Reaching for their own goals: A more democratic classroom

Naomi Hashimoto & Steve Fukuda
The University of Tokushima

While most research is written from the teacher's perspective, this paper, which originated as a self-assigned report by the first author, considers the outcomes of a university English course from a student's viewpoint. Many teachers criticize students for having no motivation or learning goals, forgetting they place students in teacher-controlled situations that influence motivation and goal-setting. In this pilot study, we explore the influence a more democratic classroom has on motivation when students work to achieve their own goals. Two courses were compared with a democratically-taught course for first-year engineering majors. Questionnaire results and student journal entries indicate students had positive attitudes and high motivation at the end of the course. Compared with the two other courses, the democratic course received higher marks in both satisfaction and achievement.

多くの授業研究の成果は教師の視点から書かれている。しかし、本論は学生の視点から、大学英語授業シラバスの効果を述べたものである。多くの教師が、最近の学生には目標ややる気がないと批判しているが、実際は教師が授業の目標と進度を決めることによって、学生の目標設定ややる気を制御しているのではないだろうか。本研究では、工学部1年生の3つの必修英語クラスを比較することで、学生が目標を達成しようとするとき、より自己主導型の授業形態が動機づけに及ぼす影響を調べた。アンケート結果と学生の日誌から、伝統的なシラバスより、教師のサポートで学生が自ら目標や進度を決める方法のほうが、学生の積極的な態度を養い、またやる気を高めることが示された。他の2クラスと比べると、この自己主導型な授業形態は満足感と達成度において、より高い評価を得た。

College students are criticized for lacking motivation and goals (Izawa, 2009), which is arguably related to social problems such as increasing unemployment (Oe, 2006) and high job turnover (Hara, 2010). This lack of motivation may be attributed to a teacher-centered, exam-oriented high school culture where most students have not had the experience of setting and achieving their own learning goals. In classrooms, students are constantly being directed, making them passive recipients of information. Robinson (2001) argues that many students actually possess a high level of intrinsic motivation, but traditional teaching methods often stifle it. With Japan being a test-based society (Goodman & Phillips, 2003), students have become so addicted to exams they no longer study unless it is for a score (Smith, 1998). Students growing up in this environment become addicted to studying for extrinsic rewards and forget the joy of learning or achieving goals. These students ask, "Will this be on the test?"

Need for democratic classrooms

It may be time for teachers to take responsibility by providing a more student-centered method of instruction. Experiments since the 1930s have observed the effects of different styles of instruction. For example, Lewin's (1938) landmark study examined three different styles of instructors: (a) autocratic, (b) laissez-faire, and (c) democratic. During the experiment, the students exposed to an autocratic instructor worked submissively and only when the instructor was present. When the group was taught in a laissez-faire method, students did the least amount of work and there was chaos when the instructor left the room. However, when the group was led in a democrat-

ic style, students had the highest motivation and originality in their work and studied continuously even without the teacher present. Lewin's results demonstrate the impact instructional styles have on learning attitudes and motivation and their potential to change them. More recently, researchers (e.g., Glasser, 2001) have also reported that instructional methods can enhance students' learning motivation, particularly when students are given choices.

To illustrate further, Deci (1996) conducted an experiment using the puzzle-solving paradigm. The participants were either (a) offered choices of puzzles to work on without time limits, or (b) assigned puzzles with time limits. Consequently, the subjects who had been offered the choices spent more time working on the puzzles and reported liking them more than the subjects not offered choices. These opportunities to choose had made a difference in their experience and had strengthened their motivation.

A more democratic instructional course offering choices and allowing students to create their own goals has potential to change attitude and motivation toward learning. In this framework, the present study examines the influence a more democratic classroom may have on students' learning attitude and motivation by measuring their (a) learning attitude, (b) feeling of active participation, (c) satisfaction with their learning experience, and (d) feeling of achievement in the course.

Course outline

The democratic course was based on the syllabus developed by Finch and Sampson (2005). The 15-week semester was divided into three parts. The first six weeks were centered on decreasing anxiety while gradually increasing autonomy through various activities. It culminated with a short presentation on a topic of choice. Activities were aimed at creating a relaxing classroom atmosphere where students could talk to friends or the instructor in English. From the first meeting, the instructor did not give many instructions, and most activities were flexible in how they were to be conducted. During the activities, the instructor did not interfere with students unless they asked questions or when checking their progress.

During the following six weeks, the students chose themes to study and a final assessment of student's choice (i.e., presentation, report, etc.). Not every student wanted to work in groups; some chose to work individually. For instance, a student created a goal of improving reading comprehension individually, and decided to use graded-readers and write book reports creating a portfolio. Initially, some groups passively waited for instruction. Despite this passive attitude, the instructor did not immediately give direction and let them struggle with the situation. This struggle guided students to find a way to work for themselves.

Eventually, students adapted to learning autonomously while concentrating on both fluency and accuracy. For instance, one group brought materials, such as pictures for discussions, to work on speaking fluency. Another group, while preparing for their final presentation, brought a grammar book and discussed grammatical aspects of the language. Interestingly, even when the instructor left the classroom, the students did not readily notice the teacher stepping out of the classroom and continued on with their activities.

The next two classes were set aside for any presentation rehearsals and then final presentations. The rehearsals were based on the idea that people learn effectively when they actually have a chance to experience mistakes or failures. The whole class viewed all of the final presentations.

The focal point of the final class was reflecting on and furthering autonomous study. The students calculated their own grades based on their mini-presentation, final assessment of choice, and class participation. They were also assigned a reflection writing assignment in which they reviewed what they had and had not achieved in the class and then planned how they would continue their studies.

Throughout the course, we used a class journal (CJ). Students received the CJ at the beginning and submitted it at the end of each class. The CJ allowed students to record attendance and self-assess class participation, homework, and final assessment scores. There was also a column for questions and comments. The CJ provided us with opportunities to view students' progress and give formative feedback. For the students, it meant continuous reflection and more communication practice.

Participants

Our course consisted of 40 first-year students majoring in mechanical engineering. There were 122 majors in all, and the other two classes (N = 42, N = 40) were also surveyed. The syllabus of one course was based on a commercially published textbook to enhance reading comprehension, and the other course used movies with the aim of improving listening comprehension. We viewed these courses as using a traditional method because the instructor decided goals, activities, and assessment methods. Each class met once-a-week for 90 minutes in a 15-week semester.

Survey

Student feedback concerning the course was collected with an anonymous Likert-scale survey administered in the final class. The survey consisted of four questions (Table 1). The Japanese version of the survey was administered by the instructors of each course in the last ten minutes.
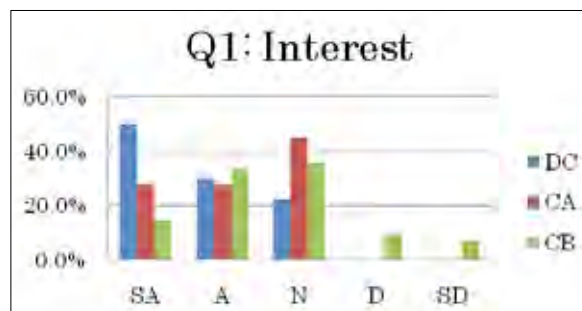
Table 1. Survey questions

(1) I have gained a greater interest in this subject to motivate further study. この授業で学習を続けられる興味や関心がついた。
(2) I have become an active participant in my learning. 学習に対する積極性があった。
(3) I have achieved the goals of the class. 授業の目標を到達できた。
(4) I am satisfied with the class as a whole. 全体的に考えてこの講義に満足している。

Results and discussion

Compared to the traditional courses, the democratic course received more positive feedback for all four questions (Table 2 and 3). Eighty percent of students had increased their interest in their English studies; 50 percent of the students strongly agreed. Throughout the course, positive attitudes and increasing motivation had been observed. One student in the first half of the class changed his attitude for the better after deciding his goal of understanding spoken English. This attitude change was observed

from his CJ comments, where he wrote 'I think English is difficult' in the first class, and in the second half of the course wrote comments such as 'I'm happy. Today is a good class' and 'Today is enjoy.' In the other two courses, 55.0 and 47.6 percent of the students gained interest for further study.

Figure 1. Survey question 1 results

*SA = strongly agree, A = agree, N = neither, D = disagree, SD = strongly disagree

** DC = democratic course, CA = course A (reading), CB = course B (movies)

When students were asked if they felt they were an active participant in the class, 97.5 percent of the students agreed. In the two traditionally taught courses, 77.5 and 76.2 percent of the students felt active. The democratic course allowed the students to feel more active in their own learning.

The students' apparent feeling of being active was noticeable when groups were preparing for their final presentations. One group, after memorizing their script early, asked for advice on how to better convey their message using PowerPoint slides and additional out-of-class sessions. Another group, presenting on rare trains in the world, explained the topic thoroughly in a quiz format, after collecting data from classmates beforehand.

In addition, students gradually became more autonomous towards the end of the class. For instance, they did not ask the instructor what to do, or wait for directions. Some groups started working even before the instructor came to class. On rehearsal day, some groups that did not have to attend, arrived to practice or to continue group work. Pearson and Gallagher (1983) would refer to this as the gradual release of responsibility. In other words, the transfer of

responsibility from the instructor to the student resulted in students becoming more active in their own learning.
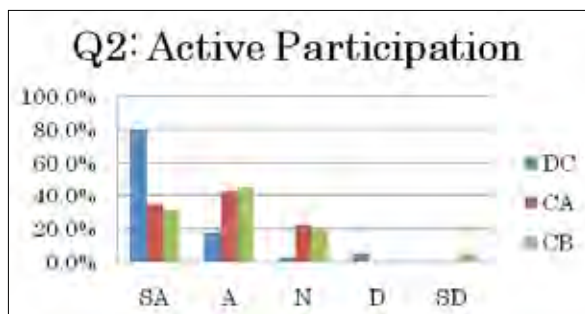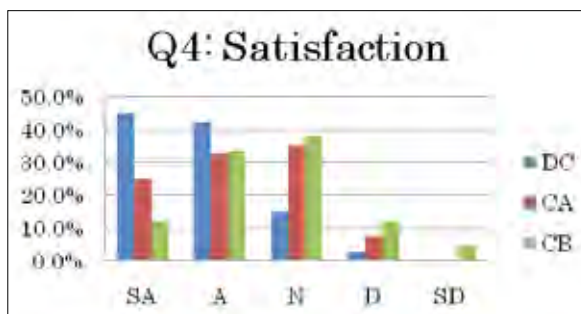

Figure 2. Survey question 2 results

A key objective of the course was for students to create their own goals and work towards achieving them. In the democratic classroom, 92.5 percent of students felt a sense of achieving a goal. Though we have no clear data representing changes in proficiency, the feeling of achievement through autonomous learning could potentially motivate further study leading to gains in proficiency. By contrast, in the two traditional courses, 72.5 and 42.9 percent felt they had achieved a goal.
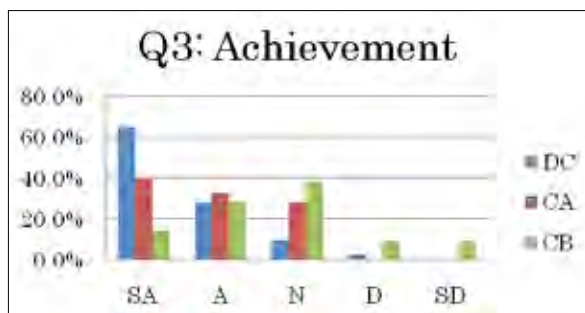
Figure 3. Survey question 3 results

The question pertaining to satisfaction resulted in 87 percent of the students answering positively. Unfortunately, which part of the course they were satisfied with is unclear. Nonetheless, this satisfaction potentially motivates efforts to continue their studies. Compared to the traditionally taught courses in which 57.5 and 45.2 percent answered positively, students in the democratic course were more satisfied with their course.

Figure 4. Survey question 4 results

Students worked on activities collaboratively without constant didactic instruction. Their own goals motivated them to study with positive attitudes. In the end, only two students had negative comments about learning English in the CJ. Thus, we speculate that those few students who answered the survey negatively were hard on themselves.

Teachers planning to implement a more democratic approach may want to consider implementing group-building activities to ensure productive group work. In addition, a well-prepared but flexible semester plan of allowing students to create different objectives, materials, and assessments is essential. Moreover, teachers must guide students into autonomous learning gradually while clearly stating objectives of each activity. Finally, it is important for teachers to receive continuous feedback from students. A CJ can serve this purpose.

Further investigation

Despite our positive results, a further study with more rigorous data collection is necessary. Remaining questions include which part of the course specifically improved learning attitudes or enhanced motivation and if positive learning attitudes and motivation were sustained after the democratic course. As Deci (1996) noted, extrinsic reward such as course credit, can undermine intrinsic motivation. Once students no longer need credit or have to take another traditionally taught course, the possibility of the students' learning attitudes and motivation declining cannot be overlooked.

Table 2. Survey results of questions 1 and 2

	Q1: Interest			Q2: Active Participation		
	Democratic Course	Course A	Course B	Democratic Course	Course A	Course B
strongly agree	50.0%	27.5%	14.3%	80.0%	35.0%	31.0%
agree	30.0%	27.5%	33.3%	17.5%	42.5%	45.2%
neither	22.5%	45.0%	35.7%	2.5%	22.5%	19.0%
disagree	0.0%	0.0%	9.5%	5.0%	0.0%	0.0%
strongly disagree	0.0%	0.0%	7.1%	0.0%	0.0%	4.8%

Table 3. Survey results of questions 3 and 4

	Q3: Achievement			Q4: Satisfaction		
	Democratic Course	Course A	Course B	Democratic Course	Course A	Course B
strongly agree	65.0%	40.0%	14.3%	45.0%	25.0%	11.9%
agree	27.5%	32.5%	28.6%	42.5%	32.5%	33.3%
neither	10.0%	27.5%	38.1%	15.0%	35.0%	38.1%
disagree	2.5%	0.0%	9.5%	2.5%	7.5%	11.9%
strongly disagree	0.0%	0.0%	9.5%	0.0%	0.0%	4.8%

Conclusion

A more democratic course centered on student choices and instructor facilitation showed positive results in learning attitude and motivation. Throughout the investigation, changes in students' attitude were observed, such as those discerned in CJ comments changing from negative to positive. Students' motivation seemed to increase, for example, when students started seeking opportunities for more English practice.

Instead of just criticizing students, more needs to be done to provide them with opportunities to create and pursue goals. If instructors take a purely autocratic stance without giving choices, students will likely give up or become passive. This stance encourages negative attitudes and undermines motivation.

If students are given more opportunities to contemplate, create, and achieve personal goals, with support from instructors, they can persist with positive attitudes and high motivation.

The first author can support this idea with her own experience as a university student. When she was given the opportunity to create her own goal in her English class (a subject she hated), she came to like and realize the importance of English. Likewise, instructors should provide more choices and autonomous learning opportunities for their students to study for (not by) themselves. This opportunity encourages positive attitudes and enhances motivation for students to set goals and challenge themselves to achieve them.

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Naomi Hashimoto was a fourth year student in the teacher-training course. Her research interests are in humanistic education and learner motivation. She now teaches English at a junior high school in Tokushima city.

Steve T. Fukuda is an assistant professor in the Center for General Education at Tokushima University. He teaches required English courses in the general education curriculum while administering the English Support Room in the university. He has research interests in self-access centers and learner autonomy.