Teaching Practice

Exchange Classes: A Strategy for Enhancing Student Communicative Competence and Confidence

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Abstract

Motivating EFL students to improve their language ability is not an easy task. Many times, institutional requirements, classroom settings and students' individual needs do not match, so students have difficulty in learning English and lose their motivation. This action research study examines how domestic-international exchange classes can be used as an effective, interactive strategy which can contribute to improving student attitude and motivation to learn by personalizing the learning process and developing communicative competence. Findings show that students' self-perceived communicative skills and confidence improved through regular conversation activities in exchange classes. The study concludes with suggestions for implementing a similar approach in a different environment and for further research.

Trying to promote and sustain a motivating environment in the language classroom has become a challenging task in an age where instant access to information seems to have created a wider gap than ever between the different needs of learners / users of information. As Bahous, Bacha, and Nabhani (2011) have noted, research in second language motivation by authors such as Dornyei (2001) and Williams (1994) showed the need for a more practical education, through identifying and analyzing classroom specific goals. However, nowadays these goals, more often than not, fail to coincide with the institutional curriculum targets and are so diverse that one can hardly refer to them as classroom goals.

This action research study took place at a private international college in Japan, where the English program goals for standard-track students are to raise students' general proficiency in English so that they may communicate with confidence in a range of real-world contexts, such as interacting with faculty, staff, and students on campus; traveling for work or pleasure; or using English for daily communication and transactions in the workplace. All students whose TOEFL score at placement in their first college year is less than 500 are required to take standard track English courses. The Intermediate English (third level in the standard track) course syllabus states the following as its objectives in terms of student communication ability by the end of the course:

Listening:

1. Make logical inferences when listening to English;
2. Use a range of listening strategies.

Speaking:

1. Show understanding of contextual details;
2. Plan responses to anticipated questions in an interview;
3. Ask clarification questions in a group discussion;
4. Use polite language to agree and disagree.

In reality, on campus, the main language for communication with most of the faculty, staff, and other students is Japanese. Similarly, according to a survey conducted in 2012, few students who take subject classes in English use English in subject classes because they do not have the confidence to do so (no information is available as to how many of the graduates use English at the workplace). As a result, the curriculum goals become unrealistic and irrelevant; and language teachers have to find ways to motivate their students within the constraints of the institutional requirements.

Based on the Dornyei and Csizer (1998) survey of motivational strategies, there are a number of efficient strategies that can be used in the classroom. Among these are “increase the learners’ linguistic self-confidence, make the language classes interesting, promote learner autonomy, [and] personalize the learning process” (p. 215). The present study explores how participating in interactive domestic-international exchange classes has contributed to personalizing the learning process and to increasing students’ self-confidence, as well as to enhancing communicative competence. Data show student reactions to this experience and their reflections on it, as well as changes in the students’ confidence and motivation. The conclusion will offer suggestions for implementing a similar approach in a different environment.

Literature Review

Discussing the role of interaction in second language learning, Lightbown and Spada (1999) quote researchers who argue that conversational interaction is essential for second language acquisition. Among these, Long and Porter (1985) maintain that learners do not require simplified language only, but also a chance to interact with other speakers. Vygotskian theory supporters like Lantolf (1994) also claim that conversational interaction with more advanced speakers improves the linguistic knowledge of second language learners.

Lightbown and Spada (1999) argue further that experiencing success when communicating in the target language contributes to positive motivation, which in turn leads to greater success. Moreover, they mention that learners at similar levels cannot contribute to error correction. According to Lynch (1996), when teaching speaking in the language classroom, practice and feedback are imperative for quick progress; and compared to activities that involve the class as a whole, group or pair work maximizes the opportunity to speak and reduces the psychological burden of public performance.

In the regular language classroom, the main factor driving student motivation seems to be extrinsic in nature (students’ main goal is to get good scores or pass the class for credits). Researchers such as Burden (2004) found that it is important for students to be aware that using the target language is more than an academic goal; it is a tool for more successful communication. Ghaith (2003) also suggests that seeing the functional gains of learning a

language contributes to an increase in learner motivation even when the language is not extensively used in the community.

Based on such research, this study estimates that engaging in dialogue with more advanced or more confident speakers of the target language can provide opportunities for language use and a chance to obtain peer feedback. This, in turn, may contribute to enhancing student confidence and motivation. The study will report on an innovative practice that can lead to both more effective communication and better self-perception in terms of language ability and confidence to use the language, which in turn can have a positive impact on student motivation.

Objectives and Method

Aim

The main objective of the study was to develop and maintain a motivational language classroom environment and to assess learning gains related to it. In order to achieve this goal, a task was created that aimed at improving student communicative ability and confidence through regular topic-related group discussions and presentations. The study focuses on the following research question: Did self-perceived communicative skills and confidence improve through regular conversation / discussion activities in the exchange classes?

Research Context

The research was conducted at an international university in western Japan. The student body comprises approximately 53% domestic students and 47% international students. The institution's primary educational goal is to improve Japanese students' communication skills and to promote intercultural understanding and communication.

Students at this university take a placement TOEFL test in their first semester and are divided into four English language levels according to their scores. They then take six 95-minute English language classes weekly. Each 14-week semester has two quarters, with a week-long quarter break. Four of the mandatory language classes focus on improving speaking, listening, and writing skills. In the intermediate-level classes (requiring placement TOEFL scores between 460 and 480 or that all previous class levels have been completed), students take eight speaking tests (six conversations, one interview, and one group presentation) per semester. Additionally, they take eight listening tests and write three paragraphs and one essay.

Results of a pre-semester survey show that, at the beginning of the semester, all students aim to become better communicators in English. However, once classes start, students express reluctance to talk to each other in English because they do not see the relevance of using English to communicate with fellow Japanese students. When they do use English in class, it is mainly small talk. For this reason, weekly exchange classes were organized. English language learners and international students learning Japanese studied together in the same room for 95 minutes per week, accompanied by one English and one Japanese language teacher. Half of the time in the exchange class students and teachers used English for all communication; in the other half, everybody used Japanese.

Participants

The participants in this study were two teachers (one Japanese language and one English language teacher), 21 international students in an Intermediate Japanese class, and 18 Japanese students in an Intermediate English class who all participated in 10 exchange classes. The researcher met the 18 Japanese students in English class three additional times per week for one

semester. This study is based on the feedback from these 18 Japanese students. In terms of language ability of study participants, the university requires all international students to submit language proficiency documentation that shows a TOEFL score higher than 500 on the paper-based test or equivalent. The domestic students' TOEFL scores ranged between 367 and 480 at the end of the semester, the average being 413.

Classroom Methodology

In the first quarter, the Japanese students were required to find English audio material on any topic of interest, to listen to it, and to fill out a worksheet that they brought to the exchange class held every Friday (see Appendix). The worksheet was designed by the instructor and comprised three sections: a summary of the audio material, the student's opinion regarding the topic of the material, and three discussion questions related to the topic. During the exchange class, students sat in mixed groups of four to five students; and they had 10 minutes to cover the three sections in order, with a focus on the discussion part. For this conversation part, students asked the questions they had prepared in advance to all members of their group and tried to maintain the conversation by adding comments or follow-up questions. After the 10 minutes, students created new groups. The task was repeated three to four times. The two language instructors monitored each group and occasionally joined the conversation by listening or asking questions. The second round of conversations was recorded, and all worksheets were collected at the end of each exchange class.

In line with the curriculum requirement, the type of discourse changed in the second quarter from discussion to presentation and from asking questions to answering questions from the group. Students were encouraged to choose topics requiring them to express an opinion and support it with arguments. This task led to choosing more challenging material compared to the first quarter, in terms of both language and content.

Research Conducted

A pre-semester survey, two post-activity surveys (at the end of each quarter), and a mid-semester class reflection session were conducted for research purposes. The pre-semester survey asked questions related to student attitude and confidence towards communicating in English. On the two post-activity surveys, questions were asked related to the amount of time spent preparing for the exchange classes, the perceived difficulty of tasks, and areas in which students felt they had made progress. The mid-semester class reflection was a round table whole-class discussion conducted in both English and Japanese, to allow students to feel comfortable expressing their opinion.

Findings

First Quarter

Student goals and preparation. According to results from the pre-semester survey, 10 (58.8%) of the 17 subjects who took the survey hoped to improve their English speaking skills, and 7 (41.2%) wanted to improve their English listening skills the most in the new semester. Other answer options were: reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary. Students were allowed to choose as many options as they considered necessary.

On the first-quarter post-activity survey, 8 (44.4%) of the 18 students responding answered that they had spent more than 1 hour weekly preparing for exchange classes, while 7 students (38.9%) selected 30 minutes to 1 hour and 3 students (16.7%) chose less than 30 minutes.

Student perceptions of task difficulty. In relation to the tasks students were assigned for the exchange class, 13 students (72.2%) answered that listening to the audio material was not too difficult, while 4 (22.2%) found it difficult, and 1 (5.6%) thought it was extremely difficult. This result can be attributed to the fact that students were allowed to choose their own material at the level of difficulty they deemed most appropriate for themselves. The instructor introduced a variety of resources previous to the beginning of the task, including listening material available on the Internet, and students were encouraged to share information related to other possible resources.

In regard to the item “having the conversation / discussion” during exchange classes, only six students (33.3% of the class total) thought it was not too difficult while nine students (50%) thought it was difficult and two students (11.1%) found it to be extremely difficult. Overall, students found creating discussion questions to be the easiest task of all. To sum up, although most students did not seem to experience much trouble listening to English and they managed to make questions to start the conversation, about 60% found it difficult to have a group conversation based on these materials.

Student perceptions of improved performance. At the same time, however, more than half of students answered that they had made either big (seven students, or 38.9%) or great (four students, or 22.2%) improvement in the listening area and a noted a similar improvement in the conversation / discussion area, eight students (44.4%) citing a big improvement and three (16.7%) a great improvement.

Furthermore, on the question “Overall, which of the following skills do you think you have improved due to exchange class activities?”, 15 students (83.3%) answered they had improved their speaking skills due to the exchange class activities, followed by 10 (55.6%) who said that they had improved their listening skills.

Finally, regarding change in other skills necessary for communication, most students thought they had made big or great improvement in the areas of body language (12 students or 66.7%), voice volume (11 students, or 61.1%), and eye contact (10 students, or 55.6%).

Second Quarter

Student perceptions of difficulty. Based on the second quarter post-activity survey, only 5 (29.4%) of the 17 respondents continued to say that listening to the materials was not too difficult; while the majority (12 students, or 70.6%) believed the material was difficult or extremely difficult. In regard to delivering the presentation, only four students (23.6%) thought that the task was not difficult for them, while the others found it difficult or extremely difficult. The highest number of students, six (35.3%), selected extremely difficult for this task compared to all other tasks. Answering questions after the presentation was challenging for nine (52.9%) of students.

Student perceptions of improved performance. The areas in which students felt they had made the greatest progress were doing a presentation and listening. In presentation, six (35.3%) selected big improvement, while seven (41.2%) chose great improvement. In listening, 7 (41.2%) selected big improvement, and six (35.3%) indicated great improvement. At the same time, 12 (70.6%) answered they had made a big improvement in answering questions after the presentation, and 3 (17.6%) said they had made great improvement in the same area.

On the survey’s multiple-answer-type question, 15 students (88.2%) answered they had improved their speaking skills, and 8 (47.1%) thought they had developed listening skills due to

the exchange class activities in the second quarter. Overall, 15 (88.2%) thought that the exchange classes had helped them improve not only English speaking and listening skills, but also communication skills in general.

Student perceptions of increased confidence over the semester. In relation to the second part of the research question about student confidence, on the pre-semester survey 5 (29.4%) of 17 students chose grammar and vocabulary as the skill they were most confident with, 4 (23.5%) chose speaking, and 2 (11.8%) chose listening. At the same time, 11 (64.7%) students reported themselves as confident to speak in English in a classroom setting and 9 (52.9%) reported the same confidence in an informal conversation in English outside of the classroom.

Although the students already reported quite a bit of confidence in the pre-semester survey, their level of confidence grew during the semester. On the first-quarter survey, 14 (82.4%) students out of 17 felt their overall level of confidence had somehow improved (a little improvement, 6 students, or 35.3%; big improvement, 6 students, 35.3%; and great improvement, 2 students, or 11.8%). On the second-quarter survey 15 (88.2%) out of 17 students answered that their confidence level had increased (a little improvement, 7 students, or 41.2%; big improvement, 5 students, or 29.4%; and great improvement, 3 students, or 17.6%).

Summary of Findings

To sum up, survey results suggest that the exchange classes promoted increases in both self-perceived communication skills and confidence of study subjects. It is also worth noting that during the reflection session several domestic students reported meeting with the exchange class international students outside of the classroom for study or for socializing, and they also took the initiative to organize an exchange class party which students from both groups attended.

Discussion

This study suggests that the exchange classes are an effective tool for increasing student motivation through developing communicative ability and confidence. Asking students to choose their topic and to control the conversation gave them a chance to make learning and content relevant and contributed to increasing confidence, as well as to enhancing communicative and interpersonal skills.

Survey results show that a majority of students report improvement in communication skills and confidence to communicate. Motivating students should be one of the priorities of the language classroom; and exchange classes are definitely both challenging and motivating, two factors that are essential for marked progress in language learning. This study supports the idea that, as Bahous et al. (2011) suggest, positive language learning experiences can have a big impact on the language learner's confidence and motivation.

Conclusion

Reflections

Although the international campus at this university seems to offer innumerable opportunities for language use, domestic students repeatedly complain about not having real chances or the confidence to interact in English with international students whose main interest is to master the Japanese language. Under such conditions, students stop seeing the benefit of taking English classes and gradually lose interest and motivation.

This study shows that there are ways to incorporate into the present curriculum communicative activities that can make the classroom content relevant and provide opportunities for communication practice while increasing student confidence and motivation. The exchange classes offered domestic students a chance to create a bridge between the all-Japanese-student classroom and the international campus and helped raise their overall confidence level.

Implications for Other Settings

Exchange classes are not difficult to organize (this project was designed and implemented by the two class instructors, without institutional support) and were received with immense enthusiasm by both domestic and international students. Exchange classes, as a formal setting where international students are required to use English for half of the class time, give non-native students the much-sought-for chance to practice and improve their own English skills. At other institutions that do not have the advantage of an international campus, the exchange classes could involve foreign students from other schools or professionals from the community. Online exchange opportunities are also possible.

Limitations of the Study and Suggested Further Research

In order to better determine the effectiveness of this approach, further research needs to analyze differences in gains between a control group, in which domestic students would perform the same task among themselves, and a treatment group, in which domestic and international students work together. Additionally, while students reported large gains in skills and confidence, follow-up interviews with participants might reveal whether these effects lasted after the end of the course. Finally, this study looked at domestic students' performance and attitude only. Collaborative research between the two instructors involved could have shed more light on the effectiveness of such an experiment for both domestic and international subjects. It would also be of interest to conduct a similar project with only domestic students with different language abilities and to compare the results with this study to see whether interaction in English with more advanced students who speak the same L1 produces similar outcomes in terms of learner confidence and motivation.

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Appendix
Exchange Class Handout

Your NAME: _____ Your class _____ Date _____

Group members' names: _____

Material title (if available):

Author:

Source:

Your SUMMARY (> 100 words). Underline 5 key words:

Your OPINION (> 100 words):

Your QUESTIONS for the group:

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____