Promoting Learner Autonomy in a Student-Centered Reading and Writing Class

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雑誌名 | 経営論集
号 | 83
ページ | 101-111
発行年 | 2014-03
URL | http://id.nii.ac.jp/1060/00006870/

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Allyson MacKenzie

Abstract:
Over the past few decades, educational reformers in North America and parts of Europe have called for a fundamental shift in the way teachers and students interact with one another and how material is presented (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Lewis & Williams, 1994; Attard, A., Di Iorio, E., Geven, K., & Santa, R., 2010). A move away from a more traditional or behaviorist model of teaching, often called the transmission model—where the teacher imparts knowledge to the student—toward a more learner-centered paradigm has been happening. In the student-centered model, students are encouraged to be more invested in their learning and to gain a deeper understanding via the internalization of information so that it is cognitively and socially meaningful. This paper examines a number of dimensions within the context of a foreign language classroom and describes a system that was incorporated into a fall semester Reading and Writing Course in order to promote learner choice and autonomy within a constructivist framework.

1. Learner Autonomy
1.1 Definition
The Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching & Applied Linguistics (Richards & Schmidt, 2010: 297) defines learner autonomy in language teaching as “the principles that learners should be encouraged to assume a maximum amount of responsibility for what they learn and how they learn it. This will be reflected in approaches to needs analysis, content selection, and choice of teaching materials and learning methods.”

In English classes in Japan students may seem unmotivated as a result of negative experiences or high negative anxiety. Such learners may have lost interest in learning a foreign language or second language (L2), and prefer passive or teacher-led classes where they are not required to participate actively (Dore & Sako, 1998; Kimura, Nakata, Okumura, 2001). In such classrooms, students may sit alone or at the rear of the class for an entire semester. Some may never or rarely use the L2 and others may produce rote responses as a result of memorization, a strategy for taking in material with no personal meaning.
1.2 Guided Learning

Changing this requires specific action by teachers and students alike. An essential element in developing more responsible and autonomous learners is the teacher’s explicit teaching of thinking skills (Lee, 1998). The teacher is also required to design teaching and learning activities that will critically engage students through a variety of tasks. In addition, the teacher must create ongoing opportunities for students to actively use and expand their language skills, practice higher order thinking skills where analysis, synthesis and evaluation of information is required. This, along with sharing their ideas with their peers in activities and tasks that challenge them to use language both spontaneously and creatively, will assist students in transferring skills that they can utilize in the real world.

1.3 Aim

The main aim of this paper is to provide a case for incorporating constructivist principles within the design of an English language course. The principal motivation was to promote a more autonomous, student centered classroom environment and to improve motivation by giving students choice over what and how they learn. This type of environment can hopefully lead to students who keep studying for their own development even after the course has finished.

2. Teaching Context

2.1 Placement

The TOEIC-Bridge is used as a placement tool for first year core English classes in the Faculty of Business Administration. The test takes place during the first week of April just before classes begin. In addition, all students complete a questionnaire with items that examine their attitudes towards English study. They are surveyed on willingness to complete homework, interest in studying abroad and desire to participate actively in class. Their TOEIC-Bridge score and survey results are combined to select 40 of the most motivated and able students who are then placed into the “Study Abroad” class.

2.2 “Study Abroad” Course (IA-21/IB-21)

Class activities in Semester 1 (IA-21) emphasize the development of speaking and listening skills. Students are taught a variety of learner roles (Wright, 1987) that they must actively take on and are made aware that each one of them must act in time as secretary, time-keeper, reporter,
manager, guide, organizer, instructor, evaluator, etc. within the group. Students have opportunities to work independently but spend the vast majority of class time engaging in exchanges with their peers. They collaborate on tasks, brainstorm, create mind maps and diagrams and provide feedback to each other. This provides ample opportunity for scaffolding to occur by assisting and being assisted. Students become engaged in the learning process. This process of helping them become more active and collaborative learners puts them in good stead for the next semester where they work collaboratively, but with much more autonomy.

In Semester 2 (IB-21), classes are not conducted in as rigid a lock-step fashion as IA-21. Students are required to organize their own learning more actively and independently. They are given choice as to what and how much they study. Students explore and examine information through lively discussion, independent and group research, collaborative project work, and reading and writing activities. They revisit content throughout the semester in order to synthesize the knowledge they have accessed, make connections and build upon them in order to develop some level of expertise.

2.3 Materials

A variety of material is utilized in IB-21. The textbook *Quest Intro: Reading and Writing* (Hartmann & Blass, 2007) is used. It contains units on education, business and sociology, each composed of two chapters. The text allows students to recycle information and gradually build up their knowledge of a variety of topics. Each chapter has five sections, which begin with a high-interest reading, moving next to a more challenging general interest text, and finally to an academic reading. Next are form focused writing activities that serve to assist students by providing review and reference materials as they compose drafts for the final writing activity. The final section has students compose a written text thematically linked to the chapter. While the textbook provides the basic framework and students are responsible for completing a number of tasks from the text, they are also required to choose from a selection of activities from a chart designed by the author.

The focus of IB-21 is reading and writing. The textbook offers a number of interesting themes and articles to read. However, the author felt that articles of a timely nature such as news and current events, topics of personal interest to students, and easy texts that students could read for pleasure were lacking. Thus, a variety of activities that students
could freely choose from—forming the acronym “I READ”, and worth 20% of their homework grade—was created. A short description of each activity follows. For a more detailed description of each activity, see Appendix 2.

- I: Intensive reading texts from current news featuring business topics of varying length and difficulty prepared by the author.
- R: Research report on a topic of interest (an Internet search for “KWL chart” will produce samples.)
- E: Extensive reading through graded readers that students self-access.
- A: A current news story students read for comprehension.
- D: Dictionary use to create a vocabulary journal OR draw a comic strip of a story read in a graded reader.
- BONUS: Students are able to petition for credit for other English work. For example, a student visiting the English Community Zone (ECZ) for an hour or longer to practice speaking would be granted a point.

2.4 Procedure

On the first day of class for fall semester (September 27th, 2013), all students were provided with their own IREAD chart (see Appendix 1) printed on A4 cardstock paper. The front of the page lists the activities in a bingo card style format. Students were able to submit up to six different types of assignments per cycle (IREAD+BONUS). For example, during the first cycle, the shortest one lasting only 12 days, students had the option of reading a 200 word intensive reading text and completing preview and comprehension questions, then discussing the article in class in a small group for a point. They were free to research a topic of their liking and submit a 350 word typed report or they could read 100 pages from a graded reader of their choice, both activities awarding them a point. They could choose to intensively read a short news story of their choice or to look up 15 new words in the dictionary and submit them in the form of a journal or typed copy, each activity giving them credit.

The rear of the chart listed the different types of activities along with a detailed explanation of the requirements to receive credit (Appendix 2). The method was explained in class with samples of some of the activities provided during the explanation for the students to examine. Students were advised to keep track of the work they submitted and the points they earned on their own IREAD chart. Late work was not accepted but students were able to submit it during the following cycle for credit in the
next stage. Work was collected five separate times over the course of the semester in roughly two and a half to three week intervals.

The 2nd semester breakdown of grades has 20% of a student’s final grade allotted to homework (IREAD activities) with each completed activity giving students one point towards their homework grade. A total of 25 activities are listed on the IREAD chart that students can complete and submit over the course of the semester, along with five possible bonus points. Highly motivated students could potentially collect a total of 30 points—10 points over and above the allotted total—if they completed every activity to a suitable standard.

3. Views of Learning

3.1 Transmission model vs. Constructivist model

The traditional approach to teaching does not promote the interaction between prior and new knowledge. It does not promote the conversations that are required for internalizing learning and gaining deep understanding. Information acquired from traditional teaching is not usually well integrated with other knowledge that students hold. This “new” knowledge is brought forth for exams, and school-type activities while being ignored or unused at other times.

A constructivist model of learning, often articulated in stark contrast to the transmissionist/behaviorist model, sees students as agents in their own learning. Through their activities and the making sense of their experiences, students create conditions where they learn for themselves and actively take ownership of information so that it has meaning to them.

Throughout the semester, students interacted and shared with their peers in the learning process through discussing the themes in the text, sharing the stories and topics they were reading and researching in their IREAD activities and receiving feedback. If students could not answer the questions I posed with competence and confidence for credit for IREAD activities they were required to discuss and share further with their peers until they could. It was only then they could receive IREAD credit.

3.2 Scaffolding

Some learners may be unsuccessful because their learning styles and strategies are not effective. Teachers can help those students by providing training in metacognition to help students become more aware of themselves as learners and to overcome weaknesses by adopting strategies that more successful learners tend to utilize. One means to
help is through instructional scaffolding, a theory proposed by the American psychologist Bruner in the 1950s.

Learner training activities can be incorporated into a lesson with stronger students or more motivated learners acting as guides or providing assistance in order to help the learner reach a goal that lies just outside their immediate reach. Examples of scaffolding that occurred in the classroom are the modeling of activities or coaching by the teacher or more able peers. Another way students got help from more able peers was through the use of jigsaw type activities. Weaker students could hear and see how their counterparts would present information, practice and get feedback before having to do it alone.

4. Student Feedback

In order to understand students’ perceptions of this newly implemented project and to further improve its execution in following semesters, an English reflection report and an anonymous questionnaire were assigned to students at the end of the fall semester in December of 2013. A total of 34 students completed the questionnaire in class. The report titled “My Active Participation in IB-21” was completed for homework and submitted via email by 33 students.

Student reports from the class questionnaire illustrate that doing group work and discussion, along with receiving feedback helped them to grow as learners. For the question: Group work is a good way to learn new things, 20 students answered “Agree”, 8 students answered “Somewhat agree”, 5 students answered “Somewhat disagree”, and 1 student “Disagree”.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat agree</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat disagree</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
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*Figure 1. Group work is a good way to learn new things*

For the question: Talking with classmates helps me to solve problems, 19 students answered “Agree”, 12 students answered “Somewhat agree”, 3 students answered “Somewhat disagree”, and none chose “Disagree”.

For the question Feedback from classmates helps me be a better learner, 17 students answered “Agree”, 13 students answered “Somewhat agree”, 3 students answered “Somewhat disagree”, and 1 chose “Disagree”.

Students who commented on autonomy and choice in the report wrote:
- I’m a more independent learner than in high school. I study English to improve my skill my ideal ways.
- In my high school English class, it’s for enter (sic.) exam of university. It’s not so interesting for me to study English but now it’s fun! I could do anything I want to learn!
- I learn new ideas. It is exciting! I can choose things I want to learn.
- I think what to do now, and what to study to improve my skills many times. Now I know how to study by myself.

Students who commented on collaborative learning and scaffolding in the report wrote:
- I discovered importance of studying English and communication with people. I feel exciting, fun and useful now about my English language learning.
- I cooperated with my friends to solve questions when doing pair work, group work. When I had problems, which I didn’t understand I got them to give me some advice. My friends didn’t
understand exercises, I taught them. I learned that teaching each other and communicating with classmates are very important to study English.

- I acquired skills for listening to English, speaking and writing it, not study to pass the exam. When I was a high school student, I studied alone on (sic.) the desk quietly. However, in this class, I studied with many friends, and talked in English, made reports in English. Especially in the second semester, I had to decide things that I should study alone. It’s very hard but I can improve my skills.

Students who commented on the IREAD activities in the report wrote:

- I really kept the heat on the IREAD every time. I was busier studying for the other subjects than last semester, but I spent much more time studying English at home. However, I was able to have a lot of different experiences. I feel that I came to try not to avoid reading or writing English. In the intensive reading, it was for the first time for me to sum up texts succinctly, because I did not do that when I was a junior high school student or a high school student. In addition, I liked the research the best of all, since I thought that I was able to receive what I really want to know. It was fun to write about what I was interested in. Finally, the extensive reading gave me a lot of encounters with interesting stories.

- “IREAD” is original homework program. It contained reading, writing, vocabulary, and thinking. Thorough Intensive reading and Article, I could raise my reading skill, and I could know and think some world news. My reflecting is that I wanted to all of “IREAD”, but I couldn’t. However, I want to continue to do like “IREAD”.

- I did IREAD as much as possible. I think that Extensive reading is the best work, and I learned that vocabulary is very important. Moreover I enjoyed reading book, so I could fun (sic.) IREAD homework every time. I want to continue it.

5. Conclusion

Overall, it seems as if a shift towards a more student-centered model where students are encouraged to make choices connected to their learning was embraced by a majority of the students in IB-21. It helped them understand the value and importance of sharing and collaborating with their peers to reach a common goal of learning. Students seemed to become more independent.

However, space for improvement was also found. Many students commented that they were much busier in the 2nd semester than the 1st, a result of the need to study for certification exams and other assignments beyond English class. Decreasing the number of activities and increasing points for more time consuming or challenging activities could help.

Second would be to implement a similar program on a smaller scale in IA-21. Doing so, students would have a better idea of the time and effort required to complete activities. This way, student perspectives could be incorporated to create a more equitable point system for IB-21 activities. This process of negotiation would be beneficial in building consensus between the teacher and students and make for an interesting group task where students are required to reach consensus and provide a rationale for the allotment. Determining how to encourage and lead
students to becoming more autonomous is not without its challenges, but the potential lifelong benefits are clear to see.

References


Appendix 1

ENGLISH IB21
SEMESTER 2 ACTIVITY CHART

NAME: ________________ STUDENT ID: _______

Keep this chart safe. It is your record of the work you complete. After I return your work, record it on your chart. Keep ALL your work (your portfolio) neatly organized in a folder. I may ask to see the portfolio at the end of the semester to confirm the number of points you earned.

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<tr>
<td>Sept. 30 ~ Oct. 11</td>
<td>INTENSIVE READING (200 words)</td>
<td>RESEARCH (KWL chart)</td>
<td>EXTENSIVE READING (100 pages)</td>
<td>ARTICLE</td>
<td>DICTIONARY (15 words)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>INTENSIVE READING (200 words)</td>
<td>RESEARCH (KWL chart)</td>
<td>EXTENSIVE READING (150 pages)</td>
<td>ARTICLE</td>
<td>DICTIONARY (20 words)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept. 30 ~ Nov. 15</td>
<td>INTENSIVE READING (300 words)</td>
<td>RESEARCH (KWL chart)</td>
<td>EXTENSIVE READING (200 pages)</td>
<td>ARTICLE</td>
<td>DRAW (マンガ) DISCUSS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept. 30 ~ Dec. 6</td>
<td>INTENSIVE READING (400 words)</td>
<td>RESEARCH (KWL chart)</td>
<td>EXTENSIVE READING (200 pages)</td>
<td>ASK &amp; ANSWER</td>
<td>DICTIONARY (25 words)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept. 30 ~ Dec. 20</td>
<td>INTENSIVE READING (500 words)</td>
<td>RESEARCH (KWL chart)</td>
<td>EXTENSIVE READING (200 pages)</td>
<td>ASK &amp; ANSWER</td>
<td>DRAW (マンガ) DISCUSS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept. 30 ~ Dec. 20</td>
<td>BONUS</td>
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NOTE: Remember to take pride in your work. Anything that is submitted that is too messy for me to read or has too many grammatical and/or vocabulary errors will not get you credit.
Appendix 2
GETTING CREDIT:

1. INTENSIVE READING: Read one of the articles I have prepared. These texts will be challenging. You will have to look up all the new words and answer questions about the text for credit. Discuss the contents of the text, any questions you may have and your answers with at least two others before you submit your work.

2. RESEARCH: Use the Know, Want to know, Learned (KWL) chart to make a plan, and then research a topic from our textbook or something you're interested in. Your report will contain an introductory paragraph (How/where did you hear about this topic? What do you already know?), one or two body paragraphs (What you want to discover/What you learned) and a conclusion (Will you learn more about this topic?) Talk to at least two others about what you learned, then submit the KWL chart and report (350 words typed).

3. EXTENSIVE READING: Choose one or more Graded Readers from my lending library, the Toyo Library, the ECZ, or a book you have. Read the required number of pages and complete a short report that you will submit. Talk about your book to at least three classmates once you have finished reading it. I may ask you some questions about the book so be prepared to answer.

4. ARTICLE: Find and print out a short article or news story (from a magazine, a newspaper, or online) that is connected to business or a topic in our textbook and read it carefully until you understand it well (it should be 250-350 words). Look up any new vocabulary and write the definitions down in English on a separate page. Submit both sheets together. I may ask you some questions about the article so be prepared to answer.

5. ASK & ANSWER: I will ask you questions about one of your EXTENSIVE READING texts from #3 or from an ARTICLE you submitted for #4. If you would like to do this activity, please write me a message on your report (#3) or article (#4).

6. DICTIONARY: Keep a list of new words you encounter and their definitions (but not connected to the INTENSIVE READING texts we use) and write them in a vocabulary journal (or you may type them and print the list out). Keep a record of where and when you read/saw/heard the words. I may ask you about your words.

7. DRAW & DISCUSS: Create a comic strip with about 10 frames that tells the story of one of the EXTENSIVE READING graded readers that you have read. Get in to a small group and discuss the book you read for a few minutes each. Ask your group members questions about the books they have read after they speak.

(2014年1月6日受理)