

A Participation Rubric for University Classes

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One of the biggest difficulties that university English teachers might face in Japan is clearly communicating their expectations for classroom participation, particularly under the following conditions: 1) the teacher in not fluent in Japanese and 2) the students are non-English majors with motivation issues. What does a teacher mean when he or she says, "you will be marked for your participation in class"? What is participation? To some students, participation means just showing up for class. This lack of understanding can interfere with the learning process for students and cause classroom management problems for teachers.

In this article, I will present an in-class participation assessment rubric that I have developed, which clearly outlines in English and Japanese my criteria for assessing student participation. This rubric has helped to bridge the gaps in languages and cultural expectations, and has helped students understand what active participation in a communicative classroom entails.

日本の大学の英語講師が抱える大きな困難の一つに、どのように学生に求めるクラスルーム・パーティシペイション(classroom participation)を学生に説明したら良いかということがあります。特に次の場合においては、これは講師にとって大きな困難となります。1) 講師の日本語が流暢でない場合。2) 受講生徒が英語を専攻していない場合(学習の動機が薄い場合)。

講師が学生に「クラスルーム・パーティシペイションは成績評価の大切な項目となります」と伝える時、講師の言うクラスルーム・パーティシペイションは、学生にはどのような意味となって伝わるのでしょうか?パーティシペイション(participation)とはいったい何でしょう?単に「出席していることである」と学生に受け取られている場合があります。この理解のずれが、学生の学習の障害となったり、講師のクラス管理に支障をきたします。

ここでは、私が自分の担当クラスのために作成したイン・クラス・パーティシペイション評価項目表を紹介いたします。私はこの表の中で、私が学生に求める評価項目を学生にわかり易いよう、英語と日本語の両方で明示しました。これにより私は、私と学生との間に生じがちな、英会話の授業で必要不可欠なパーティシペイションの意味のずれを埋め、軽減することが出来ました。

One of the biggest difficulties that university English teachers might face in Japan is clearly communicating their expectations for classroom participation, particularly under the following conditions: 1) the teacher in not fluent in Japanese and 2) the students are unmotivated to study English. If teachers are faced with these problems, how can they be remedied? One way to solve these problems is by defining what participation means to you and then communicating that to the students.

What is participation? More specifically, what does participation mean to Japanese students? For some students participation is simply attending the class, nothing more. Prior to teaching part-time at a private university in Suzuka, I had only taught at English conversation schools where most of the students were motivated to learn English. Coming into a university teaching context, however, took some serious

adjustment on my part, especially pertaining to motivation and classroom management. According to Kyoko Nozaki (1993), a Japanese professor of English at Kyoto Sangyo University, “[Japanese students] are trained to learn by silently watching and observing their teachers; thus, their classroom behavior may seem extremely passive to many foreign teachers, who believe in active participation.” (p. 29). In my classes, however, I was faced with more than just “passive” students; I had students who were completely indifferent about learning and who would disrupt others from learning. Some of these students would come into class completely unprepared; no textbook, no dictionary and no writing utensils. Others would disrupt the classroom entirely. For instance, I had students who would talk to their friends while I was trying to explain something to the class. I often had to remind these students to be quiet and to listen. At midterm, I asked students to give me some feedback about the class. I asked them to write down what they liked and disliked about the class. One exchange student wrote that he thought the class was too noisy.

Another problem in my classes was students falling asleep. These students who fell asleep in class were often baffled when they were told that they would be marked as absent; from the looks on their faces they seemed to think that attendance was all that matter. The only time they seemed to participate actively was when there was a grade involved, i.e. speaking tests, but I did not want to promote this kind of thinking among students. Instead, I wanted students to realize that their on-going participation was more important than their final test results. The problem that I faced, however, was finding a way to quantify participation. Furthermore, I was

unable to clearly explain to my students what participation meant to me due to my lack of Japanese. I often reminded students that their participation was more important than their test results, yet some students continued to come to class completely unprepared to study and unwilling to participate in activities.

If active participation is important to language learning then how can foreign teachers bridge the cultural and language gaps that they face when trying to define what participation means to them? One way to bridge these gaps is by defining what participation means to you and then clearly stating it to students in the form of a rubric. A rubric is basically “a list of specific standards to which students will be held accountable.” (Blaz, 2001, p.23)

The rubric in this article is an analytical rubric. This type of rubric consists of dividing the grading criteria into different levels, assigning different points for each level, and then adding the points up to give a final grade (Blaz, 2001). The main purposes for implementing a participation rubric in my classes were a) to clarify in Japanese, as well as English, what it meant to be an active participant in my class, b) to motivate students to take more responsibility for their own learning, and c) to quantify the final grades that students were given.

The Participation Rubric

The rubric (see Appendix A) is comprised of four main categories: preparedness, pair work, group work and individual work, and two subcategories: punctuality and discipline. As I mentioned before, some students came to class unprepared to learn and consequently these students

were unable to participate in some of the activities. In the category for preparedness, students were given 2 points for coming completely prepared with textbook, writing utensil, paper and a dictionary. After implementing this rubric, 15 out of 17 students in a sophomore compulsory English conversation class came to class with electronic dictionaries; a huge improvement considering that before the rubric was implemented only one or two students brought them.

In creating this rubric, it was important to connect how the students were assessed with the actual instruction that took place in the classes (O'Malley and Valdez Pierce, 1996). Most of my classes are centered on activities and those activities are broken down into three categories; pair work, group work (which includes teacher instruction, group discussions, or a whole class activity such as "Find someone who...") and individual work (listening and writing tasks). Another reason for marking students accordingly is because I noticed that some students excelled in one area but were weak in others. For instance, one student who was extremely shy even in his L1, was unable to participate in pair work activities. At the same time, this particular student always listened in class and did all of his individual work. In the end, this student did not receive any marks for pair work activities but he did for individual and group ones and, therefore, was able to pass the course.

The current rubric was the result of three years of implementation and refinement. The original rubric was used in both freshman and sophomore compulsory English conversation classes. Both of these classes consisted of students who were either beginners or false beginners and many of the students did not have much intrinsic motivation

for learning English. The original rubric had to be revised because the list of criteria was too vague and did not account for extremely shy students like the one mentioned above. The current rubric was used for two years.

This current rubric was also used in two higher level English conversation classes; one was a freshman compulsory English conversation class of low-intermediate to high intermediate students and the other was a third year elective course for a mixed level of students. In both cases this rubric was not advantageous because most of the students came prepared, participated in classroom activities, and did homework assignments. On the whole, most of the students were quite motivated to improve their English skills and, therefore, did not need much extrinsic motivation, such as a participation rubric, to help them learn English.

How to implement this rubric in the classroom

1) The first day

On the first day of class, students are given a copy of the participation rubric which includes both English and Japanese. Along with the bilingual rubric, students are given a letter explaining the class rules and grading system, as well as a personal profile form for each student to fill out. The students' personal profiles, along with an attached picture, are placed into a class file. The personal profile forms also include individual participation rubrics (see Appendix B) for each student.

2) In-class observations

While it is impossible to observe all the students all of the time, it is possible to observe at least eight to ten students per class. Students are usually marked towards the end of the

lesson while they are working in their workbooks. In a class that meets twice a week for a 12-week semester, students can be assessed anywhere from eight to ten times, depending on the size of the class and how the classes are conducted. On average, in a class consisting of about twenty students, I was able to assess one student at least eight times. This may seem like the students are not being assessed often enough, but this estimate also takes into account that some of the class periods were used for speaking tests and therefore the students could not be marked for their participation. For large classes, teachers can arrange students into small groups (about four students each) and assess three to four groups per class.

3) *Mid-term*

At mid-term, students are given the original participation rubric (Japanese and English) that they received on the first day of class, and asked to assess themselves. Afterwards, the teacher marks the students' participation rubrics with his or her own assessment in a different color and hands them back to the students. This mid-term assessment is an opportunity for the students to see where they need to improve. I have seen several students make more of an effort after receiving feedback from me on the mid-term assessment.

4) *Final Grades*

The student's final participation grade is marked by averaging all the assessment rubrics (about eight rubrics per student). For example, one student always came to class on-time (2 points), on average was well-disciplined (2 points), but sometimes he came to class partially prepared (1 point), did some of the pair work, group work activities and individual work (1 point each), therefore his average grade for participation was eight points out of twelve, about 66

percent. In this class participation was worth 50 points. This particular student received about 33 points for his overall participation grade.

Conclusion

This assessment rubric has proven to be an effective tool for bridging the gaps in languages and cultural differences in my classrooms. By providing my students with an explanation, in both Japanese and English, of my criteria for assessing them, I have found that students are coming to class more prepared and more eager to participate. I have also discovered that the tensions that existed before have now dissolved away and that students are taking more responsibility for their learning. Moreover, having a participation rubric has provided me with a way to be more objective when dealing with my students.

This assessment rubric worked well because I revised it to suit my teaching context, but that does not mean that it will work for every context. Some of the criteria may not be suitable for all classrooms. As I mentioned above, this rubric was not advantageous in the more advanced classes because the students already had intrinsic motivation for studying English. The more advanced students were already at a level which enabled them to effectively communicate with their peers. In cases such as this one, the rubric was not effective because the students willingly participated in the classes. By providing the advanced students with creative activities, I was able to motivate the students. The less motivated students, however, were not affected by these activities.

Teachers using this rubric also have to consider what they want to assess. It is important that the students are assessed based on what or how the teacher is conducting the lessons. Also, if a teacher is not in control of his or her own grading system then using a participation rubric might be troublesome. For example, one of my colleagues could only make participation worth ten percent of his students' final grades. In the end, he realized that assessing the students' participation was too much work for something that was only worth ten percent of the final grade.

Finally, implementing an assessment rubric is time-consuming, but I have found it to be successful in cases where the students' motivation is an issue. Furthermore, by providing beginners with an explanation of the criteria in Japanese, students will be able to fully understand what participation means to the foreign language teacher. A rubric also provides feedback, which allows the students to understand the teacher's grading system, which in turn gives students a chance to succeed.

References

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- O'Malley, Michael J. & Valdez Pierce, Lorraine. (1996). *Authentic Assessment for English Language Learners: Practical Approaches for Teachers*. USA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc.

APPENDIX A

Student's Name: _____ Class: _____ Date: _____

	Yes 2	No 0
On Time (授業時間に遅れずに時間通りに出席している)		
Well Disciplined and non-disruptive (講師の指示に従い、私語等の授業の妨げをしない)		

	(2)	(1)	(0)
Comes Prepared (授業準備)	Brings dictionary, textbooks, pen or pencil, and paper. (辞書、テキスト、筆記用具、ノート類を準備の上、授業に出席している)	Brings everything except for a dictionary. (辞書以外の必要なものを全て準備の上、授業に出席している)	Does not bring textbook and dictionary. AND/OR does not bring pencil, notebook, or paper. (テキスト、辞書を準備せずに出席している。又は、筆記用具、ノート類を準備せずに出席している)
Pair work (ペア・ワーク)	Speaks English and participates 100% in the activity. (英語で100%積極的に参加している)	Participates in the activity at least half of the time. (少なくとも半分の時間(50%)は積極的に参加している)	Only participates a little or not at all. (少しか参加していない、又は全く参加していない)
Group work (グループ・ワーク)	Speaks English and participates 100% in the activity. (英語で100%積極的に参加している)	Participates in the activity at least half of the time. (少なくとも半分の時間(50%)は積極的に参加している)	Only participates a little or not at all. (少しか参加していない、又は全く参加していない)
Individual work (個別のワーク)	Completely finishes the work on his/her own. Completes the work on time. (自力で、時間通りに、指示されたことを仕上げる事が出来る)	Does most of the work, but does not complete all of it. (ほとんど自力で指示された事が出来るが、完全には仕上がっていない)	Does not do the work at all. OR Copies friend's work. (全く指示されたことをしていない。又は、クラス内の人のものを写している)
Total (合計)	12/12		

APPENDIX B

Student's Name:

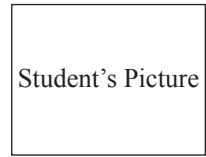
Student's #:

Where are you from?

What is your major?

What are your interests?

What country do you want to visit?



Date:

	Yes 2	No 0
On Time		
Well Disciplined and non-disruptive		

Date:

	Yes 2	No 0
On Time		
Well Disciplined and non-disruptive		

Date:

	Yes 2	No 0
On Time		
Well Disciplined and non-disruptive		

	(2)	(1)	(0)
Comes Prepared			
Pair work			
Group work			
Individual work			

	(2)	(1)	(0)
Comes Prepared			
Pair work			
Group work			
Individual work			

	(2)	(1)	(0)
Comes Prepared			
Pair work			
Group work			
Individual work			