**STORIES OF LEARNING AND TEACHING PRACTICES |
学習・教育実践の成功談・失敗談**

Action Research with Junior High School Students:
Creating a Supportive, Collaborative Learning Environment

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The action research reported here was motivated by a desire to create a more positive and collaborative classroom environment for learning English. The junior high school where I teach is fairly typical, I believe, at least with regard to Japanese classrooms. Many students try hard to do what is asked of them: they follow along in class, doing activities as directed and practicing for speaking tests in order to do well. Others do just enough to get by, and there are others still who struggle for one reason or another. Despite this variability, unless specifically directed to engage in pair or group work, I have found little student-initiated collaboration. Students do not readily offer, or indeed request help from their peers. Mixed ability classrooms such as these should, however, provide a multitude of opportunities for engaging in this type of mutually beneficial support.

Creating a more cooperative, collaborative environment, I hoped, would also lead to more enjoyment and motivation among my students for learning English. It was with these aims in mind that I asked students to complete a survey, shared all of their anonymous responses with the class, and then asked them to form groups based on what they hoped to achieve. Anecdotal findings thus far point to much greater teamwork, more negotiation of meaning and increased enthusiasm.

Connecting to Theory and Practice in the Field

To better understand these issues, I looked to theorisations about how learner motivation can be understood. The L2 Motivational Self System developed by Dörnyei (2009) is an attempt to explain the factors that play a part in a second language learner's motivation for learning. There are three aspects of this system: the Ideal L2 Self which describes the qualities the learner would like to one day have, the Ought-to Self which are the attributes that a learner thinks they should have, and the learning experience itself comprised of situational and contextual characteristics of the learning environment. The use of these imagined possible selves is a powerful tool for motivating a learner to take steps in order to reach their goal (Markus & Nurius, 1986). Equally powerful is the learning environment with all that it entails, from the teacher and fellow classmates to textbooks, the physical location or the cultural surroundings (Dörnyei, 2009). Clearly, some of these factors are more easily manipulated than others. My interest was in trying to enhance the beneficial effects that classmates' behaviours and attitudes can have on a learner's motivation.

Drawing on Dornyei's (2009) theory, Fukada and associates (2017) set out to investigate the effect of visualising an ideal classmate rather than an ideal self, and to use that visualisation in order to affect their own behaviours in class. They found that imagining and expressing in words what an ideal classmate meant to learners led to changes in the learner's own approach to and interactions with fellow classmates and therefore to the classroom environment itself.

I found their approach interesting, so I decided to use their model in an effort to make positive

improvements in my junior high classroom. The specific research questions I hoped to answer were:

1. By using a survey prompting learners to consider their ideal classmates, can the overall learning environment be made more supportive and conducive to learning?
2. Will students willingly engage in more collaboration and cooperative behaviour?

Methods

The methods I used in this action research were based on those used by Fukada, Fukuda, Falout and Murphey (2017). The entire sequence they utilised included a pre-survey, a mid-semester survey and a post-survey. As detailed below, the first cycle of my action research used the first half of the pre-survey combined with other activities in an attempt to effect positive changes in our classroom.

Participants

The students are enrolled in the first, second and third years of a private girls' junior high school in central Tokyo. They are native speakers of Japanese with varying levels of English ability. They have four hours of English grammar each week, based on a government-approved textbook and geared towards passing standardized entrance examinations, taught almost entirely in Japanese, and one hour of Communicative English, aimed at improving their speaking and listening skills, taught almost entirely in English. Within all three years, there are considerable differences in ability among students.

Pedagogical Materials

Materials used included an anonymous pre-survey given to students at the start of the academic year (see Figure 1 below). In preparing survey materials for these classes, the Japanese co-teacher felt that students would be able to more easily reply if the wording of the translation were changed slightly from the original. The original English prompt used by Fukada et al. (2017), "Please describe a group of classmates that you could learn English well with. What would you do to help each other learn better and more enjoyably?" (p. 78) was not changed, however the Japanese translation was altered somewhat.

Pre-Survey

Original:

39. Please describe a group of classmates that you could learn English well with. What would you all do to help each other learn better and more enjoyably?

いっしょに親しく英語を学ぶクラスメートのグループがどのようなものかを想像して書いてみて下さい。より上手に楽しく助け合って学ぶにはどうすればいいでしょうか。

(English Education Research Team, 2016)

Revised:

Classmates

Describe a group of classmates that you could learn English well with. What would you all do to help each other learn better and more enjoyably? 英語を一緒に学ぶのに、どのようなクラスメイトやグループメンバーが理想的でしょうか。より上手に楽しく助け合って学ぶにはどうすればいいでしょうか。

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Figure 1. Pre-survey administered at the start of the year

Survey responses were then photocopied and distributed to all members of the class. Students also made group cards on which they wrote a chosen group name, their goals for the term and rules for their group members.

Procedures

Pre-survey. On the first day of the new academic year, after an ice-breaker activity, students were given a survey, which included a prompt written in English and Japanese (See Figure 1), and given 10 minutes to reflect on the question and write their response, in either English or Japanese. Students were asked to answer as honestly and thoughtfully as possible and assured that their responses would in no way affect their grades.

Looping. Students' anonymous responses were collected and photocopied onto a handout (see Figure 2 below for a sample) that was given to each class member the following week. Phrases commonly encountered in student responses were highlighted by underlining them as well. Students were asked to read and reflect on the comments of their peers.
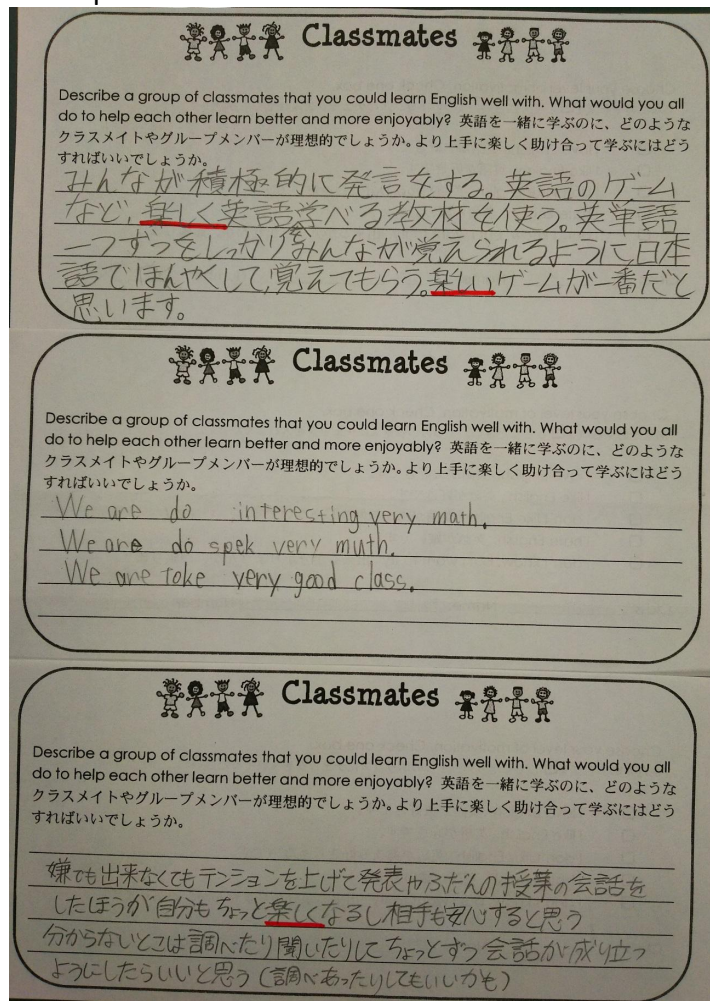

Figure 2. Looping handout

Choosing groups. Immediately following the looping procedure, students were asked to keep in mind all that they had just read and told that they would be choosing groups. Students were asked to come to the front of the class where they had space to move more freely and talk with each other. They were asked to choose groups of three and tell me once they had decided. They then sat down together, and the process continued until all students were members of a group.

Group cards. After choosing their groups, I asked them to decide on a group name, three goals they had

with regard to English Conversation class and learning English, and three rules they agreed to follow as a group. They wrote these goals and rules primarily in Japanese as I felt this would resonate more with students and serve as a more accessible reminder in future. However, I did ask students to write a rough translation into English of these items as well, with assistance provided as needed.

Discussion

The findings. I used a simple, open-ended survey to elicit learner views on what type of classmate would most help them to learn English well. Responses followed some general themes across all classes. Learners wanted someone who could help them. As one student wrote, "I can't speak English, so please teach me." They also wanted classmates with whom they could laugh and have fun, as evidenced by the common response, "I want friendly classmates who are funny. Let's have fun!" Learners also wanted to learn with those who shared similar beliefs such as, "We should listen carefully to the teacher" or "As much as we can, we should speak only English in class."

The first research question I sought to answer was whether the survey and subsequent activities used would result in a healthier, more supportive learning environment, and it has. I have observed much more positivity and enthusiasm in class. Students are engaged and appear to enjoy activities more, helping each other as needed and working together. I have also noticed fewer instances of sleeping, drawing or doing other coursework, and more instances of enthusiastic, active participation. Another interesting yet unexpected effect of this process was that students appear much less distracted by disruptive students. They simply continue working with their group on the task they have been given whereas before the same outburst would have affected and engaged nearly everyone.

My second research question asked about cooperative, collaborative behaviour among learners. In this regard as well, I have noticed positive improvements. In every class, students sit in their groups, and these logistical changes have provided more opportunities for conversation and working together. Therefore, understandably we have more chatting than before. However, I have also noticed that this chatting has helped them to build strong rapport with their group mates and create the bonds which facilitate collaboration. More encouraging is how often their conversations involve some type of negotiation of meaning or other form of assistance with classroom activities or content. In addition, with regard to group formation, there were the expected groupings based solely on friendship or other shared interests. However, I also witnessed several pairs of stronger students who specifically sought out weaker ones to join them. These collaborations appear to have proven beneficial for all involved. The weaker students are participating more and speaking more confidently, while the stronger students appear less bored during easier activities because they are engaged in helping someone rather than simply finishing quickly and having to wait.

The next steps. Based on my observations and findings thus far, my plan for the next cycle of this action research consists of the following three components:
- Post-survey
- Self-selected new groupings for next term after silent reflection on classmate qualities
- Mid-term 16-descriptor survey

Firstly, encouraged by these preliminary observations, I plan to administer another survey at the conclusion of the term, to ascertain student reactions to this process. I will be using the following wording, as recommended by the research team in their "Ideal Classmates Procedures":

"Please describe any changes you have made during this semester in your behavior or attitudes toward your classmates. What influences do you think these changes may have had on your classmates, relationships in and out of class, and your English learning?" (English Education Research Team, 2016)

I hope to find out whether they have noticed changes in their own or others' behaviours or attitudes. I am interested as well in any negative reactions or changes they have experienced that could be addressed in the

coming term or future cycles of this research.

During this end-of-term survey, however, I plan to start the class by silently distributing the survey, rather than administering it after an ice-breaker activity. In future as well, when I do the pre-survey, I plan to let students reflect on and answer the prompt before doing an activity aimed at creating a communicative atmosphere. This year I found that some classes quietly wrote their answers while in others there were several questions which turned into discussion. While I want learners to understand so that they can respond thoroughly, it is difficult to address their concerns without me or others possibly influencing their responses through examples or other information.

Secondly, I would like to give students an opportunity to work with a variety of partners. As the students are in the same class for the entire academic year, they will be choosing from the same pool of classmates. However, over the course of the first term they will have had the opportunity to learn a lot about their fellow classmates. Therefore, prior to choosing new groups, I will give learners time to think silently once again about what characteristics they appreciate most in the classmates with whom they will be continuing to learn English. Then I want learners to choose different group mates from the first term.

Lastly, I would like to use the 16-descriptor survey (Murphey, Falout, Fukuda, & Fukada, 2014) at mid-term. The 16 descriptors refer to the common qualities of ideal classmates (e.g., respect for others or willingness to take risks) that Murphey and his associates synthesised from the survey responses of various groups of learners (English Education Research Team, 2016). Using Likert scale scoring for each of the 16 descriptors, learners indicate 1) whether they feel it is important, 2) whether their classmates are exhibiting these behaviours, and 3) whether they themselves are doing these things.

Conclusion

At the time of writing in the early days of the 2019 school year, this initial cycle of action research has provided me with ample anecdotal evidence to support the use of a reflective survey such as that proposed by Fukada et al. (2017), along with self-directed group formation and the writing of shared goals.

Learners seem to have an increased willingness and desire to work together to ensure success, not only for themselves but for their classmates as well. Their group interactions also more often include negotiation of meaning, showing their desire and willingness to learn. Their interest and enjoyment in accomplishing the goals they set out for themselves also seems to have given them focus, therefore lessening the impact that distractions have had for them in the past.

From my perspective, the classroom environment has certainly benefited from this action research. Our classroom has a far more constructive atmosphere, with learners participating and collaborating more with their peers, resulting in a more positive, supportive and energetic space in which to learn.

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