

〔学術論文〕

Eggplants and English

A brief look at students' use of English outside the EFL classroom

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Abstract: One of the most long-running questions in education and in language education in particular is that of how to motivate students to learn. This piece of action research investigated student's motivation when using language learned inside the classroom to engage in an activity outside the classroom. It involved the learners in a project in which they raised a variety of garden vegetables. In the process, they were encouraged to use the English they knew to communicate with the instructor and their peers as they went about their weekly farming chores. The results of this study will show that the students did use English in their weekly written diaries, yet when working outside the classroom, they did not make as much effort as in the classroom to maintain their conversations in English.

教育、とくに語学教育では学生の学習意欲をどうやってあげていくか長い間の疑問でした。これは学生が授業で学習した英語を教室の外で行う活動において、英語を使うか否かを研究したものです。小さな畑で学生は色々な野菜を育てる活動の中で英語でコミュニケーションすることを奨励されました。研究の結果、学生が毎週の作業日記を英語で記録しましたが、教室外で英語による会話は教室内ほどの努力をしませんでした。

Keywords: EFL, student motivation, language learning, group project

Background

The concept of motivation in the field of language study has received a great deal of attention since the 1980s, and more recently there has been renewed interest in the construct. Motivation has been defined as the reason why a person sets a goal, how much effort the person is willing to exert and for how long in order to attain the goal. Albert Bandura developed the concept of self-efficacy, “individuals' perceived capabilities to attain designated types of performances and achieve specific results” (Pajares 1996, p. 546, see also Bandura, 1982). This self-concept influences the effort and persistence a person will make towards attaining the goal (Zimmerman, Bandura and Martinez-Pons 1992, p.664).

More recent theory focuses the learner's identity as a core part of motivation for language learning. Richards (2006) lists three divisions within the concept of identity: a professional identity role, "situated identities, which are explicitly conferred by the particular context of communication," e.g. teacher-student identities; a discourse role he labels "discourse identities" such as that of a listener, questioner, etc.; and a role of revealing one's "real" self, a "transportable" identity, for example providing the conversation partner with personal details (cited in Ushioda 2011, p.16).

Ushioda argues that students who present these "transportable identities" may have "a much higher level of personal involvement, effort and investment" than those who experience a more traditional classroom setting of teacher-student talk. However, she notes Richards' 2006 observation that bringing the transportable self within the boundaries of the classroom requires commitment on the part of the student. Ushioda points out, "a key pedagogical principle in this regard is one of enabling students to exercise autonomy for choice in terms of which aspects of their identity they wish to engage and are motivated to express" (ibid, p 17). In other words, students should be given a choice of when, how and what aspects of themselves to express. Her observation assumes the students will be expressing themselves in the L2.

Ushioda further argues that by constructing a classroom environment that allows the students more free range to express themselves in the L2 as individuals with their own interests and "transportable identities", the students will be more motivated to express themselves in the target language. Yet is creating such an environment sufficient for motivating the learners to use English?

Brophy (2009) proposes that achievement motivation theories are actually value based and identity oriented, and that our identity is influenced in part by "encouragement and pressure from the culture at large, or from socializers, peers and significant others within one's social circle" and that such identity "can solidify and develop into core values and more long-term stable identities" (cited in Ushioda, 2011, p. 21). Indeed, as Ushioda writes:

There is an intimate connection between our goal directed behaviors and the identities we pursue; between the activities we engage in and the social groups we want to identify with; between what we do and the kind of person we see ourselves as or want to become (ibid. p.19).

Out of work on identity comes the psychological theory of possible selves, (Markus and Nurius 1986, cited in Dörnyei & Ushioda 2011, p. 80; Dörnyei 2005, cited in Ushioda 2011, p.

20), essentially what a person either would or would not like to become or thinks that they should become because of some external pressure.

Correspondingly, Uchioda acknowledges that the lack of motivation for learning a language may be “because the language does not connect with them in any personal sense. It is not part of who they are or want to be” (Uchioda 2007).

Purpose

As these classes began in April of 2011, exactly one month after the Great East Japan Earthquake and Tsunami, the students (and their instructor) were still in a process of healing after the shock of the events. Although the university is located far away from the Tohoku area, anyone who had watched the images and heard or read the commentary about the devastation could not have come away unaffected. A small part of the idea for this type of project was to use direct contact with nature as a way to help foster a sense of appreciation for the earth and its power to create as well as crush. As I talked with the students, I found that many had never worked in the soil. A few had raised morning glories or small plants when they were in elementary school, and still fewer helped their grandparents in the garden.

The main purpose of this preliminary study was to investigate whether or not students would use English conversation outside the classroom but within the instruction period to complete certain tasks to reach a group goal. The goal was one that, it was hoped, would keep the students interested and, at the same time, challenge them to use the English they knew at their own language level.

Methodology

Over one spring semester (15 weeks), four classes of students in English oral communication courses at this university participated in a weekly 10-minute hands-on farming lesson given at the end of each class period.

Students in two of the classes were majoring in intercultural studies (Groups 1 & 2), one class was majoring in sociology, and one in psychology (Groups 3 & 4). The English conversation course was a required subject. The content of the courses was the same.

Although the spoken English level of the intercultural studies majors was slightly higher than that of students in the other majors¹, all of the students had sufficient oral communicative and listening ability to successfully complete this project.

The farming plot was located just outside the classroom, providing easy access to the

work area. Gardening tools, seedlings, and fertilizer were provided by the instructor. Each week at the end of the class students were given 10 minutes to go outside and care for their plant. As the course went on, they were instructed to water, weed, tie up any loose branches, and to keep the area clean.

Daily routines

In this section I will outline what the students were instructed to do in order to give the reader a sense of the project and the vocabulary level required of the students for listening and speaking purposes.

From the 2nd week of the course, students formed groups of 4 and decided which vegetables they would like to grow from a list of choices of seedlings which had already been purchased. They were given a small notebook in which they were to keep notes each week on what the group did, useful vocabulary, and their thoughts about this project. The students also had roles for that day: diary keeper, stick finder, hole diggers. They were given instruction in English on the task for the day which was to pull weeds, to dig a hole about 25 cms (10 in.) deep and 20 cms (8 in.) wide, to place compost in the hole and cover it with about 3 cms (1 in.) of soil.

Students were then taken outside to choose their space among the sections of the farming area that had been marked off. The “stick finders” were told to go to a large pile of branches that had been cut from trees around the university to find sticks .5 - 1 meter (2-3 ft) long. The students who had the role of “hole diggers” prepared the hole for their plant. When ready, the sticks were inserted in an arc over the holes forming an X dome over which the students placed gardening fabric. The fabric was held down with soil and rocks around the edges. For homework the students were asked to make small signs with their group's name and the vegetable they were growing.

The next week, the students were given instructions on how to plant the seedlings. Students then went outside to plant them and cover them again with the gardening fabric, placing their homemade signs next to their plant. The farming diary was given to another student to complete that week.

The following week, the students were given a handout with instructions on watering, weeding and the importance of placing the weeds around the bottom of the seedlings to keep moisture in the soil. They were given the task of designing a frame from the tree branches

1 This observation was not tested quantitatively, but determined through observation of students' pair and group work in class.

that would support the vegetable they were growing. This meant that they would need to talk about the best way to build a strong structure from the tree branches that were available. They often asked me what kind of structure they should build, but I only told them that it had to be tall enough to hold the vegetables (for example a cucumber vine) and strong enough to withstand a typhoon.

By the 5th week of the project, the plants had outgrown the gardening fabric, so the students were instructed to remove the fabric and replace it with large plastic bags, open at each end, which had contained potting soil. Each bag was supported with four tree branches.

During the 6th week, students began to build some very strong structures with only tree branches and string. They also used the string to wind around the tree branches and form a sort of net to support the branches of their plants.

As the plants grew they started to produce vegetables, and the students, were very pleased to be able to pick and eat what they had grown. They chose how to divide the produce, and generally, each group either divided the total amount for that week (green beans, green peppers, tomatoes) or one person would take the vegetables one week, and another student the next week (eggplant, cucumbers).

At the end of the semester, a questionnaire was given to the students, and they were requested to complete and return it the following week, along with their farming diary.

Out of a total of 77 students who were enrolled in the classes and were given the questionnaire at the end, 65 returned the completed questionnaire, and four did not give permission to be included in this study. These questionnaires were eliminated from the data (N=61).



Results

The results of the questionnaire and of the farming diaries are reported in this section. There was one additional source of responses from the students, the course evaluation at the end of semester, which will be discussed at the end of this section.

	Total Mean/SD (N=61)	Mean/SD Groups 1 & 2 (N=32)	Mean/SD Groups 3 & 4 (N=29)
1. Doing simple farming made this conversation class more interesting.	4.34 (0.73)	4.31 (0.82)	4.37 (0.62)
2. It was too much work.	2.59 (0.97)	2.59 (1.01)	2.58 (0.94)
3. I tried harder than usual to listen carefully to instructions in English about what we should do for our plants each day.	3.62 (0.84)	3.56 (0.91)	3.68 (0.76)
4. Growing plants should not be part of an English class.	2.02 (0.77)	1.96 (0.86)	2.06 (0.75)
5. I used 60% or more Japanese when I was working with my group taking care of our plant.	3.36 (1.1)	3.28 (0.99)	3.44 (1.21)
6. I was more motivated to come to class because we were doing farming.	3.38 (0.78)	3.28 (0.72)	3.48 (0.82)
7. I enjoyed doing farming this semester.	4.3 (0.84)	4.03 (0.96)	4.58 (0.56)
8. We should have spent the time doing other speaking activities in class.	2.9 (0.81)	2.93 (0.91)	2.86 (0.69)
9. I was motivated to speak English when we were taking care of our plants.	2.87 (0.99)	2.84 (0.95)	2.89 (1.04)
10. I have learned something important from planting and taking care of my plant.	3.59 (0.86)	3.53 (0.98)	3.65 (0.72)
11. I would like to do this again in another English class.	3.79 (0.97)	3.78 (1.00)	3.79 (0.94)
12. I would like to raise a plant on my own.	3.82 (0.99)	3.75 (1.07)	3.89 (0.90)

An unpaired t-test was conducted on all items with none showing statistical significance with the exception of item 7, "I enjoyed doing farming this semester." Groups 1 & 2 (N=32) had a mean of 4.03 and S.D. of 0.96, while Groups 3 & 4 (N=29) had a mean of 4.58 and S.D. of 0.56. The t-statistic was 2.69, with a p=.009.

Farming Diary Data

Each team was given a small notebook to keep track of the activities they did each week in order to take care of their plants. Some of their entries are included here verbatim. The vocabulary that the students used is the vocabulary needed for this particular project, not normally used in general conversation.

Planting a young plant in compost.

To protect our plant from caterpillar.

We weeded around the tomato.

Covering the roots of a plant with soil.

Taking out roots of weeds.

We till a field and planted a seedling of cucumber.

We weeded. it wasn't necessary for us to water our plant because it rained.

The cucumber grew up so speedy! But he was lying on the ground, so we prop up a sapling.

We saw our beans condition.

We could harvest four green beans.

Maybe we need some fertilizer.

Put chicken manure and soil. And we plant our eggplant. We also covered it.

Cucumber is now in season! He is lively.

It was difficult to think of a strong support.

Useful vocabulary: *to water (v), mulch, compost, frame, thin out unusual buds, potting soil, shallow, humidity*

What was easy? *Watering our plant was.*

What was more challenging? *Pulling out a lot of grasses was.*

However, the project was not without its problems. "Our broccori was eaten by warms. It's leaves had many halls. The new plant we have chosen to grow is eggplant. We also continue to grow broccori." (Later:) "We can reap two big eggplants. Because of insect, our broccoli don't grow."

Course evaluation data

At the end of the semester the instructor conducted a course evaluation asking students in the four classes for their observations on the course and how it could be improved. The

evaluation contained open-ended questions that were not directly asking about the farming project. However, many of the students mentioned the farming project in their comments. The following is a summary of those comments.

What parts of the course did you enjoy?

I enjoy “our little farm”. Because I found out it is very interesting that we grow our plants by ourselves. (G4)

Growing plants is very exciting. We can enjoy growing them and talk about that. (G4)

I enjoyed farming. I brought up green peppers. (G3)

I enjoyed exchanging our opinion about social issues. I also enjoyed growing green beans. (G1)

I enjoyed growing cucumber in our little farm in cooperation with my friends and thinking how to grow not to use artificial tools. (G1)

I enjoyed growing vegetables. When we harvest them, I felt happy. (G3)

I enjoyed growing kidney beans. I ate kidney beans and these are delicious. (sic) (G4)

I enjoyed growing green pepper. We got some green peppers from the tree(?).(sic) They were so delicious. (G1)

The 2 most important things I learned in this class are...

Planting is very important activity because I learned planting unique vegetables help for reducing CO2. And I learned we eat living things. (G4)

I learned a lot of things by growing kidney beans. (G4)

Which parts of the course could be improved?

Growing plants. The student should cooperate with each other. (G4)

I think we needed a bit more vocabulary about the farming. It was hard to talk in English. (G2)

I wanted you to take time in class to take care of our plants. Because I sometimes forgot taking care for plants. (G2)

What can the students do to improve this course?

I think we should talk in English during farming. (G1)

Instructor's observations

In each weekly session outside the classroom, the instructor used only English with the students, and observed that the students spoke English when asking the instructor questions on how to go about the daily activities. The students were regularly encouraged to use English when they were speaking in their farming groups. English phrasing was provided for students' communication in the L1 when possible. However, regardless of my suggestions, some groups communicated in their L1.

Discussion

The results of the questionnaire show that, in terms of English language use outside of the classroom, the students reported using more Japanese than English and that this project did not contribute to their motivation to speak English. However, groups 3 and 4 reported slightly more motivation to attend class as a result of participating in this project. In terms of effort made to understand instructions in English, both groups reported making more effort than usual in order to understand what they had to do each day. All of the students expressed enjoyment in doing this project and felt it was not inappropriate to do this in an English class. The results also revealed the students thought they had learned something important through this project that was not necessarily related to learning English, shown as well by the slightly more positive response of expressing interest in raising plants by themselves.

Two comments on the final course evaluation showed a bit of frustration on the part of the students regarding the use of Japanese during the project, about which I would like to make two points.

With language learning, it may be that core values such as peer acceptance and “fitting in” may be a stronger source of motivation for using L1. A conflict may exist between motivation and identity, in other words, who we want to become. If the pressure from peers to stay in the L1 is stronger than the student's motivation to use the L2, it may have a significant effect on the student's identity and performance.

Yet, there may be a further complication here. In a study of Self-Access Centers in five countries, researchers found that the learners did not see the development of autonomy as a necessary element for success in a foreign-language (Reinders and Lázaro, 2011, in Murray, et al). In fact, as Reinders and Lázaro write, “...it was not so much cultural differences, but rather a lack of previous education that underlies this phenomenon. Students are simply not

used to the idea of taking responsibility for their learning” (ibid, p. 138). This may be the case in the Japanese context in that throughout their years of schooling, Japanese students have probably not been given instruction on how to make the best use of English outside the classroom.

This lack of understanding how practicing the L2 in real-life conversational situations will help to increase fluency, vocabulary, etc., needs to be bridged in order to increase motivation for using the L2 to a degree that is stronger than that of peer pressure to remain in the L1.

Limitations

Much of this research was done as observation on the part of the author. There were no video or audio recordings of the students as they worked on the project. There were no records kept on the actual number of times the students produced utterances in the L2 as opposed to the L1. Therefore, the validity of the findings is highly questionable. However, based on the self-reporting of the students through the questionnaires and weekly diaries, some interesting data did arise.

Questions for further research

The results of this study raise questions for further research such as:

- 1) to what degree do Japanese learners of English in Japan feel influence from their peers to speak L1 rather than L2?
- 2) what other kinds of projects would create an environment in which students would feel more comfortable using the L2?
- 3) assuming a lack of education on the value of autonomous use of the L2, how can language educators best approach such instruction with their learners?

Conclusion

Although there may have been some gains made in terms of motivation to attend class, stimulating interest in and learning about growing simple garden vegetables, increased motivation to speak English outside of the classroom boundaries did not appear as a result of this project. However, as a by-product of their contact with plants and the soil, it is evident that the students' respect for the power of nature to provide as well as destroy did, in fact, grow.

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