaffection. Quiz performance and overall proficiency appeared to be the most strongly associated predictors of engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Within second/foreign language (L2) research, psychology in language learning (PLL) has emerged as a topical and en vogue subfield (Dörnyei, 2019). Motivation was the first area of interest within PLL research with many studies focusing on what drove language learners to put in the time and effort to acquire the L2 (Al-Hoorie, 2018). That is not to say that motivation has occupied the entire PLL space, however. From positive psychology to language learner anxiety (Dörnyei, 2019), PLL has been a diverse field. This reflective teaching journal inquiry focused on a subfield of PLL whose topicality in the field is current waxing, behavioral engagement (Cox & Montgomery, 2019), within the teaching context of an academic discussion course at a Japanese university. Specially, I reflected on observed instances of behavioral engagement and disaffection between two sections of low proficiency English L2 speakers, within the discussion tasks, and their possible factors. Thus, this endeavor was a reflection on low proficiency students' task engagement. To further frame this report, an overview of the reflection process against the theoretical framework of engagement and the learning context are now discussed in turn.

The Focus of the Reflection: Behavioral and Task Engagement

Svalberg (2009) had worked to provide a working definition of engagement with language but even ten years later (Cox & Montgomery, 2019) it was clear that the academic community was still struggling to define the construct and differentiate it from its conceptual neighbors. As an interesting aside, Svalberg's operationalization of 'affect' engagement was very similar to Oxford's (1990) affective strategy use descriptors. This is a consideration that Svalberg omitted in her report. To put it plainly, the field is still working to define engagement. Because of this discord, I chose to reflect on a specific sub-domain of engagement: behavioral engagement. While fitting into many competing models of overarching engagement, behavioral engagement is the external artifacts of learners' engaging with and through the L2 in social space. Skinner, Kindermann, Connell and Wellborn (2009) and Skinner, Kinderman, and Furrer (2009) summarized behavioral engagement as consisting of action initiation, effort, persistence, intensity, attention, absorption, and involvement. Behavioral disaffection, the opposing construct, consisted of passivity, giving up, withdrawal, inattentiveness, being unprepared, being distracted, and mentally disengaged. For the purposes of clarity and to represent underpinning theory accurately, engagement/disaffection are employed as contrasting terms with disengagement subsumed under 'disaffection.'

Task engagement, for the purposes of this report, is behavioral engagement within the confines of the academic speaking tasks of the course I was teaching. The following points/questions guided my reflections and acted as the theoretical prism through which they were considered and organized:

- What are the perceived (by me) manifestations of (behavioral) engagement and disaffection?
- What factors are possibly associated with these perceived manifestations?
- How can I and the program perhaps promote better engagement among the students, especially lower proficiency learners?

Learning Context: The Course, the Sections, and the Teacher

To unpack the setting in which this reflection project occurred, the course, the two sections of students, and me as the teacher are presented in sequence.

The academic discussion course reflected upon in this report is offered at a private university in central Tokyo. It is taught over two semesters and all university students must pass both in order to graduate. The course content focuses on the academic discussion text type (Hurling, 2012) but, unlike most courses, the learning objectives focus on discourse and strategic competencies (Hymes, 1972) as opposed to underlying linguistic competence, subsuming syntax and lexis. The course features a unified syllabus that can loosely be described as fitting into a communicative language teaching framework that is task-based (TBLT) and is organized using present-practice-produce (PPP) scheme (Ellis, 2004; D. Willis & J. Willis, 2007).

Because of the course's PPP organization, which, at times, has been posited and observed to be inappropriate for higher proficiency learners (Vitta, Jost, & Pusina, 2019; D. Willis & J. Willis, 2007), I chose my two lowest sections for this reflective endeavor. The rationale for this choice was that I wanted to reflect on sections for whom the course's curriculum was most optimal. The first section had eight students who demonstrate good attendance habits and they were all A1 (beginner) on the Common European Framework (CEFR - Council of Europe, 2001) according to their placement TOEIC scores (values < 225; see Educational Testing Services, 2019). An interesting feature of this section was that six of eight students were athletes at the university. I assumed this would make them somewhat energetic and eager to engage with the course's tasks. The second section contained seven students (one of the assigned eight students missed all classes) and demonstrated slightly higher proficiency upon entry. There were five students at the A2 level, $225 < \text{TOEIC} \leq 300$, and two students at A1. The highest TOEIC score among the section's students was 300, and $225 \leq \text{TOEIC} \leq 550$ is the stated ETS range for A2. Unlike the first section, there were no athletes. Regarding majors, both sections majored in the social sciences such as communication and media studies and/or psychology.

Three pertinent aspects to my professional background as a teacher are relevant to this reflection piece. The first was that like my students that was my first year at the university. This reality has both a positive and negative influence on this endeavor. Considering the former, the course, its contents, and the student behaviors therein were still relatively novel and remarkable. Thus, my attention was heightened. Considering the latter, I was still acquainting myself with the course's contents as this was my first time teaching the second semester. Thus, it was entirely possible that my reflections would have been more focused had I undertaken this project later on. Secondly, I am an active researcher with interests in both language learning research and more abstract linguistics. The focus of this project reflects this dualistic interest of mine. Finally, my focus, as both a teacher and a researcher, has involved vocabulary and linguistic complexity (Vitta, 2019). This course was exciting and new for me while also highlighting and reinforcing my view

that vocabulary is and should be at the heart of any second/foreign language experience (Lewis, 1997). It should therefore not be surprising that most of the student behaviors that I perceived as evidence of task engagement were essentially productions of noteworthy linguistic forms.

DISCUSSION

The first point of reflection was focused on the manifestations of task engagement and disaffection in the academic discussion tasks. My reflections were mostly interested in linguistic observations but there were some para- and extra-linguistic observations on my part which were of interest. A1 learners would often exhibit patterns of rising intonation and fast tempo when it appeared to me that they were engaged with the task. Since these perceptions were mine alone, they cannot support a claim of causality. One, however, could assume that they might have done this if they were actually engaged to help to compensate for a lack of linguistic competence. What was more was that students who appeared engaged were observed using the Western mannerisms I taught as an aside in weeks 1 and 2 during later discussions. These actions included eye contact and specific hand gestures. Disaffection appeared to manifest itself in a delayed tempo or very flat intonation, sometimes both. In a layman's terms, students whom I perceived to be disaffected would sound robotic. That is not to say that students not using gestures while sounding robotic were disaffected. It could have been the case that they were truly engaged but forgot to use taught gestures and mannerisms or had linguistic competency issues that prevented them from demonstrating more standard intonation and tempo patterns. Nevertheless, the contrasting behavioral patterns observed by me could be further explored in a more robust inquiry.

Linguistically, engaged students would try to extend from the discussion task prompt sheet that contained the discussion questions and usually four ideas or nodes on information that could be used in the discussion (e.g. people tipping in North American but not in Japan). A framing point to this is that students read a text before the class on the topic to be discussed during the class. Using lesson 4 as an example, engaged students would offer up Obon, a Japanese summer festival, as an example of Japanese culture and customs. They extended from the ideas on the task prompting page to the production of content not found on it. For instance, students would share personal stories and their beliefs. They would also ask follow up questions that sought more details on what their discussion partners were saying. As one might expect, A2 learners displayed these behaviors more than their A1 counterparts. Disaffection was perceived by me to manifest itself in a reliance on content from the prompting pages and/or refusals to speak. That is not to say with absolute certainty that disaffection was the cause of the behaviors that I perceived. Linguistic competency limitations or interpersonal issues (with their discussion partners) could have been at play. This small-scale reflection project, however, was not designed to identify nor consider such confounding and covariate constructs. Interestingly, the lower proficiency class had less 'muted students' than the higher class. I would probably attribute this to the athletic backgrounds of the learners, which sees them treat the tasks as a competition of sorts. In the preceding Spring semester, I noticed that my student-athlete students would gamify discussions and practice activities with little prompting from me. It should be noted however that the seemingly disaffected students did manage to get near full points when being assessed, however. They would use the phrases linked to the discussion and communication skills just enough to warrant points. Thinking about the distribution between 'engaged' and 'disaffected,' there were three lessons in which all students appeared to be fully engaged and five lessons where only 1 or 2 students appeared to be disaffected. Surprisingly, no student appeared consistently disaffected.

This reflection report is not meant to be a bona fide empirical enquiry but there were some possible causal factors that I noticed in relation to engagement and disengagement. The first was quiz performance which measured students' understanding of the reading. Students who scored

above 75% (6 of 8 questions right) on the quiz never really appeared to demonstrate disaffection. While I cannot claim a direct causal relationship between quiz performance and engagement as this report is not designed to empirically uncover and consider all possible covariates and confounding variables. This simple association does tacitly suggest that students who take the time to read content that they can use in a subsequent discussion task might be better engaged with said task. With that said, individual differences in terms of linguistic competency and overarching L2 proficiency could have also been associated with the behaviors I observed as possible indicators of engagement and disaffection. As highlighted above, A2 students usually offered extra content to the discussions. It stands to reason that since they took the time to read, they would be engaged in the task. A2 learners, who according to CEFR guidelines have mastered simple questions on everyday topics (Council of Europe, 2001), were more likely to extend exchanges with their speaking partners with follow up questions. Finally, those with outgoing and somewhat competitive personalities appeared to have a disposition towards engagement irrespective of what their proficiency might be.

CONCLUSION

This reflection has implications at the program and teacher level. At the program level, one wonders if having A1 (students in one of my classes) and B1/B2 (higher levels of the course) should be discussing the same topics and questions if we are to expect task engagement from everyone. As noted by Svalberg (2009) motivation pairs with and precedes engagement and perhaps students feel overwhelmed by tasks and language outside of their grasp. This point is constrained by most students apparently being engaged, however. The second implication at the program level is that there appears to be room for the program to frame the reading within a flipped paradigm (Mehring, 2016) where the students know that content important to that class precedes it and that the teacher expects them to learn it. The course can currently be described as flipped, but there could be more done in relation to communicating expectations to students and perhaps using the L1 to push higher order processing that defines the flipped process. At the program and teacher levels, the reflections in this report point to the possible effectiveness of the course in getting lower proficiency students engaged with academic discussion text types. Thus, the course's unique combination of PPP and TBTL can be utilized by teachers and programs alike to get students of lower proficiency to engage with the academic discussion text type.

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