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

Encouraging Self-Motivation among Students in an EFL Classroom in Japan

Claire Ryan
Email: <claire.ryan34@gmail.com>

Ask any language instructor about the biggest difficulties they face in the classroom and many of them will have the same answer: demotivated students. When a student doesn't want to take part in class, it disrupts the learning environment and makes for an unpleasant experience for learners and educators alike. A motivated classroom is an effective classroom. However, learners' self-motivation may often be overlooked as an important tool in language learning. This is noted by Kimura, Nakata and Okumura (2001), who say that "in Japan the most popular teaching methods have been teacher-centered rather than learner-centered … thus the motivation of individual learners has received little attention" (p. 50). For students to fully engage with their learning environment, it is essential that they feel motivated to study. From working as a business English and test-preparation instructor in Tokyo for the last four years, I have found there are a number of techniques and strategies that are useful for creating engaged and motivated learners. I'd like to share what has worked for me in my role. By doing so, I hope to create a dialogue where other educators can contribute their own suggestions and successful tactics.

In many cases, students in Japan are enrolled in an English course not because of their own interests but because it is mandated by their university, their employer, their parents, or other external factors. This is where the old adage comes into play: you can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink. Conversely, when students are motivated to learn and succeed, studying becomes second nature as a part of their daily lives rather than a chore to be endured. Encouraging students to find this motivation within themselves is critical, as explained by Dörnyei, Muir and Ibrahim (2014), who note that "the achievement of clear goals ultimately comes to fruition through a powerful surge of highly focused motivation" (p. 10).

For students to fully engage with their learning, they need to have a goal in mind to focus on. Not just their company's goal - "If I learn English, my company will become more global" - but one that actively applies to their own lives and future enrichment - "If I become proficient in English I will be a more international person, I will be more attractive to international companies, and I will achieve my dream of working or studying overseas," and so on. This goal-setting with the use of an 'I' statement connects students to their purpose of study in a more tangible way. The importance of individual goals for students which allow them to grow their abilities is noted by Zimmerman (2002), who says that "self-regulated learners are proactive in their efforts to learn because they are aware of their strengths and limitations and because they are guided by personally set goals" (p. 66). Allowing students to define their own goals like this also benefits the instructor, who can then tailor the lessons and materials to better suit the overall aims of their students.

Another important aspect of a student's goal-setting is that it must be easy to measure the outcome and assess their progress towards reaching the goal. Students will feel more motivated when they can see they are making progress - but how can we, as educators, show them their level of progress in a simple, accessible way? If you ask students what they want to achieve, the answer "I want to improve my English" may be the most common refrain. But it is difficult to measure 'improvement' with accuracy. A learning outcome such as "I want to be able to make a restaurant reservation / phone call / presentation in English," with practical exercises to test students' abilities, will be a far more achievable aim. These types of goals are measurable because the students' performances can easily be evaluated by the instructor through role-play activities. If the student can use the language that they set out to learn in a real-life situation and is able to complete the task with ease, they have clearly reached their goal. When they are able to achieve their goal in a classroom setting, it gives them the confidence they need to feel they can then do it in "the real world" as well. With this success also comes an increase in their motivation to be able to achieve further, more complex situations.

Allow me to share an example of how I put this type of goal-setting into practice in a classroom situation. On this occasion, I was working with a group of adult learners for a week-long, intensive business English course. Given the fast-paced nature of the course, I wanted to be sure to include time for students to reflect on what they had actually learned each day. I felt this would give them the chance to be able to make solid statements at the end of the course, where they would have a clear understanding of how their English had improved in a tangible way. In order to do this, I set up some English "check-points" around the classroom. These check-points consisted of large sheets of paper, each of which had a different heading or category, which could be filled out by students at various times of the day.

The morning checkpoint included the title "Today I Will…" As students entered the room, they took a sticky note and wrote their goal for the day. I had started the week by introducing the idea of SMART goals (Doran, 1981) which should be Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound, so students could complete this activity easily and with clear objectives in mind. Some example goals that the students put included "Today I will learn five new expressions and use them in conversation with my classmates by the end of the day." Another check-point was planned for the end of the day, with a "Today I Learned…" theme. As before, students took a sticky note and wrote down a word, expression, or language-learning technique they picked up that day, and a note about how they could utilize it in their English communication in the future.

At the end of the week, students reflected on the goals they had set and discussed with each other how the use of these one-day goals helped them to focus their learning objectives for the day. They were easily able to recall what had been taught in class each day when doing an end-of-day review and, when questioned, could explain in detail about how they would use the language taught in their future work. I believe that this came about as a direct result of setting a realistic target to be completed within a set timeframe, something that was relevant to their learning outcomes, and that could be easily measured as achieved or not achieved at the end of the day. This goal-setting technique was also something they could use going forward to aim for bigger language-learning goals in their future studies and work overseas.

Another important aspect of self-motivation is that students should be encouraged to feel in control of their learning. This may involve the instructor taking a more hands-off approach, by allowing students to work together in pairs or groups to complete tasks, while monitoring the activities and providing support only when truly necessary. In my experience, this can take a couple of attempts to get right. At first, students may 'freeze' when given a more relaxed rein and encouraged to work independently. Often an air of silence will

descend over the classroom with no one willing to take the first step in leading a task or discussion. Instructors may need to model at first: "Student A, please ask student B about this topic; student B, please discuss your ideas with student A." But in my experience, once students overcome the initial fear of working outside such a strictly controlled environment, they flourish and are able to lead discussions with other students and take charge in role-play activities. This improvement in independent interaction with their learning materials and with the other learners allows students to take charge of their learning and further motivates them to become more self-assured in their use of English.

Allowing a degree of flexibility in the amount of homework to be completed will also encourage students to be in control of their own learning. Rather than overloading students with multiple homework exercises related to all the topics taught in that day's class, I present the homework assignments and ask them to choose two or three activities that they found most difficult during the class and just complete those for homework. This allows students to feel that they have their say about the direction that their English education is progressing in, as well as removing the pressure and fear of strict punishment for not doing every single assignment. Students quickly learn that doing homework is for their benefit - not mine - and this method allows them to use it to their own advantage.

An unwelcoming or unfriendly classroom environment will, of course, undermine the learning potential of students. It stands to reason, therefore, that a warm and safe space can be a place where students are encouraged to flourish and express themselves without fear of negative outcomes. The task of creating a pleasant atmosphere falls to the instructor from the very first day of the course. It is important to set guidelines for what type of behavior is expected from students as this will influence the overall atmosphere of the learning environment. As noted by Poupore (2015) "motivation needs to be supported by helpful interpersonal interactions and/or scaffolding within a positive social environment" (p. 730). The ongoing COVID-19 crisis creates a new challenge for educators in how best to create this welcoming environment when not working face-to-face, but it is not something that we should shy away from trying to achieve, despite the perceived difficulty. Online classroom rules can be established in much the same way as in a face-to-face classroom. Students should be encouraged to mute when not speaking, and to use functions such as the "raise hand" button on online platform Zoom if they wish to contribute; groups can be assigned to "breakout rooms" which can be monitored by the instructor in order to work collaboratively on projects before returning to the main room to present to the class; and positive feedback and reinforcement can be provided by the instructor verbally or through the use of shared screen functions to highlight corrections and areas for further study.

Another key point I would like to discuss for encouraging self-belief among students is how we react to errors. As Firdaus (2005) notes, "praise can play a crucial role in motivating students . . . it can build self-esteem and build a close relationship between students and teacher" (pp. 29-30). Students should be praised for their attempts at using English, regardless of their accuracy. Only after praising or thanking the student for their contribution should the instructor then focus on correction. If a student hears nothing but negative feedback, one of two things will happen: they will become afraid to offer an answer, fearing the embarrassment of being wrong in front of their peers, or they will become apathetic, thinking "Why bother answering when it will probably just be wrong anyway?" Fearful or indifferent students will lose their motivation to participate actively in class and will become withdrawn from the group and ultimately from their learning. Conversely, if students receive praise for trying, they will be encouraged to keep trying -

attempting to get the answer right next time to reach the next 'level' of praise. This kind of support in the learning environment will greatly aid student motivation.

Finally, the level of self-efficacy that students feel regarding their abilities in English will also have an impact on their outcomes. If students feel that they have a high level of competency in using English, they will be more likely to set goals with a high bar, engage in conversations with others using English, and push themselves to complete more difficult tasks. As Bandura (1994) notes, "people with high assurance in their capabilities approach difficult tasks as challenges to be mastered rather than as threats to be avoided" (p. 71), and nowhere is this more apparent than in the classroom. When students truly feel motivated in their approach to studying English, this change in mindset becomes clear to see. Some examples of how this increased confidence has presented in my classroom include students asking for classroom activities to be tailored to better suit their learning goals, or taking the lead in group activities and explaining tasks to lower-ability students.

Encouraging self-motivation among students of English as a foreign language is a key element in creating an effective learning environment. Students should be able to realize the value of motivation and its impact on their learning, but the effort made by the instructor will have a significant impact on how well this works in practice. By making use of the various strategies outlined above, such as setting SMART goals, and encouraging students to take charge of their learning outcomes, instructors can bring about a key shift in their students' attitudes to learning. This improved self-motivation can help students to thrive in their learning environment and become more confident and assured speakers of English. I have used the methods mentioned in this article to great effect in my classroom, and have seen the positive outcome that they can have on students' language learning. I would be interested to know of any other techniques Learner Development SIG members have explored and found to be successful - or unsuccessful - in encouraging self-motivation in the English language classroom.

References

Bandura, A. (1994). Self-efficacy. In V. S. Ramachaudran (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of human behavior* (Vol. 4) (pp. 71-81). New York, NY: Academic Press. (Reprinted in H. Friedman (Ed.) (1998), *Encyclopedia of mental health*. San Diego, CA: Academic Press).

Brophy, J. E. (1981). Teacher praise: A functional analysis. *Review of Educational Research, 51*(1), 5-32.

Doran, G. T. (1981). There's a S.M.A.R.T. way to write management's goals and objectives. *Management Review*, *70*, 35-36.

Dörnyei, Z., Muir, C., & Ibrahim, Z. (2014). Directed motivational currents: Energising language learning through creating intense motivational pathways. In D. Lasagabaster, A. Doiz & J.M. Sierra (Eds.), *Motivation and foreign language learning: From theory to practice* (pp. 9–29). Amsterdam, The Netherlands: John Benjamins.

Firdaus, H. F. (2005). Teacher praises and students' engagement in EFL classroom. *Journal of English and Education*, *3*(2) 28-40.

Kimura, Y., Nakata, Y., & Okumura, T. (2001). Language learning motivation of EFL learners in Japan—a cross-sectional analysis of various learning milieus. *JALT Journal*, *23*(1), 48-68.

Poupore, G. (2015). Measuring group work dynamics and its relation with L2 learners' task motivation and language production. *Language Teaching Research, 20*(6), 719-740.

Zimmerman, B. (2002). Becoming a self-regulated learner: an overview. *Theory into Practice*, *41*(2), 64-70.

Reflecting upon an Attempt to Introduce Critical Thinking to EFL Students in Remedial Education

Megumi Uemi

Kokusai Junior College

Email: <megumiuemi@gmail.com>

Teaching English at the current junior college has been one of the greatest challenges in my 10-year-long career as an English teacher. What has made the experience so difficult may be the fact that most of my students were those in need of remedial education, lacking basic academic or English language skills expected at the university level. For them, elementary grammar rules such as third person singular or perfect present tense were far from simple to grasp or exercise, and uncomplicated words like "difficult" and "different" were almost indistinguishable and unspellable. Few of them were able to produce or comprehend more than just textbook self-introduction, and to carry out even a casual English conversation with the students was a laborious task for the teacher to handle.

When I learned the level of these students in my classes, I immediately thought this was not an ideal place for me to pursue my original research interest, which was to explore how Critical Thinking (CT) should be implemented into the instruction of Japanese English learners who, according to some scholars, face great difficulty practicing the mode of thought (Atkinson, 1997; Fox, 1994; Ramanathan & Kaplan, 1996). The need to teach CT to ESL/EFL students, especially those from Asia, has been contentiously debated among some TESOL educators who perceive that the non-Western students have a harder time expressing themselves critically in L2 academic contexts (Atkinson, 1997; Benesch, 1999; Davidson, 1998; Gieve; 1998; Fox, 1994; Ramanathan & Kaplan, 1996). These non-Western ESL/EFL students are regarded as unfamiliar with the sociocultural practice of CT as their L1 Western counterparts. Thus, if they were to acquire English, CT must also be addressed in the classroom because the mode of thought defines and cannot be separated from the fundamental concepts of the language as seen in forms of academic writing or public speaking.

I do not necessarily agree with some of these scholar's interpretations that Asian, or Japanese students for that matter, are somewhat deficient in their capacity as critical thinkers. I see that they have their own socially and culturally accepted ways of showing controversial viewpoints, disagreements, or analysis (Littlewood, 2000; Stapleton, 2001, 2002). I do, however, observe a tendency among Japanese students that makes them unprepared to answer questions with reasons or verbalize their thoughts or experiences in concrete words, even in their own language, and thus they appear unequipped with critical abilities, especially in the eyes of non-Japanese English educators (Lasker, 2007; Dunn, 2014, 2015). With the new educational guidelines published by the Ministry of Education in 2017（新学習指導要領), greater importance has been placed on the development of students' ability to "think, evaluate, and express."（「思考力・判断力・表現力」）(MEXT, 2017) CT has been, even more importantly, recognized as one of the key academic elements that need much training and improvement among students at the university level in Japan (Sawa, 2005).

With all this said, nonetheless, teaching CT in English to *my* students, most of whom had not even reached *Eiken* Level 3, sounded impractical or even nonsensical. With no substantial foundation of the

language, there was no way they could use it to develop a thinking ability. Even content-based learning seemed difficult; the students would struggle comprehending materials and not appreciate the lesson at all. The only option I thought might work was the "entertainment" tools, such as pop songs, movies, or games, because then I would at least have the students' attention and they would enjoy "feeling like" they were learning English. I thought this would be enough or even appropriate for the level of students I was responsible for, because the most important or even the most challenging part of teaching students in need of remedial education was to get them to become *motivated* and *stay motivated*. As Kiyoda (2010) puts, "The difficulty of remedial education at the university level is that we (teachers) have to deal with those who have lost motivation for learning" (p. 38). Tsumura (2010) also states that due to "the wall of difficulty and ability,"（「困難・能力の壁」） (p. 45) the academically challenged students tend to develop an aversion to English and thus become indifferent to studying the language.

Thus, for a while, I put my energy into providing students with entertaining lessons to inspire their motivation to study English. It seemed to work as no students particularly complained about the approach; they were in fact very enthusiastic about the lessons. As I continued with the method, however, I felt that this could not be the solution forever. I needed to challenge my students more, academically. As a mission of higher education, students are not *just* supposed to be having fun in English classes; they should also be learning how to *think* in the process of language acquisition. As Makino, Ishii, Suzuki, and Hirano (2013) point out, although entertainment is an important element of good classes for students in remedial education, "the quality of enjoyment" ought to be reexamined. Although students may prefer to be just entertained in classes, they must also engage themselves in much deliberate thinking if they were to develop their academic capacity. As Makino et al. (2013) further state, "How we can incorporate "the joy of thinking" into communicative activities may be one of the factors we need to consider in reexamining "the quality of enjoyment" (p. 183-184). But how does this involve my students?

With these thoughts and puzzles in mind, I watched my students perform in classes and what became increasingly more visible was that lack of my students' basic English proficiency was not a problem that stemmed simply from how their foreign language was acquired. Obviously and unfortunately, it had more to do with the students' innate ability to learn and process things in general. Therefore, regardless of whether it was in English or Japanese, students' output performance in speaking and writing was poor, and their comprehension from written and spoken language did not appear to be working fully. I became more convinced that rather than just learning English, what needed attention is developing the students' overall academic skills, including their critical thinking (CT) ability, the area of my original research interest, if their foreign language skills were to see more concrete improvement.

Thus, I decided to go back to the research and this time delve into the level of my students' CT abilities in their first language. I wanted to see what it is that the students first need to work on if they were to expect progress in their academic and eventually language acquisition skills. I reexamined papers of my basic seminar's students (16 in total) written in Japanese and searched for some distinctive features that revealed their thinking patterns. In doing so, I referred to Bloom's revised taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001), a framework that demonstrates six categories of how students acknowledge and process information or knowledge into their cognitive system stage by stage: "remember," "understand," "apply," "analyze," "evaluate," and "create" (Figure 1). The first two are the basic categories ("remember" and "understand") for building the remaining four higher-order thinking (HOT) skills.

Bloom's Taxonomy

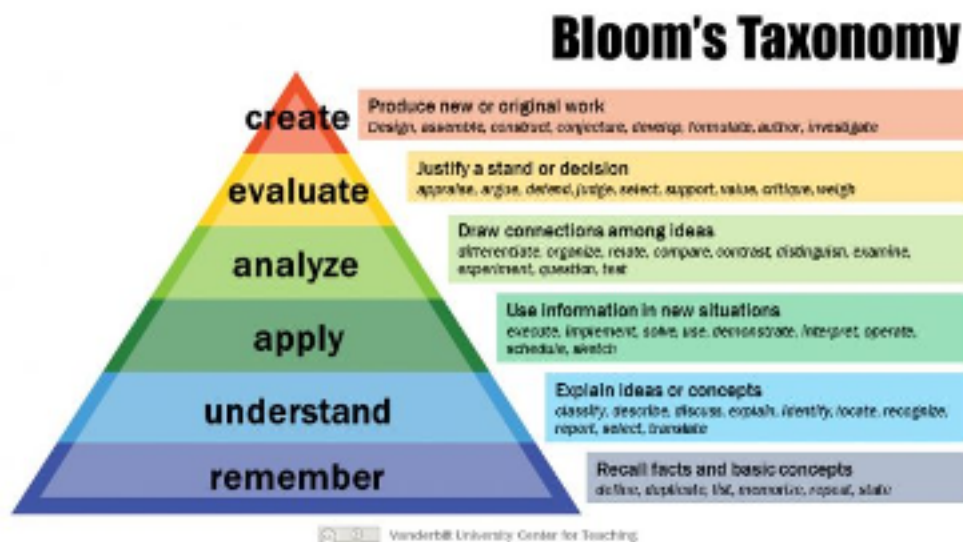|	
create	**Produce new or original work** Design, assemble, construct, conjecture, develop, formulate, author, investigate
evaluate	**Justify a stand or decision** appraise, argue, defend, judge, select, support, value, critique, weigh
analyze	**Draw connections among ideas** differentiate, organize, relate, compare, contrast, distinguish, examine, experiment, question, test
apply	**Use information in new situations** execute, implement, solve, use, demonstrate, interpret, operate, schedule, sketch
understand	**Explain ideas or concepts** classify, describe, discuss, explain, identify, locate, recognize, report, select, translate
remember	**Recall facts and basic concepts** define, duplicate, list, memorize, repeat, state

Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching.

Figure 1. Bloom's Taxonomy (Vanderbilt University, 2015)

Among these skills, what should be noted is the second category in which students show their understanding of ideas or concepts through their ability to verbalize what they remembered in their first category. In English-speaking contexts, self-expression through language may be more of a sociocultural norm rather than a product of conscious effort people try to make, as it may be the case in Japan (Atkinson, 1997; Carson, 1992). In such a verbally active Western society, an act of summarizing information or knowledge in one's own words and sharing it with others sounds like a natural thing people do, if they find the content relevant in the conversation. This practice, however, does not seem to fit in a sociocultural milieu such as Japan where language somehow did not develop as a tool of negotiation but more like an expression of empathetic feelings toward others (Clancy, 1986, as cited in Atkinson, 1997; Nisbett, 2004). Therefore, few Japanese people have grown up learning how to articulate their opinions or viewpoints under the current school system, and what is promoted by the Japanese Ministry of Education through their rigorous guidelines for "Active Learning" (MEXT, 2012) may be seen as drawing on traditionally embedded sociocultural practices in the West such as debate or discussion.

Such a tendency coincides with what I found in my basic seminar's students' Japanese papers. Out of all the 16 students, only three of them indicated in their writings that they had the ability to "understand" in Bloom's context, that is paraphrasing what they remembered from outside sources into their own words, giving a clear thesis statement, and putting sentences in a coherent structure. The remaining 13 students produced nothing more than information they had copied from the Internet (as Kuchikomi, 2010, and Dunn, 2015 also report), adding personal impressions at the end that they thought the topic was "interesting" or that they felt the matter was "serious."

In fact, this type of writing may be what most Japanese students are familiar with from high school. In "Kansoubun" （感想文）students are required to describe their subjective feelings or experiences rather than show their understanding and provide objective analysis and interpretation that others might find beneficial reading. Surely, while they are at their secondary school, they have not been introduced to the know-how of writing a logically sound paper considered standard in a Western academic context (Dunn, 2014, 2015). (I personally know this to be the case, too, as I went to a Japanese high school myself and never

learned it there!) Yes, they have worked on their memorization skills, in fact very intensively for occasions such as school term tests and entrance exams; however, they have not been educated to use their own words to describe or explain to others what they "remembered" and "understood" from outside sources as described in Bloom's taxonomy. Verbalization skills (*gengoka nouryoku* 言語化能力) and objective thinking that underlie them are most notably what's lacking in Japanese students.

Based on the observations above, I concluded that what I should first focus with my students is to develop their verbalization skills, their ability to "understand" in Bloom's context, by making them paraphrase what they learned into their own words through increased amount of writing and speaking activities. I decided that the training should start with Japanese or at least a mixture of the two if possible, so the students would not be at a loss during the lesson. Thus, I devised a Learning Log in which students write down with their own words (together with graphics or pictures if they want) what they thought was important in the lesson and explain to others about it either in English or Japanese (see Figures 2 and 3 below). This Log allows students to describe and think out loud about what they learned with their classmates and help each other understand the lesson better. As a result, active verbalization occurs, and their input and output skills can be stimulated to grow. How this Learning Log differs from *Kansoubun* is that the former expects students to use their objectivity and explain ideas and concepts, and the latter focuses on their subjectivity and asks for articulation of their personal experiences or feelings.
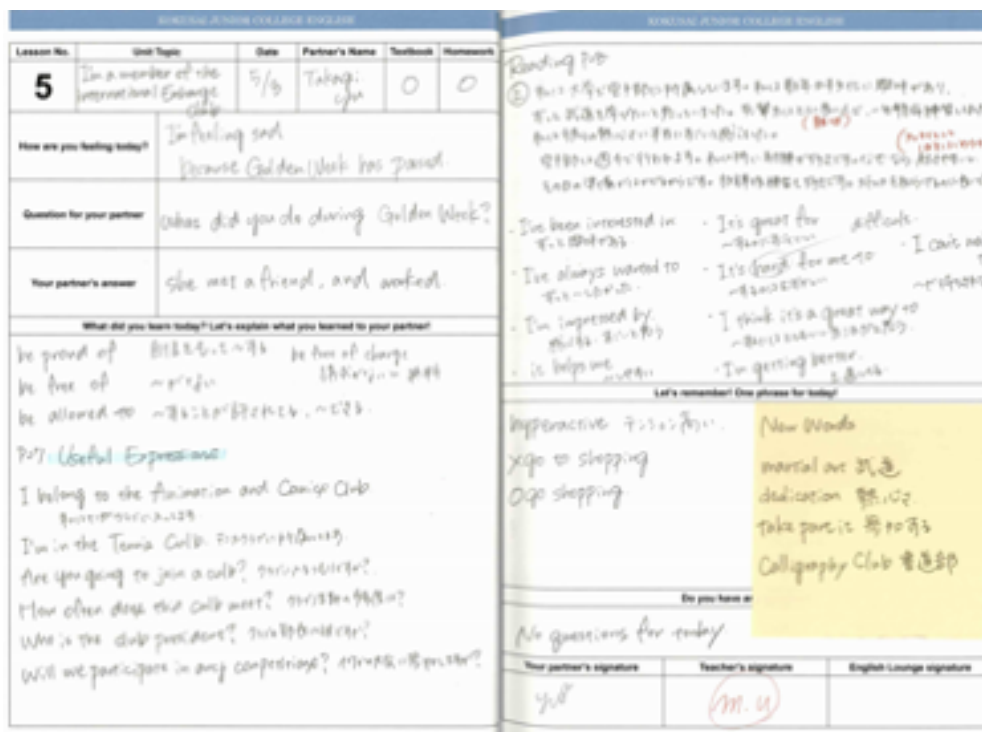

Figure 2. A sample page from student A's Kokusai Junior College English Learning Log

The extract from student A's Learning Log in Figure 2 shows important vocabulary and useful expressions the student noted from the teacher's lecture as well as the Japanese translation of her reading homework. In the case of student B (see Figure 3 below), the student records her answers and the corrections for the textbook's exercises, as well as relevant grammatical points and key phrases the teacher highlighted during the lesson.
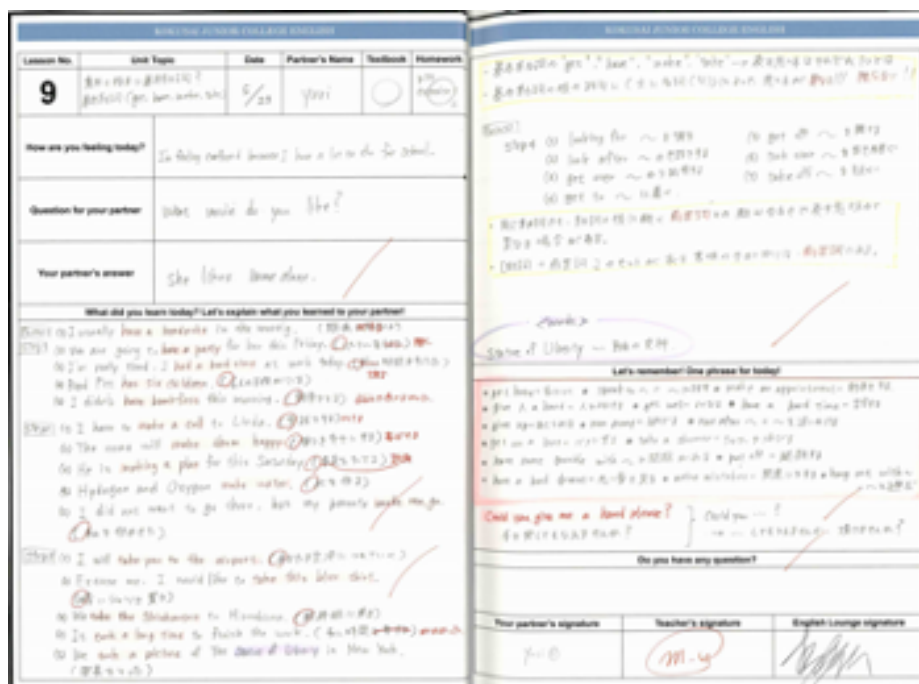
Figure 3. A sample page from student B's Kokusai Junior College English Learning Log

The point is that the students learn by articulating and expressing in their own words what they have been doing in the class and by explaining important points to their classmates, in other words through expressing their understanding to other people. While students are encouraged to use their first language to think and express ideas or concepts as it is described in Bloom's Taxonomy, their overall academic skills start to develop, and their capacity to absorb English can also grow. As English is a school subject which EFL students must make a deliberate effort to learn, it may be a fair assumption that especially for these academically challenged students, the possibilities for their English learning are enhanced when their activity in English helps them to develop their academic abilities rather than simply perfecting discrete foreign language skills for memorization and exams. As students become more comfortable and confident with this active and reflective way of learning, then they can shift their focus onto foreign language acquisition more fully.

When I first started teaching at the current college, I thought that it was nonsense to implement CT into teaching EFL students in remedial education. After much pondering and studying, however, I have come to the conclusion that it is worth guiding students through the development of their academic as well as thinking abilities, using the process of English acquisition as a means to make it happen. Although these students in need of remedial education might not have used the opportunity to learn what they were supposed to while they were in secondary school, it does not mean they want to redo what they did then all over again (Kiyoda, 2010). They now want to do it differently, and they want to do so as *college students*. Thus, for now, I am going to keep using this Learning Log and see if it meets their needs, still pondering what is best for my EFL students in remedial education, thinking critically on the way.

References

Anderson. L.W., & Krathwohl. D. R. (Eds.) (2001). *A taxonomy for learning, teaching, and assessing: A revision of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives* (Abridged edition). New York, NY: Longman.

Asahina, N. (2017, August 3). *"Kyouiku konnan daigaku" no amarinimo hidoi jyugyou fuukei* [Too awful class situations at "universities with educational difficulties."] *Toyokeizai Online*. Retrieved from https://toyokeizai.net/articles/-/181672?page=2

Atkinson, D. (1997). A critical approach to critical thinking in TESOL. *TESOL Quarterly*, *31*(1), 71-94.

Benesch, S. (1999). Thinking critically, thinking dialogically. *TESOL Quarterly*, *33*(3), 573-580.

Carson, J. G. (1992). Becoming biliterate: First language influences. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, *1*(1), 37-60.

Davidson, B. (1998). A case for critical thinking in the English language classroom. *TESOL Quarterly, 32*(1), 119-122.

Dunn, J. (2015). Critical thinking in Japanese secondary education: student and teacher perspectives. *Critical Thinking and Language Learning*, *2*(1), 28-38.

Dunn, J. (2014). Limited critical thinking skills in Japanese EFL: Where does the responsibility lie? *Critical Thinking and Language Learning, 1*(1), 2-9.

Fox, H. (1995). *Listening to the world.* Urbania, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Gieve, S., (1998). A Reader reacts…*TESOL Quarterly*, *2*1(1), 123-128.

Japan Today (2010, February 6). The dumbing down of Japanese students. Retrieved on from https://japantoday.com/category/features/kuchikomi/the-dumbing-down-of-japanese-students

Kiyoda, Y. (2010). *Rimediaru kyouiku ni okeru jisonkanjyou to eigogakushu* [Self-esteem and English learning in remedial education]. *The Japan Association for Developmental Education*, *5*(1), 37-43.

Lasker, B. (2007). Critical thought and literature in the Japanese university EFL classroom. *The Journal of Kanda University of International Studies*, *19*, 159-169.

Littlewood, W. (2000). Do Asian students really want to listen and obey? *ELT Journal, 54*(1), 31-36.

Makino, M., Ishii, K., Suzuki, M., & Hirano, J. (2013). Eigo rimediaru kyouiku; watashiwa kou kangaeru (gakushuuiyoku, tanoshisa no youin, ashibatsukuri, soshite gakuryoku koujyou) [Revisiting English remedial education from four substantial perspectives (willingness, quality of enjoyment, scaffolding, & academic development)]. *The Japan Association for Developmental Education, 8*(1), 181-187.

Nisbett, E. R. (2003). *The geography of thought: how Asians and Westerners think differently…and why*. New York, NY: Free Press.

Ono, T. (2017, June 28). *Gakuryoku wa chugaku level…Daigaku kyouiku, houkai no jittai souzouwo zessuru gakusei & kyouin no shitsurekka* [Academic ability remains at the level of middle school…The collapse of university education, Quality deterioration of students and teachers beyond imagination.] *Business Journal*. Retrieved from https://biz-journal.jp/2017/06/post_19598.html

Ramanathan, V., & Kaplan, R. B. (1996). Some problematic "channels" in the teaching of critical thinking in current L1 composition textbooks: Implications for L2 student-writers. *Issues in Applied Linguistics, 7*(2), 225-249.

Recruit. (2013). *Nyuushi seido ni kansuru gakucyou chousa* [Survey from Deans regarding entrance examination system.] Press Release, *Recruit*. Retrieved from http://souken.shingakunet.com/research/2014/01/2013-3ee7.htmlj

Sawa, T. (2005). Students and analytical skills. *The Japan Times,* Nov. 1, 2005. Retrieved from https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2005/10/31/commentary/students-need-analytical-skills/#.XD7dQ1X7Tcv

Stapleton, P. (2002). Critical thinking in Japanese L2 writing: rethinking tired constructs. *ESLT Journal, 56*(3), 250-257.

Stapleton, P. (2001). Assessing critical thinking in the writing of Japanese university students, Insights about assumptions and content familiarity. *Written Communication, 18*(4), 506-548.

The Japan Association for Developmental Education. (2012). *Building a System of Developmental Education at Universities and Colleges in Japan*. Kyoto, Japan: Nakanishiya.

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science & Technology-Japan (MEXT). (2008). *Chuou Kyouiku Shingikai Daigakubunkakai (Dai 71 kai) Gijiroku, Haifushiryou* [Proceedings of the 71st central council for education, working group on universities.] *MEXT*. Retrieved from https://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/shingi/chukyo/chukyo4/gijiroku/08103112/003/005.htm

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science & Technology-Japan (MEXT). (2012). *Chuo Kyouiku Singikai Toushin "Aratana Mirai wo Kizukutame no Daigaku kyouiku no Shitsuteki tenkan ni mukete~syougai manabi tsuzuke, syutaitekini kangaeru chikara wo ikusei suru daigaku e"* [Reports on central council "Transforming the quality of university education for a new future, toward a university that fosters life-long learning and active thinking ability.] *MEXT.* Retrieved from https://www.mext.go.jp/b_menu/shingi/chukyo/chukyo0/toushin/1325047.htm

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science & Technology-Japan (MEXT). (2012). *Gakushushidou youryou Jyugyou Kaizen no tameno Sankou Shiryou* [The points of educational guidelines, references for teachers to improve their lessons.] *MEXT*. Retrieved from https://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/shotou/new-cs/senseiouen/index.htm

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science & Technology-Japan (MEXT). (2017). *Gakushushidou youryou "Ikiru chikara" kaitei no pointo* [The points of educational guidelines, "the power to live."] *MEXT.* Retrieved from http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/shotou/new-cs/1384661.htm

Tsumura, S. (2010). *Eigokirai ni taisuru gakushuuiyoku soushitsu youin no eikyou* [Impact of demotivating factors in learning English]. *The Review of Osaka University of Commerce, 6*(2), 35-48.

Vanderbilt University, Center for Teaching (no date). Bloom's taxonomy. Retrieved from https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/blooms-taxonomy

Implications for Online Education: Reflections on Earning an MA in TESOL through Online Distance Learning

Nobue Inoue
Niigata University of Management, Niigata
Email: <up794335@myport.ac.uk>

The coronavirus pandemic has completely changed our lives and forced schools to reshape the idea of education. As a university English teacher myself I had never taught a class online prior to Covid-19. I have heard several news stories of students complaining about the quality of online education, which they claim would not be worth the full price of tuition (The Japan Times, 2020). This was of great concern when my university decided to switch to remote learning for the academic year beginning in April 2020 because I was nervous about whether students would be satisfied with my delivering a class online. I assume that due to a lack of educational expertise in distance learning many teachers in Japan feel the same way and are struggling with how to keep their students motivated with this new teaching option.

Nevertheless, I might be able to gain insight into students' perceptions of their online learning by reflecting on my own experiences. I have earned a master's degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) by attending a distance learning program provided by a university in the U.K. As far as I recall, I was the only Asian enrollee at that time, and most of the students were Americans and Britons. Earning a master's degree online in English from a foreign university provided me with the opportunity to grow and develop as an English user and teacher, as well as a self-motivated student.

In this reflective story, I look back on my own online distance learning experiences, which I hope will help explore how students perceive online education.

Overview of the Program

The master's program I completed was a three-year online distance learning course designed to develop ELT practitioners' knowledge of linguistics theories and TESOL methodologies. It was composed of two core modules, two elective modules, and a dissertation. The core and elective modules aimed to expand students' knowledge of applied linguistics and TESOL, while students undertook a dissertation in an area that was relevant to their own professional interests and work. I completed the program from 2015 to 2018. While doing this, I also continued working as a study abroad counselor at a public university during the first year and then became an English teacher at a private university during the second year.

Reflections on the Program Benefits

One of the most beneficial aspects of the program was its flexibility, giving me complete control over my own studies. As long as I met assignment submission deadlines, I was essentially able to study anywhere at my own pace, so I was able to balance getting a qualification with my full-time occupation and family life. I remember I was particularly busy during the second year because I was under a lot of pressure while getting accustomed to the new working environment. Working as a university teacher for the first time, while studying for my MA, was a huge challenge. I assume that I would have sacrificed my work and family had I

chosen to study via a face-to-face format. Fortunately, studying on a flexible basis enabled me to prioritize my personal life when necessary, which alleviated my concerns about my postgraduate studies.

Another beneficial aspect of the program was that it followed the same course structure as the university's MA course delivered through on-site study. At first I was genuinely skeptical about online education because I believed that online studies would not be as effective as in-person studies. I was concerned that I might not be able to develop the knowledge and skills needed to become an effective ELT practitioner as I would on campus. Happily, the course provided me with the opportunity to study the same modules as the on-site study programs, but with no residency required. The program was well-designed and covered key components of TESOL. Each module was strictly assessed by coursework that required students to have a good understanding of the theories and methodologies. Even though the assignments were challenging, they were returned with beneficial comments made by teachers to help students improve their understanding. In particular, I had never read academic journals and books before the program, so writing a literature review about an aspect of second language acquisition provided me with the opportunity to establish my expertise in the field of second language teaching. I got a distinction in this assignment, but I was also pleasantly surprised by the marker's comments. He highlighted that my authorial voice could have been more prominent, instead of just the plethora of theories and beliefs in the paper. This aspect helped develop my critical thinking skills and the ability to reinterpret the existing material for conducting research.

The program also introduced the benefits of distance learning from the perspective of English learners. This was in contrast to my experiences while studying abroad in Canada around five years before enrolling in the program. At that time I studied at a rural community college as a full-time student for eight months. Although my English improved dramatically by studying abroad, I assume that understanding difficult linguistic and TESOL terminologies would have been more challenging if I had selected face-to-face format. For example, while studying in Canada, I sometimes had difficulty following lectures taught entirely in English and missed important information while taking notes. The distance learning program meant that I received instruction mostly by text or recorded audio files and I was thus able to keep up with lessons at my own pace. I also recall that during my studies in Canada I was overwhelmed by so much English reading and this sometimes led to me giving up reading assigned texts. Fortunately, my reading for the program was very successful; I found it much easier to read electronic materials than to read on paper because the search function helped me locate key words or phrases and enabled me to focus on the most important sections to read.

The final aspect of the program I found beneficial was not necessarily limited to its characteristics as distance learning but one that would apply to any type of teaching format. I was fortunate to have an extremely supportive supervisor who gave me clear guidance from the very first phase of the dissertation. As I was interested in language training for those planning to study abroad, I conducted research on how to develop an effective pre-departure orientation program for my university's study abroad program in the U.K. Even though I was already familiar with academic English writing, writing a dissertation was my biggest concern about the program because I had never written a thesis in English. Furthermore, I did not know anything about research methods in applied linguistics; nor did I understand the difference between qualitative and quantitative approaches. My supervisor encouraged me to work on the dissertation by providing regular Skype tutoring. Although he must have been exceptionally busy, he kindly spent a tremendous amount of time supervising me closely. When I asked why he was so helpful, he said that it was his job to take care of students. Thanks to his assistance, I developed my research skills tremendously and

successfully completed my dissertation. If I had not received supervision from him, I truly believe that I would not have been able to earn a degree.

Difficulties

Even though I was very pleased with the program, earning a degree by distance learning had its challenges as everything I experienced was new to me.

First of all, when I started the program, I was not familiar with online learning platforms. For example, all lessons were delivered via Moodle, the institution's learning management system (LMS). I now know that Moodle is one of the world's most popular LMSs, but I had no idea at that time and was concerned about whether Moodle would truly provide students with a suitable learning environment. Another system utilized by the institution was a digital library called ebrary, which was intended to support those who were unable to borrow books stored in the university library. I was also apprehensive because I had never read an electronic book in my entire life before using ebrary. Although I was proficient on a computer, it took a while to take full advantage of these applications' features due to my unfamiliarity with such online learning platforms.

I also found it difficult to ask questions online compared with face to face, which allows students to ask questions during a class. Because of the characteristics of distance learning, I had no choice but to ask questions after reading lesson materials and sometimes forgot what I really intended to ask. In particular, although some lessons were easy to follow thanks to videos or podcasts that explained lesson materials orally, others were explained only by text and I sometimes struggled with understanding especially when I encountered difficult terminology. I also noticed that it took time for some teachers to answer students' questions. Considering that Moodle was always full of students' comments, I assume that teachers themselves must have found it challenging to answer each student's questions instantly online. However, it was frustrating when teachers did not respond to my comments promptly.

In addition, I sometimes felt lonely and found it difficult to keep myself motivated. Although I had many classmates from around the world, we never met in person because most of them were working outside of their own countries as part-time or full-time teachers there; we communicated exclusively online by exchanging comments on Moodle. Therefore, I feel that distance learning requires students to be self-disciplined. This was in contrast to my studying abroad experiences in Canada. I made friends with students from a number of countries and we motivated each other to study by organizing a study group and sometimes getting together and socializing after school. Considering that most of the classmates in the MA program were English teachers, if I had selected a face-to-face format, I would have been able to gain more insight into TESOL and other related fields from mutual help with classmates.

Connections between Learning and Teaching Online

Overall, the program was beneficial for me because I was able to balance my studies with my work and family life, develop my knowledge on TESOL in the same way as on-campus studies, and learn effectively to research and write my dissertation thanks to a very supportive supervisor.

Indeed, although my students initially had no idea about how to learn English online and were skeptical about improving their English through online education before experiencing it, they have come to acknowledge the benefits of distance learning. For instance, many of my students have started to prefer taking a lesson online because it is more convenient than the face-to-face format. I believe that students who are struggling to balance their studies with part-time jobs and/or club activities would find distance learning

to be of great value. In addition, beginner level students who often struggle with keeping up with regular classes seem to find distance learning helpful because they can learn at their own pace. I remember that weak students hesitate to ask questions in a regular class because they do not want to embarrass themselves. Such students took full advantage of this new learning opportunity and asked me many questions privately by email or on the Google Classroom online comments section.

Furthermore, some students mentioned that they have become more self-disciplined and come to study much harder than before; they explained that when they learned on campus, they did not study much except during the exam week, while during the coronavirus crisis they became more responsible for their own studies. Even though it is unclear whether online learning helped students improve their English compared to the face-to-face format, I believe they benefited from learning online because it increased their motivation to study.

Recalling my own experiences, I remember that the MA program was challenging because I was unfamiliar with a new online learning environment, I could not ask questions as I would on campus, and I sometimes lacked motivation to study. My negative perceptions remind me that when I started delivering a lesson online myself for the first time, my students were unfamiliar with new technology, such as Google Classroom and Zoom. Furthermore, while some students completed their assignments instantly, others procrastinated and did not work on them until I sent them a message to encourage them to finish.

According to Markova, Glazkova, and Zaborova (2017), successful and effective distance learning requires considerable commitment on the part of faculty. As feelings of isolation are often reported and the lack of feedback or contact with the teacher and other learners is one of students' concerns for distance learning (Galusha, 1998), it is important for teachers to monitor students' progress and give them immediate feedback to keep them motivated and on track. Therefore, I encouraged students to reach me by email, in the Google Classroom private comment sections, or on Zoom anytime they had a question and I did my best to respond to their inquiries as promptly as possible. In addition, instead of just returning assignment marks, I praised students after every correct answer and gave them individual feedback to encourage them to study; if the student's answer was incorrect, I made sure that he/she understood what the error was by giving clues to help him/her discover the correct answer.

Overall, shifting to online education during the coronavirus crisis provided me with the valuable opportunities to develop my online teaching skills. Although online teaching was trending even before COVID-19, I had never thought of doing it myself because I was not confident about online education due to my lack of experience.

During the crisis, I had no choice but to give it a try, and managed to survive the Spring Semester. Using new applications, such as Zoom and Google Classroom, seemed to be technical the first time, but I became accustomed to using the technology and ended up finding the benefits of using it; for example, recording a Zoom meeting helped me assess students' pronunciation test by their mouth movements and Google Classroom saved me considerable time by automatically marking quizzes and showing scores.

From the students' perspectives, despite initial concerns about online education, they became more responsible for their own learning and came to study harder than before. I believe that online education would encourage students to study individually on a regular basis. By following the example set by the teacher I met on my program, I would like to help students to fully benefit from this online opportunity next semester as well. I am also planning to incorporate online education into a regular class even after the crisis.

Last but not least, I hope that my reflections on my online studies experience will also give teachers some insight into their own teaching.

References

Galusha, J. M. (1998). *Barriers to learning in distance education*. Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED416377)

Markova, T., Glazkova, I., & Zaborova, E. (2017). Quality issues of online distance learning. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, *237*, 685-691. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2017.02.043

O'Donoghue, J. J. (2020, April 21). In era of COVID-19, a shift to digital forms of teaching in Japan. *The Japan Times*. Retrieved from https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/04/21/national/traditional-to-digital-teaching-coronavirus/

The Japan Times (2020, May 24). Shift to online classes leaves Japan's university teachers exhausted. Retrieved from https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/05/24/national/university-teachers-japan-exhausted-online-classes/

Suzuki, H., & Ikeda, T. (2020, May 9). Japan univ. lecturers worry over crumbling class quality as virus forces courses online. *The Mainichi*. Retrieved from https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20200509/p2a/00m/0na/002000