

Initial Report on First Stage of Action Research into Student Classroom Motivation

Kevin J. Axton

Introduction

This paper is the result of the preliminary stages of an action research into enhancing students' motivation at the university level within the English department. The main focus of this research are students who are regarded to be average or below average at the academic level, and may be considered to have low motivation in learning English skills based on their placement scores and previous teachers' assessments.

There have been numerous studies regarding motivation, both regarding motivational teaching tools and strategies, as well as students' own learning strategies and preferences. Motivational factors will briefly be discussed during the analyzation of materials; however this paper will not discuss or define those at length. This report is merely a presentation of initial findings from data collection regarding the possibility of enhancing student motivation within the classroom.

The data in this report is taken from personal observations of class tasks and activities, and also some observations on student participation during classes. Also, I conducted an interview of one student who decided to study abroad independently in order to improve his L2 learning. The material will be presented along with some preliminary analysis of this data, and then a brief summary and suggestions for further study based on reflections of the material.

1. Research Method

1.1 Justification

At Kyushu Lutheran College (KLC), as at several other colleges in Japan, there are students who decide to improve their English skills by choosing to go abroad for an intensive or immersed second language (L2) education. However, several of these students at KLC are/were not considered to be 'advanced' in their L2 development; some might even be thought of as mediocre students with below-average motivation in terms of class work.

The question then arises as to why some of these students decide to improve their L2 levels on an individual basis. Do they hold a belief that their skills would better improve in

an immersion setting? Are they concerned about future employment to the point of raising their standardized test scores to enhance their resumes? Is there a more intrinsic factor in motivating these students to study abroad? The aim of this research is to find what motivated those students to go abroad, and find if any of those factors also motivate others at the same level within the classroom here at KLC.

1.2 Research Method and Questions

The research method being carried out is one involving action research. For personal reasons that are related to a context within KLC itself, this form of research is more relevant to the situation in which it is involved in that the researcher is looking to enhance motivation in students within the classroom. Action research is an approach to research that is defined by Nunan and Bailey (2009) as:

“... a systematic, iterative process of (1) identifying an issue, ... or puzzle [teachers] wish to investigate in [their] own context; (2) thinking and planning an appropriate action to address that concern; (3) carrying out that action; (4) observing the apparent outcomes of that action; (5) reflecting on the outcomes and other possibilities; and (6) repeating these steps again.” (p.227)

There were two questions, or puzzles, which sparked this research: (1) Are there any motivational factors that are the same or similar among those students who chose to go abroad to further their studies; and, (2) Can some of those factors be transferred to the classroom to enhance motivation in learners who do not choose to study abroad?

1.3 Data

The data used for this initial report are taken from my personal teaching journal, based on observations from the classroom and students. Also, an interview was conducted with a former student, a graduate of KLC and an English major, about his personal experiences with his own L2 education, and what motivated him to study abroad. There were also teaching journal entries used to attempt to identify any in-class observations that might be similar to the interview itself.

2. Teaching Journal Excerpts

In this section journal entries from my personal teaching journal will be presented in which I keep ideas about lesson plans, activities, and observations I make on students and their participation during classes. I have only included those entries which relate to the research questions and/or student motivation. Contexts for the entries will also be explained when necessary.

The first entry was written in 2010 regarding student interviews. The interviews which are being written about were ten minute conversations between two students. Instructions

were given to all students explaining what was to be included in the conversations. However, one aspect of these student-to-student conversations became apparent upon review of the recordings made during the interviews.

October 10, 2010: "...it was really easy to tell which parts of the conversation had been practiced and rehearsed. The utterances between the two sounded mechanical, there were several occasions when one students or the other would pause as if trying to remember what to say... It wasn't only one pair either, but many. However, when the partners would get off-track, or talk about a topic that they hadn't rehearsed, the conversation pace began to pick up. It wasn't just the pace, however that began to speed up, but the fluency of the utterances as well... They didn't seem so concerned about making a mistake, but were interested in the subject being discussed..."

What I found most interesting was that this not only occurred one time, but became a common observation in following student-to-student conversations. Over the course of roughly one academic school year more experimentation went into how to conduct student-to-student conversations and how to evaluate those. There was some success (none of it formally measured or tested), and it was noticed that students preferred a more spontaneous structure to these interviews.

November 15, 2011: Something else that has dawned on me in terms of hearing Ss speak English together in class is what I may NOT be hearing. ... I think, about doing a more spontaneous interview for formal evaluation. ... I mentioned this to the advanced class this morning and about half (I'm basing this on facial expressions, mind you) seemed in favor of this.

I took notice of this type of spontaneous, natural type of behavior when students were working together again a year later in a class of second year beginning level students

November 10, 2011: "...I used the same task that [I had seen another teacher use]. Had the Ss (students) do the exact same thing, then I asked them work in pairs and create their own maps but with the same cities, rivers and Mts. as I had used. This worked wonders, I was impressed by the participation of ALL the Ss during this task. ... I had originally intended to use this as a kind of warm-up, and BAM... I carried it out over a 45 minute period and the Ss were getting into, paying attention to 'L' and 'R'. I even heard one Ss (KM) exclaim to his partner; "すっごく楽しかった!" [That was very enjoyable] Have got to continue with this sort of task with this group (info gap and sharing information and working together).

Again, the observation was made that when students were working together with a little more personal freedom in how they went about a task, there seemed to be an enhancement of in-class motivation. This seems to be consistent with a study done by Julkunen (2001) regarding task-specific motivation. "In the classroom context, motivation can be seen as a continuous interaction process between learner and the environment." (p.29). He goes on to explain that in that study, "... the cooperative learning situation proved to be best for both low- and high-achievers." (p.32). In other words, tasks requiring students to

cooperate and/or work together can be used to create/enhance motivation in students regardless of achievement level.

One final segment regarding observed motivation within the classroom comes from an activity I had used with students from an advanced course and filtered that same activity down to a lower level class. This task involved students working in pairs or small groups. The goal of this task is to promote vocabulary through cooperative learning. Each pair or group is given a different list of vocabulary words from a reading activity prior to the actual reading of the passage, define those words, and then teach that new vocabulary to the rest of the class by explaining the words to their classmates. This had had an overall positive reaction from the Advanced course students, and I was curious how lower level students would find this task.

July 2, 2013: I decided to try out the vocab activity from the Advanced class on the lower level class today. The Ss reacted well to it. At times they struggled with how to explain a word, but most worked well together, and even used English in their pairs. When it came time to teach the words to the rest of the class, there were even "Oh, I get it" reactions from the peers. After the vocab task, I allowed the students to read the passage together, and this went a little faster than usual. Definitely something I want to try again and test out for real results.

2.1 Summary

There are a few themes that become evident when reading through these entries. One basic theme is that of wanting to offer to students more authentic (or natural, in the journal entries) opportunities in terms of oral communication and how to achieve that. Another trait that is similar in several entries is that of pair or group work. Students appear to enjoy their time working with each other, which can lead to a higher level of motivation.

When working together on a cooperative learning task, or having more formal interviews with peers instead of the teacher, students seem more animated and less inhibited than when working individually or being one-on-one with the teacher. Is this behavior also common in those students that chose to go abroad, even though they were not in the Advanced track? If that were shown to be a strong factor in motivating students to independently improve their L2 learning, could the integration of more cooperative task enhance motivation in more students? These questions are the basis for the following interview.

3. Interview

The following excerpts are from an interview I conducted with a former student (T0). The questions that were asked pertained to the individual's own experience with his L2 learning from the high school through the college level, and his personal view on his likes and dislikes regarding his own learning style. Along with these excerpts will also be some

analyses of the student's answers and how they might also relate to the journal entries.

Not all questions and responses are included here. I transcribed those that were most relevant to the research. It should be noted, that T0 explained that in junior and senior high school he did study independently; in junior high he attended an English conversation school, and in high school he studied grammar and reading on his own time outside of homework requirements. This practice, however ended once he began his college career. This type of pattern was also reported by Miura (2010).

In Japan, English is usually a required subject. Oral communication skills classes are also common as well. In the following responses, T0 states that he was enrolled in grammar as well as oral communication classes, and was an average student.

Q: When you took required English courses, what kind of a student were you? In other words, did you make good scores; did you make high grades?

A: No, just moderate. Average.

Q: Did you take only grammar and vocabulary classes, or did you also enroll in oral communication classes as well?

A: I had all of them. Reading and oral communication.

The next set of questions revolve around the topic of his likes and dislikes in those high school classes.

Q: Did you like studying English when you were in high school?

A: Yes. Absolutely.

Q: What did you like about it?

A: What did I like about it? Like talking; when I did the pair work I could speak to my friends. That was only fun stuff. Like grammar and reading and writing, I hated it.

Q: Did you enjoy oral communication because you were good at it, or did you like it because you could talk?

A: Just talk. I like talking. All of them I like it. I made, when I do speech, umm, I often hesitated to speak up. In college it is not. But I don't know why I didn't like speeches. If I involved in group work or whatever, it's fun.

Q: So, working with other people was fun?

A: Yes.

Here, the student responds that he what he enjoyed most about his L2 education was working and speaking with other students; this is very similar to what I had noticed from students in my classes at the college. It is interesting to note, also, that he did not feel comfortable giving speeches in front of the class. The next group of questions refers to his dislikes in high school classes.

Q: Why did you hate studying grammar, reading and writing?

A: Why? Because, when I do the grammar, reading and writing, well sometime, the teacher's talking. Teaching to us. In Japanese. In Japanese, I felt, for my opinion, passive class.

Q: You did not score well (in those classes)?

A: Not so bad, not so good. Just average. Because I like to study English, I like studying outside of class.

T0 explains that he didn't enjoy those classes because he felt he was being spoken at. He used the phrase 'passive class' when describing the teaching style in those classes. This is in contrast to his opinion regarding those classes in which he was allowed to work with others.

Q: When you enrolled in college, you were enrolled in Career English (English Department), yeah?

A: Yes.

Q: What was your original goal? Did you have a goal such as wanting to be a teacher, or in a job using English?

A: I had a dream to be a teacher, or tourism company. Using English. Living overseas or in Japan.

Here, T0 explains that as an incoming freshman in college he had the intention of using English in his career after graduation; he was motivated to study English at this point. However, as mentioned earlier, the incentive to study English in school would decline over time. The next set of questions and responses deals with his college career prior to deciding to go abroad to study.

Q: How did you find the [grammar] classes (within the English department)?

A: Not so often. I mean, uh, about grammar, after entering college, I noticed that grammar is boring. I read so many books about grammar. But the other classes, like writing and reading, I often focus on it. But the [oral communication] classes, that was enjoyable.

Q: Why were the oral communication courses enjoyable?

A: You know, working with others. Not only with teachers, but with my friends.

Again, the theme of working with others and finding support in that situation comes up as an enjoyable factor within the classroom.

At some point during his college career, T0 began to suffer in his studies. His absences became noticeable, and his grades began to drop. This is notable, because before he decided to study abroad for the purpose of improving his L2 learning, his academic standing was at the low-to-average level. What sparked this decline, and why did he suddenly decide to challenge himself to undergo an intensive educational experience?

Q: Before you went to Canada, were you motivated to learn English? Why was your energy going down? What happened?

A: When I was a sophomore, I was not. Almost my energy was going down. I felt bored. Not all of the classes. And also, one time I got an absence from class it tended to lead to be more absent. Now I know that.

Q: Why did you decide, if you were losing motivation, to go to school in Canada?

A: I didn't tell anyone. I just wanted to change my life. Actually, when I was a

junior I realized what I'm doing, and thinking about my English competence. My friends TOEIC score and other English skills were higher than mine. I just want to change it.

Q: It was your decision?

A: Yes. That was my decision.

Q: Do you think that the possibility of getting a good job helped you make that decision? Or did you just want to improve your English level?

A: Both. Mostly to improve myself, and to live overseas. Better job. Yes, I was thinking of future. If I didn't go to Canada, I couldn't achieve being a member of society.

TO admits that his academic standing was declining, and by the time he was a junior he wanted to make a difference. He states that, compared to his friends, his tests scores were lower and their other communication skills were above his own. He also explains that another reason he wanted to go abroad to study was for the benefit of possibly obtaining a good job once he graduated. This motivation shift may have developed from two possible factors; (1) he felt a personal need to increase his own L2 learning to the level of his friends, noticing that his skills were not competent enough, and (2) in order to make himself more attractive in the job market, he believed that he needed to improve his L2 skills.

3.1 Summary

The responses given during the interview were insightful in that many of them appear to run parallel with the observations from the teaching journal. Where it was noticed that enjoyment of the activities and tasks increased when students were given more freedom in working together, TO also mentions that his own learning strategy preference in the classroom was that of communicating and working with other students. However, the reasons for TO's shift in motivation during his junior year in college are not immediately transparent, and it would seem there is still need for a follow-up interview.

4. Conclusion

Dornyei (2005) implies that without sufficient motivation even learners with very strong aptitude toward acquiring the second language cannot accomplish their long-term goals. Motivation has been shown to be an integral part of student success in terms of not only grades, but also learning.

There are two questions stated at the beginning of this report; (1) Are there any motivational factors that are the same or similar among those students who chose to go abroad to further their studies; and, (2) Can some of those factors be transferred to the classroom to enhance motivation in learners who do not choose to study abroad? As this is an initial stage within this action research, these questions were not fully answered. It is still

unknown if certain motivational factors that do exist in some can be transferred to others in a classroom setting to help improve L2 learning.

It was noticed, however, that in observations of student behavior in the classroom and responses by T0 were similar; in both, working together in the classroom seems to foster a positive atmosphere in which students could enhance motivation. The types of activities in which this reaction was notice went beyond merely having conversations, but also was seen in other tasks that involved cooperation amongst students as well. T0 had also stated that his preferred personal learning style involved “working with others.”

It was suggested that there may be two factors involved in T0’s motivational shift. These two factors can both be explained as motivation, one type of motivation being intrinsic (the desire to improve his L2 skills for the sake of self-improvement), and the other being extrinsic, the promise of financial reward if his L2 improved. Ryan and Deci (2000) in their research also describe the two types of motivation. They also state about intrinsic motivation that, “... the evidence is now clear that the maintenance and enhancement of [intrinsic motivation’s] inherent propensity requires supportive conditions, as it can be fairly readily disrupted by various nonsupportive conditions.” (p. 70).

In other words, to support and enhance students’ intrinsic desire to learn English, the instructor needs to create an environment in which this can be fostered. As this is an action research, and this report is only the first stage of that, it is apparent that the questions laid out should be studied in a more detailed investigation.

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