Student ideas about classroom democracy

Eric Hauser
University of Electro-Communications

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This paper presents results of teacher-research on student ideas about classroom democracy, as expressed by university students participating in a democratic EFL class. The primary source of information came from student writing, supplemented by notes taken by the teacher and a student-designed course evaluation form. Students expressed an instrumental orientation towards classroom democracy, seeing it as a means to encourage active participation. They also saw a contrast between their democratically-organized EFL class and their other, undemocratic classes.

　この論文は、民主的な英語授業に参加している大学生が述べた、教室民主主義（classroom　democracy）に対しての考えについての教師による授業研究（teacher　research）の結果を発表する。学生が書いた文章が第一の情報源で、教師／研究者の覚書きや学生が作成した授業評価アンケートもデータとして使われた。学生は、積極的な参加を促す方法として、教室民主主義を物の見方の一つの道具と捉えた。尚、民主的に組織された英語授業と他の非民主的な授業を対照的なものとして認識した。

As a teacher of EFL at the university level in Japan, I have for several years been attempting to introduce democracy into classes which I am responsible for. My reason for doing this is that it is consistent with my values as a teacher. On the one hand, I am a firm believer in participatory democracy. On the other, it is clear that societies which are claimed to be democracies (e.g. the US, Japan) are, in reality, not so democratic. Amin (2004), for example, argues that the sort of democracy found in such societies is merely "low-intensity democracy," limited to opportunities to participate occasionally in elections in which the range of alternatives is extremely narrow. Or, in work which continues to be relevant today, Mills (1956) analyzes how political power in the US is controlled by an economic, political, and military elite, while Newton (1996) demonstrates the existence of severe political repression in the US. In Japan, while the role of the military may for now be limited, political power is probably no less controlled by an economic and political elite, with the latter including the higher levels of the state bureaucracy. In addition, while the degree of political repression may be less severe than that documented by Newton, the

existence of such repression in Japan cannot easily be denied (Takahashi & Saitoh, 2004). Nor are major institutions within these societies (e.g. schools) generally organized democratically. Yoneyama (1999), for example, analyzes authoritarianism in Japanese education, while McLaren (2003) argues that there has been a "retreat of democracy" in US education. The pursuit of the democratic classroom, in part by highlighting how limited democracy is in school, can be one small way of bringing democracy into education. It may also help to highlight just how limited democracy actually is in so-called democratic societies.

It is also possible that classroom democracy in a foreign language class, by helping to foster a better language learning environment, can facilitate language learning. However, assuming that this is the case, I consider it to be an extra benefit of, rather than an essential justification for, classroom democracy. A corollary of this is that, if it were shown that classroom democracy had no effect on language learning, this alone would not be reason enough to abandon the pursuit of democracy in the classroom.

A basic definition of classroom democracy (Shor, 1996) is that it involves the teacher and students sharing decision-making power. For example, I try to promote classroom democracy by asking students to vote on rules and procedures (Appendix 1), generate and choose topics, decide on specific activities (e.g. reading one another's writing), find and/or choose materials, and participate in the ongoing design of the class. An important aspect of classroom democracy is genuine dialogue (Freire, 1970; Shor, 1987) between teacher and students. There is some overlap with learner autonomy in language classrooms (e.g.

Smith, 2003) in the use of, for example, individual grading contracts (Appendix 2). However, the focus of learner autonomy is student control over *personal* decisions, while the focus of classroom democracy is on shared control over *group* decisions. Classroom democracy may be uncommon in mainstream schools in Japan as elsewhere but, as shown by the free school movement (Okuchi, 1992), it is not completely alien.

It is important to consider, of course, what the presumed beneficiaries—the students—think about classroom democracy. When students, who may have had little or no experience with democracy in the classroom, are asked about what they think of such democracy, how do they answer? After they have had some experience in a democratic classroom, how do they respond when asked about democracy? The teacher-research reported in this paper involves an initial attempt to answer such questions.

Researching student ideas about classroom democracy

In one of the universities at which I have taught EFL, in the 2007 academic year, I was responsible for a discussion and writing class for second-year students, which had an enrollment of 29 regularly-attending students. Students' proficiency in English varied, but they had all presumably met the university's relatively stringent admission requirements for English and had self-selected to take a course taught through English. All students were majoring in a foreign language other than English. Class met for 90 minutes a week across the academic year. I intended the class to be organized democratically, as described above.

In order to learn about what students think of classroom democracy, I engaged in teacher-research in this particular classroom.

I gathered information on student ideas about classroom democracy from four different sources. First, one of the writing components of the class involved each student keeping a journal, in which they answered assigned questions. Usually, these questions were related to the current discussion topic, but I also twice, for the first journal assignment and the seventh, asked them questions related to classroom democracy. I collected these journals every few weeks and responded to the students in writing. The journals were thus one form of dialogue, albeit limited, between students and me. Students' answers to the questions about classroom democracy were the primary source of information. The second source of information came from detailed notes about what happened in each class session, which I wrote immediately following each session, with a few things occasionally added later. These notes were supplemented by lesson plans and class materials.

Near the end of the school year, I guided the students in developing a course evaluation form. The students generated a list of questions which they would later answer to provide me with feedback about the course. The third and fourth sources of information come from this form. As it is important to understand how this form was developed, I will describe the process in detail. After explaining that I wanted the students to design the evaluation form for this class, I asked pairs of students to think of at least one question that could be included in such a form. The result was a list of 53 questions, which I distributed in the next class. I asked the students to shorten this list by identifying questions that were asking the same thing. I also asked them to suggest questions that they felt should be added. This resulted in a shortened list of 32 questions, which I distributed in the next class, when I asked them to decide which questions should be included and which should be dropped. This resulted in a list of fourteen strongly supported questions and fourteen weakly supported ones. In the next class, the students focused on which of the fourteen weakly supported questions should be kept and which should be rejected. This allowed me to develop a draft course evaluation form of fifteen questions. In the next class, the students suggested several modifications of how the questions could be answered and suggested the inclusion of space for additional comments. Based on these changes, I made the final draft (Appendix 3) and presented it to the students for their approval, which they granted. On the last day of class, the students completed this form individually. The two sources of information provided by this course evaluation form were the questions that the students considered important and relevant enough to include and their answers.

To summarize, the four different sources of information were: (1) students' written answers to journal questions related to classroom democracy, (2) my observations recorded in my notes, (3) the questions included on the evaluation form, and (4) the completed evaluation forms. I obtained oral consent to conduct and share this research.

Lack of democracy in Japanese classrooms, active and passive students

Initial ideas

One of the questions included in the first journal assignment, given on the first day of class, was, "What do you think about the idea of classroom democracy?" At this time, the students had probably had little or no experience with classroom democracy. They had, though, listened to me explain classroom democracy and had discussed a list of questions (Appendix 4) relevant to how they desired to organize the class. This discussion was conducted first in small groups and then as a whole class, with the former in a mixture of Japanese and English, but the latter all in English. In my notes, I described the whole-class discussion as "relatively quiet," with more students showing "a willingness to contribute" as it progressed. I also described an orientation to teacher control of opportunities to contribute to the whole-class discussion, writing that most contributing students "first raised a hand and waited to be called on."

In general, students wrote positive comments, but there were also some reservations. The most negative comment came from a student who missed the first two class sessions, and thus missed my explanation of classroom democracy and related student discussions. This student wrote, "I think that the idea of classroom democracy is important but I want the teacher to handle this class because the teacher have accumulated considerable experience." (In quotes from students' journals, violations of standard English conventions are uncorrected.) It is interesting that this student prefaced his rejection of classroom democracy

with an assertion of its importance and that he justified his rejection by appealing to my "considerable experience." In so designing his answer, this student displayed his awareness that he was disagreeing with the teacher, me, who would be reading what he had written. It is important to recognize that, while he was not merely writing what he thought I wanted to read, he was designing his answer for his recipient and for a particular context. This point can be generalized to all the answers which students wrote in their journals, in that these answers should not be treated as transparent indications of what the students believed, but as answers designed to fit the particular context in and for which they were written (Bilmes, 1986; Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

Other reservations were less negative, with students indicating that classroom democracy might lead to certain contradictions ("Adjustment of democracy and keeping teacher's authority is difficult and delicate"), that many students might have trouble participating ("If we adopt classroom democracy, there is a possibility that people who speak their opinion is limited"), that classroom democracy could be dangerous ("[With classroom democracy] we [the students] can make this class better, and we also can make this class worse"), and, from a non-Japanese student, that classroom democracy may not be suited to Japan ("I'm not sure if it will work in Japan… Japanese usually keep to themselves and will not speak up unless spoken to").

Aside from such reservations, two dominant themes emerged from what the students had written. One was that democratic classrooms are unusual in Japan (e.g. "In many other classes, teachers decide all, and student participate in the class passively," "In Japan, usually only teachers make

class. They use textbooks decided by them, teach students something decided by them"). The other was that students will be more active in a democratic classroom (e.g. "This form of class grows students' courage to express what they think," "…we should decide what do do and how to be evalluated, and we can keep our enthusiasms"). It was not unusual for one student to express both dominant themes and in several students' writing they were closely connected, in that lack of democracy in Japanese classrooms was presented as the cause of student passivity (e.g. "Actually in my high school, teachers decide everything. That made me got used to passive attitude").

To summarize, in the first journal assignment, the students indicated that there was a lack of democracy in Japanese classrooms, which could lead to students being "passive," and took an instrumental view of the advantage of classroom democracy, as it would lead students out of their passivity. McVeigh (2002) points out that how to "activate" students is a dominant theme in the discourse of university educators in Japan. Perhaps students have picked up this theme from their teachers. Presumably, a classroom in which students actively, rather than passively, participated would be a better environment for learning. If this is indeed something that the students agreed with, then it would seem that they see classroom democracy as offering them better opportunities for language learning than they had previously received in EFL classes in Japan. While students' attention was apparently drawn to the lack of democracy in school, this instrumental view of the advantages of classroom democracy contrasts with my own view that classroom democracy may help highlight how limited democracy is in society. The

only example of a politically-oriented view from a student's journal contradicts my view with an assertion that Japan is democratic, "As our nation, Japan, is democratic, the class will be a kind of simulation of the real world, where after graduating from the university we must survive."

Later ideas

The seventh journal assignment, which I gave to the students at the end of the tenth class, focused on student satisfaction with the class and on how the class could be improved. The questions included, "Do you think that this class can be described as democratic? Why or why not?" One theme to emerge was that the class was democratic (e.g. ". . . this class is democratic. Teacher always listen to what we talk about") and also democratic in comparison with other classes (e.g. "I've never experienced this type of class"). This resonates with the theme from the first journal assignment that democratic classes are unusual in Japan. In addition, as they now had some experience in a democratic classroom, students could give concrete examples of what it involved (e.g. ". . . this class can be described as democratic because the discussion themes are dependent on our decisions. In addition, we decided not to use textbook, we decided some rules of this class"). In their answers, such concrete examples of the practice of classroom democracy served as reasons to support the assertion that the classroom was democratic, reasons which were overtly asked for as part of the journal assignment. Again, their answers were designed to fit the context.

In my notes, it is not difficult to find the same concrete examples. For example, the notes for the second class state

that, "It was decided not to use a textbook; 18 votes for no book, 8 votes to use a book."

In the course evaluation form, there was no question which directly compared this class with other classes, but students did include a question about democracy, "Do you think that this class has been democratic?" They also included a question about the appropriateness of the discussion topics, most of which were chosen by the students, "Were the topics appropriate for the students?" The students thus treated whether or not the class was democratic and their ability to democratically choose appropriate topics as relevant points on which to give me feedback. On a five-point scale (1 for "definitely no;" 5 for "definitely yes"), the mean response to the question about democracy was 4.68 (sd: 0.56; mode: 5), indicating that the students thought the class was democratic. The mean response to the question about topics was 4.04 (sd: 0.72; mode: 4), indicating weaker affirmation that the students could choose appropriate topics. (However, see below.)

One other point that emerged from the students' answers for the seventh journal assignment was an ambivalence about whether students were actively participating. Some students mentioned the lack of pressure to use correct English enabled them to participate more actively, with some indicating that this contributed to the class being democratic (e.g. "There is an environment where everyone talk in English casually, so I think this class is democratic compared with other class"). Also, some students described themselves and/or others as active (e.g. ". . . the majority of students in this class have high motivations and try to say their opinions in the class"). On the other hand, some students described themselves

and/or others as not being able to actively participate (e.g. ". . . there are a few people who hardly speak during the class"). A common theme was that students found it easier to actively participate in small group discussions than in discussions which involved the entire class (e.g. "It [small group discussion] is helpful for me to speak my own idea actively").

In their answers, then, students indicated that classroom democracy had not been completely successful at encouraging students to be more active in class. Particularly when the discussion involved the entire class, it was pointed out that some students became passive, even if they were more active in small group discussions. Again, some of the reservations about classroom democracy which students expressed in the first journal assignment concerned the possibility that students would have trouble participating.

How active students were in class was also something that I focused on in my notes. Perhaps the question of whether classroom democracy fosters a better language learning environment is more of a concern to me than I had realized. From my notes there does not emerge a clear picture of a class of either active students or passive students. Rather, there emerges a picture that is similar to the students' perception of being more active in small group discussions but less active when the discussion involves the whole class. For example, from the third class, "When they are in small groups, most students are active and try to speak English. Some also ask me questions. But as a whole class, they seem to be much quieter and reserved." Or from the nineteenth class, "Some groups were a little quiet, but they all seemed to be able to talk about these different reasons." And

later in my notes for the same class, "Only a few students participated [in the whole-class discussion], but a couple of students who usually tend to be quiet also joined whole-class discussion, so I was pleased." There were also indications that whole-class discussions could either be lively or painfully quiet. From the ninth class, "Today's class was satisfying for me as a teacher—the students, most of them anyway, were active in both small group work and in the whole class discussions." But then from the fourteenth class, ". . . most of the 'discussion' time consisted of me talking and of students being silent, sometimes painfully silent. A few students made a few comments, but these were mostly the usual suspects." While in several places in the notes I refer to those who were likely to participate in the whole-class discussions as "the usual suspects," it is also clear that these students were not necessarily those who were strongest in English and that, occasionally, usually quiet students would participate. For example, from my notes for the sixth class, "Only a few students responded, but this included some who are fairly quiet and weak in English."

It is clear, though, that students were not averse to interacting with me in English when it did not involve speaking so that the whole class could hear. For example, from my notes for the tenth class, "It seems that most students, when they want to ask me something related to a procedural matter, prefer to interact with me one-to-one, when I am not talking to the whole class. They seem perfectly willing… even the quieter ones, to approach me and ask things in English."

Overall, then, my notes described a fairly complex situation with regard to whether the students were active.

Similar to how several students described themselves, I described them as more active in small groups than as a whole class, but also indicated that, at times, they could be more active in the whole-class discussions. I also described them as more active when interacting with me one-on-one, something the students did not mention. I noticed quieter students occasionally trying to be more active.

As for the course evaluation form, one question was, "Did you actively participate in class?" By including this question, the students treated whether they had been active as a relevant point on which to provide me with feedback. On the same five-point scale, the mean answer was 3.72 (sd: 0.89; mode: 4), indicating that most students saw themselves as having been more active than passive.

A negative reaction

As described above, answers on the course evaluation form indicate that students felt they had chosen appropriate topics. However, one student, in his journal, objected to one of the topics that students had chosen. The topic was same-sex marriage. This student wrote, "By the way, I didn't feel good about discussing the same-sex marriage. Of course, teacher asked us what we discuss. But in my opinion, there were some students in our class who were careless and who wanted to discuss the same-sex marriage just for fun…If we discuss the same-sex marriage, I think that teacher should have explained about homosexual first." While this student did not object to the topic earlier, when it may have led to class negotiation over its appropriateness, he did not refrain from directly criticizing me, or criticizing his classmates to me, in writing. This was the same student who wrote the

most negative comment about classroom democracy for the first journal assignment, discussed above. One way to take this criticism is that I failed to use the "considerable experience" earlier attributed to me to "handle" the choice of topics.

Conclusion

My engagement in teacher-research in this particular classroom revealed that, from the students' perspective, one important reason for promoting classroom democracy is that it helps the students to be active. Conversely, (again from the students' perspective) one problem with the non-democratic classroom, which the students take to be the norm in Japan, is that it produces passive students. The students did not express anything akin to the idea that democracy is lacking in so-called democratic societies. Such an instrumental orientation to the advantages of classroom democracy was also to be found in my notes. It could be that the students' focus on the importance of being active ended up shaping my own perception of the class. Also from the students' perspective, the creation of a democratic classroom was successful. Finally, based on what the students wrote in their journals, what I wrote in my notes, and the students' answers on the course evaluation, their belief in the power of classroom democracy to promote active participation, while overly simplistic, was, for this particular class, not entirely misplaced.

One criticism that could be made of the pursuit of classroom democracy in Japan is that it is a culturally inappropriate and imperialistic imposition of Western values on Japanese students. One response is that this implies an exaggerated view of the extent to which classrooms in "the West" (e.g. in the US) are democratic. Another is that classroom democracy, though uncommon, is not alien to Japan. The results of this teacher-research allow for a different sort of response, which is that, with the exception of one student who consistently expressed disagreement, as well as some initial reservations from a few students, the students reacted positively (if instrumentally) to democracy in this particular classroom.

Eric Hauser is an associate professor at the University of Electro-Communications in Tokyo. His research interests are primarily in conversation analysis and ethnomethodology but, as an EFL teacher and teacher-researcher, he is also interested in critical pedagogy.

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PAC7 at JALT2008: Shared Identities

Appendix 1

Questions regarding rules and procedures used in the classroom described in this study and voted on during second class

We should come up with class rules regarding the following things.

1. Being late: The class starting time is 4:30. Should students be required to come by this time, or is it okay to be a little late? If students are late several times, should this be treated as an absence? If students are very late, should this be treated as an absence? My suggestion is that if a student arrives by 4:35, then he or she is not late. If a student arrives between 4:35 and 5:05, then he or she is late. Being late three times is treated as one unexcused absence. If a student arrives after 5:05, this is the same as being absent. Is this too strict? Is it not strict enough? What do you think?

2. Contributing to class discussions: Should students be required to raise their hand when they want to say something? In order to get everyone to contribute, should I call on students who have not said anything yet?

3. Small group discussions: In addition to class discussions, should students form small groups to discuss things on their own?

4. Addressing one another: How should students address each other? By first name only, by first name plus "san," or by last name plus "san"? (Or some other style?) How should I address the students? How should the students address me?

5.   Going off topic: Should I try to prevent the discussions from going off topic, or should I be flexible about this?

6.   What should be done if I discover that a student has plagiarized something?

Do we need to decide rules about anything else?

   I have not chosen a textbook for this class. What I would like us to do is look at some sample pages from a few different books and have us decide as a class, first, whether to use a textbook, and if the answer is yes, choose a textbook. As this class focuses on discussion, we should choose a textbook that will provide good material for us to discuss in class. Also, it should be challenging but not too difficult. Whether we decide to use a textbook or not, I will also bring in other material and I will ask students to find other material for us to use in class. If we do not use a textbook, students will have to do more work to find material for us to use.

   The books that I would like us to consider are:

An Ordinary Person's Guide to Empire, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition*, *The Culture Struggle*, *The Liberal Virus: Permanent War and the Americanization of the World*, *Profit over People: Neoliberalism and Global Order*, *Empire of Capital*, *Water Wars*,「教育と国家」

Appendix 2

Grading contract used in the classroom described in this study

The purpose of this contract is for us to agree what grade (A (優) or B (良)) you are going to work for and what you need to do to get this grade. During the semester, you will have opportunities to renegotiate this contract, if you think that it is necessary. Students who do not do the amount of work that they have agreed to will receive either a C (可) or D (不可). However, please only take this class if you want to get at least a B.

   In order to receive a grade of A (優), you need to meet the following requirements:

-    no more than 2 unexcused absences

-    contribute to class discussions every week (and, of course, pay attention to other students)

-    miss no more than one journal assignment

-    two typed A-quality essays (750-1000 words, or approximately 3 pages)

-    one well-prepared presentation, based on one of your essays

   In order to receive a grade of B (良), you need to meet the following requirements:

-    no more than 4 unexcused absences

-    contribute to class discussions, but maybe contribute more some weeks than you do in other weeks (and, of course, pay attention to other students)

- miss no more than three journal assignments

- two typed B-quality essays (500-750 words, or approximately 2 pages)

The journal is a notebook in which you answer questions related to the current discussion topic. I plan to give you fifteen journal assignments during the course of the school year. For the journal, you should get a B5 notebook. There is no minimum or maximum that you need to write, but for a person with average-sized handwriting, you would probably write around one page for each assignment. I will collect the journals every three or four weeks in order to give you feedback on the content of what you have written. Students might also read one another's journals, if this is something that the class is interested in.

In an essay, you will be expected to explain and support your opinion related to a topic that we have discussed in class. This may, but does not have to, involve revising and expanding something that you have written in your journal. Whether it is A-quality or B-quality depends on how well it is organized, how much effort you appear to have put into it, how clearly you have written it, and how well you have supported your opinion. I will give you feedback on each essay, so if you want to get a better grade on it, you can use my feedback to revise it. Revised essays must be handed in by the next class after I return the original essay to you. You may revise it as many times as you think necessary (until the end of the school year). There is no specific due date for the essays, but the first one should be turned in by the eighth (?) class (June 11th?) and the second one by the eighteenth (?) class (November 19th?).

In this class, I will work for (circle one):   A (優)   B (良)

Appendix 3

Final draft of collaboratively designed course evaluation form

Class Evaluation Form

Please answer each of the following questions. This is an anonymous survey, so please do not write your name.

1. The class was . . . (circle one)

    a. interesting and fruitful.

    b. not interesting but fruitful.

    c. interesting but not fruitful.

    d. not interesting nor fruitful.

2. Did this class help you improve your overall English ability?

1	2	3	4	5
(definitely no)		(neither yes nor no)		(definitely yes)

3. Did this class help you improve your discussion ability?

1	2	3	4	5

4a. Did you get something out of this class other than improved English ability?

1	2	3	4	5

4b. If yes, what? _____

_____

_____

(Answer in either English or Japanese.)

5. Were the topics appropriate for the students?

    1   2   3   4   5

6. Did the teacher speak clearly?

    1   2   3   4   5

7. Did the teacher give enough time for students to think?

    1   2   3   4   5

8. Are you satisfied with the amount of writing? (circle one)

    a. I think there was too much writing.

    b. The amount of writing was appropriate.

    c. I think there was too little writing.

9. Is it comfortable for you to change group members?

    1   2   3   4   5

10. Is the evaluation system clear to you?

    1   2   3   4   5

11. Did you actively participate in class?

    1   2   3   4   5

12. Do you like the teaching method used in this class?

    1   2   3   4   5

13. Do you think that this class has been democratic?

    1   2   3   4   5

14. Was the style of the class what you had expected it to be?

    1   2   3   4   5

15. Are you satisfied with this class?

    1   2   3   4   5

Additional comments (in English or Japanese):

Appendix 4

Discussion questions used in the first class

In this class, I hope that we will be able to build a democratic classroom environment. As a way to start building this environment, I would like to discuss the following questions.

1. In a good English class, what should the teacher try to do? (As we answer this question, try to be specific. For example, some people believe that the teacher should try to correct students' mistakes, or that the teacher should grade homework promptly, or that the teacher should try to prevent students from going off topic.)

2. In a good English class, what should the students try to do? (Again, try to be specific. For example, some people believe that students should come to class on time, or that students should always try to speak English, or that students should pay attention to the teacher.)

3. In an English class, or other foreign language class, how should the students' grades be decided? (For example, should the grades be based on attendance, examination scores, homework, language proficiency, and so on.)

4. In a discussion class, who should choose the discussion topics? Is it better to use "safe" topics, or is it okay to use controversial topics?

5. In a discussion class, is it better to discuss things in small groups, or as a class?

6. Try to think of a language class that you thought was really bad. In your opinion, what were the major problems in that class? Try to think of a language class that you thought was really good. In your opinion, what made it a good class?