Student Perceptions of an Autonomous Fluency Activity

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on student perceptions of a student-led version of the 3/2/1 fluency activity which was designed to foster learner autonomy in English Discussion classes at Rikkyo University. A questionnaire was distributed to participants over multiple semesters which asked students to state their level of agreement regarding how difficult they found the activity, how the activity affected motivation, and whether they preferred the student-led activity over a teacher-led activity. Results show that the majority of students preferred the student-led activity. In addition, changes in the activity between the Spring and Fall semesters had positive effects on students' confidence and ability to participate in the activity. However, further changes to the activity are necessary in order to cater to individual student needs and foster a stronger desire for autonomous learning.

INTRODUCTION

The 3/2/1 fluency activity (adapted from Nation, 1989) has been a fundamental aspect of lesson design since the inauguration of the Center for English Discussion Class (EDC), a mandatory speaking course for first-year students at a university in Japan. Since one of the goals of EDC is to develop spoken fluency (Hurling, 2012), the 3/2/1 activity is a natural fit for the program. During almost a decade of courses being taught at EDC, this activity has been researched and discussed in numerous articles published in this journal. In previous studies, the 3/2/1 activity has been utilized as a means to research topics such as communicative competency, willingness to communicate, and automaticity (see Wash, 2016, for examples). One common aspect of previous studies has been the roles of teachers and students in the 3/2/1 activity—teachers have consistently been placed as the leader of the activity, and the students as participants.

While teacher-led activities represent the norm in second language teaching, research has shown that there are benefits to creating opportunities for more autonomous learning to take place in the classroom, such as increased motivation and self-reflection (Ushioda, 2011). These benefits are most salient when learners have a clear understanding of the desired learning outcomes of the activity they are participating in (Black & William, 2010). Activities or tasks which are repetitive and easy to conduct may offer the best opportunity for autonomous learning to take place. The 3/2/1 activity represents such a task, since the learning outcomes of the activity (described below) are easy to comprehend, and students are asked to conduct the activity at the beginning of every EDC lesson. Therefore, the 3/2/1 activity could be used as an ideal opportunity to increase autonomous learning in EDC. However, in order to discover how EDC students would react to and perceive such an activity, more research was needed.

The current paper describes the implementation of a version of the 3/2/1 activity in which students participated autonomously, without teacher interference. The activity was first piloted during the Spring semester of 2018, and a questionnaire was given to all participants. Based on responses from this questionnaire, the activity was improved and then implemented again with a new set of participants in the Fall semester. The same questionnaire was implemented with the second group of participants, allowing for a comparison of students' perceptions of the two versions of the autonomous fluency activity which were used. The aim of the study was to ascertain how difficult students found the activity to be, how students believed the activity affected motivation, and whether students preferred the student-led version of the 3/2/1 activity over the teacher-led version. After describing the background and method used for this study, a descriptive analysis of the questionnaire results is discussed.

BACKGROUND

Versions of the 3/2/1 activity typically employed at EDC are modeled after the 4/3/2 technique, described and popularized by Nation (1989). This technique requires a participant to speak on a subject three times, each time with a different partner, or 'listener'. Participants are asked to repeat the same content in each speaking turn. However, the amount of time given is reduced in each turn—four minutes is given in the first turn, reduced to three minutes in the second turn, and two minutes in the final turn. Research on this technique has shown positive gains in spoken fluency. A study by De Jong and Perfetti (2011) demonstrated that fluency improved more in activities where speeches were repeated than in activities where participants spoke about three separate topics. In another study, Thai and Boers (2016) found that fluency gains were more pronounced with increased time pressure activities when compared to constant-time condition activities (e.g., 2/2/2). The version of the 4/3/2 technique employed at EDC incorporates both aspects of repeated speech and increasing time pressure. However, due to the time constraints of EDC lessons, the time limit for each round is shorter—usually three minutes, two minutes, and one minute.

This study considers several concepts of 'autonomy' which have been applied by researchers in the literature. One early definition provided by Holec (1981) defines learner autonomy in a holistic sense, stipulating that learners must take responsibility for all aspects of learning, including the selection of methods and techniques to be used. A more applicable concept of learner autonomy is discussed in Cotterall (1995), where the autonomous learner is described as taking responsibility "over and above responding to instruction" (p. 195). Littlewood (1999) describes the two main dimensions of learner autonomy as responsibility and ability; the latter of which is particularly important for learners to continue being autonomous after formal learning has ended. Ultimately, autonomous learners should take responsibility for certain aspects of learning traditionally managed by the teacher. The autonomous fluency activity developed in the present study was designed to give students responsibility for giving directions, making classroom management decisions, and providing evaluative feedback—all tasks which are traditionally overseen by the teacher.

A number of advantages to increasing learner autonomy have been identified. One of the most often cited benefits is improved motivation for learning. Scharle and Szabo (2000) explain that motivation is an important building block of responsibility. Increasing learner autonomy by providing students more responsibility for their own learning may then increase motivation as well. According to Ushioda (2011), to be an autonomous learning is by definition to be a motivated learner. In a study by Tassinari (2012), students reported that the use of a dynamic autonomous learning model improved self-reflection, increased awareness of learning processes, and aided in improving their learning. Another study, conducted by West (2017), confirmed that increased autonomy led to increases in awareness of both learning processes, and also course objectives.

Increasing autonomous learning my also involve some disadvantages. First, there is the problem of identifying when learners are ready for autonomy (Little, 1991). That is, how can we determine if a language student has reached the appropriate level, linguistically or psychologically, to become responsible for his or her own learning? Another issue is whether the concept of autonomy is suitable in all contexts. Research has called into question the appropriateness of fostering autonomy in Asian cultures (Palfreyman & Smith, 2003). For example, learners in Asian contexts may be reluctant to offer critical assessments of their performance for fear that their assessment may not match that of the instructor's (Littlewood, 1999). These possible disadvantages exemplify the need for the current study—to test whether or not EDC students can handle the responsibility and difficulty of conducting the 3/2/1 activity autonomously. Next, the method used in the study is described.

METHOD

An initial version of the autonomous fluency activity was piloted in the Spring semester. There were 67 total participants, and class levels ranged between I to III. Level IV classes—the lowest level taught at EDC—were not taught by the instructor in either semester during this study. The activity was implemented in the fourth lesson (EDC has 14 lessons per semester). This was done so that students could be exposed to the basic, teacher-led version of the 3/2/1 activity in the first three lessons of the semester. This allowed students to develop an understanding of the procedure, desired learning outcomes, and typical feedback given in the activity. This teacher-fronted modeling of the activity was essential because in order for students to autonomously run the activity, which includes giving feedback to their peers, they must understand what the goals are, and have some basic competence in effectively assessing themselves in light of these goals (Black & William, 2010). Another advantage of introducing the activity in the fourth lesson (L4) was that it gave each student in the class (n=8) a chance to be the leader for the fluency activity one time. Since the activity was not used in test lessons (L5, L9, L13), starting the activity in L4 meant that the activity would be used in exactly eight lessons during the semester.

At the beginning of each lesson in which the autonomous fluency activity was conducted one student was chosen to be the fluency leader by the teacher. The leader selected in each lesson was chosen at random from the pool of students who had not yet led the activity. For this study, an instrument was developed in the form of an instruction sheet which was given to the fluency leader prior to beginning the activity. The initial instrument developed for the Spring semester version of the activity (see Appendix A) asked the fluency leader to consider three questions before the commencement of the activity: *How will you ask everyone to stand up and make two lines?*; *How will you decide which line will be speakers first, and which line will be listeners first?*; and *What feedback will you give to the students during the activity and after the activity is finished?* The instruction sheet also included several examples of imperative forms and simple feedback phrases which the fluency leader could use. One key point regarding the Spring semester version of the activity is that after the fluency leader was given 1-2 minutes to observe the instruction sheet, this paper was then taken away from the student. The fluency leader was then given a timer, and asked to begin the activity, from which point the teacher assumed a passive role of either observing the activity from the back of the classroom, or joining as a listener in cases where there were an uneven number of speakers and listeners. Once the activity began, the students were responsible for giving instructions, managing the activity, and providing feedback.

A questionnaire was developed and administered to all participants at the end of the final lesson of the Spring semester (L14). The questionnaire contains 10 items (Table 1), and participants were asked to agree or disagree with each item using a Likert scale which ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The questionnaire included statements regarding the difficulty of giving instructions and feedback, the effects on motivation, whether participants preferred the teacher-led version of the activity or the student-led version, and to what extent participants desired more opportunities to lead classroom activities.

The method used in the Fall semester mirrored the procedure used in the Spring semester with one important difference—the instrument given to the fluency leaders. Based on the results of the questionnaire given after the autonomous activity was piloted in the Spring semester, it was determined that fluency leaders may benefit from increased scaffolding of instructional language and feedback phrases. Observations made by the instructor during the Spring semester also indicated that fluency leaders especially struggled with the use of imperative forms. The instruction sheet used in the Fall semester (see Appendix B) was adapted to include more examples of language which could be used to give instructions. It also includes an expanded list of example feedback phrases, as well as some open-ended phrases which the fluency leader could use (e.g.,

Some interesting ideas I heard were...). Finally, the most significant change which was made to the Fall semester procedure was that the instrument was not taken away before beginning the activity. Instead, fluency leaders were allowed to use the instruction sheet while conducting the activity. Accordingly, a space was provided for fluency leaders to take notes regarding interesting ideas, questions, or English reactions they observe.

At the end of the Fall semester, participants (n=71) were given the same questionnaire which was administered in the Spring semester. By using the identical questionnaire, possible changes in student perceptions of the autonomous fluency activity between semester may be measured. In the next section, observed changes and their possible relation to adaptations in the Fall semester instruction sheet are discussed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the questionnaires (Table 1) show that while students' perspectives regarding the autonomous fluency activity were similar across semesters for some items, others items revealed a marked difference in levels of agreement between semesters. In regards to observed changes in students' perceptions between semesters, the results can be divided into three categories: items in which the level of agreement increased, items in which the level of agreement decreased, and items in which the level of agreement generally remained the same (threshold for change was set at +/- 0.20).

Table 1. Results of the Spring and Fall semester questionnaires

Item	Average Level of Agreement[a] Spring Semester (n=67)	Fall Semester (n=71)
1. I felt confident in my ability to give instructions to the class	1.94	2.24
2. I felt responsible for classroom teaching	2.84	2.46
3. I felt confused about what I should say to the class	2.63	2.46
4. I prefer the teacher to be the leader for the fluency activity	2.06	2.18
5. The instruction sheet was helpful	3.40	3.46
6. Giving feedback after the fluency activity was difficult	3.31	2.90
7. This activity motivated me to speak more fluently	3.09	2.93
8. Being the fluency leader was stressful	2.07	2.01
9. I prefer a student to be the leader for the fluency activity	2.96	2.86
10. I would like to have more opportunities to be the leader for other activities during EDC class	1.91	2.08

[a]Agreement was measured on a Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = agree; 4 = strongly agree)

There was only one item in which the level of agreement increased in the Fall semester above a threshold of +0.20. This was item 1, where agreement regarding the level of confidence in giving instructions rose from an average of 1.94 to 2.24. Two items showed decreases in agreement greater than -0.20. The first was item 2, in which agreement about the level of responsibility for classroom learning dropped from 2.84 to 2.46. The second was item 6, where the average level of agreement that giving feedback while being a fluency leader was difficult dropped from 3.31 to 2.90. Levels of agreement in the other seven items did not change above or below the 0.20 threshold.

These results show interesting implications regarding positive effects that changes to the instrument had on students' perceptions of the autonomous fluency activity. First, item 1 reveals an increase in fluency leaders' confidence to give instructions to the class. This suggests that the added scaffolding and imperative forms provided on the Fall semester instruction sheet may have increased confidence in giving instructions. This is also reflected in the slight decrease in item 3 (-0.17), the number of participants who agreed that they felt confused about what to say. More evidence that changes to the instrument were positive can be found in responses to item 6, where fewer participants felt that giving feedback was too difficult; a decrease of -0.41. Interestingly, the level of agreement to item 5 (*The instruction sheet was helpful*) showed almost no change between semesters, increasing by only +0.06.

Another interesting result was found in item 2, where participants showed their level of agreement regarding whether they felt responsible for classroom learning. Agreement actually decreased for this item in the Fall semester by -0.38, which means that overall, students felt less responsible for classroom learning when using the adapted instruction sheet. One hypothesis for this result is that the added levels of scaffolding, and the fact that students could simply read phrases from the instruction sheet while conducting the activity, lead to a decrease in autonomy. This is certainly reflected in literature on learner autonomy, where it is stressed that students should be made responsible for making decisions about all aspects of learning (Holec, 1981), including opportunities for practice (Cotterall, 1995) and evaluation of performance (Littlewood, 1999).

While some results found in the questionnaire reflected positively on the Fall semester version of the activity, other results confer some conflicting implications. Firstly, items 4 and 9, which did not change over a +/- threshold of 0.20 between semesters, possibly contain the most important results of all—that the students showed a strong preference for having a student be the fluency leader over the teacher. Since this result was consistent across both semesters, it seems to reflect an overall positive perception of the autonomous fluency activity. Adding to this is the fact that the majority of students in both semesters agreed with item 7, that the activity motivated them to speak more fluently. However, despite these results, in item 10 a strong majority of students in both semesters disagreed with the suggestion that they would like to have more opportunities to be the leader in other activities during EDC class. This apparent contradiction—that students preferred the autonomous version of the activity, but would rather not participate in future autonomous activities—leads to the conclusion that while participants preferred to have a student be the leader for the 3/2/1 fluency activity, they would prefer that student to not be themselves. While changes to the Fall version of the autonomous fluency activity showed positive results in terms of motivation and confidence, it did not lead to a significant change in students' desire to lead activities in the future, with item 10 results increasing by only +0.17 from the Spring semester.

Going forward, one suggestion for improvement is to use different versions of the activity depending on the level of the class. While some students will benefit from receiving less scaffolding and being given to make their own decisions regarding what language to use while being the fluency leader, other students may not have the language capacity or the confidence to

do so. Utilizing varied levels of scaffolding from class to class would more appropriately cater to individual students' needs and abilities. This may lower affective filters such as anxiety or lack of confidence, and perhaps increase students' desire to participate more in autonomous learning.

One limitation of the study which should be noted is that the participants changed midway through. Students who participated in the Spring semester were different than those who participated in the Fall. While this did not affect general perceptions of the autonomous fluency activity overall, it does lower the validity of data comparison of participants' perceptions between the Spring semester and Fall semester versions of the activity. A questionnaire which tracks the perceptions of students who participated in both versions of the activity would render more valid results, and is recommended for future research which aims to monitor how changes in a classroom activity are perceived.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to ascertain student perceptions of an autonomous fluency activity. In particular, questionnaire items were designed to garner feedback on how difficult students found the activity, the degree to which students felt the activity affected motivation, and whether students preferred the student-led activity over a teacher-led activity. It was found that in fact, students did prefer to have a student leader over having a teacher lead the activity. This result reflects an overall positive student perception of the autonomous fluency activity. In addition, changes made to the initial version of the activity showed positive results in terms of increasing learner confidence and ability to give instructions and feedback. The majority of students also agreed that the activity increased motivation to speak more fluently.

Despite these positive results regarding participants' perception of the activity, the majority of students disagreed with the statement that they would like to have more opportunities for autonomous learning in future lessons. This leads to the conclusion that many students either found no utility in the activity, or still lack the confidence or motivation to make autonomous decisions regarding their own learning. Ultimately, the teacher must strike a balance between allowing students to take responsibility for making decisions autonomously, and ensuring that the difficulty level of classroom activities matches the language ability and confidence level of individual learners. Future iterations of this activity should strive to attain such a balance.

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APPENDIX A – Instruction sheet given to fluency leaders in the Spring semester

You will be the leader for the fluency activity today. Please think about these things before the lesson starts:

1. How will you ask everyone to stand up and make two lines?
Example: *"Please stand up." "Make two lines here."*

2. How will you decide which line will be speakers first, and which line will be listeners first?
Example: *"This line will be speakers." or "Please do rock, paper, scissors."*

3. What feedback will you give to the students during the activity and after the activity is finished?
Example: **Good** – *"Well done everyone." "Nice job!" "You gave many great examples."*
Bad – *"Speak faster." "Give more examples." "Use more English reactions."*

APPENDIX B – Instruction sheet given to fluency leaders in the Fall semester

Giving Directions

- Please stand up.
- This line is listeners.
- This time speak for 3 (2,1) minute
- Make two lines.
- Move left / right
- Ready, go!
- This line is speakers.
- Come to the end.
- Nice job! Please sit down.

Speakers: → Interesting ideas	**Listeners:** → Some reactions / questions

Giving Feedback (以下のフレーズは単なる例です。)

Good	**Not Good**
- Everyone spoke English only.	- Try to use English only next time.
- Everyone could speak faster.	- Please speak faster next time.
- You could speak smoothly.	- Please don't stop speaking.
- Well done! / Nice job!	- Use more English reactions.

- Some interesting ideas I heard were...
- Some interesting reactions / questions I heard were...