

The Benefits and Reasons of Student-Centered Classrooms: From Psychological Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Objective: It is reported that students who are highly motivated, confident, and having enjoyment in student-centered communicative English class can expect higher TOEIC IP scores. In response to the finding, the reasons why this is the case are explored in this study.

Design: A qualitative essay-based study was conducted in four classes at a Japanese university.

Methods: The EFL 108 freshmen were taught in English in a student-centered, communication-oriented class which includes how to write an essay. Students were required to write an in-class essay on the last day of the course. The essay title was how the students felt about the student-centered class.

Results: Many students noted that student-centered classes are good for students who are autonomous, motivated, and like to collaborate with classmates. This seemed to increase their motivation, confidence, and enjoyment in class. On the other hand, it was not suitable for students who lacked motivation and autonomy because it required them to prepare for class. There seemed to be individual differences in preference for this form of instruction.

Conclusion: The results of this qualitative study showed that students who favorably accept the student-centered language learning system enjoy studying in pairs/groups with their classmates, are highly motivated, and are autonomous. This result proved to support the quantitative study result. However, individual differences in preferred learning styles made it difficult to tailor lessons to all students. Therefore, teachers' efforts to create a constructive learning environment are required and some advice is presented.

KEY WORDS

autonomy, motivation, zone of proximal development, higher English proficiency, individual differences

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, university English education in Japan has adopted a student-centered language learning system that aims to simultaneously improve the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing¹⁾. In these classes, it is important to take students' feelings into account and to make them attain high English proficiency through making them actively participate in lessons²⁾. Reducing anxiety in the foreign language (FL) classroom as high anxiety levels decrease student performance and increasing enjoyment in class as it will decrease student anxiety may lead students' performance to improve³⁾. In order to identify the conditions that lead to improved English proficiency, students' levels of psychological factors (motivation and confidence) and emotional factors (enjoyment and anxiety) were investigated and the results showed that students who had higher levels of motivation, confidence, and enjoyment performed better⁴⁾. Therefore, this study examined the reasons for the result through qualitative research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Students' feelings in communicative EFL classrooms

Rivers⁵⁾ raised the issue that foreign language classroom anxiety (FLCA) is a major problem for Japanese learners of English. They have poor communication skills in English because of the EFL environment where they do not need to speak English in their daily lives⁶⁾. Since foreign language (FL) instruction will involve learners' affective variables, less anxious students may learn the target language (TL) more easily²⁾. Low anxiety may increase students' motivation to learn TL⁷⁾ and student confidence levels⁸⁾. When students enjoy learning TL, they are more motivated and confident, less anxious, and improve their English proficiency³⁾, which may be related to SLA success²⁾.

Zone of proximal development

Many researchers support the zone of proximal development (ZPD)⁹⁾ in communicative classrooms: solving problems through collaboration between classmates using both the TL and the first language (L1)¹⁰⁾, helping each other more¹¹⁾, creating the kind of interaction needed for learning, giving students different learning opportunities, and expanding new learning possibilities regardless of their knowledge¹²⁾, exchanging ideas reciprocally to increase group-framed motivation¹³⁾,

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increasing peer interaction that is beneficial for language learning¹⁴⁾, and utilizing a transformational process in which other learners can play an important role¹⁵⁾.

Individual differences

Individual differences such as aptitude, motivation, anxiety, self-confidence, tolerance of ambiguity, risk-taking, language learning style, age, and gender may play an important role in SLA¹⁶⁾. They concluded that better learning attitudes, stronger confidence in language skills, less perfectionism, and greater tolerance for ambiguity can improve language performance. Non-perfectionists are characterized by not worrying about making mistakes, tolerating ambiguity, skipping non-essential information, and casually exploring several different languages at the same time¹⁷⁾. High tolerance for ambiguity (ie, not perfectionists) is associated with low levels of anxiety¹⁸⁾. Anxious students and perfectionists are similar, and anxious learners gradually become more confident, but they still feel anxious at all stages¹⁹⁾.

Teachers' role

Although classroom-based language teaching and learning can lead to higher levels of anxiety, teachers should strive to create lessons tailored to students' different learning styles in order for students to enjoy the lessons, increase motivation and self-confidence, and reduce anxiety. In addition, the role of teachers is very important and they need to create a student-centered environment to increase students' self-confidence and motivation²⁰⁾. Therefore, teachers need to provide teaching materials for students to experience success²¹⁾, provide students with simple explanations and clarifications of areas they do not understand²²⁾, and occasionally compliment them²³⁾. Because students need to practice to improve their English-speaking skills, teachers should be flexible to students' needs²⁴⁾ and create a non-threatening classroom environment that encourages reticent students to participate in group and pair activities²⁵⁾.

RESEARCH QUESTION

A recent study⁴⁾ found that students with higher levels of motivation, confidence and enjoyment had high English proficiency. Therefore, this

study investigates the reasons of this. "Why did students with more enjoyed, motivated and confident in a student-centered communicative English classrooms at a Japanese university have higher TOEIC IP scores?"

METHODS

Setting

The Japanese researcher, who is bilingual (Japanese-English), taught four English classes and used the data for this study. The classes were focused on students' communication, reading, and writing development. The university English program adhered to an English-only policy for both teachers and students. Textbooks, lesson plans, homework assignments, and tests were the same for all classes. Course-specific textbooks were used to teach vocabulary, reading comprehension exercises, and essay writing. Prior to class, students were required to read approximately 500 words of English each week in preparation for class, and to complete the vocabulary exercises and reading comprehension questions in the textbook. In class, students checked these answers and practiced speaking in pairs and groups. The teacher then moved on to the topic of writing, explaining step-by-step how to write an essay (introduction, body, and conclusion). Students completed their assignments at home and then worked in pairs in the next class to correct each other's mistakes and practice writing. Students were required to write an in-class essay on the last day of the course and take a TOEIC IP one week after the course ended. The purpose of writing the essay was to confirm that the students were able to write an academic essay as they had learned in class and to find out how the students felt about the student-centered class. The purpose of the TOEIC IP was to measure each student's English proficiency.

Essay report

A thirty-minute in-class essay writing was given on the final day as a qualitative survey. The students were asked to write about their opinions of the student-centered lessons they had experienced and to follow the essay format that they had learned in class: an introduction, three points in the body of the text, and a conclusion. The teacher emphasized

Table 1: The Results of Students' Essay Report

Category	Number	Score	Students' opinions
Autonomy	30	438	Cultivate creativity Search for information extensively Think profoundly Deepen knowledge & enhance comprehension
ZPD	49	422	Learn together by sharing opinions & thoughts Freely ask questions to classmates & a teacher Find mistakes by themselves or do not mind making mistakes Less psychological pressure when speaking in English with classmates never spoken before Enjoy pair/group work and have better classroom atmosphere
Proficiency development	57	417	High autonomy and motivation lead to SLA success Develop English skills (particularly speaking ability) Acquire four skills simultaneously
Motivation	24	395	Students with high English proficiency recognized that they needed the ability to speak by themselves when traveling abroad or looking for a job after graduation. Increase motivation by finding that there is no correct single answer Not sleepy or bored because of lots of activities Concentrate during lessons Increase attendance rate
Individual differences	30	391	Unmotivated students reduce others' motivation Talk about unrelated topics and speak in Japanese without engaging in pair or group work Not prepared in advance and unable to keep up with the class Not suitable for students who lack autonomy & motivation

Note. Number = The number of students; Score = The average of TOEIC IP score

the importance of writing logical and persuasive essays.

RESULTS

Participants

The participants (108 freshmen at a Japanese university) were racially homogeneous (68 Japanese males, 40 Japanese females: Japanese L1, English L2). All the participants were freshmen aged 18 to 20 years (mean 19.01 ± 0.634 S.D.). The age distribution was 18 years ($n = 21$), 19 years ($n = 65$), and 20 years ($n = 22$). The students' levels of English proficiency ranged from 125 to 870 (mean 420.32 ± 140.81 S.D.) on the TOEIC IP.

Findings of the essay report

The essay data (students' opinions) were summarized and categorized to make the data anonymous, and analyzed using QSR NVivo12 qualitative software. The following categories for coding were based on factors that had been identified by previous researchers: autonomy²⁶⁾, ZPD⁹⁾, proficiency development³⁾, motivation²⁷⁾, and individual differences¹⁶⁾. The students' average TOEIC IP scores were calculated for each category. The order of each category of opinions was ranked according to the higher average TOEIC IP score.

DISCUSSION

As a result of changes in Japan's English education policy and the EFL environment where there are few opportunities to speak English outside the classroom, many universities including the university where this research was conducted are focusing on improving their students' English communication skills. The aim is to improve the ability to explain opinions and thoughts to others in English through oral practice. The participants in this study were first-year college students who studied vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehension, and listening comprehension (writing and speaking were not the primary focus) primarily in junior high and high school. Therefore, as college students, based on their accumulated knowledge of the English language, they generally agreed with lessons that emphasized speaking practice. Especially the student with their high TOEIC IP score was positive about the student-centered classrooms as they recognized that they themselves need to have the ability to speak when traveling abroad or looking for a job after graduation.

It was deduced that strong autonomy and motivation were vital for improving students' English proficiency through student-centered lessons. This was supported by the following researchers. In order to develop their autonomy and motivation, Najeeb²⁸⁾ stated that teachers needed to identify various ways to encourage students to practice speaking so that teachers should create a student-centered environment. The students in this research mentioned that it was important to search for information extensively by themselves, to think profoundly, and to deepen their knowledge. This led to the learning of English gradually becoming more enjoyable because the students felt that there were no wrong answers in the lessons in which they could cultivate their creativity. In addition, the student-centered classes were able to extend the four skills of English at the same time. The pair/group work especially allowed for a lot of speaking practice, which improved students' speaking ability. Developing the students' independence and motivation when learning a language seems to lead to increased success in SLA.

An environment in which students can learn together with their classmates makes pair/group work enjoyable and motivates them. This theory is known as the ZPD, which was introduced by Vygotsky⁹⁾, and is supported by many SLA researchers. Activities in pairs/small groups have been found to make most students feel comfortable²⁸⁾, and story-telling activities in group work increase the students' motivation and self-confidence²⁹⁾. This research adopted ZPD theory. Sharing opinions and ideas with classmates and knowing others' opinions broadened the students' perspectives and allowed them to stimulate each other intellectually. As the number of friends increased via the exchange of opinions, the atmosphere in the class naturally became comfortable. In addition, creating an environment in which students learned from each other made it easier for them to pose questions to other classmates or the teacher when they did not understand. In this way, they discovered their

mistakes by themselves, and were less concerned about errors. In addition, a sense of unity seemed to develop as a result of speaking English. One student said that she felt less psychological pressure/anxiety when she spoke in English to classmates to whom she had never spoken in Japanese than she would have done had she addressed them in Japanese. This finding is in accordance with Wilson's³⁰⁾ view: For some of her research subjects, FL played a role "as both a spur to communicate and as a mask to cover their shyness" (p. 307). Another advantage of this type of lesson is that more activities allow students to motivate themselves naturally. This may not indicate voluntary motivation, but it was associated with a sense of motivation, such as not falling asleep, not being bored, being able to concentrate on what they were doing during the lessons, and increased attendance in class.

By contrast, this system was not suitable for students who did not have autonomy and motivation. The effectiveness of this system might depend on individual differences and the students' personalities. This is in line with Oxford and Ehrman¹⁶⁾, who listed factors pertaining to individual differences that were related to SLA. Low motivation is an obstacle and classes that emphasize autonomy and independence are not suitable for unmotivated students²⁶⁾. In fact, this research revealed that a lack of motivation created a chain reaction, which caused the motivation of motivated students to diminish. Unmotivated students discussed unrelated topics and spoke in Japanese instead of engaging in pair/group work. This increased the amount of time wasted, counteracted the purpose of speaking English, and made the entire class noisy. Students with low motivation and autonomy could not catch up with the lessons because they had not done any preparation for them at all. This was partially echoed by Zhang²⁾, who mentioned that motivation, self-confidence, enjoyment, and anxiety could be associated with students' performances.

IMPLICATIONS

First, teachers should provide a precise explanation of what is necessary in a university class that adopts student-centered lessons to the students: As students have been studying English for at least six years, it is important to practice speaking in university classrooms on an on-going basis because being able to speak English is necessary for working in a global society in the future. The student-centered learning method can also develop the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing simultaneously, and in a balanced manner. Preparation (doing homework at home) is necessary in order to participate in classes of this nature.

Second, teachers can teach in a way that develops students' autonomy and motivation, and encourage them to learn independently and to deepen their knowledge and creativity. At the same time, teachers can adopt a student-centered approach, increase pair/group work, and try to create a comfortable atmosphere where classmates can help and learn from each other. Students can discuss what they did not understand in their homework during pair/group work. This will make students less afraid of making mistakes, less anxious, more willing to participate in class, and improve their English skills. However, it is difficult to deal with students who lack autonomy and motivation, but those students may gradually be stimulated by other students and change for the better.

CONCLUSION

A qualitative survey (student writing reports) was conducted in four EFL classes (108 freshmen participated) at a university that uses a student-centered language learning system. This was to find out why students who are motivated, confident, and who enjoy classes have higher TOEIC IP scores, based on the results of a qualitative survey. Students who scored high in TOEIC IP enjoyed studying in pairs/groups with their classmates and were highly motivated and independent. However, there were individual differences in the desired learning style so that it is difficult to tailor lessons for all students. Some advice was suggested on what teachers can do to create a constructive learning environment.

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