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Challenging Assumptions
Looking In, Looking Out

Developing self-efficacy through reflection

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Recently in the field of Second Language Acquisition, we have been blessed with much research focused on what language learner motivation consists of and how motivation theory links with learner development and autonomy. Yet, there is little research investigating constructs of learner *demotivational* states and how language teachers actually challenge such learner states. In this research, students were asked how they viewed their past experiences of language learning. An analysis of their answers suggested that students have passive attitudes toward language learning and skeptical views of utilizing English. In response to our students' voices, action research was conducted wherein students were asked to write reflections on their learning at the end of every class in order to investigate how reflecting on their own learning would lead to the development of self-efficacy and motivation to study.

第二言語習得 (SLA) では近年活発に学習者の自律や動機づけに関する研究として、学習者がすでに持っている動機の分析や学習者が自律的に学習を成功させようとする努力をどのようにサポートすればよいのか、といった議論が主であり、実際に教室でみられる、学習に対する無気力感や嫌悪感といったマイナスの要素に関する研究はまだまだ稀少である。本稿では、大学一年生の英語学習者の過去の英語学習経験調査から、授業ごとの学習の内省を学習者自らが書きのこすことを通して、それまで抱いていた自己のイメージや自己効力感 (self-efficacy) や英語学習に対する動機づけがいかに変化したかを調査したアクション・リサーチである。

One crucial issue confronting university educators is how to motivate students to learn. As Dörnyei (2005) states, however, ESL/EFL researchers have overlooked learner *demotivational* states. Although much research focuses on learner motivation, identifying useful strategies for enhancing learner motivation, and analyzing components of learner motivation, few shed light on learner demotivational states.

Nakata (2006) compares two similar terms: *amotivation* and *hopelessness*. According to Nakata, demotivation, if contrasted with amotivation and hopelessness, is temporal, and thus, not particularly serious. Consequently, in appropriate circumstances, the demotivational state may disappear, the learner returning to a state of motivation.

Learner autonomy

The second aim of this research is to enhance student self-efficacy through activities in which they engage in their present English course. The aim is for the students to become autonomous learners who identify their own particular interests, search for strategies themselves, and attain a sense of well-being and satisfactory results for themselves. Learner autonomy is sometimes viewed rather skeptically in Japanese educational settings due to reported characteristics of East Asian society, such as collectivism and distance toward authority (Littlewood, 1999). Yet, Littlewood claims that Japan and its culture are most influenced by Western cultures, and in terms of collectivism and acceptance of power and authority, Japan is the lowest-ranked among the East Asian nations. Furthermore, Littlewood, quotes Aoki and Smith (1996, in Littlewood, 1999) that “the most important issue...is not whether autonomy itself is appropriate, but how negotiated versions of autonomy can be best enabled in all contexts” (p.72). Littlewood presents a preliminary step, *reactive autonomy*, toward *proactive autonomy*, for learners. To enable achievement of reactive autonomy, teachers must create direction and offer effective ways for learners to acquire the target language. Once they find their direction, “learners organize their resources autonomously

in order to reach their goal” (p.75). Proactive autonomy is the aim whereby “learners are able to take charge of their own learning, determine their objectives, select methods and techniques and evaluate what has been acquired” (p.75). Since the first step toward learner autonomy requires the teacher to help the learner by offering direction and effective learning methods, the researchers in this study decided to teach the basic features of English in order for the students to lead themselves toward proactive autonomy.

Self-Efficacy

At the beginning of the course, the students were asked about their past learning experiences and their self-efficacy. Their answers suggested that the students had weak self-efficacy toward English language learning. Hayakawa (1980) claims that how we view and conceptualize ourselves determines how we act and develop ourselves. How we view ourselves creates our conception of ourselves. Thus, it is important for students to modify their self-image to that of someone with self-efficacy. To build a new image of belief in themselves, the present research asked for confirmation of what they learn in each lesson. Deci and Ryan (2000) discuss the importance of learners having competence as well as autonomy and relatedness. Self-efficacy is a subjective, introspective view on one’s own competence. To facilitate student competence, feedback and communication between learners and the teacher, i.e., relatedness, is necessary. In this research, the researcher commented on what students wrote on reflection sheets, with some student responses to such comments—weaving written conversation and promotion of self-efficacy in learning English.

Introduction of the study

Reasons for the study

Researchers in Japan have recently reported that students exhibit a lack of learning motivation, and sometimes even manifest resistance to studying in the classroom. In 2007, more than 50% of high school graduates entered universities in Japan. University education is now offered to the majority of young people rather than a limited few, as was the case in the past. University education is now depicted as *general education*. At the same time, motivational issues have come to the fore. There are students who enter university, but who do not yet have a clear idea of their direction for study there, sometimes showing little motivation, or even a demotivation for learning.

The present research was conducted to attain some understanding of students' past English learning experiences as well as how they view themselves as language learners.

Although there has been much research on student motivation over the past thirty years, research on learner demotivation, i.e., a temporal state of a lack of motivation (Nakata, 2006) is, as yet, insufficient. It seems crucial to know how each learner's demotivational state has been shaped and how teachers can minimize the effects of, or change, this passive state into an active, productive one. In this study, in order to determine how the students feel and learn, participants were asked to write what they learned in Japanese and to reflect on each lesson using *reflection sheets* prepared by the researcher. Since most of our students have difficulty figuring out the fundamental structures of English, we decided to combine basic features of English, such as grammar and vocabulary, into our lessons.

Research question

Can students promote their own self-efficacy through basic English instruction and written reflections about their learning experience?

Participants

Two groups of university freshmen participated in this research (Class A and Class B). The 27 (including 5 female) Class A students are majoring in science. The level of the class is the lowest among the seven levels offered. The 28 (including 4 female) Class B students are majoring in law. The proficiency levels of students in this class range from very low to low-intermediate.

The research process

Step 1: Past learning experience questionnaire

At the beginning of the semester, the participants in this research were asked about their past English learning habits, and reasons for satisfaction or dissatisfaction toward their high school English grades.

Step 2: Reflections

The students were asked to write their reflections on each class and the goals that emerged from those reflections. For Class A students, the researcher collected the reflection sheets twice during the semester, writing comments and words of encouragement in the margin. For Class B students, at the end of each class, students wrote self-reports on what they learned, and the researcher wrote back to them every

week on the same reflection sheet. There were two parts to the reflection sheet. The first part was about *what was learned in that day's class*. The second was about *what was discovered in the class* or *what the student would do next to improve herself*. Ten weeks of reflections could be recorded on a single sheet, so the students could read their previous entries and teacher comments as they wrote new reflections.

Prior to undertaking this research, we had many discussions concerning reasons for the low self-efficacy of our students. Our assumption is that their lack of self-efficacy resulted from their past learning experiences in English classes. Therefore, new experiences should be given priority in class. This reflection task is designed to give *two* new experiences. It is hoped these experiences will stimulate students to start believing in themselves.

First, by writing their own reflections, students experienced expressing their ideas to others, as well as themselves. In traditional classrooms, teachers usually present the English knowledge to be learned, so the only thing students have to do is to remember as much as possible. They have little opportunity to express their feelings and opinions to their teacher and peers in class. Their attitude toward learning English is very passive, waiting until the teacher tells them what to do.

However, through self-reflection, the students were able to talk to their inner-selves and discover what they really thought about the lesson itself and their own learning. Writing reflections enabled them to communicate with the teacher. This process will allow them to begin to take control over their learning. As they become more accustomed to writing reflections, they will take a more active part in their English classes.

The students' second new experience was self-evaluation. In traditional classrooms, the teacher evaluates a student's performance through testing. Students have to follow their teacher's instructions in order to get good scores on tests. If a student has a different learning style from what the teacher expects, she cannot achieve good test scores. When the teacher evaluates a student's performance only from test scores, she unconsciously makes the student follow her way. By considering only the test results, students might not notice their good points, only their errors. The more they notice their mistakes, the more they lose self-efficacy. This reflection task will give students the second new experience of evaluating themselves. Self-evaluation will help them to see the positive sides of their learning. Forming a positive attitude toward learning will encourage them to have more self-efficacy.

Results

Students' preparation for the classes and satisfaction toward the grade received in high school

When asked about whether or not they prepared for English classes in high school, 18 out of 27 students from Class A, and 21 out of 28 Class B students, answered that they had not prepared (see Table). Although these were different groups of students at two different universities, the ratio of the students who had prepared for English classes was around half of those who did not. When asked about whether or not they were satisfied with the grades they had received in the past, 7 out of 27 from Class A said that they were satisfied and the remaining 20 answered they were dissatisfied with their

grade. Similarly, in Class B, 6 students answered that they were satisfied, and the remaining 22 students said that they were dissatisfied (see Table). Once again, the two different groups had similar ratios. In both groups, only around one-third answered that they were satisfied with the results compared to those who were dissatisfied. In either case however, the reasons vary (see Table).

The participants' responses regarding their past English learning experiences and their attitude toward the grades they received suggest that the participants did not have self-efficacy, i.e., they did not believe they could acquire what they were being taught. Students responses indicated that the

majority of them were not satisfied with their past grades and that they did not have the habit of preparing for class.

Some participants reported that they did not study hard enough, and that was the reason why they were not satisfied with the grade, yet the majority stated that the main reason for their dissatisfaction was actually getting a bad grade. Although the students were not asked directly about their self-efficacy, their responses indicate that they may not have a sense of self-efficacy—they tended not to believe they could acquire that what they were being taught. In other words, what we hypothesized and what the students thought in terms of self-efficacy were congruent.

Table: Results of survey

	Class A (freshmen, science majors)	Class B (freshmen, law majors)
Class size	27 (5 females)	28 (4 females)
Class level	Lowest among seven levels	Very low to low-intermediate
Past learning experiences	Didn't study at home: (18)	Didn't study at home: (21)
Reasons for satisfaction toward high school English grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • successfully graduated (1), • received a fairly good grade (2) • scored above 60 (1) • anyway, the results (2) • did my best (1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • attained the target grade (1) • received a good grade (3) • didn't fail the course (1) • no reason given (1)
Reasons for dissatisfaction toward high school English grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • didn't receive good grades (10), • didn't study hard enough (4), not good but bad grade (1), • didn't understand English (2), • wasn't smart (1), • no reason given (2) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • received poor grade (11), • didn't know how to study English (1), • didn't study hard enough (2), • didn't understand English (4), • had a bad teacher (1), • no reason given (3)

Results of reflections

After one semester, the reflection sheets were analyzed. The comments were classified into 3 categories: lesson content, classmates, and learning attitudes (see Appendix for some examples). Two patterns were found (Cases X and Y). Some students were focused enough to see changes in their own reflections (Case Y).

Case X:

The majority of our students could be classified as *Case X* students. They have two common characteristics. First, they could not point out their strengths and weaknesses in learning English even through reflections. They knew that their English knowledge was very limited, but they did not know what they should do to make up for this lack of knowledge. They continued to have bad self-images.

Second, they wrote only a few lines for their future plans. For example, “I will make a better effort to study (*motto doryoku shitai to omoimasu*).” Or “Anyway, I will do my best (*ganbaru*).” In Japanese, these comments indicate positive attitudes that show a motivation to study. The teacher can expect some improvements in the students’ behavior. But do these comments really mean that? It seems that they are too abstract for students to take new actions. They should make more concrete plans that can be put into action immediately. Plans that are too abstract prevent them from taking a step forward. Therefore, it can be considered that *Case X* students, which make up the majority of our subjects, could not make use of the reflection tasks effectively.

Case Y:

Though the overall tendency of students fell short of reviewing or analyzing their learning through their reflections, there was one exceptional student who seemed to make full use of the reflection task. This student had been labeled as being as a slow learner, and when asked about his past experiences, he answered that he had never prepared for English classes until he entered university. He is, however, the most enthusiastic learner in the class. He prepared a full length Japanese translation of each chapter of the textbook.

At the beginning of the course, this student wrote in his reflection sheet, “I hope I will like English.” Also, he selected two words, ‘justice’ and ‘freedom’ from the song that was to be memorized for class. At the third meeting, he wrote, “I will take care of the Japanese national flag more,” which was related to the content of the text concerning how the national flag was treated in the U.S., especially during the Vietnam War period. At the fifth meeting, he talked about racial discrimination, reflecting the textbook content. At the seventh meeting, he responded to the content of the text with, “I wish I had a T-shirt with the words, I love my hometown.” He then added, “I will love my hometown as much as I can.” He declared in the reflection of the ninth meeting, “I would like to be a person who can say his opinion directly to anyone, even to the one who has power.” All through the course, he responded to the content of the textbook sincerely.

This was very different from the other students, who only wrote some vocabulary items to be remembered. It seems that somewhere in the middle of the course, this student decided to write about what he thought about the content.

He carefully chose what elements to record on the reflection sheet while continuing to prepare a complete Japanese translation of each chapter. Through a lot of pair work, his partner also began to write about the content of the text and tried to write his own thoughts toward it. The student seems to have influenced his peer by preparing for class and trying to understand and respond to the message of the author.

Since this student always had the Japanese translations with him, it was easy to recognize his understanding of the text and the construction of the sentences. His English has improved a lot during the semester, and now he is one of the most advanced students in the class.

It is assumed from this *Case Y* student that if the level of reflection goes beyond just recording individual words, reflection plays an important role in enhancing the understanding and comprehension of classroom materials. In other words, it appears that those who are more eloquent speakers of what should be learned from the class and who express their opinions and reactions from their subjective, real voices, are the ones who consequently improve their learning through reflection. This student, who successfully voiced his opinions and feelings, has been showing increasingly strong motivation.

In terms of the relationship between motivation and self-efficacy, it is necessary to clarify self-efficacy. In this study, self-efficacy is a subjective, introspective view on competence when managing particular tasks or recognizing one's ability to understand in class. The term, self-efficacy, is used not to indicate general competence of the students themselves, but rather to indicate how each individual perceives his or her own ability and the accumulation of positive views toward themselves.

Even if they have a sense of self-efficacy, Japanese students tend not to explicitly express such perceptions. Therefore, expressing a fairly deep understanding or reaction on the reflection sheet, as done by the *Case Y* student, for example, would indicate that the student senses his self-efficacy in reading comprehension and understanding of the English used. By the same token, for other students who showed motivation or used the word “fun” (see Appendix), there was an indication that their commitment or understanding was strong enough to be intrinsically involved in the task, leading to a feeling of self-efficacy.

Discussion

In our study, a few students were able to change their attitudes through reflecting on classroom tasks. The *Case Y* student felt comfortable when he studied English. Thus, this reflection task can contribute to enhancing a student's self-efficacy. This indicates that our action research is on the right track. However, most of the students (*Case X*) could not utilize the reflection tasks effectively. They wrote reflections as if they just wanted to please the teachers. Our goal was to help students reflect on their learning. The ability of self-reflection enables students to find a way to change their attitudes. Therefore, a review of this project found some weaknesses.

The purpose of the reflection task should be clearly stated. When writing their reflections, the students were advised to make a plan that they could begin from that night. A hint was dropped that small step plans will help them change their attitudes. In addition, comments were made on their reflections. When students wrote only that they would do

their best, a comment such as, *What will you do exactly to do your best? State a small plan* was written. Such comments seemed to be the only way to promote the reflection process. However, it was discovered that the purposes of the reflection tasks were not explicitly stated. The importance was only implied. As a result, many students did not understand why they were given this task. Our procedure failed to train the students to learn the proper way to reflect. Therefore, teachers should clearly state the benefits of this task in the first class.

Furthermore, if students are given more opportunity to share their reflections with their peers, they will become aware of and adopt new ideas that will lead to new ways of reflecting. This is widely known as *near peer role models* (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003; Murphey, 1998). When they really understand the merits of the task, they can focus on the task itself and feel comfortable doing it. When they start reflecting on themselves, students will notice their strengths, which will enhance their self-efficacy. This reflection task could be the first step toward feeling they might learn something in English and motivating them to keep learning in the future.

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Appendix

Excerpts from students' reflections

On learning the contents

We study 5 basic sentence patterns today. Although we studied this in junior and high school, it is very helpful to have these patterns.

Today's section shows us some vocabulary which I can use in my life. It's fun.

We watched the movie, "The Miracle Worker." I am very interested in that. More than that, I could comprehend some of their conversations.

Today's lesson was very difficult to understand even after hearing a translation from my teacher.

On classmates

We did shadowing today, and as usual, I didn't do smoothly and got behind the other students. I would like to improve my reading.

We translated appointed paragraphs in a group, and I discovered that I understand much better if we work in groups.

On their attitudes toward study

(goal-setting)

I decided to change my attitude toward this class and today I did my best. I think it works some.

I found out that I don't fully understand the 5 basic sentence patterns, so from now on, I am more careful with those patterns when I read.

(noticing)

Since my vocabulary is not so large, it is important to study on my own in order to memorize more vocabulary.

I couldn't translate my part well. I am sure that the reason is my poor grammatical knowledge.

I figured out that understanding individual words is not enough. I should know more about grammar to understand the passage.