

An Experiment with Freedom to Learn

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Introduction

One of the main factors that a teacher faces is engaging the interest and motivation of students. A teacher's personality, teaching techniques, and grades are some ways used to encourage students to learn. At times, any of these many fail to motivate some students. On the other hand, with some students no special efforts are required to stimulate interest and motivation. However, a common assumption concerning teaching and learning is that the teacher is the one in the classroom with the authority, power, and responsibility to see that learning takes place. The authority, power, and responsibility of students is often not considered an important factor in classrooms or schools. This seems to be especially true in Japan where rigorous entrance exam requirements for college lead schools to rigidly control classrooms as students engage in much rote learning. When these students enter college they have seldom exercised much power, authority, or decision making concerning their education. Most students have learned to be quite dependent on their teachers. Furthermore, such dependency is a culturally encouraged trait (Doi). In language learning such dependency can be counterproductive. In language classes students should be required to actively speak, or write in a foreign language. Constantly waiting on the teacher to take responsibility for learning deprives students of many opportunities to practice their active language skills. Thus, language teachers are particularly concerned with motivating and activating their students.

One promising way to engage learners in a more active role in their learning is through humanistic education. Carl Rogers, a leader in the

humanistic education movement wrote *Freedom to Learn in the 1980's* as a guide to both the philosophy and practice of humanistic education. Essential to humanistic education is the teacher's role as facilitator.

The attitude of the facilitator has almost entirely to do with climate, "How can I create a psychological climate in which the child will feel free to be curious, will feel free to make mistakes, will feel free to learn from the environment, from fellow students, from me, from experience? How can I help him recapture the excitement of learning that was natural in infancy?" (136)

Rogers contends that such a climate can be created when the teacher follows a number of principles. Among these principles are 1) building upon student interests, 2) providing resources, 3) peer teaching, 4) group learning, and 5) self-evaluation (148-56). The effectiveness of these and other principles is illustrated with numerous examples from the United States and Canada (45-115). There is also abundant statistical data supporting these principles taken from studies in North America and Western Europe (197-224). The preliminary study reported here began with the assumption that these same principles would be effective in motivating and activating students in Japan despite any cultural differences.

Subjects

The students who participated in this experiment were the 26 second year Oral A class members at Osaka Women's Junior College during the school year April, 1987 through January, 1988. The members of A class were the top level students at the college as determined by placement test results. One reason for selecting this group for study was their advanced English ability. At the time of this study the Oral English curriculum was based largely on the textbook, *American Kernel Lessons: Intermediate*,

much of which was at a level below that of the students. The students needed conversation practice beyond that of the text. In addition, because of the students' advanced English ability it was assumed that they had sufficient experience and knowledge of English learning to participate in choosing their subject matter. The advanced English ability was also important in that the teacher could readily communicate with the students in English concerning the class structure which would be quite different from what the students were accustomed to. Equally important was the ability of the students to communicate with the teacher in English about their concerns in the class.

Procedure

At the outset of this class the students were informed that they could participate in an experiment if they as a group wished to do so. The type of learning expected to take place was explained and a number of questions were answered concerning grading, responsibility, and other concerns. When students seemed ready a vote was taken and the overwhelming majority of class members decided to attempt an experimental class structure.

One important aspect of the class was that students were given as much power over grades as possible. At the same time, to encourage responsibility and accountability students were required to keep a journal in which they were to record reactions to the class activities, participation in the class, and evaluation of participation. In addition, the journal was to be a place where students could share any special concerns about their study. The class journal was also used in determining each students' classwork grades, which accounted for 60% of the semester grade. The other 40% of the semester grade was determined by a standardized semester exam which all second year oral students were required to take.

Students were expected to take more initiative and responsibility for their learning in this experimental class. At the same time this was a new experience for the students who might have needed some practice and training to assume responsibility. Thus, during the first semester the teacher came prepared with lessons and materials for conversational practice. However, when meeting the class it was a practice to ask them if there was anything that they wished to talk about, any activity that they wished to do, or any comments or questions that they had. Students at that time seldom had any response so several alternative conversational exercises were introduced. After briefly explaining each exercise students were asked to choose which one they wished to participate in. Usually there would be a few further questions about the exercises and then students would take a vote. The class then proceeded to carry out the exercise or activity which the majority chose. Interestingly, a number of students complained in their journals that they felt very uneasy and disliked being asked what they preferred to do during the class. In retrospect, this constant making of choices seemed to be a type of training for greater involvement in decision making later in the class.

Through the first semester the above routine was repeated until the time for semester exams neared. For the last several weeks of class, in order to prepare for the standardized semester exam based on the textbook, virtually no other oral activities were done outside the scope of the textbook. Before taking the exams all students were required to turn their journals in to the teacher with the grade they thought they should receive for their classwork during the first semester and the reason(s) they expected that grade. The students graded themselves quite fairly and reasonably. While a few grades were somewhat higher or lower than expected, in light of the students' explanations of why they thought they should receive their grades there seemed to be no reason to call a conference with any student to negotiate a mutually satisfying change of grade. Thus, the students got exactly the grades that they

requested for their classwork and exactly the grades that they earned on their exams. These grades were then combined 60% for classwork and 40 % for the exam to determine the semester grades.

At the beginning of the second semester each student was given the score earned on the semester exam and the semester grade that resulted from the average of the students' classwork grade and the exam grade. The class formed a circle of chairs, a student leader was appointed by the teacher and quite a dynamic discussion began concerning what would be done during second semester. Nearly every student in the class had something to contribute to the discussion. A few students with more English ability contributed more than others but everyone was very much involved, and concerned about the class. It seemed that when the students realized that they really had power over their class grades, they were then ready to assume much more responsibility over the class content.

During this discussion a number of decisions were made concerning the second semester. First of all one day a week, Wednesday, was given to the teacher, to cover the textbook materials. Every second Monday was to be used for each student to tell what she had done that previous weekend. Sharing of weekend activities was to be accompanied by questions from other class members. Students explained that they wanted this activity so that they would have a chance to get to know each member of the class. Furthermore, in the remaining class days students decided to work in teams of two's and be responsible for an activity lasting about 20 minutes of class time. The activities chosen by the students were to involve the class in the use of English. Not only would the students choose an activity, they would also be responsible for explaining it to the class, thus, teaching each other through English. The total class time to discuss these alternatives and make decisions was about three class hours. All discussion took place in English.

Schedule

Week	Monday	Wednesday	Saturday
1	student teams	textbook	student teams
2	weekend talk	textbook	student teams

The class worked through the above plan, with all teams participating, in approximately eight weeks. Afterwards, a second class discussion was held to evaluate the class up to that point.

A student was appointed as leader of the evaluation discussion and class members began to share ideas. Once again this proved to be a very dynamic discussion with a great deal of student involvement. Even students who had been rather reluctant to share in discussion at the beginning of the semester joined in. Each student was asked to share what they thought were the good points and the bad points of the activities that the class had done. It soon became evident that the biggest problem perceived by the students was that most of the activities they and their peers had chosen were too simple - not challenging enough to advance their English study. On the other hand, students pointed out that it was a challenge to use English to explain the activities to their classmates. With further discussion students decided to continue paired student responsibility for finding class activities. In order to answer the criticism concerning the lack of challenge in the earlier activities, the students decided to find articles for discussion from the newspaper with each member receiving a copy of the selected article for preparation before class discussion. Other aspects of the class were to remain the same. There was debate about holding discussions of the newspaper articles in small groups or in large groups. A number of the students who had returned from overseas study and who were more at ease using English insisted that holding one large group discussion was best. Most of the other students felt more comfortable when the class was divided into smaller groups. There was no consensus reached concerning the issue

so during the remainder of the semester some classes were held for whole class discussion and other classes were held with smaller group discussions. Also, some classes were begun with small group discussions and later moved into whole class discussions. Once again about three class periods were held to discuss these issues in English and to make decisions for the remainder of the semester.

This second cycle of discussions based on the newspaper articles was not completed due to lack of time as the semester came to a close. It was very evident that in the discussion sessions that were held, the students were being challenged to use more advanced English and to express ideas more extensively with the class. The students had found a remedy for the negative aspects of the class that they had observed earlier.

Evaluation

This class was conducted with the principles that Rogers had found effective. Five of the principles concern students and are considered here.

1) Student Interests. At first student were reluctant to express their interests but during the second semester they learned to pursue their interests in class activities and discussion topics. Some might fear that students allowed the freedom to choose their own curriculum would not choose responsibly. The students in this class appeared to be doing just that as they began the second semester. However, they reviewed what they were doing and were dissatisfied with it. Their dissatisfaction led to a much more responsible approach to the class content.

2) Providing Resources. At the beginning of the class and through most of the first semester I tried to choose activities which would serve as examples of what students might choose themselves. I also tried to choose activities which would help the students become better acquainted

with each other and more comfortable communicating with each other in the class. I expected that in the second semester many students would come to me for advice or for materials which they could use when they were having their turn at introducing an activity to the class. Virtually no students came to see me concerning materials for the class despite the fact that I had made it clear to them that I was available to help them and had a number of ideas available for them to use. The students' own resources seemed adequate for the second semester in which they really took responsibility.

3) Peer Teaching. This was not a major factor in the class until the second semester. During the first semester most teaching was still done by the teacher. In the second semester, when the students took responsibility for the class, peer teaching was one of the bright spots acknowledged by students. Even when some of their activities were criticized as being too easy, the same student critics accepted the fact that the English explanation of the activities was demanding.

4) Group Learning. A major reason for group learning in an oral class is to increase the amount of time that students spend speaking the target language. If the students are in one large group, each of 26 students can spend about two minutes speaking in a 50 minutes class. Ideally, the same students divided into groups of four to five members can each spend from ten to twelve minutes speaking during the same 50 minute period. Observing the group learning taking place in the experimental class and comparing it with any other classes using group learning is rather subjective but it appeared that the groups in the experimental class were superior in some ways. In the experimental class the students tended to continue talking in English for more extended periods of time without teacher intervention. More importantly, there seemed to be a spirit of cooperation among the students whereby they helped each other to communicate rather than competing with each other to impress the teacher.

5) Self-Evaluation. Since many teachers depend on the power that grades have over students, it can be rather frightening to give up that power and allow students to share it. I was apprehensive as a teacher about the experimental class taking over 60% of their final grade—the total grade for class work and performance. Despite my apprehensions the overwhelming number of student graded themselves in a responsible way and behaved in a responsible way. In fact, this giving of power to the students seemed to be the key that unlocked all of the other benefits of the experimental class. It was not until the second semester began after the students had received the grades that they had given themselves, that they really became involved in managing their course. This power over their own grades and course led the students to take the initiative and pursue their own interests, to help each other in a cooperative way, and to improve their course for their mutual benefit. The effectiveness of student grading and classroom power was particularly evident in the unsolicited comments that students wrote with their final semester grades.

... I liked this class. Very good classmates ... and we had much more chances to speak each other on many topics than last year. I was very glad that you asked our ideas and opinions very often.

I think our Oral class was very good, because everyone tried to make the class better.

To me, this semester was more interesting than first semester. The games were fun and I enjoyed them. The discussions were difficult but very useful to improve English ability.... I was glad that everyone listened my opinion intently and I also enjoyed listening various opinions.

I had a very happy and useful time in the class. The discussion and preparing for the game was an important experience for me. I felt much easier to speak English in the class than the last class.

I think I could speak more and participate in the class more than before. We led the classes, and discussed very much. It was very good experience for me, and I enjoyed the class very much.

We discussed many things in this class. I think it was very nice to discuss the matters with all, how we could get in touch with each other so we could enjoy this class very much and so on. We played a lot as well as studying, but I should say it was not a useless at all, it was a great help for us to communicate each other though sometimes they were not like an academic, but childish. I learnt a lot from this class; to help each other, studying all together and sharing things.

I had to talk. If one person didn't talk, other students asked her, "What do you think?" So, I gradually became to join conversation. And I think my English was improved a little. That's because I joined the conversations, I think. If I had not been in this class, I didn't speak English. I learned not to answer the questions of teacher, but to talk what I myself thought.

Conclusion

Observing this experimental class indicates that giving Japanese students freedom to learn, with power over their learning, their classroom,

and their curriculum is a viable alternative to traditional classroom practices. Students in this class did become intensely involved in discussions and other class activities using English as would be predicted by a humanistic model of education. This present study can only be considered a pilot study depending as it does upon teacher observation without extensive objective data. From the observations made in this study, it would seem reasonable to predict that educational gains similar to those attained in other objective studies could be attained in Japanese classrooms.

Any cultural differences that exist between Western cultures and Japanese culture do not seem to prevent the implementation of humanistic methodology in Japan. However, cultural differences might be the reason that Japanese students took longer than expected to adjust to the nature of a class that offered them opportunities they had seldom if ever experienced before in their education. Barnes notes that "...if pupils find that the school as a whole rejects their purposes and what they see as the real world, they are unlikely to adopt a collaborative approach in one teacher's lessons" (147). Thus, a school atmosphere which encourages teachers and students to cooperate in the classroom could lead to a quicker and more effective implementation of the gains possible with this type of education.

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