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I Let a Group of Learners Take Ownership of Their English Communication Course, and THIS Happened!!

ABSTRACT

In this reflective article I tell the unfolding story of an English communication course for first-year students at the University of Fukui (School of Global and Community Studies). In this course, students were given agency and control over the course content and logistics. In the beginning, learners engaged in self-assessment of their spoken English; then, they responded to a survey inquiring about their language needs and goals and desired focus for the course content. The results showed that learners wanted to prioritize explicit vocabulary learning and idiomatic language, with fluency training a close third. The learners then negotiated the course syllabus and identified topics of interest. Through their decisions, the course was divided into three units focused on self-expression, conversation strategies, and English for interaction on campus, respectively. In this account I reflect on learner achievements, their development of agency, and the challenges and rewards of adopting this approach.

Keywords: EFL, learner agency, learner development, negotiated syllabus

When I presented this story as a poster at the LD30 conference, I received many comments and questions from a supportive audience of colleagues, so it is only appropriate to thank them here at the beginning of this extended reflection. One question, in particular, stayed with me, mostly unanswered, after the conference: Why did I decide to give my students almost full control of a university course that I am eventually responsible for? Serendipitously, the kind reviewers who first read a draft of this piece asked similar questions: What was the spark that got me started on this track? What was my inspiration? At this point, it is only fair to try and answer these questions before narrating the unfolding of my learners' story.

RATIONALE

I am a passionate language learner and enjoy studying new languages independently. I also strongly believe that learning is growth and growth is something we strive for as human beings. I always hope to share my enthusiasm for learning with my students, but I have not encountered success in this since my English classes moved first online, and then hybrid, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In the meantime, I have also become increasingly frustrated with the one-size-fits-all approach of the many EFL textbooks I used in the past, which never seemed to cater to the needs of my students. Furthermore, they tended to guide my teaching to cover what the authors of the textbooks thought should be learned, rather than what the learners wanted to practice.

In 2023, I had the opportunity to resume having classes in person, which coincided with the structural change in the English curriculum at my department described below. In the little time I was given to plan a new English Communication course, I decided to forego adopting a textbook and instead design a learning experience tailored to the students who would eventually join my course. The factors that influenced my decision were my research interest in learning awareness, past experiences teaching English speaking, and the many ideas exchanged interacting with the talented colleagues of the JALT Learner Development SIG. However, the fundamental reason why I decided to give (almost) complete ownership of the course to my learners is something that I understood through the experience of emergency remote teaching: *to trust my students* and acknowledge that they are fundamentally competent language learners and, when given the opportunity, can make language learning choices based on what they would like to achieve with English in their future.

I started the semester equipped with little more than hope and expectation, a mostly blank Google Classroom course page, and a blank syllabus. Then, *this* happened.

CONTEXT

First-year students at the School of Global and Community Studies (GCS) at the University of Fukui take a total of four compulsory English language courses in the spring semester. In 2023, the department offered for the first time four additional workshop-style courses for students desiring a more intensive learning experience. One of these four courses is called English Communication Workshop – an inoffensive-looking course title that attracted 43 applicants. The students were further divided into two sections of 22 and 21 to ensure they found themselves in a learning environment where they could speak English often and consistently. I taught one section of the course – or rather I should say that I let the 21 students take control of their learning experience. This short account is the story of what happened in class and outside and what the students and I have taken away from this experiment.

The rationale for this course is based on an [ongoing KAKEN research project](#) aiming to make learners more aware of their development as speakers of English through extensive reflection, progress tracking, and progress review. Some of the fundamental principles of the original research project that have informed this course design are learner *agency*, *choice*, *purpose*, and *accountability*. For brevity and at the risk of oversimplifying, I will define *agency* as a learner's ability and willingness to play an active role in their learning; *choice* as the feeling of having control over equally meaningful options; *purpose* as the understanding of the goal of a language task and its connection to a learner's needs; and *accountability* as the learner's acceptance of the responsibility they take on as a result of being an active influence in their (and others') learning.

As a preamble to the story, I need to state some of the situational matters that the course designers (that is, the students and I) needed to work with as they are relevant to the course goals or timeline. First, studying abroad is an integral part of the GCS curriculum, and 20 of the 21 students expressed a desire to study abroad (one could not, as their status in Japan is already that of an exchange student); therefore, the overall focus for developing communicative skills in the course had been predetermined to be "English for campus life," which is understood as the communicative ability to interact in English with fellow students, instructors, and university staff members on academic matters. For the same reason, the course also integrates an academic vocabulary component to support the learners' efforts in achieving the TOEFL score they need to be eligible to study abroad. Finally, it is necessary to point out that students enrolled in this course meet 30 times a semester (twice a week rather than the more common once-a-week format found in Japanese universities).

COURSE START AND EARLY DECISIONS

Upon meeting the students for the first time, I offered a brief orientation, including an explanation of the nature of the English Communication course. To avoid talking too long and to ensure that the learners experienced the four principles of agency, choice, purpose, and accountability from the beginning of the course, I presented them with a small-scale puzzle informed by previous personal forays into exploratory practice. For this introductory activity, I asked the students to recall how they met their new friends one week prior during the university orientation, how they introduced themselves, and what they talked about. Then, we compared the results of their brainstorming and role-play of spontaneous conversations with a set of typical 'first encounter' situations from EFL textbooks to appreciate their differences. Finally, the learners proceeded to generate a model 'first day on campus' conversation in English that sounded as realistic as possible for them.

During the second class meeting, I prompted students to self-assess their English proficiency using the CEFR-J descriptors for *spoken interaction* and *sustained monologue* (Tono & Negishi, 2020). Accordingly, 10 learners evaluated their speaking abilities at the B1 level, 8 at the B2 level, and 3 at the C1+ level. The average self-assessed proficiency of this group was slightly higher than past cohorts of students who used the same diagnostic tool for placement in our department. While this is not a factor I considered in the early phases of the course, in hindsight it may have influenced my confidence in giving the learners carte blanche. Reassured that the group had a sufficiently high level of English to understand what I was asking of them, and why, I let them free to start taking ownership of the course and make their first decisions on their expected outcomes for the course, the logistics involved, and the course content.

Using Google Forms, I asked students to rank six options in order of relevance to their language learning needs. The options were labeled with keywords whose meaning was negotiated in class before starting the poll (*fluency*, *vocabulary and expression*, *grammar*, *"natural English,"* *pronunciation and intonation*, and *TOEFL practice*). We conducted the poll in class, computed the results together, and sorted out the three most chosen options. Then, through class brainstorming, we clarified each focus further to reflect exactly what the learners meant. This brought me to rewrite and number the learners' choices with the purpose of creating statements that could be easily referenced (although I realize now that the use of ESL/EFL jargon, which I adopted for the sake of precision, may have been inappropriate for the target audience).

Student decision #1: *focus on vocabulary-building activities.*

Student decision #2: *focus on idiomatic language and collocations.*

Student decision #3: *focus on reducing hesitation and code-switching.*

The second week started with the idea of co-constructing a negotiated syllabus (Breen & Littlejohn, 2000). I had to contribute more than I hoped for in this activity: talking to the learners, I realized that as of the second week of their university enrollment, they were unfamiliar with the idea of a syllabus. Nevertheless, we managed to identify a set of "core features" that they wanted to include in the course description. As a general sentiment, the learners mentioned that they hoped to (1) learn the kind of English that they could use when studying abroad; (2) become more comfortable talking about themselves and the things of their immediate interest; and (3) practice communication strategies to make their English conversation more natural in structure and pace. I accepted the students' idea to build a course on these three pillars and guided them in arranging the goals in a sequence that resonated with the CEFR-J descriptors. This process of brainstorming, in which I participated in a facilitating capacity rather than actively making suggestions, resulted in a fourth student decision:

Student decision #4: *divide the course into three units.*

(self-expression, weeks 1–5; conversation strategies, weeks 6–10, and English for interaction on campus, weeks 11–15).

Another resolution reached through a common agreement was how to evaluate the effort and results of the course. I introduced several assessment methods commonly used in EFL communication courses to the learners, including presentations, peer evaluation, and self-evaluation. This was certainly a hard choice to make, not only because the learners did not have any experience being "on the other side" of assessment but also because of the direct effect of their choice on their grades for this course. Eventually, we settled on experimenting with *test-making* (as opposed to test-taking). In other words, learners would be creating tests, quizzes, games, or other activities that could be used for assessment purposes, that creatively reuse the language they learned and practiced in communication as part of this course. I would then evaluate their tests based on a set of criteria that I suggested and the students approved. We also felt that this meta-assessment activity should come at the end of each course unit; thus, the decision was confirmed and evaluation was planned at the end of weeks 5, 10, and 15.

Student decision #5: *conduct assessment through test-making.*

At this stage, I intervened with one of the few unilateral decisions of this experimental course and added an academic vocabulary component, albeit limited to homework tasks. The reason for this was to reinforce the learners' efforts to expand their lexicon by providing more context and recall opportunities for the academic and TOEFL vocabulary items they learn as part of their English Reading Workshop; additionally, I thought that more vocabulary would expand the pool of content that the learners could draw from to create their assessment materials. The group seemingly understood and accepted this addendum to the course contents; however, I can only speculate about this since it was never mentioned in learner journals, and only rarely did a few groups use this specific academic vocabulary in the assessment activities they created.

AGENCY IN FULL SWING

The course developed according to plan until the end of week 10 when something happened that I did not expect – but thoroughly appreciated. In the poster I presented at the LD30 Conference, which inspired this account, I used the wording "students and instructor worked together to review the learners' original survey answers and make any due amendment to the course syllabus" – which is true but fails to highlight how this idea came from a place of learner ownership of the course and true agency – in other words, *the learners explicitly asked for an addition to the syllabus*. To be fair, some students had already been commenting that they were not completely happy with their pronunciation and intonation, especially during impromptu speaking activities. I made a point to help these learners individually in class, as I routinely do, and offered to give additional feedback about this in response to their voice-recorded reflection tasks. It was one of these students who first approached me as a spokesperson for the group to inquire whether it would be possible to add a pronunciation and intonation component to the course. I replied that this was their (the learners') course, not mine, and their wish was my command – which I recall leaving the student puzzled. Thus, I followed up with the idea of reviewing the initial course design in light of the learners' experience in the first ten weeks. We accomplished this through yet another survey, which confirmed the group's intention of adding explicit pronunciation and intonation activities to the course:

Student decision #6: *add a pronunciation training component.*

A question in the latter survey ("Do you feel any change in your ability to speak English compared to to *(sic)* the beginning of the semester?") also revealed an underlying issue that the learners were verbalizing in various ways, such as:

Learner 6: *These days I cannot come up with the exact words I want to say and I don't think that I am able to make myself understood in English.*

Learner 7: *Less and less time I stopped talking bacause I didn't know what I should express in English but sometimes I still don't know the word and stop.*

Learner 8: *I understand question's meaning, but I can't expression a word I wanna tell group members.*

Learner 20: *I'm able to say what I want to say more smoothly than before, but I still often feel frustrated that I couldn't tell the vocab I want to say.*

In the following class meeting, I presented the survey results highlighting how this issue could be alleviated through specific circumlocution tasks, i.e., "talking around" a word you do not know or cannot remember ([like these ones](#)). I confirmed that the concept of circumlocution was a fair approximation of what they meant, which brought us to:

Student decision #7: *practice circumlocution strategies.*

I most likely had some influence on this choice, but I believe this was still their decision – I only helped to identify exactly what they wanted and provided the language needed to talk about it. A further decision was instead decidedly unilateral, despite it being inspired by a response to the previous survey question:

Learner 21: *Even now, I sometimes react to my partner in Japanese. I really want to use only in English, but I still can't.*

The learner here is referring to their back-channeling, which is something I had previously hoped to work on in class. In fact, while I thought that the ability of this group to start and hold a conversation in English became remarkable, their emotional reactions to surprising statements and moments of conversational brilliance maintained a distinct flavor of their mother languages in some cases, which is understandable and I would argue appropriate; however, in most instances, their back-channeling was completely negotiated in their L1. When I presented this further direction to the learners, they accepted it seemingly with pleasure and immediately showed increased awareness and monitoring of their use of back-channeling.

COURSE END

The last few weeks of the course flew by with no particular obstacle or change. We took advantage of the early summer weather to get out of the classroom and learn and practice English for campus life around the campus – a nice change of pace while we kept focused on following the revised course plan. The learners used the second-to-last class meeting to make their third round of assessment materials, and we left the final class meeting open for closing remarks, final reflections, and to celebrate personal achievements, as the learners clearly felt that "something" had happened. The learners' reflections, given below in their voices, suggest they perceived appreciable improvements in their ability to engage in spoken communication beyond the basics, as well as a sense of accomplishment and progress of a tangible nature:

Learner 4: *I think this course achieved my progress very much because at first, my friends and I were talking about only the topic and we didn't extend the discussion, but now we talk a lot in English. This is a big change and a sign that everyone understands what we talk more than past. It was so helpful for us!!*

Learner 17: *I think it was perfect. At the beginning, I wonder that teacher didn't taught us so many things in classes, but after I finished this course, I knew that dealing with myself many problems*

and talking and talking is the best way to make progress. From this course, I got a big confidence about English and I got learn to speak English without hesitation.

Learner 19: *This course was very helpful for me to feel progress in communication in English. I think the conversation of paired work has become more voluminous.It was also good to learn about natural English.*

However, I must point out that the themes found in the learner reflections are not dramatically different from other courses I taught in the past based on the same fundamental rationale, but where control over course design and logistics was firmly in the hands of the instructor. For example, there was little to no reflection on their own active role in decision-making for the course – which could be argued was the most prominent difference between this and other English language courses the students were taking in parallel. Equally, when they talk or write about their achievements, they mention appreciable improvements in speaking fluency, confidence, active vocabulary, and pronunciation. They do not reflect on how they lived up to the challenge of taking control of their English Communication course. Yet, from the point of view of a privileged external observer, I think *this* – the THIS of the title – achievement is their most remarkable. Not having any data to go by, however, I can only present my takeaways in these directions as uncircumstantiated impressions resulting from my observations.

IMPRESSIONS

First and foremost, I need to praise the students for being brave enough to accept having "the burden" of agency and choice. They could have refused to engage or requested a more traditional approach to their English Communication course. Instead, they were soon on board with the idea of course ownership, were willing to negotiate our mutual expectations, and took their role as learners seriously, actively working together and thinking about their language goals and needs. This brought them to ponder about the purpose of their choices and of the class activities that I prepared for them based on their decisions. In turn, I believe this has given rise to an increased awareness of their learning and of their progress. This could also explain why this group committed to working both in and outside of the classroom – they seem to have understood the reason why certain take-home or on-demand tasks were assigned and how they influenced class activities, resulting in an unprecedented homework submission rate. In addition, having to work together not only for regular pair work or group work, as expected in any speaking-oriented course, but also to make impactful decisions on the direction of their learning, conceivably contributed to a positive and cooperative class atmosphere.

A positive side effect of adopting this approach is also increased transparency and intellectual honesty on my part; in other words, having to create class materials based on specific themes and addressing specific skills and having to make the purpose of each task explicit made me more aware of what I actually ask my students to do and more aware of what constitutes a realistic result for such tasks. In addition, this made me question some language task choices I made in the past (from unpopular ones, such as assigning homework for homework's sake, to popular ones, like playing games in class without providing a clear purpose and direct connection to the language items to practice).

ISSUES

Earlier in this reflective article, I described learner accountability as a learner accepting responsibility for their action oriented towards their learning and their peer's learning. Most of the 21 learners responded very well to this increased accountability – but not everyone. One student, in particular, did well in the classroom but was inconsistent with out-of-class decisions and work, meaning they, and sometimes the group they worked within, were not able to begin their communicative activities in class as smoothly, which impacted the group atmosphere at times. Reminding them of their

accountability alleviated the issue temporarily, which suggests at least one learner may not have understood or fully accepted their responsibility as an "owner of the course".

Two further concerns resulting from this full-fledged foray into learner ownership were due to the nature and logistics of decision-making. In particular, it was sometimes a struggle for the learners to verbalize what they wanted or needed to focus on, likely because of an understandable lack of awareness of the language learning processes and terminology. One such example is the common occurrence of expressions like "natural English" or "native English," which took some discussion to be finally understood as idiomatic expression and the use of collocations. Furthermore, group decision-making meant learners whose goals diverged significantly from others may have felt their ideas were underrepresented. A student, for example, reflected on this on multiple occasions, expressing some level of frustration as they advocated for a shorter time dedicated to English conversation and longer time spent on vocabulary learning and quizzes.

While I feel confident in saying that most of the course outcomes, planning, and content were indeed selected based on what the learners stated, I must also acknowledge that it would not have been possible to give more agency and still expect the course to have pedagogically sound structure and outcomes and make sense as a whole. While I felt comfortable making some adjustments to the student decisions to make sure they could be realistically implemented in class, I also had to make a small number of decisions myself (adding a focus on academic vocabulary and back-channeling). I would have preferred not to intervene at all, guided by the belief that the learners should make all of the relevant choices and have full ownership of the course. In a way making unilateral decisions felt uncomfortable, as if I was interfering with the students' construction of their learning experience. However, I have accepted this by reminding myself that agency needs scaffolding – something I have learned from some self-directed learning and project-based learning courses I facilitated in past years (see Hennessy & Lombardi in this issue). In addition, there were no negative mentions of the instructor's decisions in the feedback from the learners; on the contrary, the focus on back-channeling was especially appreciated.

Finally, reflecting on this course brings me joy and pride, which is the reason why I decided to narrate the story of this course at the LD30 conference. However, there were some traumatic aspects to this approach. One was the burden of preparing course materials for 90 minutes of class meeting time and ideally 90 minutes of homework time, twice a week, all without previous preparation and based on student decisions that sometimes are made in advance and sometimes the night before a class meeting. On a good day, it would take me two hours to prepare for one class meeting; on a bad day, up to three hours. This piles onto the 180 minutes of class time per week and circa 90~120 minutes of feedback on individual written and recorded learner reflections after each class. This course being only one of seven I taught in the spring semester probably starts to explain the toll it took. Yet, I never found myself questioning why I do this and whether it was worth the effort.

I do not wish for the above to discourage fellow language instructors, however. If your teaching happens in an environment that has the right conditions (in my opinion these would be a flexible curriculum and free choice of teaching materials, as well as a group of learners with intermediate or higher proficiency and in a number that you feel comfortable with giving individual weekly feedback), then I would strongly suggest you try and trust your students with the keys to your course (or start doing so in increments if a full-blown approach sounds too extreme). Facilitating this course was hard work, but the reward was witnessing my students bloom in front of my eyes as independent learners. They were happily speaking English in class and they were becoming more aware of their achievements. I still see more than half of them twice a week as they enrolled in an EFL discussion course I teach in the fall semester. They are confident and are not afraid to ask questions, comment on course activities, or request specific discussion topics. They still own it. *THIS keeps on happening.*

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