

The Practical Report on Task-Based Studies (English Course)

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Abstract : The purpose of this report is to show the educational effects of active-learning style classes and look into the possibilities of improving students' self-esteem or "Self-efficacy" through their voluntary activities. At the first stage, to enable students to take the initiative in doing research, some tasks related to the research were prepared for them. While a series of tasks they submitted showed their improved efforts as well as their enhanced English abilities, the former, the efforts are presumed to be as effective as the latter in this style of class. The goal of the English course is to make the students acquire English presentation skills. Considering this goal, the three points students should voluntarily achieve were thought to be the choice of their theme, the creation of manuscripts for the presentation and power-point slides, and the practice of delivery. The role of the guidance teacher was to give them a scaffolding condition; in this case giving them the above-mentioned training tasks. This report concludes that their success in accomplishing several kinds of tasks under the scaffolding condition leads to their more independent and voluntary attitudes toward research and their awareness of the importance of English activities.

Keywords : active-learning, scaffolding, self-efficacy

1. Introduction

The subject discussed in this report, "Task-Based Studies" is among a few subjects whose teaching style is active learning in our college. Its educational goal in our college is 'Learning ability', which can be interpreted as a student's acquisition of ability to learn continuously and voluntarily like an engineer who works generally and practically. The active-learning style is necessarily connected to this desired goal. Every year, three teachers selected from those who teach general subjects are in charge of this subject and basically three different courses are provided to students as one of their elective subjects. The three courses consist of one subject, "Task-Based Studies" and the small-size of the whole class is among its characteristics. The number of the students in each course is basically more than 3 and no more than 8 mainly because of the active-learning style. Another characteristic is that the class time is not set in the weekly timetable and the guidance teacher determines when the "class" will take place.

As shown in the above paragraph, the "English Course" is not an independent subject and is required to meet the conditions attributive to the subject. Since the teaching plan must reflect the conditions, the standards of evaluations are the first thing to be ascertained. Therefore, the two targets of evaluation were the students' achievements in English tasks and their continuous and voluntary efforts to attain the goals. While the former, the achievement corresponds to the aim of the English course, the latter, the effort reflects the aspects of the whole subject, "Task-Based Studies."

The other subjects besides the English course in the year of this report were Japanese and Physical Education. Since both the courses have their unique themes and approaches to some degree, the three teachers in charge first confirm the common parts to the three courses such as the joint orientation, the joint midterm presentation, the joint final presentation and the joint reflection meeting. After the dates of the four gatherings are set and some rules are checked, each of the courses develops in accordance with their respective plans.

2. From the beginning (before the orientation) to the midterm presentation.

The total number of students in the English course was 7, and this small number allowed many possible approaches. After consideration, the ways whose beneficial effects were convincing for the students were adopted. Before the formal orientation, Google Classroom for the English course was set up and the first explanation of this course was recorded in a short film, which was updated in Stream of Office 365. The film announced that some tasks would be assigned to them beforehand. The first task was to submit an audio file recording their speaking. Handed the copies of one lesson from a TOEIC textbook which targets a score of 500 and told to hear the audio file of the lesson, the students practiced and recorded themselves speaking.¹ The textbook is edited for reading aloud and the length of the passages is about 140 words. As the average score of the third-grade students in our college has not reached 500 so far, the choice of the textbook seemed to be

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suitable for the ones in the English course. Either of their recordings lasted more than one minute but finished within two minutes. This first task was adequate to check how positively they engage in these kinds of training tasks.

The second task was also a submission of their audio files again, but this time the length of the material differed. The chosen material was a speech, Leonardo Dicaprio's speech on climate change at the United Nations General Assembly.² The reason was that some members were thinking about a theme related to environmental problems in Japan. The copies of the script and the translation were distributed and the information about hearing the speech on the Internet was provided to the students. As expected, this task was more painstaking and required some practice of reading aloud. All the submitted recordings lasted about five-six minutes, which is equivalent to the length of the individual speaking time in the mid-term presentation. Despite the changes in the groups' interest after the submissions, this training task was practical training for the mid-term and final presentations.

The third task was to make presentation materials, power-points, and this aims at improving their English writing abilities and giving them a chance to make visually impressive slides. The procedure is to provide them with one assigned material along with its audio file as a sample, and to make their original power-points corresponding to the contents. At the time when this task was assigned, the whole orientation had not taken place yet. The development of several types of training at the early stage took effect. Not having been influenced by the other courses, the students in the English course were used to the idea of using English as a tool for presentations. As for this task, neither the number of the slides nor the number of the words in the ppt were designated partly to evaluate their artistic senses. Their sense of illustrating the information was better than expected but parts of their English expressions left room for improvement.

The joint orientation was useful in sharing common perceptions related to the subject and the planned dates of presentations and meetings were informed. After the orientation, doing the assigned tasks, the students start to research their themes. While the four members were divided into two groups, the other three planned to study individually. Most of the members were going to work on an internship during the summer vacation and the date of the mid-term presentation was the last day of the vacation. Making the best use of the free time during the vacation and the guidance teacher's regular contacts with the members were key in advancing their research. Some members had difficulty in deciding what theme to choose, and even those who decided their theme later than the others finished making the presentation ppts and manuscripts just before the mid-term presentation day.

In total, the five different presentations of the English course were given at the mid-term presentation. Commonly related to the society in Shinagawa ward, the themes range from SDGs to single-person households in the ward. As a mid-term presentation, all the groups achieved more than an average level. As the result of the mid-term presentation, the main point to be considered was the consistency of delivery style in the presentations of the English course. At this stage, the members were informed that all the final presentations would be given in English and the expressions in the power-points and leaflets would be written in English.

3. After the midterm presentation to the final presentation and the joint reflection meeting

As fourth-grade students, the members have daily tasks and their own studies including preparation for entrance examinations and job hunting. Despite their busy college life, all of them did their research as group research. The three members who gave an individual presentation made one group and investigated one theme. The group adopted one member's theme, the history of Shinagawa and developed it into a larger-sized presentation adding some aspects the mid-term presentation had not dealt with.

Taking advantage of the usefulness of Google Classroom, the degree of their research's progress was ascertained. At this stage, the importance of making the English presentation manuscript and materials was emphasized. The members were told to submit the drafts, which were checked mainly to find grammatical errors. Allowed to change the contents right up to the presentation day, the members had deliberated on what should be discussed in the presentation. After most parts of the English manuscript were written, the members of each group got together and practiced the delivery.

On the day before the presentation, the members spent a lot of time on the practice and made the final changes and at the lunchtime of the day, they practiced again. At the final presentation, although one group had to rely on online tools, all three groups could give presentations. At the final presentation, all the attendees evaluated all the presentations, and the presenters also reviewed the others. At the closing part of the final presentation, the evaluation sheets were withdrawn.

The next month, the joint reflection meeting was held, and the results were announced. All the scores were counted, and the 1st prize and 2nd prize groups were awarded certificates by the chief teacher of general subjects as in previous years. One of the groups in the English course won the 2nd prize, and it was not officially announced that the other ones in the course won the 3rd and 4th places.

4. Reflection on a set of activities in the English course

What has been introduced so far is a set of activities in the English course. Although the Japanese course and the P.E. course have their own characteristics, the activities in the English course are focused on in this report and the effects of active learning should be examined. Here the effects are considered by choosing some indispensable aspects, the students' changes through active learning, the merits of active-learning classes and what should be improved hereafter.

Several points such as attitudes and English abilities show that the change in the students is favorable. The biggest hurdle at the beginning stage is to find an effective way to make them overcome their mental blocks in speaking English and writing English sentences. It is true that this subject is an elective and all the members must have been ready for English activities, but their anxieties about their English abilities and their confidence differed. Obviously, some of them did not need any special attention, but the teaching ways were adopted to make them more independent in steps by helping them first and gradually reducing the teacher's support. This way was in parallel to "scaffolding teaching" and in this case the teacher's main support was to provide training experiences using some tasks.

Here the effects of the speaking tasks are looked back at. Both the first task and the second task were speaking and the difference between them was the number of English words to be recorded in an audio file. The increase from about 140 words (the first task) to about 500 words challenged them to make more efforts and achieve a higher level. The recording time of the second task lasted about five times longer than the first one. As for the fluency and the accuracy of pronunciation, their average scores were evaluated and the former became 0.4 higher and the latter 0.6 higher with 5 the best grade and 1 the lowest, which may not look like a great difference. Taking the difficulty of the second task into account, the increase of the average scores is noteworthy.

The comparison between the manuscript of the mid-term presentation and that of the final presentation is also significant to evaluate the change in their English writing abilities. The third task was to make visuals for presentation, in short, power-points, but the materials were designed by the guidance teacher as a part of the training. As most groups developed their themes of the mid-term presentation for the final presentation, some English expressions are once again employed in the final presentation. Even if this point is taken into consideration, comparison can be made between the mid-term presentation and the final one. As for the adequateness of vocabulary and expressions, the average score became 1.3 higher with 5 the best grade and 1 the lowest. As the number indicates, the improvement in writing between them was recognized as being greater than speaking.

At the joint reflection meeting, the results were announced, showing the three presentations in the English course were rated highly. Their sense of accomplishment must have developed their self-confidence. The results of the self-evaluation rubric and the class evaluation questionnaires by the students reflect their self-esteem at the end of this subject. The questions in the rubric are "1. To be able to think of a solution for a task and make a study plan", "2. To be able to make self-motivating and continuous progress on study, research, and fieldwork according to a plan.", "3. To be able to cooperate and proceed with the work", and "4. To be able to summarize the obtained results and make a presentation in a clarifying way." Their average scores of 1. and 3. and 4. are 85% and for 2. is 90%. These percentages indicate that they have gained more than a certain degree of self-confidence. The questions in the class evaluation questionnaire related to this research are "1. To be able to be satisfied with this subject overall" and "2. To be able to become interested in and feel the necessity for the related subjects after joining the class. Their average scores of these two 1. and 2. are 90%, which reveals the positive effects of active-learning classes.

5. Discussion for the future research

The results gained throughout the class were consistently positive, but they result from the students' untiring efforts. To make good use of this teaching experience in future classes with other members and other conditions, discussion of the results is required. Some of the results were expected even at the stage when the teaching plan was being made, but the unpredictable ones are worthy of more careful attention. One of them is that their voluntary engagements in the activities advanced their research and training related to the delivery. The voluntary engagements were not directly proportional to the levels of their English proficiency. Their self-motivated engagement enhanced their abilities in research as well as English.

The engagements were associated with the concept of "Self-efficacy." In *Psychological Review*, 84 (1997), this concept was proposed by Albert Bandura, a Canadian-American psychologist:

This theory states that psychological procedures, whatever their form, alter the level and strength of *self-efficacy*. It is hypothesized that expectations of personal efficacy determine whether coping behavior will be initiated, how much effort will be expended, and how long it will be sustained in the face of obstacles and aversive experiences. (191, Bandura 1977)

One's beliefs in self-efficacy is defined as "people's beliefs about their capabilities to exercise control over events that affect their lives. (Bandura, 1898, p.1175) " In "Control Orientations in the East and West" of *The Handbook of Culture and Psychology*, Susumu Yamaguchi and

Takafumi Sawaumi discuss the relation between “personal control” and “self-efficacy”, “If one has confidence in his or her self-efficacy, he or she will initiate and persist in coping behavior and consequently attain autonomy.” (513) Unaware of these views related to “self-efficacy”, most of the members in the English course developed a sense of “self-efficacy”, which induced favorable results.

To consider the relationship between active learning and self-efficacy, the definition of “active learning” should be re-examined here. In his article, “Does Active Learning Work?” Michael Prince defines active learning as follows:

Active Learning is generally defined as any instructional method that engages students in the learning process. In short, active learning requires students to do meaningful activities and think about what they are doing. (1, Prince, 2004).

All the activities being reflected from this viewpoint, the task-based teaching was adequate for the members. The teaching way was based on the technique called “scaffolding” in the field of education. In her book, *Scaffolding Language, Scaffolding Learning*, Pauline Gibbons defines “scaffolding” as follows:

Scaffolding – in its more usual sense – is a temporary structure that is put up in the process of constructing or repairing a building. The scaffolding is temporary, but essential for the successful construction of the building. [...] *Scaffolding*, however, is not simply another word for *help*. It is a special kind of help that assists learners in moving toward new skills, concepts, or levels of understanding. Scaffolding is thus the temporary assistance by which a teacher helps a learner know how to do something so that the learner will later be able to complete a similar task alone. It is future-oriented and aimed at increasing a learner’s autonomy. (16, Pauline 2015)

In this case, the temporary assistance was the assignment of the first to third training tasks and the instruction for the tasks. More than expected, these tasks cultivated their self-motivation. At the first stage, the members tended to be at a loss at what to research. After submitting several tasks, they came to find how to find the necessary information and what to do next for their research. The way to encourage independence step by step was found to be effective in this active-learning class.

To conclude, to foster a student’s sense of self-trust is equivalently indispensable for doing English tasks initiatively and researching for a presentation. It is true that students’ English abilities differ, but their self-efficacy plays an important role in bringing out their potential. It is expected that this viewpoint of emphasizing self-efficacy will be utilized in other English classes which do not adopt an active-learning style and other subjects than English.

The main theme of this report is based on my presentation at the 48th annual convention of Japan Society of English Language Education at Kagawa University on August 19, 2023.

Notes

1. The textbook is *Kachosan no TOEIC Test rakuraku 500 scores* by Junichi Chida, Haruo Shikano and Horoshi Adachi (Asuka Publisher), p 84-85.
2. It is Leonardo Dicaprio’s speech at the United Nation’s Climate Summit in 2014.

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