A Class of Introverts: Tracking Shy Students in a Teaching Journal

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ABSTRACT

Teaching journals can help instructors learn more about and influence changes in teaching, including approach, student behavior, and classroom management. By tracking a specific focus over the course of several weeks, the instructor anticipates a noticeable change in the classroom, for better or worse. For six weeks, I kept a teaching journal on a class with eight fairly shy students with the hope that a few different approaches I tried with them would eventually yield a reduction in reticence in the group. Noting uses of humor, encouragement, and praise did help the students open up a little in the short term. Ultimately, the personalities did not shift, but the students were able to meet the course requirements and improve proficiency in English discussion. This paper summarizes the journal entries regarding this class and how personalities and proficiency are not mutually exclusive.

INTRODUCTION

In the English Discussion Classes (EDC), first-year students are sorted into classes based on their department, major and TOIEC scores. Class sizes are capped at nine students in order to maximize discussion practice and proficiency opportunities (Hurling, 2012). Within each class, students are paired, grouped, and regrouped depending on the activity and attendance. One of the aims of this frequent rearrangement is for students to practice with different speakers and listeners and gain confidence sharing their ideas with multiple recipients. Sometimes instructors may actively ensure certain students are or are not grouped together based on dynamic, for example, students with noticeable personality clashes that could overtake a discussion. Oftentimes, the personalities in a single classroom are varied enough that the instructor is easily able to mix in extroverted students and introverted students together and the two types can aid one another in setting an active tone for the discussion. This may not always be successful, however. Sometimes the introverted, risk-averse students may retreat further into their shells, allowing the extroverted students to dominate the discussions. Sometimes the extroverted students, exasperated with having to carry the discussion load, may yield the onus of running the discussion to the introverted students by asking the introverted students endless questions, resulting in a discussion that appears more like an interrogation. A mix of the two personality types creates a helpful balance in an EDC classroom. Reserved students can observe more open students share ideas. They gradually feel comfortable and over the course of the semester may try to do the same thing. More extroverted students can gain valuable skills in turn-taking, listening, and building group dynamics by working with students less open, less risk-taking, than themselves.

But what if an entire class is introverted? This semester, I had a class with this unique dynamic. This was an eight-student class, seven females and one male, comprised of German, French, and literature majors. The students all had TOEIC placement scores of 365-370, which placed them in Level III of Rikkyo University's four-level proficiency system ("Rikkyo University Center for English Discussion Class", n.d.). For my second semester project in the EDC, I created a journal using Google Forms that I sent myself each week to fill in with questions regarding student behaviors, thoughts about activities to consider or alter, and research possibilities. I focused my journal entries on my all-introverted class. By observing this particular group and maintaining the journal, my goal was to see if these students would gradually open up over the semester. What could I as the instructor do to gain their trust and lower their affective filters? How

could they be more comfortable with each other? How much of their reticence was based on their personality, outside factors, or English proficiency level? As I documented this class over six weeks, I noticed no sweeping personality shifts, but little by little, week by week, these introverted students did become slightly less introverted.

DISCUSSION

To keep my journal entries and student observations consistent, I created and used the same Google Forms survey each week and saved the results. For six weeks, from Lesson 5 through Lesson 10, I answered ten questions regarding what happened in the lesson, what could have been better in the lesson, what could be improved for the upcoming lesson, and relevant research that could either support a change in my approach to the class or help explain the student behavior, such as using humor, helping reticent students, and lesson preparation (see Appendix).

Lesson 5: "Fun, Enjoy, Tired, Difficult, Good Tired"

In the first week of keeping a journal about this class, I tried to gauge the mood of the class by asking them individually how they felt periodically. This was their first Discussion Test, and getting reactions out of them was difficult, a word they used often to describe the tasks and the Discussion Test itself. However, despite the reticence and brief responses, I was happy they were at least responding.

Some unintentional humor came about in this lesson as well. Half the class had nearly identical names, and during the test I learned that the students were still struggling with each other's names. This invited an opportunity to bring some humor into the stressful testing situation from both myself and the students. It changed the mood, which Aldrich (2016) indicated as mutually beneficial to the instructor and student. I learned in this lesson that calling on students in this shy group directly was not helpful for me or the students in terms of building trust or confidence: despite the moments of humor here and there the students remained as closed-off as ever and I felt more and more awkward calling on them.

Lesson 6: Increasing encouragement and praise

In Lesson 6, which focused on using function phrases to help join a discussion ("Can I start?" "Does anyone want to say something?"), all but two students expressed "a positive attitude towards using the new function", and encouragement throughout the lesson spurred them on even further. I also noted that students "took feedback well" when I posted student examples on the board of missed opportunities to use the function phrases as well as when students discussed their discussions with each other. Despite research indicating that giving students praise early in a lesson sends the message that they need not continue to work hard (Broderick, 2012), most of the students continued to practice the new function.

Two students held back during the discussions in terms of function use, but agreed with everyone else that the functions made discussions more difficult. During the peer-feedback portion of the feedback time between the two class discussions, students reflected and chatted with partners from the other discussion groups. They compared their respective discussions in terms of topics covered, functions used, and their confidence with the new function. The whole class made more use of other necessary class phrases and skills, such as using agree/disagree phrases and asking follow-up questions. For such a reserved class, I can only imagine how much harder it is to initiate discussion with others, even classmates they've become familiar with over several weeks, and to be graded on initiating the discussions. For the six who worked especially hard with

the new functions, the encouragement and praise definitely revealed more frequent and appropriate function use.

Lesson 7: "Good morning, I'm tired"

Because of the positive effects of encouragement and praise on the majority of the class, I continued this tack with subsequent lessons. Students gradually began expressing other concerns with the lessons at around the same time, explaining that the lessons were difficult and they felt they did not have enough time to prepare. Some students were even taking risks in using English any time before, during, or at the end of the class. The one male student began a series of weekly greetings and mood announcements in Lesson 7, entering class and loudly greeting me and declaring his mood and energy level. I don't know what brought this on, but it showed a new level of comfort in him, a relaxed response from his classmates, and a humorous way for the class to bond.

Despite the emotional improvements, in my notes I found that students struggled with the function in Lesson 7, asking for and giving examples ("Can you give me an example?" "For instance…"), and I was pleased they could comfortably articulate why between the discussions: not enough preparation time to think of examples. For the students feeling comfortable in asking for more help, I suggested trying to find extra time to review the lessons' readings before each class, previewing all of the discussion questions for the upcoming lesson, and even making note of any new vocabulary words in the readings (DeCou, 2017; Kambe, 2016). I feared this would overwhelm the students, but many took the advice to heart and were more prepared going forward, and able to offer more ideas during discussions. In Lesson 7 there was a marked improvement in student mood and willingness to take risks in discussions and communicate. Though still noticeably more reserved than other Level III classes I've taught because of the concentration of reticent students, the students were staying on task and helping each other more often using communication skills such as negotiation of meaning ("Is that clear?").

Lesson 8: "It's ten minutes!"

Students continued to be upbeat in this lesson, but the increased comfort with each other and the class allowed them to casually slip into Japanese frequently. I worried sometimes that getting them back into staying in English would shut them down; after all, I had been building them up with encouragement and praise. A sharp admonishment could undo that. Nonetheless, I found ways to coax them back into staying in English using humor and pointing out the inappropriateness of reacting to the exchange, such as when four of the students tried to confirm how long the discussion was with me (Student: "How long is this discussion?" Me: "Ten minute--s. Another student: "*juppun gamon*" ("It's 10 minutes!")). To help the students contribute more, in English, to the discussion, I managed to fit in extra planning time for the discussion. Based on the class notes and observation notes, the students used a variety of functions, worked "very hard giving details and staying upbeat during the lesson", and the students seemed "positive about their progress."

Humor, encouragement, and praise significantly impact a student's willingness to participate and open up, and this is particularly impressive to behold when the entire class is gradually opening up together. Using humor helped reduce the tension in the classroom as the semester went on, thus allowing "a warm and friendly atmosphere in which students feel safe and relaxed about speaking English" (Garside, 2015).

Lesson 9: Outside Factors

Humor, encouragement, praise, and extra preparation time cannot always quell student anxiety and shyness. In Lesson 9, when the second Discussion Test took place, though the students worked hard and used all the functions during the preparation activities and test itself, outside factors affected their energy and overall openness. One student was ill. Another had a job interview that afternoon. I expressed encouragement and reassurance as best as I could; in the following lesson both students came to class with brighter attitudes: the first had overcome her illness and the other had succeeded in her interview.

Prior to Discussions Tests I always have students do a full 16-minute practice discussion, which I turn into a competition known as the Practice Discussion Rally. The student who is able to use the most function phrases and communication skills appropriately during the practice discussion can decide if they want their group to go first or second, thus determining the order of the tests for all the students in the class. I like to add a dramatic flair when explaining this by telling the students the winner "controls the destiny of the class." My more active classes are vocally competitive and keeping track of function use during the rally is exhausting with them; surprisingly, this class was no different. These students were also competitive and anxious when the results were announced and the winner made their choice and the other students learned their test group and order fates. Despite that tension, students can still be reserved and shy if outside factors are on their mind.

Lesson 10: Cooperative, but still shy

The name confusion returned in Lesson 10, which focused on the function of Connecting Ideas. Students were tasked with using each others' names when performing the function ("What do you think of Aki's idea?" "As Aki said…"). One student still confused his classmates' names as well as mine during the practice, but it was all done in good humor. By witnessing the students making jokes themselves, in English, their ability to take such a risk showed me they could open themselves up and be friendly with each other (Wan, 2014).

In Lesson 10, everyone participated in the tasks and used the new function. Humor, encouragement, and praise helped the students open up, but even by the end of the semester they remained reserved, introverted students upon entering the classroom and between activities. Though it is fortunate they were able to open up a little more in the activities and discussions, no method or technique could change their personalities.

Based on their grades, it is clear that the students had no trouble completing the tasks each week and they could perform at their level of English knowledge. Feedback with them varied little from other, more extroverted classes. Yet, the general mood of the class was noticeably quieter throughout the entire semester. The classes I taught on either side of this group were more active, more talkative, and a more typical mix of shy and open students. In classes with more mixed personalities, students can feed off one another and influence each other. In classes with the same personality, that type of influence is not seen and the shared traits of shyness and introversion are only enhanced. The change in classroom atmosphere is what attracted me to this group as a possible group to observe and keep a journal on. My goal was to find ways to help them open up more and perhaps be a little less shy, to find ways to improve the atmosphere (Wan, 2014), but in the end, I learned I could not change their personalities. I also could not control outside factors that further influenced their behaviors. On the other hand, I learned and appreciated that they were not immune to humor and positive reinforcement, and that worked to slightly lighten the mood in the lessons.

CONCLUSION

Murphy (2014) indicates many purposes for teaching journals, among them to help inform instructors of ways to modify or improve activities and lessons to better accommodate students. Seeing progress through journal entries informs instructors that students are developing (or perhaps regressing) week by week. I may have naively thought journaling about an all-introverted class would yield a completely changed class by the end of the observation period as a result of activities and methods I introduced each week – humor, encouragement, praise – and while the students did show great progress with proficiency, their personalities remained relatively unchanged. Further research, including student surveys and video recordings of classes, could identify possible other factors and features of an introverted classroom. This could be informative for instructors thinking they alone can change a class. Certainly, an instructor can gain student trust and students can perform better in a comfortable classroom setting, but that does not mean the students' personalities and nature will change. Shy students will remain shy. Outside factors can inhibit student openness. Nonetheless, minor adjustments and additions of humor, encouragement, and praise can still help these students in lessons.

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APPENDIX

Below are the guiding journal questions I answered each week using Google Forms. All were marked with an asterisk, meaning they required an answer:

1. General summary: how was class today?
2. Did my new or altered techniques work? Why or why not?
3. How was student behavior during review/practice activities?
4. How was student behavior during Discussion 1 (think about prep, responses, talking time, etc.)?
5. How was student behavior during Discussion 2 (think about prep, responses, talking time, etc.)?
6. How did students describe their abilities during tasks?
7. How did I interact with the students?
8. What articles or research could help explain student behavior this week?
9. Based on classroom behavior today, what could I try and alter next week?
10. What articles or research could help me try something new next week?