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Abstract

This pilot study examines the perceived benefits of a self-evaluation activity by 73 Japanese university learners taking an elementary English conversation course. Participants were asked to watch online videos of English TED presentations, discuss their reactions to the videos in a group and then reflect on their individual speaking performances and listening skills after each group discussion using a retrospective self-evaluation form. Student comments indicated that the majority of learners perceived value in the process of identifying areas of weakness and in the prescribed task where they planned to improve on these areas. The preliminary findings support the use of self-evaluation and reflection tasks in second-language conversation courses to improve speaking and listening abilities and autonomous learning

Keywords: autonomy, motivation, reflection task, Japanese university

The context for this paper is a university in the Tohoku region of Japan. Students like the ones described in this paper often face challenges when developing oral communication skills. The author (also the instructor/researcher) sought to engage students in reflection and self-evaluation in order to foster learner autonomy and motivation for English language learning. Developing autonomy in the classroom may be a first step to promoting autonomous learning habits outside the classroom and in self-access environments. The paper provides details of the implementation of activities which offered opportunities for autonomous practice through group discussion and reflective practice. Along with details of the implementation of these activities, some feedback from students is also shared.

Autonomy and Learner Reflection

There may be a number of ways in which to approach research which seeks to examine student reactions to new learning methodologies. However, in this study, the author will concentrate on how the activities appeared to foster

learner autonomy through self-evaluation, focussing in particular on student reactions to their participation in the activities.

For Benson (2011), autonomy and autonomous learning is "learning in which the learners demonstrate a capacity to control their learning" (p. 124) and in which autonomous behaviour is developed through practice in modes of learning which help to promote self-direction. Furthermore, Cooke and Leis (2015) argue it is important not to misinterpret autonomy as self-instruction or individualization whereby learners can determine their own needs and act upon these needs independently. Indeed, it is the teachers' role to both understand and account for learners' needs, in addition to creating activities which might help in the development of the autonomous learner. Thus, autonomy is defined in this paper as a "matter of learners doing things not on their own, but for themselves" (Little, 2007, p. 14).

In his paper which examined the value of self-evaluation through reflective practice, Cooke (2013) describes the concept and practice of self-evaluation as key in helping students to become more confident learners. According to Ushioda (2011), this idea of fostering motivation to participate in the construction of language, plays a vital role in the development of the autonomous learner as it allows students to examine possible avenues of learning strategies that best fit their preferred learning styles (Benson, 2011), offering them greater responsibility and control over their learning.

Allowing learners greater engagement in and responsibility for their learning, is seen as vital in the transition from a top-down to a more learner-centred approach. However, in handing over some areas of control to the learner, such as self-evaluation of proficiency, we are faced with a number of challenges. One is the introduction of autonomous practices to learners who may be more used to the prescriptive, top-down classroom. Indeed, as Benson advises, it is up to the teacher to "…help learners to confront their ideas about learning that lead them to resist the idea of autonomy" (2011, p. 108). Another challenge that may be encountered is one of simple objectivity. Learners might feel that they are expected to be improving in their L2 ability as the semester continues and so grade themselves accordingly, in a manifestation of demand characteristics, sometimes referred to as the Hawthorne effect (in which people are observed to modify their behaviour because they are being scrutinized). In an attempt to

reconcile these concerns, the tasks detailed in this study were designed to engage learners in speaking and reflection tasks in an enjoyable way. This pilot study sought to examine learners' reactions to the opportunities they were given to reflect and self-evaluate their English oral/aural skills.

Method

Context

The pilot study took place in a university L2 English conversation course. The course was an elective for first-year learners from a variety of disciplines. The class objectives as stated in the curriculum outline guide are to help learners improve their communication (speaking and listening) skills through a variety of textbook-based activities.

Participants

73 first-year students from two elective English conversation classes were chosen to participate in the study. The two classes were taught by the author.

Learner English levels

To gauge learners' current English skill levels (the university does not have a specific English levels test for incoming learners), the learners were administered with a self-perceived proficiency test taken from The CEFR-J (Tono & Negishi, 2012). The CEFR-J is based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and has been adapted for the English language context in Japan. It consists of a series of 'can do' descriptors, which indicate what the test-taker can do with language. It is based upon the 'action-oriented approach' proposed in the original CEFR and has 12 levels based on the original six A1 to C2 levels found on the CEFR. A Cronbach's alpha was carried out using SPSS version 22 to assess the internal consistency between the CEFR can-do list of variables. The results demonstrated that all the variables are related and could therefore be equated as satisfactory indications of learners' self-perceived English proficiency (see table 1 below). The median score on the test for the learners in this study was A2.1, classed on the CEFR-J as 'First stage of basic proficiency'.

Table 1. Correlation Coefficients Between the CEFR-J Variables

Variable	Reliability
Listening	.854
Reading	.870
Speaking (conversation)	.912
Speaking (presentation)	.910

Note: All the correlations are significant at the $p < 0.01$ level (2-tailed)

Procedure

In addition to the textbook-based activities, class time was also dedicated to practicing English through a variety of pair and group-work activities, such as role-play and presentations. In addition, every third week of the course, starting in week three, 50 minutes of the 90-minute class were dedicated to learners watching one of six prescribed 5-6 -minute TED videos and writing comments about what they were watching on a teacher-created handout (see Appendix A). This part of the activity took 30 of the 50 minutes. After these 30 minutes had elapsed, learners were then asked to share the comments they had written regarding the video with previously assigned group members for 10 minutes. The remaining 10 minutes were assigned to learners assigning scores regarding their own speaking and listening performances during those two activities and writing comments regarding how they might address perceived weaknesses in these areas (Appendix B). This handout could be completed in Japanese if the learners wished to do so. For subsequent weeks in which the activity took place, learners were required to watch one of the prescribed videos they had not previously seen. The first two weeks of the course featured brief class tutoring practice sessions regarding both discussion and handout completion. These preparation sessions involved the whole class watching a video together, making groups, and using teacher-prepared discussion and conversation prompts that the learners could re-use for subsequent classes.

Question 5 on the form (Appendix A) asked learners to consider how they might improve upon speaking/listening performances. This question required specific and realistic written responses regarding how they would achieve the stated goals. An example of an acceptable response to this question is shown below:

I want to read my grammar book from high school. The title is (book title

here). I will read the section on conjunctions and do the exercises in the book about conjunctions.'

Learners were asked to keep the forms to be able to verify improvement over previous assigned speaking and listening performance scores and to check to see if they had completed the self-directed learning task(s) or not.

Data collection and analysis

After carrying out the activity four times during the course, learners' were asked to give feedback via an open response form regarding the both the group discussion and the self-reflection parts of the activity. The comments were all written in Japanese. They were translated into English by the author and the translation checked by a proficient bilingual. Sixty-five (90%) of the learners offered comments of varying length. The comments were collated and divided into themes by the author. The comments were anonymous and students chose their own pseudonyms (which have been used in this paper).

Findings

Of the sixty-five comments received, just five percent referred to the activity in a negative way. As shown below, other negative opinions mainly focused on students' perceptions of their own shortcomings in English, or the timing of the activity.

Theme 1: Relating to students sharing opinions in English with class members.

Yuta: Giving my opinion in English enabled me to improve my communication skill. I thought the discussion activity was really fun.

Cheese: It was great way to get to know new people.

While Yuta's comment demonstrates what might be described as the ideal reaction to the class, Cheese's comment also highlights another benefit to using the activity; a way of helping learners get to know each other through the discussion element of the activity.

The negative opinions from learners centred on their perceived communication weaknesses in English.

Shiorin: It was difficult to get the words out from inside my head.

In addition to practices aimed at improving learner confidence in using the L2, activities which look to enhance and embrace group learning, such as those found in Arnold, Dörnyei, and Pugliese (2015) could be implemented.

Theme 2: Relating to using English.

Keita: Little by little I felt English speaking becoming part of me.

Hatopan: I felt that I was able to make full use of the English I've learned up to now.

By asking learners to engage in authentic activities in the L2, i.e., in the exchange of ideas and opinions, comments such as these hint that reflective tasks can offer not only enjoyment in the curriculum content but also engagement with material that hints at life applications (King, Newman, & Carmichael, 2009). In light of the views expressed by Ryan (2009) and others regarding the paucity of opportunities for English use in Japan, life application in this case means giving students the opportunities to learn something new and of interest from the videos shown and also through the opinions of their group, sharing interactions in no-risk cooperative turns.

The negative opinions in this theme related either to the content of the videos being too difficult or to learners feeling no improvement in their listening or speaking skills. In addition, Pelly's comment also demonstrates the challenges of asking learners to engage with English for an extended period of time and therefore the need to introduce new materials and class methodology in a procedural fashion. A greater role by the teacher in this regard, one who might seek to intervene or offer their support for learners who appear to be 'treading water' in this way, might help to determine measures to aid these learners. This could be achieved by paying closer attention to the comments section of the feedback sheets after each session and/or checking for efficient functional group interaction and turn-taking during the discussion period of the activity.

N: I think my listening improved but I don't really think my speaking did.

Nade: I don't think my level changed.

Pelly: It was really hard to speak in English for all that time.

Theme 3: Relating to students overcoming challenges.

Whilst learning need not necessarily be perceived as being fun, it should certainly be engaging (Wentzel & Brophy, 2014). Furthermore, the creation of an atmosphere which can enhance intrinsic motivation is deemed necessary to foster motivated, autonomous learners (Fukuda, Sakata, & Takeuchi, 2011). Many of the positive opinions stated related to the amount of English that the learners were asked to pay attention to and to produce. For many of them, this seemed to be an enjoyable challenge:

Rippi: It was hard but I was able to come into contact with a lot of English.

Itonoko: Every time I come to the lesson each week, I can feel my English improving.

The negative opinions given here carried none of the contrasting conjunctions found in many of the positive statements. A longer period of scaffolding for the activity including the teaching of effective listening and discussion strategies could benefit learners struggling with the activity.

Pancake: It was really hard.

Theme 4: Regarding self-evaluation.

As can be seen in the remarks below, the majority of learners spoke of the act of verification of changes in their English skills in very positive ways. The comment by Pancake is revealing here as he/she speaks highly of the activity in necessitating the use of English despite their earlier comment found in Theme 3 that they found the activity difficult.

Red: I feel like I can sense the improvement I make and that is motivating.

Takeyan: I was able to really feel a sense of achievement and change in skill when checking my previous score.

Pancake: I could use English much more than before.

The negative comments centred on learners either being unable to sense any changes or, as noted below, a noticing of their scores decreasing. Picking up on the negative trends of these learners at an early stage could help the teacher to offer assistance, such as helping to redefine short-term student goals, to ward off demotivating trajectories.

Kimura: I wasn't able to see much change from week to week.

Cheese: My level kept going up and down. I couldn't understand it.

Theme 5: Regarding students setting their own study plans.

As shown in the comments below, learners appeared to recognize their weaknesses and most spoke of the perceived value of the opportunity to act upon them.

N: I was able to check and pinpoint my weak points and see what I needed to work on.

Sayumiso: I was able to plan what I needed to work on for next time.

The negative opinions mostly related to the learners' inability to find the time to address their weaknesses.

Carbon: I was so busy with other classes that I couldn't do the work that I set myself.

Theme 6: Regarding desire to do the activity again.

The positive comments allotted to this theme justify the inclusion of such an activity even for learners who, as has been observed in some of the comments above, are not used to its type.

Blacksmith: I really wish that there were other English classes like this.

Takeyan: As not many other English classes offer the chance to speak so much, I wish there were classes like this that let you have contact with English in the same way.

The negative opinions focused mainly on the fact that this was a class that took part in the final university period of the day and on the overall difficulty of the activity.

Water: It was a 5th period class and so it was tiring!

Yu: It was fun but difficult.

Conclusion

The findings of this preliminary study suggest that the handing back of some control through the implementation of reflective practice is highly valued by learners and is perceived as instrumental in fostering motivation and playing a role in their English improvement. In this way, it supports the findings of other studies into the value of reflective practice and the development of autonomous practices through reflection to enhance students' English abilities (Cooke, 2013; Werner, 2014). In addition, the comments suggest that value was placed in the perceived benefit of learners sharing their opinions in the L2. Despite the novelty of the activity and the placing of more responsibility in the hands of the learner, the relatively small number of negative comments relating to its difficulty suggest that the implementation of such an activity was not excessively demanding. As recommended by Benson (2011), Wentzel & Brophy (2014) and others, for motivated learning to occur, teachers must provide sufficient scaffolding to enable learners to be able to perceive the benefits that the adoption of autonomous practices such as reflective practice might bring. The positive comments reveal

value in pursuing a more comprehensive study into the use of activities that promote learner reflection tasks.

Limitations

The variety of the comments and indeed the implementation of a study such as this suggests potential for rewarding further investigation from a number of perspectives, including student anxiety, peer evaluation and feedback, which could each reveal valuable reflections on the value of the activities. Future iterations of this study will primarily seek to implement a questionnaire which can focus on just one or two of these fields to greater inform the research.

The instructor made efforts to encourage students to write in detail regarding their perceived weaknesses and their proposed study plans to address these weaknesses, in order to create suitable guidelines for autonomous study. However, student responses were found to be rather vague in a small number of cases. Clearer instruction in this area would encourage more elaborate details regarding the extent to which these tasks had been completed, possibly helping learners to better pinpoint areas for improvement. Future extensions to the study could include a more thorough investigation into what extent the self-prescribed self-study (and indeed what other additional study) was carried out by the learners would be beneficial in defining optimum realistic and effective study plans. By the same token, examination of methods used by learners pre/during/post activity could be made available as hints and guidelines for other less-able learners.

Notes on the Contributor

Simon Cooke, has been teaching English in Japan for 14 years. His interests include motivational dynamics in second language acquisition, and autonomous learning. He currently works at the Tohoku Institute of Technology, in Sendai.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Handouts Showing Video Selection and Discussion Activity Print

Discussion

Matt Cutts: Try something new for 30 days
マット・カッツの30日間チャレンジ
https://www.ted.com/talks/matt_cutts_try_something_new_for_30_days?language=ja
http://tinyurl.com/moyu4fe

Jay Walker: The world's English mania
ジェイ・ウォーカーが語る世界の英語熱
https://www.ted.com/talks/jay_walker_on_the_world_s_english_mania?language=ja
http://tinyurl.com/lhhoato

Kenneth Shinozuka: My simple invention, designed to keep my grandfather safe
祖父の身を守るための僕のシンプルな発明
https://www.ted.com/talks/kenneth_shinozuka_my_simple_invention_designed_to_keep_my_grandfather_safe?language=ja
http://tinyurl.com/og2785g

Graham Hill: Why I'm a weekday vegetarian
ウィークデイベジタリアン（週5日の菜食主義）のすすめ
https://www.ted.com/talks/graham_hill_weekday_vegetarian?language=ja
http://tinyurl.com/o9tjjwa

Sebastian Thrun: Google's driverless car
Googleの自動運転車で目指していること
https://www.ted.com/talks/sebastian_thrun_google_s_driverless_car?language=ja
http://tinyurl.com/kvcjayh

Graham Hill: Less stuff, more happiness
ものは少なく、幸せは多めに
https://www.ted.com/talks/graham_hill_less_stuff_more_happiness?language=ja
http://tinyurl.com/pt645sd

1. Make a group

2. Choose one of the TED talks.

3. Watch the TED talk for 30 minutes. You can re-start the video as often as you want. Your teacher will tell you when to stop watching.

While you are watching, write the answers to these questions. You can write in Japanese.

A. What was the title of the presentation? Why did you choose it?
_____
_____

D. Was the presentation interesting? Why/Why not? What was the most interesting part?
_____
_____

E. Would you recommend others to watch it? Why/why not?
_____
_____

F. What 5 words of vocabulary did you learn?
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

4. Now discuss your answers to the above questions with your group.

5. How did you do? Complete the self-evaluation form over the page.

Appendix B

Student Self-Assessment and Feedback Sheets

自分に点数を付けて下さい:

Listening	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Speaking	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

1. Did my score improve over last time?　　Why/why not?
前回のスコアよりも上がりましたか？なぜですか？なぜそうでもないですか？

_____
_____
_____
_____

Did I carry out number 3? 前回のこのプリントの3番の活動(弱点の改善)はしましたか？
yes の場合：どうでしたか？効果的でしたか？
no　の場合：なぜですか？

_____
_____
_____
_____

2. What do I need to improve?
自分の弱点はなんですか？

_____
_____
_____
_____

3. How am I going to do that?
2週間後までその弱点を改善する為に何をしますか？

_____
_____
_____
_____