

Foreword

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On December 14, 2019, the Japan Association for Language Teaching's (JALT) Yokohama chapter staged their annual My Share event, where chapter members were invited to share practical classroom ideas for local language teachers.

This issue of *Accents Asia* is a selection of papers written by seven of the presenters. Samuel Bruce offers some very practical advice on how to design an effective academic poster. Keith Hoy examined the effectiveness of two visual prompts: timelines and visual metaphors, used to introduce an English-based content course focusing on contemporary cultural issues. Jon Shepard traces one language learner's path to becoming a more successful student. Lucinda and Yusuke Okuyama consider the learning app, Edmodo® (edmodo.com) as a pervasive learning platform. Brooks Slaybaugh introduces peer-assessment as a way to improve in-class discussions. A series of performance-based activities targeting the enhancement of EFL students' self-concept and sense of agency are described by Rashad DuPaty. And, in the final article, Lucinda and Yusuke Okuyama utilize a youth participatory evaluation approach to establish which strategies EFL students at the university level in Japan exercise to succeed in the classroom. The authors then worked with focus groups to co-create a reflective practice tool for maintaining learners' focus on the effective learning strategies.

I sincerely thank all authors for their wonderful contributions and their hard work behind the scenes as reviewers and proof readers. Each article presents very practical suggestions for the EFL classroom and I believe this issue will most certainly challenge teachers to try something different in their next teaching assignment.

For readers who are interested in participating in future JALT Yokohama events, please visit yojalt.org.

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Less Is More: Academic Poster Design That Works

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ABSTRACT

A major part of brain activity is given over to visual processing, yet many academic posters fail to make much visual impact. This article examines academic poster design to identify how to communicate more effectively in this medium; what works and what does not. The article offers key rules and ideas from the fields of graphic poster design and information graphics (*infographics*), to help make academic posters more successful. Topics covered include the use of text, language, color, and high-impact graphs and charts. The ideas are applicable to researchers' own academic posters and to students' poster projects, and many principles are equally applicable to creating effective presentation slides. An appendix offers suggestions on software and online tools and resources.

INTRODUCTION

The brain is primarily a visual organ. At least half of brain activity is concerned with visual processing (Fiser, Chiu, & Weliky, 2004), and the eye is naturally drawn first to more visual information, such as pictures and graphs which can be quickly identified, rather than to text (Endress & Potter, 2014). However, many academic posters are text-heavy, and may not make effective use of more visual communication, to which a poster is best suited. If one is creating an academic poster, one is adopting the role of designer. D'Angelo (2016) notes that the academic poster author must "...act not only as a writer but also as an editor and graphic designer who must be able to condense the message and render it appealing." (p. 45). The goal of an academic poster is to attract an audience, and communicate a key message. More complex data and ideas can be included in a separate handout, and explained by the presenter in person to interested viewers. The central premise of this paper is that 'less-is-more', and that by reducing the information load on the viewer the core message can be more effectively communicated. This also frees up more space, so that design principles can be harnessed to create more visual impact and help viewers to rapidly understand key concepts and ideas.

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THE PRINCIPLES

1. Reduce Quantity of Text
2. Consider Choice of Font
3. Prefer Visuals
4. Simplify Graphs
5. Consider Color

1. Reduce Quantity of Text

Reducing the quantity of text allows the viewer to more quickly and effectively scan a poster. Rossi (2018) suggests a maximum of 250 words for an academic poster, and I feel this is a good working guide to aim for. Having a word limit can be useful in forcing the designer to be selective when choosing what key information to include, and to favor visual representations of information as far as possible. Where text is used, bullet points and ellipsis should be preferred.

2. Consider Choice of Font

Font Style

Consideration of font style and size is a vital part of visual design involving the use of typography. *Serif* fonts, such as Times New Roman, have small, horizontal ‘feet’ (known as serifs) which help to lead the eye along the line. Serif fonts are best suited to blocks of text, like this paragraph. *Sans serif* (meaning ‘without serif’) fonts, such as Arial, have cleaner, simpler lines and are better suited to headings and smaller amounts of text. The APA Publication Manual notes that sans serif fonts can improve visual presentation (2016). For the purposes of poster design, sans serif fonts are preferable. Figure 1 shows examples of common serif and sans serif fonts.

FIGURE 1
A ‘serif’ font compared with a ‘sans serif’ font.

Times New Roman - Serif	Arial - Sans Serif
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Font Size

Main text should be large enough to read from a couple of meters away; a minimum of size 30 is recommended. In addition, there should be some clear size differentiation between the title, headings and main text. The following is a good rule of thumb (Figure 2):

FIGURE 2
Recommended font sizes for posters and slide presentations.

Title	Size 90 (or larger)
Headings	Size 60
Main Text	Size 30

3. Prefer Visuals

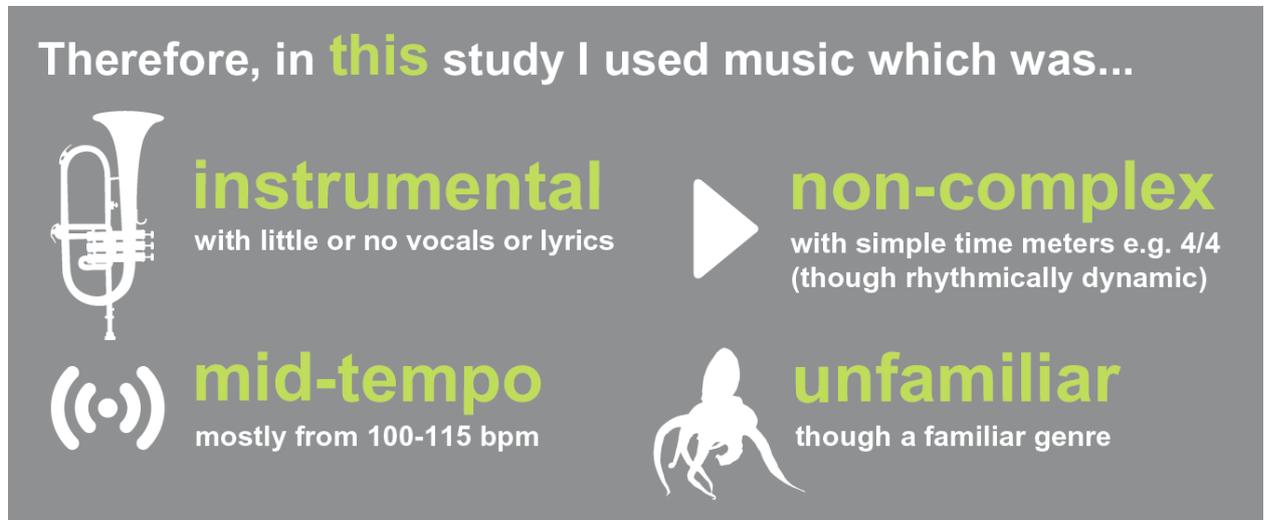
As mentioned, the eye is drawn more quickly to visual information, which can be more rapidly understood and processed (Endress & Potter, 2014). In addition, the superior recall of information when accompanied by a picture, as opposed to text alone, known as the *picture superiority effect*, has been demonstrated in numerous studies (Hockley, 2008; Whitehouse, Maybery, & Durkin, 2006). The following examples relate to a study by this author on the use of background music in the language classroom (Bruce, 2018). Compare Figure 3, in which only text is used, with Figure 4 in which the use of color and pictures offer more effective visual communication of the same information. The quantity of text has also been reduced.

FIGURE 3
Text-only explanation of the choice of music in the study.

<p>Therefore, in this study I used music which was:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Instrumental - or contained very brief, occasional non-intrusive vocal elements● Mid-tempo - between approximately 100 and 115 beats per minute (though also up to around 120 bpm)● Unfamiliar - the students would be unlikely to have heard these particular pieces before (though a familiar genre)● Non-complex - with simple time meters, e.g. 4/4 (though usually rhythmically dynamic) and relatively simple key changes
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FIGURE 4

A more visually-effective representation of the same information in Figure 3, here using pictures and color.



4. Simplify Graphs

A research study can produce a wealth of data, but while an information-dense graph may be fine for publication in a journal, it may not work well in a poster or slide presentation. It is important to focus on key findings, so that the viewer does not miss the central message. Discussing the effective presentation of complex data, the celebrated infographics pioneer Nigel Holmes said, “Move away from complexity and remove irrelevant detail until only what is essential remains. It is at this moment that what is relevant becomes visible, not before.” (cited in Errea, 2017, p. 17). Try to tell one story really well, to avoid distracting the viewer with less important data.

The following examples are based on data taken from a study on types of writing exercises found across five different textbooks (adapted from Kobayakawa, 2011). Figure 5 shows an information-dense chart; in which it is not easy for the viewer to quickly identify the key finding or core message. In contrast, Figure 6 shows a more selective approach, and simpler design, allowing the viewer to swiftly recognize a central finding (in this case, that translation tasks vastly out-numbered opportunities for simply writing). The reduction in complexity also allows for a larger font size.

FIGURE 5
Information-dense chart (data adapted from Kobayakawa, 2011)

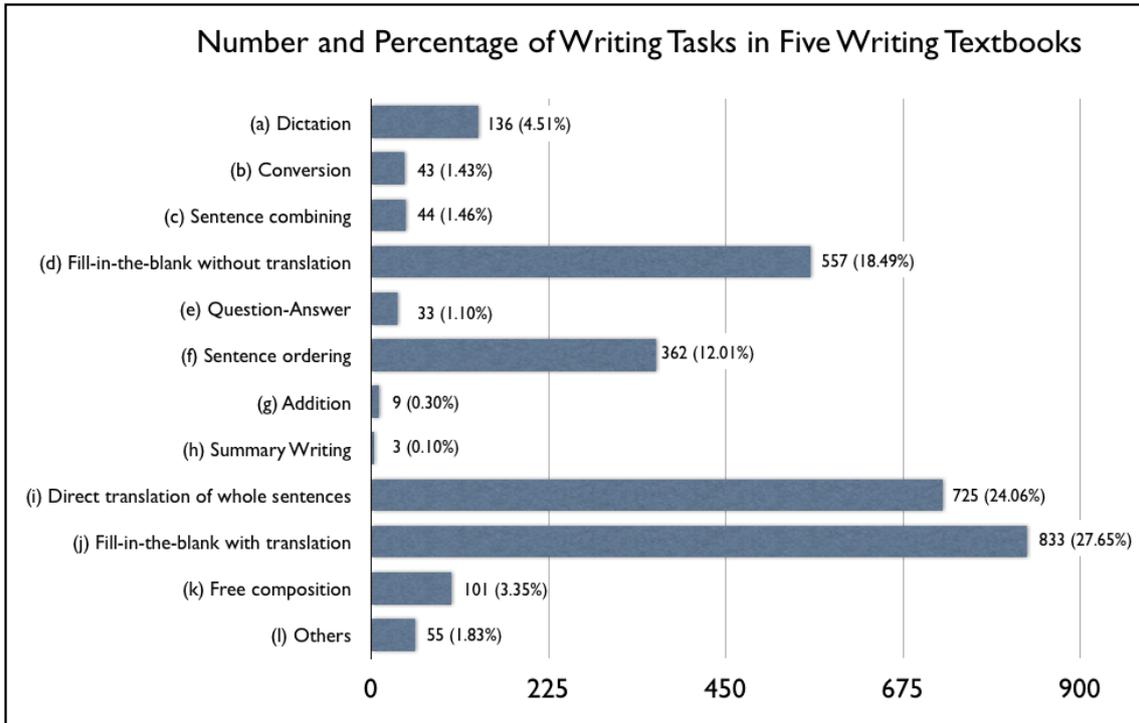
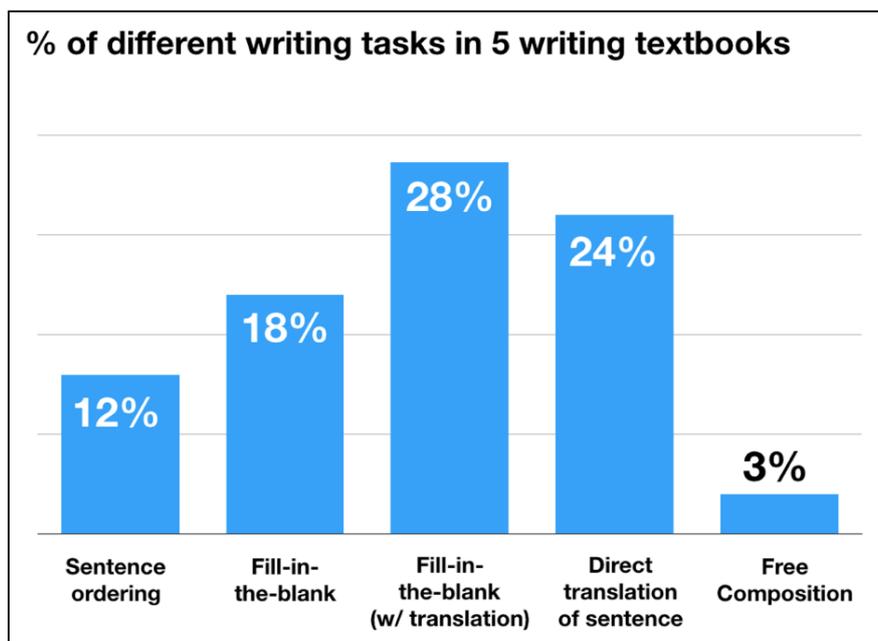


FIGURE 6
A more selective representation of key parts of the same data. The viewer can more swiftly identify a central relationship within the data.



5. Consider Color

Color can add visual interest, and allow the author to highlight key information. However, it is important not to overstimulate the viewer. A limited palette of around two or three main colors and a consistent approach to usage is most effective. In Figure 7 the viewer may be confused and overwhelmed. In contrast, Figures 8 and 9 are more effective due to the limited and consistent use of complementary colors³.

FIGURE 7
Use of too many different colors, and strong colors clashing.

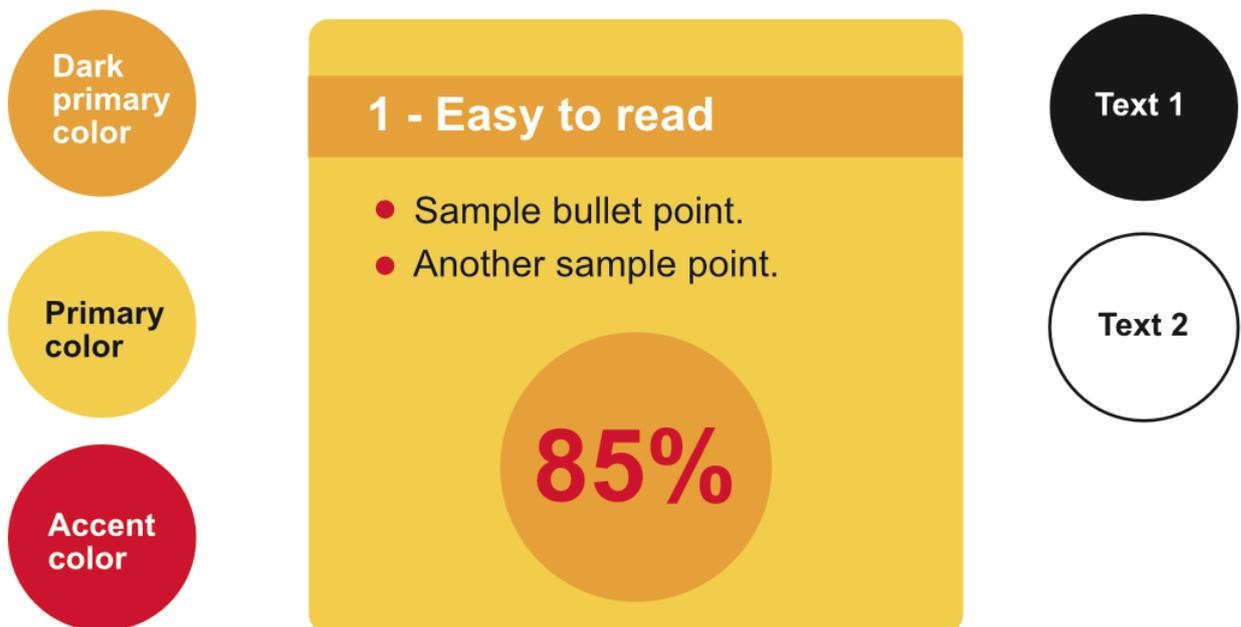


³ Figures 7, 8 and 9 adapted from Rossi (2018).

FIGURE 8
Example 1. Effective and consistent use of color.



FIGURE 9
Example 2. Effective and consistent use of color.



CONCLUSION

The goal of an academic poster is to attract an audience, and communicate the author's key message. This is best done by being selective in choosing what information to include, and by applying basic design principles to increase visual impact. The most fundamental of these are to reduce the amount of text, and to favor visual communication. More detailed information, data and references can be included in a separate handout, and also explained face-to-face when the opportunity arises. Poster authors should also include a contact email address in case viewers wish to find out more about their research.

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Appendix 1 - Suggested 1 Software and Online Resources

Free design software (online and/or downloadable):

- Gravit Designer
- GIMP
- Vectr
- SVG-Edit
- Inkscape

Paid design software:

- Affinity Designer (one-off purchase)
- Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator (monthly subscription only)

Online resources:

These sites generally offer free access with some limitations on selection and usage, or subscription options with unlimited use and more powerful tools.

- The Noun Project - thousands of free icons
- Easel.ly - hundreds of free infographic templates
- Vexels - thousands of free graphics
- Infogr.am - create free infographics

Appendix 2 - Poster Sample⁴ (Bruce, 2018)



⁴ This sample is presented as a flawed model. If I redesigned this, I would further reduce the amount of text, make the minimum text size 30, and favor a more dynamic layout (i.e., more varied use of shape and space) with a relatively large central image. Note: The actual poster has a good contrast between the green text and the grey background; on screen the contrast is reduced.

Using Visual Prompts to Activate Student Learning in the Study of Contemporary Issues in Japanese Society

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the use of two visual prompts within a Multi-Cultural Project (MCP) class consisting of Japanese and foreign university students. These two prompts were timelines and visual metaphors, and they were used to introduce an English-based content course focusing on the study of contemporary issues affecting Japanese society. The results reveal that visuals, particularly those which foster reflective, creative and critical thinking skills benefit all students, regardless of linguistic ability. In the case of timelines, it provides a valuable diagnostic tool in determining how much content knowledge students already possess. In terms of visual metaphors, they not only allow learners to extend their current knowledge, but also provide a platform to better understand the broader-based themes inherent within this course. Finally, the benefits of using these two visual prompts are clear in that they engender a high degree of collaboration and communication, skills which are important to cultivate in a world that is becoming increasingly interconnected.

INTRODUCTION

The pedagogical limitations of using visuals within a classroom have been well documented (Weninger & Kiss, 2013; Hill, 2013). In Weninger & Kiss (2013), their study focused on the interplay between images and text and they concluded that this relationship primarily served the “purpose of reinforcing lexical meaning” (p. 696). They proposed that instead of fostering linguistic competence, visuals and text should be used to develop a learner’s critical and reflective understanding of the world, or in the words of Kumaravadivelu (2008), a *global cultural consciousness*. A similar study by Hill (2013) reinforces this claim in that the images he examined within three English learning textbooks were used more for decorative purposes rather than any true engagement between the learner and the content. In the context of this paper, the two visuals which had a significant impact on promoting higher-level cognitive skills, were timelines and metaphors. In relationship to timelines, it allowed learners to better recognize the various connections and patterns over a specific period of time (Hines, 2006; Filipot, 2011). As for visual metaphors, the powerful messages they convey transcend linguistic abilities and content knowledge and provide a very important introduction to the discussion of important social issues (Birdsell, 2017); for the purposes of this paper, these issues pertain to the study of contemporary Japanese society.

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OVERVIEW

The MCP Program

The MCP classes started three years ago at a private university in Japan. The purpose of these classes is to encourage the Japanese students attending this university to take part in classes with the approximately 10-20 foreign students that come each year from the school's 14 partnership universities. These classes are offered throughout the academic year (4 terms) with each term consisting of 16 class meetings. The common features of the MCP classes are: 1.) Content-based lessons relating to a Japanese theme; 2.) English is the Medium of Instruction (EMI); 3.) English is the Lingua Franca (ELF) with secondary use of Japanese; 4.) Collaborative learning in which groups of people work together; 5.) Student learning is demonstrated through a final project-based group presentation.

Participants

The MCP classes are open to all Japanese students at the university providing they have a TOEIC score (or any other valid equivalent) of 500 and above. This rule also applies to those foreign students whose L1 is not English. For the past 3 years, the total number of students in these classes have been capped at around 20 students with an average ratio in each class being 30% foreign, to 70% Japanese students. Although the Japanese and foreign students are undergraduates from a variety of academic disciplines, they do receive credit for taking these MCP courses. Finally, the primary purpose of these foreign students coming to this university is to participate in a number of Japanese language and culture courses over a period of 6 months to a year.

METHODOLOGY

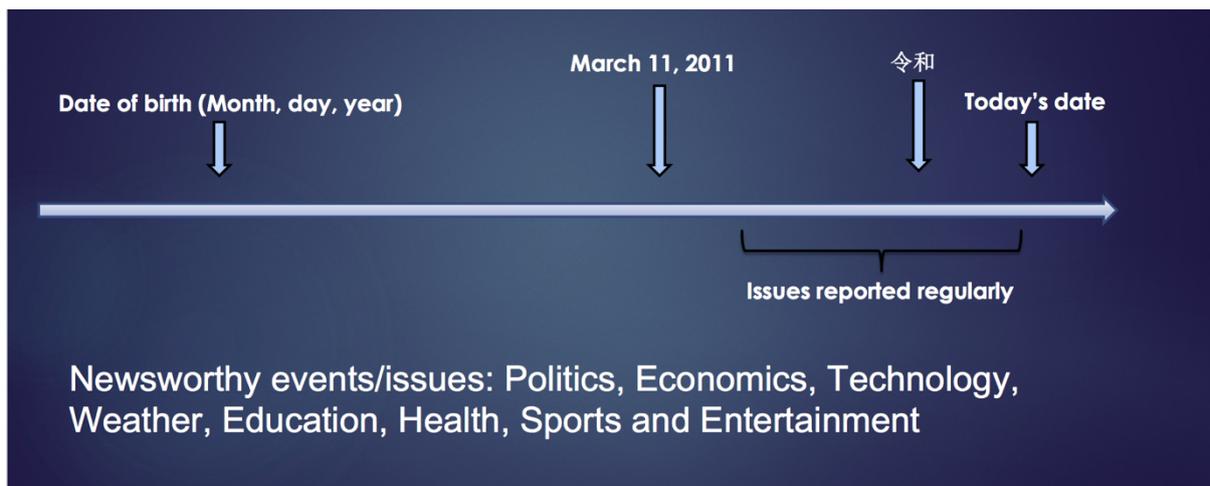
Given the diverse range of student abilities and interests as it relates to their English language levels and content knowledge, what would be the best approach to introduce a complex course which: 1.) gets students interested and engaged in the issues related to contemporary issues affecting Japan; 2.) gives students the larger picture as to why this is an important subject to study? In order to accomplish this, the instructor of this MCP course experimented with a number of ways to introduce the course and finally settled with an approach (on the first lesson of the term) using two kinds of visual prompts that have been highly effective in bridging the differences that are inherent in his classes.

The Use of Timelines

The first visual prompt involves the use of timelines. The teacher starts by instructing students to draw a horizontal line and then mark one end of that line with their birthdate (month, day, year) and the opposite end with today's date. Next, the teacher asks the students to plot any other points on that line that they would consider to be newsworthy events in Japan. These events could be news that they had seen online or on the television and could be related to: politics, economics, technology, weather, education, health, sports and entertainment. Although the main point here is to have students plot down any information (significant or not) on their timeline, the instructor has often noticed that it took students at least a minute to write down anything. Therefore, the teacher quickly follows up on his initial

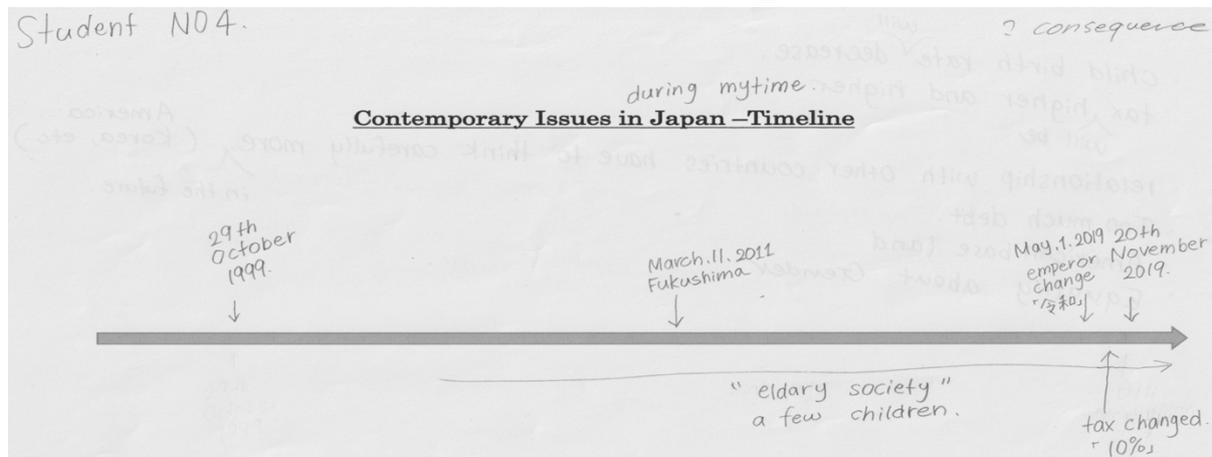
instructions by using cueing techniques. These techniques could be in the form of plotting down dates, for example, March 11, 2011, which was the Tohoku earthquake and the Fukushima disaster. In addition, the teacher can stress that if the student can not remember the specific date of an event, a word or term will do, for instance, *Reiwa* (令和). Lastly, there are newsworthy events that do not have a specific date, but have been reported regularly in the media and can be drawn as a horizontal curly bracket (See *Figure 1*).

FIGURE 1
Contemporary Issues in Japan Timeline



After giving these cues, the students had 4-5 minutes to complete as much information on their own. The amount of content that each student was able to plot on their timelines varied from 1 entry to several. *Figure 2*, shown below, is an example of a 20-year-old student who did very well in this activity as she managed to plot some very significant entries whether it was the tax increase of 10% instituted on October 1, 2019, to the ongoing issue of Japan's population implosion.

FIGURE 2
Student Sample



Once the students completed their individual timelines they were instructed to discuss some of the similarities or differences that they had with their entries in pairs. After that, they would be placed in groups of 4-5 students to once again reconfirm and re-edit their information so as to come up with a group timeline. Finally, each group would present their respective timelines to other groups so that the class could get a further consensus as to scope and sequence of the key events.

Visual Metaphors

After having the students present their group timelines to the other groups, the instructor then introduces a second visual prompt by displaying a visual metaphor that would be simple enough for students to decipher in terms of what the course content is all about. This is accomplished by first having the students guess what the leaks depicted in figure 3 represent. If there is no response, this is immediately followed up by cueing the students to the information that they wrote on their timelines. Soon enough answers such as: Aging population, Mounting-debt, Natural & Man-made disasters and Foreign workers were given. Next, the instructor would extend this visual metaphor by having students guess who that person is trying to plug the leaks. Most students were able to respond quickly with the correct answer, the government. Finally, the instructor asked what the wall represents and although many of the answers were correct (i.e., danger, divisions) it needed further clarification. It is at this point that the instructor explains the connections between all these metaphors by stating that many of the contemporary issues facing Japan today need to be examined through the lens of the significant pressures placed on this country both domestically and internationally. These pressures build up and are manifested as leaks springing out of a wall, that wall being Japan.

FIGURE 3
Visual Metaphors



OUTCOMES

Timelines and visual metaphors serve as very effective openers in getting students from diverse linguistic abilities and content knowledge backgrounds to better understand the complex dynamics surrounding the study of contemporary Japan. Timelines give the instructor a gauge on how much students know or don't know. In general, the instructor of this course noticed that in a typical class of 20 students, there would be at least 2-3 students who were able to add significant newsworthy events to their timelines (refer to the student sample in *Figure 2*). Interestingly enough, the foreign students -particularly the L1 native English speakers- did not dominate in this area as the instructor thought they would. Next, providing the right visual metaphor as shown in *Figure 3*, taps into the students' existing knowledge and in turn, allows them to connect with the content in a more meaningful way. Lastly, the instructional activities surrounding these two visual prompts involve group work, enquiry, and collaboration, all of which form the basis for further practice and refinement throughout the course and culminates in their final project-based presentation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the visual prompts used in this instructor's classroom reinforce the claim by Weninger & Kiss (2013) that images are more "than just mere visual reinforcement or space fillers, but instead, the main focus of attention in a meaningful task" (p. 710-11). In the case of this paper, it appeared that the students benefited from an instructional approach in which the interplay between the visuals and the text that they produced, clearly demonstrated a high degree of engagement and understanding of the course content in question. In order to further enhance the validity of this study, future research should be directed towards the kind of visual prompts that can: 1.) provide greater diagnostic analysis of students' existing knowledge and 2.) promote their critical and creative thinking skills.

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A Foundation for Language Learning & Development

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Westgate Corporation

ABSTRACT

Learning English can be fun and it can also be terrifying. Many students face language anxiety, or a feeling of apprehension, tension, and stress associated with the L2 context (Noguchi, 2019). This can be debilitating for students who truly want to learn and improve their English, but lack the confidence. This article looks at one such student, and her path to overcome challenges and attain success. Relatedly, we explore The Prism Model, which not only outlines how students develop academically, linguistically, and cognitively, but perhaps most critically of all, socially and culturally (Thomas & Collier, 1997). A positive learning experience and mind-state can lay the foundation for other interdependent learning processes to flourish and these positive social connections can build confidence and offer a bridge to better language learning.

AN ENTHUSIASTIC STUDENT

Not long ago, an enthusiastic student entered my classroom for the first time. Her name was Kimmie. She arrived early. With her pen in hand and perfect posture, she excitedly awaited the first English class of the term. However, as other students arrived, and the class filled up with English chit-chat, Kimmie's excitement quickly turned to dread. It took but a few moments for her to realize that not only was she the youngest student, she was perhaps the worst. Immediately, she lost her confidence and convinced herself that her English was not good enough--a terrible feeling that many English learners face.

But the next day, she showed up. And the day after that and the day after that. She did not give up, but it was increasingly apparent that she was losing her motivation. She was losing the enthusiasm that she held dearly on the first day. Kimmie needed more than the teacher's support and encouragement. That was not going to be enough.

Veronica was another student in the class. Excellent and patient. Compassionate and positive. One day after class, I spoke with Veronica in a sensitive way and I invited her to befriend Kimmie; to perhaps sit with her in class and partner with her during speaking exercises. She gladly agreed.

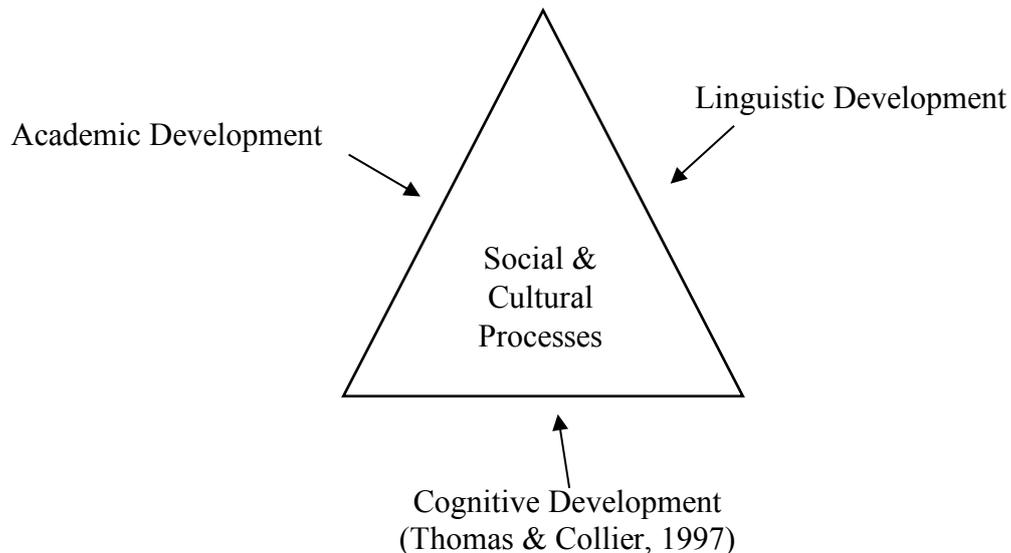
The transformation was almost immediate. Veronica indeed took Kimmie under her wing, and from then on, they sat together, laughed together, and spoke English together. Just as quickly as Kimmie lost her confidence, she gained it back. She started absorbing the language like a sponge and her production skills impressed and surprised nearly everyone in the class. Maybe she had the skills all along, but was too timid to show them. However, with

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Veronica's help, Kimmie was able to do what she set out to do in the first place. To learn and improve her English while having fun.

INTER-CONNECTED LEARNING PROCESSES

FIGURE 1
The Prism Model



Learners progress in different ways. According to The Prism Model (see Figure 1), students develop academically, linguistically, and cognitively. Academic development refers to classroom related knowledge acquisition. Students can acquire competency across various academic disciplines and subject areas. Linguistic development is all about language. Students develop linguistically, in their L1 and L2. These language processes take place both consciously, and subconsciously. Lastly, learners also develop cognitively. Cognitive development is both natural and continuous; it is in perpetual motion from birth, throughout schooling, and beyond (Thomas & Collier, 1997).

An important consideration is that the sides of the prism are not isolated. In other words, they are not independent processes representing three distinct sides, but in reality they are interconnected and interdependent. Academic, linguistic, and cognitive development are intertwined. A change in one side will necessarily impact the others, and the shape as a whole. However, that's not all.

Most importantly, at the heart of the triangle we discover social and cultural processes (Thomas & Collier, 1997). This is the foundation of the shape. The glue that holds the triangle together. Socio-cultural processes, in many ways, consider the mental state of the learner. Considerations include: stress, language anxiety, confidence, self-esteem, relationships, and much more. In essence, it asks the question: how do we feel? Naturally, positive social and cultural elements are imperative to optimal learning. If a student is anxious throughout an entire class, how can they learn? It is up to educators and students to cultivate a positive learning environment together? Instead students can find motivation in a safe and secure space.

The interplay between emotion and cognition is pivotal during the learning process. Emotional well-being is central to social and academic success. This is an obvious fact, but at times a difficult observation to make and a tangled problem to solve in an ever-evolving classroom. Positive and non-intrusive relationships which are built on respect, trust, active engagement, and support allow students to grow in a multitude of interconnected ways (Park, 2014). The teacher has the vital responsibility of keeping the spark of motivation alive. Undoubtedly, motivation is an essential factor that can help extinguish anxiety and offer a bridge to true learning (MacWhinnie & Mitchell, 2017).

CONCLUSION

How can a student be expected to learn if they feel anxious, stressed, and defeated? They cannot. Ultimately, we strive to cultivate positive learning environments. This can be done with the help of students, and never without. Kimmie would not have succeeded as she did without the support of her friend Veronica. Also, when learners attain positive socio-cultural experiences and mind-states, only then can academic, linguistic, and cognitive processes have an opportunity to reach their full potential.

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‘Edmodo’ as a Pervasive Learning Tool and how it Pertains to Formal, Informal and Social Learning Modalities in the EFL Classroom

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to examine Edmodo, an educational social networking platform, as a Pervasive Learning tool in the EFL university context. This article will define Pervasive Learning and introduce Edmodo as it pertains to formal, informal and social learning modalities. Additionally, practical examples from the literature regarding the successful use of Edmodo as a Pervasive Learning tool will be reviewed. In conclusion, recommendations and future research required will be considered.

INTRODUCTION

Pervasive Learning

Undoubtedly “the internet has profoundly reshaped education” and “offers more opportunities for students to obtain education” (Squib & Hafiz, 2015, p. 243). Students can access information via their mobile phones, tablets and computers when it is convenient for them and when the need for information is critical (Luján-García & García-Sánchez, 2015). Emerging eLearning tools and technologies are offering students unlimited information anytime, anywhere (Pappas, 2015; Luján-García & García-Sánchez, 2015). An emerging learning philosophy in keeping with this era of technological advancement is Pervasive Learning.

Dan Poterfract officially coined the term ‘Pervasive Learning’ in 2013, he defines the concept as “learning at the speed of need through formal, informal and social learning

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modalities” (Pontefract, 2016, para 3). Pervasive Learning is an emerging educational trend that is offering students a social learning experience beyond the classroom (Pappas, 2015). The Pervasive Learning model was initially created for the corporate learning environment however, it is also successfully utilized within educational settings (Chattopadhyay, 2014). Research shows that Pervasive Learning enables “collaborative learning” and “can have a positive impact on the classroom learning environment” (Squib & Hafiz, 2015, p. 242). The figure below illustrates that Pervasive Learning is comprised of formal, informal and social learning modalities and combines eclectic elements such as game-based learning, forums, podcasts, webcasts, friending, micro-blogging, wikis, tagging and so forth all under the umbrella of these learning modalities.

FIGURE 1
Pervasive Learning Framework (Arnab, 2017)



Pervasive Learning Environments (PLE’s) are becoming more prevalent and learning is no longer confined to the classroom. Edmodo is an example of a Pervasive Learning tool that facilitates learning via technologies such as tablets and mobile phones.

Edmodo as a Pervasive Learning Tool

Nick Borg and Jeff O'Hara, two school employees, created Edmodo in 2008 to enhance the classroom learning environment through the use of technology (Tsiakyrودي, 2018). Edmodo is an educational social networking platform specifically designed for learning and has been recognised as “one of the popular online learning tools used in the world” (Okumura, 2016, p. 36). These days, some researchers and educators refer to Edmodo as the ‘Facebook for Education’ (Dominican University of California, 2017; Enriquez, 2014). Tsiakyrودي (2018) describes Edmodo as “an educational website that takes the idea of social networking and refines it and makes it appropriate for the classroom” (p. 109). Edmodo allows teachers and students to collaborate in a secure online environment. Also, teachers can control and monitor online collaborations via a message board (Edmodo, n.d.). The tool enables users to chat, send and receive messages, access files and assignments through a cloud-based library from any device at any time (Edmodo, n.d.).

Edmodo has been used in various ways by different EFL teachers around the world. Some articles have been written about the use of Edmodo by EFL and non-EFL students from the Philippines (Enriquez, 2014), Japan (Okumura, 2017; Okuyama & Okuyama, 2019), Saudi Arabia (Khodary, 2017), Greece (Tsiakyrودي, 2018), Iran (Ma'azi & Janfeshan, 2018) and Malaysia (Mokhtar, 2018) to name a few. Among these, some investigated the interaction between American and Japanese students using Edmodo (e.g., Okumura & Bronson, 2016). The findings of these studies have mainly centered around topics such as perception, authentic communication, exchange programs, self-directed learning, improving writing skills, language anxiety and emotional connectedness to learning. Although some regard tools such as Moodle and Edmodo as Learning Management Systems (LMS), it can still be “motivating spaces to support face-face instruction” (Luján-García & García-Sánchez, 2015. p. 376). This article will add to this knowledge base as it explores Edmodo as a Pervasive Learning tool in an EFL context.

HOW EDMODO PERTAINS TO FORMAL, INFORMAL AND SOCIAL LEARNING MODALITIES

The following section will investigate the characteristics of each learning modality named in Pontefract's Pervasive Learning Model (i.e., formal, informal and social learning modalities) and explore successful examples of how Edmodo has facilitated Pervasive Learning in the literature.

Formal Learning Modalities

According to Pontefract's Pervasive Learning model, formal learning modalities are characteristic of traditional, “highly structured” and “top-down” teaching approaches (Chattopadhyay, 2014, p. 116). This modality includes the use of “courses”, “modules”, “forums”, “conferences” and “classroom trainings” among others (Chattopadhyay, 2014, p. 116). Learning is typically facilitated either through “e-learning or instructor-led training” customary in university settings (Chattopadhyay, 2014, p. 116). It is argued that “structured formal top-down” training is inadequate “to support the constantly changing and complex learning requirements” (Chattopadhyay, 2014. p. 115). However, a study by Durak, (2017) investigated teachers' perspectives of Edmodo and discovered that teachers find Edmodo useful especially for course administration, evaluations and for communicating with students. Moreover, Okuyama (2019) notes that teachers find Edmodo useful for class administrative purposes such as providing access to: course syllabi, course outlines, assignment criteria and

course materials. The author also found it to be useful for: assignment submission, grading, instant course evaluations and for monitoring online class participation.

In addition to course logistics, Edmodo has also been found to have a significant effect on EFL students' perceptions of writing and writing abilities. Writing lessons often fall into the formal modality due to its technical nature. EFL students often consider writing a "cognitively demanding" and "boring" activity, done in isolation with the teacher as "the only audience" (Tsiakyroudi, 2018, p. 100). Often students avoid writing and have little motivation to complete writing tasks. A comparison study found that Iranian EFL students who used Edmodo during writing lessons were more open to sharing their writing with others, discussing issues and less embarrassed about their grammatical mistakes compared with students in a control group who did not use Edmodo for writing tasks (Ma'azi & Janfeshan, 2018). Additionally, students who used Edmodo were more accurate in their writing and more motivated to correct their errors. The study found that Edmodo significantly improved students writing skills and helped students to cultivate positive attitudes towards writing tasks (Ma'azi & Janfeshan, 2018). These findings are supported by Tsiakyroudi, (2018) who found that Edmodo not only helped Greek EFL students to feel more positive about writing, but also improved their writing accuracy. Both studies found that the collaborative nature of Edmodo spurred greater student participation in writing tasks (Ma'azi & Janfeshan, 2018; Tsiakyroudi, 2018). This section explored Ponterfract's (2016) formal learning modality, the next section will investigate the informal learning modality in more detail.

Informal Learning Modalities

Evidently, EFL students have diverse learning needs and traditional teaching approaches are limited in their ability to fulfil them. Clearly a more flexible approach to learning is necessary to enable EFL students to take ownership of their own knowledge construction. According to Chattopadhyay (2014, p. 116), informal learning "takes place outside of the conventional framework" of learning and originates in response to a problem or a need. Hence, this type of learning is neither "predefined nor is it curriculum driven" (Chattopadhyay, 2014, p. 116). In fact, it provides students with more autonomy compared to formal learning (Chattopadhyay, 2014). An informal learning approach empowers students to fulfil their unique personal learning needs and positions the teacher as a learning facilitator rather than a "learning gatekeeper" (Chattopadhyay, 2014, p. 116).

A study by Okumura (2016) considered how Edmodo functions in an informal learning context for Japanese students who have few opportunities to practice English outside of class. He bridged this gap by creating authentic digital communication opportunities for his students using Edmodo. He instructed students to communicate with each other in English via Edmodo on a fortnightly basis. The first step was to post a picture and a written summary of their holiday on the Edmodo wall. Following the initial step, students progressed to communicating about themes related to their textbook. According to his study, this informal homework task gave the students authentic communication opportunities that allowed them to express themselves outside of the classroom.

In a subsequent study, Okumura & Bronson (2016) studied the interactions between 62 Japanese students improving their English skills and 53 American students improving their Japanese skills using Edmodo. This project empowered both parties to engage with native speakers by discussing commonalities such as favorite places, daily activities and childhood memories. These discussion tasks were set in addition to students' formal course requirements. It was found that the project allowed students to successfully apply their formal

learning in an informal context outside of the conventional learning framework. It is clear that informal learning provides diverse learning opportunities, in addition to this, Edmodo as a social learning tool further diversifies the learning experience.

Social Learning Modalities:

Social theorists have closely linked social learning to modelling however, due to technological advances, these days “proximity is no longer required for people to learn from one another” rather one must connect, network and create a personal learning environment (Chattopadhyay, 2014, p. 116). Chattopadhyay (2014) explains that the characteristics of social learning includes: “Connected students”, “Availability of social networking platforms”, “Ability to, access, create and share content freely”, “Technology and mobile devices”, “Facility to network with globally spread individuals” and “Access to expertise”. The section below explores these characteristics in more detail through investigating examples in the literature.

The literature shows that improved teacher-students communication is a common experience for those using Edmodo (Okuyama & Okuyama, 2019; Squib & Hafiz, 2015). This is because Edmodo enables students to informally chat or confirm assignment details with teachers online using emojis and screenshots. This has been found to reduce students’ anxiety as they are able to solve problems fast without arduous formal procedures (Al-Said, 2015; Khodary, 2017; Okuyama, 2019). Additionally, a study by Balasubramanian, Jaykumar and Fukey (2014) found that when teachers award students with electronic badges on Edmodo, students feel motivated and they perform better. Clearly, technologies are changing the relationships between students and teachers as their communication opportunities are expanding (Squib & Hafiz, 2015).

Edmodo has not only been found to improve teacher-student communication but can also enhance peer learning. Teachers can create secure online group chat spaces which enables students to participate in online group work outside of class. This is especially useful for self-directed assignments which students must complete in addition to formal course requirements. This allows students to create, share and access content freely (Okuyama & Okuyama, 2019). Sharing content such as homework assignments with peers online, enables students to support each other and to learn from each other (Okuyama & Okuyama, 2019; Balasubramanian et al., 2014).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article introduced Edmodo as a Pervasive Learning tool in an EFL context and explored successful examples from the literature of how formal, informal and social learning modalities have been facilitated using Edmodo. In many ways, our review of the literature, parallels that of Luján-García & García-Sánchez, (2015) who investigated Moodle as a Pervasive Learning tool. The literature shows that Pervasive Learning tools such as Edmodo are particularly valuable in higher education institutions where students must develop autonomous learning skills (Luján-García & García-Sánchez, 2015). It is not suggested that Edmodo replace face-to-face classroom interaction in fact, it could be used as a supplementary tool for learning. For instance, teachers could implement Edmodo in order to support students to consolidate their formal learning through exploration and practice as also mentioned by Luján-García and García-Sánchez (2015, p. 385). In this type of learning

environment, Edmodo allows students to “actively participate in their own process of knowledge construction” (Luján-García & García-Sánchez, 2015, p. 385).

Edmodo provides educational advantages however, no application is perfect and there are disadvantages to using Edmodo, for example, students need access to personal mobile devices and Wi-Fi. Furthermore, mobile phone screens can be too small for complex tasks, mobile phones run out of battery power reserves, students sometimes forget their login passwords and cannot use Edmodo until the teacher resets the passwords (Al-Said, 2015; Okuyama & Okuyama, 2019). Moreover, students can create multiple accounts which can cause confusion. The accumulation of these issues may increase the administrative burden on the teacher. In addition, data security also raises an issue and needs further investigation. Nonetheless, despite these disadvantages, it seems that Edmodo remains a useful tool in the EFL classroom. It is evident that Edmodo provides students with significant educational advantages and educators and educational institutions should take note of this and act.

Considering the rapid technological developments of the 21st Century, it is useful for teachers to re-examine their perceptions of technology, especially mobile phones, as a distractor in classrooms as also mentioned by Al-Said, 2015. We suggest that instructors who prefer a more traditional teaching style re-evaluate their teaching approaches to include more Pervasive Learning technologies such as Edmodo as also suggested by Balasubramanian et al., 2014. Additionally, we recommend that universities provide professional development to teachers regarding the benefits and practical application of pervasive learning technologies and prioritize the inclusion of social learning technologies in their curriculum (Al-Said, 2015; Ma’azi & Janfeshan, 2018). In accordance with Shubina & Kulakli (2019) we believe that future research should focus on best practice regarding aspects related to the data security of Edmodo and explore the risks that technologies such as Edmodo may pose to learning.

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Peer Assessment for Test Preparation in the Discussion Class

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ABSTRACT

Peer assessment is a useful tool for teachers and has many benefits. It can provide timely feedback for students in large classes. It can also be used in discussion classes for university teachers as a way for students to realize how they can improve at speaking English by noticing how other students perform. This paper argues that for a discussion class to be effective, teachers should use peer assessment as a way to prepare for discussion tests, in tandem with a list of questions for discussion. It is recommended that students keep a written record of how their partner performs, in order to notice their individual strengths and weaknesses. The goal of peer assessment is for students to improve at speaking practice, and to be able to speak for a longer period without the help of a teacher. Besides vocabulary, the students need to learn the proper conversational style of discussions, along with phrases and questions for discussion. In discussion practice, students need to keep track of the opinions given, whether their partner agrees, partly agrees, or disagrees. Also students must pay attention to examples given, notice if the L1 is used, and extended periods of silence.

INTRODUCTION

Assessment in the discussion class can be challenging for teachers. Students may not perform well and may not understand what is required for a successful discussion. One way to assist teachers is for students to assess each other. Peer assessment is a useful tool for teachers, especially with large class sizes. It gives students a chance to think about their own performance in preparing for a discussion test by assessing another student. One problem students may face is they may not realize that they are not interacting enough in discussion practice and need to continue to react to other students in their group or ask questions in order to avoid extended silence. This paper is about common problems students face in preparing for a discussion test and tips for helping them to prepare.

CONTEXT

The context is required multi-level classes of approximately 30 students per class. The students study science or engineering at a national university. Students are assigned to

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classes by their last name, and their proficiencies can vary substantially: from students who have lived abroad to those who have poor listening skills. Some students are unprepared to sustain a discussion, and there could be gaps of silence or a few Japanese words spoken when students do not know what to say in English. Students may take turns giving their opinions but it can seem like recitations for lower level students, who could just have memorized certain parts. Also, there may not be enough interaction between students and it could seem like students are using a Japanese conversational style unconsciously, where students are just taking turns speaking.

A possible solution is peer assessment as well as the use of discussion questions. According to the Stanford Teaching Commons (n.d., para. 2), “peer assessment gives students feedback on the quality of their work, often with ideas and strategies for improvement.” In formative assessment, students assess each other before their tests. Discussion questions and formal language is needed in order for students to not be dependent on the teacher during a test so as to keep the discussion going. During this process, the teacher’s main goal is to listen, and observe.

BENEFITS OF PEER ASSESSMENT

Peer assessment has many benefits. According to Instructional Support and Information Technology (ISIT) which is in the Faculty of Arts at the University of British Columbia, peer assessment is useful in that it “provides feedback, more quickly” as teachers may not have time to give feedback in a timely basis (Ideas and Strategies for Peer Assessment, n.d., para. 4). It also gives students a chance to learn by giving feedback to other students. It provides ‘reflective comparison’ between what other students write and what is expected by the instructor, and is ‘active engagement’ between students. (paras. 7-8). The Center for Teaching Innovation at Cornell University (2020, para. 2) argues that peer assessment can “empower students to take responsibility and manage their own learning...enable students to learn to assess and give others constructive feedback...enhance students’ learning through knowledge diffusion and exchange of ideas...” and “motivate students to engage with course material more deeply.” Indeed, so far I have noticed a marked improvement where students can have a discussion in English without the teacher joining the discussion, thanks to peer assessment, and also by using questions and phrases for discussion.

By using discussion phrases, it is hoped that students begin to improve at expressing their opinions as one of the challenges many students may face is to become comfortable in expressing disagreement. It is easy for students to agree but it is more difficult to partly agree and express why one feels that way and more so to disagree. As students don’t want to directly disagree due to cultural mores, I teach students to disagree politely, as they seem to prefer this. Also, I find that when students write about a topic in order to see more than one side, it helps them to better understand why some people may disagree with their point of view. Another technique is to try debate practice or ask students to write and consider views that they disagree with, such as nuclear power or artificial intelligence. According to the debate club at Stanford University (2020, para. 2), with debate students “learn to explain their own ideas and assess different viewpoints.”

PROCEDURE

In order to prepare for a discussion, it helps for students to write their opinions with reasons, details and examples. This is because some students may run out of things to say in a five-minute discussion test, and because they need to prepare their arguments. I give students a list of four topics before the three discussion tests. One list of topics for the second discussion test are Artificial Intelligence, Cyber Money, My Hometown, and Life in Tokyo. I chose topics which I thought would be interesting for university students who study science and technology. I ask my students to decide in pairs what topic they would like to choose for their test.

To prepare for the discussion test, in each class students can use the discussion peer assessment form. Students should try to keep track of how their partner speaks. Students need to write down their partner's opinions with examples and the reasons they give. They must also note whether they agree, disagree or partly agree. They need to keep track of the questions they ask, their reactions, and whether they used any Japanese or were silent for an extended period. It is anticipated that students will begin to notice what the proper English conversation style is, and how they may use a Japanese conversation style unconsciously.

CONCLUSION

At its core, in practicing peer assessment for English discussions, students need to learn formal language when interacting with other students and when they agree or disagree, and they need to learn to react and interact in English, instead of just listening silently. Students need to learn to actively engage with their partner. Students can prepare by using their handout with discussion questions and statements in order to remember the phrases for discussion. Regular practice helps, and higher level students can take their test without looking at the discussion questions sheet.

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Appendix:
Peer Assessment Sheet for English Discussion

Name? _____

Partner's name _____

Date _____

Topic _____

Opinion – yes/no

Reasons –

Examples-

Agree –

Partly agree-

Disagree –

Extended silence –

Asked a question –

Reacted to another student –

Japanese spoken – yes/no

An Investigation of Student Motivation through Self-Regulated Video Performance

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ABSTRACT

Motivation has long been a popular topic within second language acquisition. In particular, teachers who operate within an EFL context are typically more mindful of this notion as factors such as a surrounding homogeneous L1 environment often hampers the necessary need for an L2 as it serves little function within student lives. Student motivation development is often difficult for such teachers, especially those who are often assigned to one class per week ALT positions where their time is limited. With all of these factors in mind, the following series of performance-based activities were created in order to not only provide EFL students with a better self-concept of themselves, but also a sense of agency that they were not used to in their prior educational history.

CLASS CONTEXT

The context for this series of activities was in consideration of a third year (senior) high school curriculum in Chiba prefecture, Japan. The majority of these students were athletes who belonged to a number of sports clubs within the school where their athletic activities were often prioritized over academic progress. Due to this and other existing conditions, the students in these 12th-grade classes were often apprehensive and had little motivation in progressing with their English study since they were already university-bound after having difficulty in two years of differentiated language instruction while maintaining a heavy athletic schedule with their clubs. Through observation and analysis, I had deduced that a primary reason for student apprehension was due to their own self-deprecating views of their L2 abilities which had grown over the years where their inability to accurately follow and understand the varying course progressions resulted in a belief in an innate disparity that they had with the language itself. Therefore, aiming to have these students push the limits of their own individual English abilities and encourage learner autonomy, the following series of role-play activities was created. This series has been broken down to three stages.

ACTIVITY DETAILS

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Stage One

The students were first provided with an explanation for the series of activities and given an outline of the steps that they would progress toward the end goal of an original role play with a partner. They were then given time to review a number of pre-written example scripts to take note of vocabulary and phrases targeted by the teacher to discuss with their partner. Upon completion of the discussion they were finally shown the teacher-led video performances of the example scripts, then asked to select one of the model scripts to perform as a rehearsal with their partner while being video recorded for later review. Attention was given to Nation's (2007) 'meaning-focused input' segment of his Four Strand theory in this stage where the example scripts were created by the teacher in order to:

(a) have most of the input already familiar to them, (b) attempt to create learner interest in the input and a desire to understand it, (c) have only a small proportion of the language features unknown to the learners, and (d) create an opportunity where learners can gain some knowledge of the unknown language items through context clues and background knowledge (p. 3).

This stage also had Richard Schmidt's 'Noticing Hypothesis' in mind where the students are asked to evaluate multiple examples of the targeted phrases in order to attempt to have them "consciously notice input in order for it to become intake" (Mackey, 2006, p. 408).

Stage Two

The students were next given the videos from their rehearsal performance to review at home and evaluate themselves on where they saw their strengths and weaknesses according to a ten-point scale among three categories: 'pronunciation', 'fluency', and 'memorization'. This is modeled in the mark sheet below:

FIGURE 1
Rehearsal Mark Sheet

<i>Memorization</i> <i>(Minus points every pause in your speech)</i>	<i>Pronunciation</i> <i>(Minus points every mistake in rhythm and pronunciation)</i>	<i>Body Language</i> <i>(Minus points every use of bad posture)</i>
<i>Memorization</i>		/10
<i>Pronunciation</i>		/10
<i>Body Language</i>		/10
TOTAL		/30

After self-evaluation the students were then given new mark sheets to write down which targets they wanted to allocate to different point totals. They were encouraged to place their weaker targets in the higher point range and their stronger targets in the lower point range in order to have them focus on developing their weaknesses instead of relying on their strengths.

FIGURE 2
Student Regulated Mark Sheet

<i>Memorization</i> <i>(Minus points every pause in your speech)</i>	<i>Pronunciation</i> <i>(Minus points every mistake in rhythm and pronunciation)</i>	<i>Body Language</i> <i>(Minus points every use of bad posture)</i>
<i>Target 1:</i>		/16
<i>Target 2:</i>		/10
<i>Target 3:</i>		/4
TOTAL		/30

This step had Dörnyei ‘s (2001) ‘goal setting theory’ in mind where it was emphasized that it can be used effectively with demotivated, reluctant students, who have no general goals with language learning and allows teachers to look at the tasks from the students’ point of view while creating an immediate purpose that is valid in their eyes. Since most of these students often panicked or became distraught in the face of tasks with the vague idea of “overall fluency” as a target, it seemed to make more sense to have everyone focus on specific short term goals as stepping blocks instead where they have a chance to count and analyze their own progress to fluency towards the future.

Upon agreement on their commitments the students were finally asked to meet with their same partners as before to write an original short role-play. The only stipulations were that they were five sentences and contained two highlighted expressions from the previous example scripts for each student as a minimum. They were then given time to write, edit and rehearse their role-play with teacher assistance. This step had the idea of having the students exercise ‘social comparison processes’ as they worked interdependently as well as through review of peer performances. The ‘broaden and build theory’ of positive psychology was also taken into consideration as the positive emotions developed through the sharing of everyone’s original character personalities from both their written and gestural work would hopefully broaden their ideas into experimenting with new forms of expression (Mercer & Ryan, 2015).

Stage Three

After preparation, the students were finally asked to perform their original role play either publicly in front of the class or privately with the course staff while being recorded on video in either scenario. These collected videos were later used for further home review and self-reflection where the students were asked to update their assessments of their three targets. After the update, they were asked to select a new target to focus on for their next assessment and draft a plan of practice towards their new goals.

STUDENT REACTIONS

Upon course evaluation at the end of the year, a majority of these students reported that they appreciated the freedom to select their own assessment targets. The lower-proficiency students reported spiked interest in the class due to the positive reinforcement of their own strengths. The higher-proficiency students reported enjoyment in the freedom to experiment with new language features that were previously unfamiliar to them.

LIMITATIONS

The largest limitation was the teacher's inability to control the amount of effort placed by the students when given the autonomy to select, create, and control certain aspects of their learning experience. One way to address this could be using a general assessment rubric throughout the course without compromise which could prove beneficial in this case to gauge how their results progress over time. Such a rubric could be reviewed at any time as an archived video and used to focus on certain features of a verbal performance such as unimpeded word/sentence flow and uses of body language. One last idea could be to also archive and note the changes in the student's comments from their self-reflection sessions in the hopes that they begin to feel they accomplish their targets and continue to find new ones for their own personal growth.

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Strategies for Successful Language Acquisition and the Co-Development of a Reflective Practice Tool: A ‘Youth Participatory Approach’

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is twofold, (a) to investigate which strategies Japanese EFL students employ to master language learning at university level, and (b) to share these strategies with EFL student groups through the co-development of a reflective practice tool. Utilizing a strength based ‘Youth Participatory Evaluation’ (YPE) approach, 64 questionnaires and a 4-focus group were administered. The student questionnaire identified that participation, motivation, shame resilience and preparation were the most common strategies that successful EFL learners employed. Following the questionnaires, the student focus groups co-designed a reflective tool based on the data collected. This study shows that it is necessary for researchers and educators to make a pedagogical shift from “problems” to “possibilities” to empower EFL students in their language learning journey (Krutkowski, 2017, p. 227). This article will discuss the findings, introduce the reflective tool and describe how the tool was co-developed.

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, researchers investigate problems in order to explore issues and find solutions (Zimmerman, 2013). Although this type of research is useful and necessary, it is often rooted in problem-focused theories, which results in mere improvements as opposed to change strategies (Zimmerman, 2013). On the other hand, *resiliency theory* focuses on positive factors that become change strategies which can heighten existing strengths (Zimmerman, 2013). What is more, a deficit research perspective can lead to the stigmatization of its population and seldomly empowers participants and their communities.

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For example, numerous articles highlight poor communicative ability as a significant problem regarding English Education in Japan (Takanashi, 2004; Tan & Chia, 2015; Yashima, Ikeda, & Nakahira, 2016).

Overly focusing on what is “wrong” or “missing” could lead researchers to neglect the strengths that students already have (Krutkowski, 2017, p. 227). It is timely to ask new research questions that focus on positive enquiry rather than deficit perspectives. This strength based epistemological underpinning led us to investigate what strategies successful EFL students employ to achieve successful language acquisition. In keeping with the ‘Youth Participatory Approach’, the researchers worked with participants to empower them to share their knowledge with their learning communities through a self-reflective tool (See Appendix A). Reflection is a valuable means to raise awareness and share learning in educational settings (Riley & Harsch, 1999). This provided an opportunity to minimize the use of westernized tools by developing a context specific tool for Japanese EFL students in Japan.

METHOD

This study employed a ‘Youth Participatory Evaluation’ (YPE) methodology. The YPE approach engages students in the research process to influence and evaluate the programs that serve them. Students play an active role in various stages of the research and develop knowledge about their experiences that can be put to use (Flores, 2007; Powers & Tiffany, 2006). In this study, students not only answered the questionnaire, but also engaged in analyzing the data and creating the reflective tool based on their personal experiences.

Procedures

Participants in this study were advanced EFL university students in Japan with TOEIC scores of 650 and above. The rationale for this was to (a) capture the experiences of students who have successfully acquired English as a foreign language, and (b) ensure that students had a conversational level of English in order to comfortably answer the questionnaire and discuss topics in the focus group. Participants were recruited by posting a ‘Google Forms¹³’ survey link on the class ‘Edmodo¹⁴’ page. Students were informed that (1) their participation were voluntary, (2) their responses would be anonymous, and (3) their answers would not affect their grades in any way. Data was collected between June and July 2019.

Part A: Questionnaire

A sample size of 63 students completed a ‘Google Forms’ electronic questionnaire (See Appendix A). The sample included both female and male Japanese university students’ voices. In addition to standard demographic questions, the questionnaire included two open ended questions:

¹³ Google Forms is a free web-based application that is used to create electronic forms for data collection purposes.

¹⁴ Edmodo is an educational “social networking platform” specifically designed for learning and “has been recognized as one of the popular online learning tools used in the world” (Okumura, 2016, p. 36).

1. Participants were asked to list approximately three reflective questions that they think Japanese EFL students should ask themselves in order to improve their English skills.
2. Participants were asked to provide some advice to EFL students in Japanese universities that would help them to improve their English skills.

TABLE 1
Questionnaire: Demographic Data (63 students)

Demographic Data		Number	Percentage
Ethnicity	Japanese	61	97%
	Other	2	3%
Gender	Female	31	49%
	Male	32	51%
Age	18-20	53	84%
	21-23	7	11%
	24-26	1	2%
	Unknown	2	3%

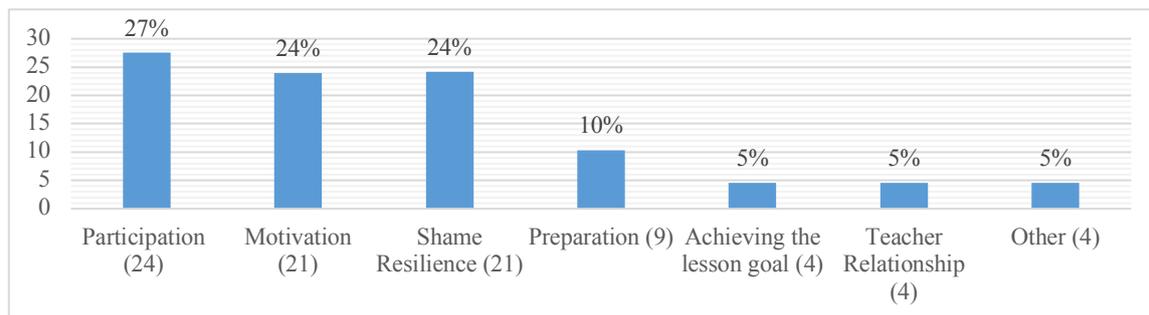
Part B: Focus Groups

Seven focus groups were conducted, and each focus group consisted of about four students. The focus group participants analyzed the questionnaire data that was generated by ‘Google Forms’. This methodological decision was based on the YPE approach which states that young people should be active participants in various stages of the research process (Flores, 2007; Powers & Tiffany, 2006). The focus group participants were asked to analyze the qualitative data (student-generated questions) by categorizing the data according to themes in groups of four (See Appendix B & C). Subsequently, a follow-up discussion was conducted to clarify the meaning and importance of the data and students categorized and listed the most significant reflective questions for EFL students in Japanese universities. The data collected in the focus groups were captured by note-taking. The focus groups consisted of a total of 27 participants between the ages of 18-20 and included 56% (15) female and 44% (12) male participants. The data shows that 96% (26) the the participants identified as Japanese and 4% (1) identified as other.

RESULTS

The focus group participants categorized the data according to themes as depicted in the graph below. The most salient themes that emerged (FIGURE 1) were participation, motivation, shame resilience and preparation.

FIGURE 1
Key themes identified from student generated questions (87 Questions)



DISCUSSION

Participation: Maximizing Speaking Opportunities in Class

The most prominent theme that emerged from the data was the importance of class participation. The data shows that 27% of the questions created by students emphasized the importance of class participation with a specific focus on speaking. The student-generated questions revealed that top performing students were able to self-evaluate their class contribution and were well aware of the pitfalls of passivity in the classroom. The questions below highlight that successful students maximized speaking opportunities in class and actively expressed their opinions. Moreover, they challenge themselves to experiment with the language in class despite the risk of making mistakes and feeling embarrassed. The student-generated questions below illustrate this point in more detail:

“Did you use opportunities to speak English to the fullest?”

“If you don’t intend to speak up or share your opinions, what is the point of going to English classes anyway?”

“Do I realize that it is important to participate and speak actively in class?”

“Do I have confidence to speak English?”

“Do I try to speak in English, not in Japanese in class?”

Difficulty of speaking in class is one of the most frequent concerns that language learners have (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986). Students sometimes “freeze” when having to speak English without extensive preparation or cue cards according to Horwitz et al. (1986). This is often due to having perfectionistic tendencies which inhibit students from experimenting with language and feeling free to make mistakes along the way (Gregersen & Horwitz, 2002). Thus, successful students seem to have more realistic expectations of their performance in class. They see the classroom as a place to grow rather than a space in which to prove themselves or compete with their peers.

Motivation: Having a Meaningful Reason to Study English

The second most prominent theme that emerged from the data is motivation. The analysis revealed that 8% of student-generated questions were focused on motivation. It appears that successful students have a clear goal for studying English and understand that each class is an opportunity to move closer to reaching their goal. Students also actively applied their learning. It seems that having a clear and meaningful rationale for studying English provides the impetus to maximize learning in the classroom:

“What do I want to learn from this class?”

“Why am I learning English?”

“Do I really want to improve my English skills and if so, why?”

“What do I want to do with my English skills?”

“Do I think that learning another language is necessary for a good education?”

Not surprisingly, research shows that “achievement in learning English as a foreign language (L2) demands a high level of motivation among learners” (Tan & Chia, 2015, p. 41). Highly motivated students have more determination, self-regulation and positive attitudes that enable them to endure the difficult journey of language learning (Tan & Chia, 2015).

Shame Resilience: Problem Solving and Shame

Another significant theme that emerged from the data was the importance of problem solving in class. The analysis shows that 24% of the student-generated questions focused on clarifying the teacher’s instructions in terms of class work or homework. It is clear that successful EFL students are proactive in terms of resolving misunderstandings and deciphering the teacher’s instructions. This was usually done by asking questions to either the teacher or their peers. The questions below show how successful students actively dealt with ambiguousness in class. It appears that students were able to navigate feelings of shame which could inhibit their learning process. The quotes below illustrate this more clearly:

“Did I understand what the teacher wanted me to do?”

“Did I ask all the questions I had in class?”

“Do I understand what we will do in next class?”

“Is anything unclear, do I need any help to clarify?”

“Are there any words I don’t understand?”

“Is the work I did correct?”

“Have I set the right priority for what I should be doing?”

“Did I address issues which made me feel anxious during class?”

Studies show that shame is a common emotion in the language classroom and has a debilitating effect of L2 acquisition (Wilson, 2016). Shame often causes students to withdraw, refrain from asking questions, feel confused, avoid others and feel the desire to hide (Wilson, 2016). Additionally, shame affects working memory performance; for example, it can cause students to forget important information such as teacher’s instructions or grammatical rules

(Wilson, 2016). Successful students resist the urge to avoid and withdraw and, in its place, they connect with their peers to solve problems and clarify instructions.

Preparation: Taking Responsibility for Your Learning

Another important theme that emerged from the data was preparation. The analysis shows that 10% of the student-generated questions emphasized the importance of preparation. It appears that successful EFL students are diligent and persistent when it comes to self-directed study. These students take responsibility for their learning and actively consolidate their learning before and after lessons. Additionally, participants reviewed and reflected on their learning. The quotes below further demonstrate this:

“Did I prepare enough before class?”

“Do I read exercises from the last class aloud at home?”

“Do I look up words or expressions that I don't know after class?”

“What did I learn in the last class and what are we going to do in the next class?”

“What should I prepare for the next class?”

“Do I reflect on my learning after class?”

Preparation is not only related to effective performance in class but is also a behavioral strategy to deal with language learning anxiety (Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004). Preparation had a twofold effect as it allowed students to (a) work towards mastering the language while (b) distracting them from anxious thoughts related to the language class (Kondo & Ying-Ling, 2004). Students appeared to discharge negative feelings through preparation and focused their energies on their performance in class.

In addition to the most salient themes discussed above, other less prominent yet still significant themes included achieving the lesson goal, accuracy and having a good relationship with the teacher.

CONCLUSION

This study utilized a strength-based ‘Youth Participatory Approach’ to investigate what strategies successful Japanese EFL students employed that allowed them to successfully acquire English language skills in a university setting. Data gathered from 64 student questionnaires and 4 focus groups revealed that participation, motivation, shame resilience and preparation were the most common strategies that successful EFL learners employed.

It became clear that successful students understood the value of class participation and had realistic expectations of their class performance. They accepted that making mistakes were part of the language learning journey. They also prioritized experimenting with the language over proving themselves to their peers. Successful students applied their learning in the class by actively engaging with the learning materials and practicing with their peers. The data also showed that successful students were highly motivated because they often had a clear and meaningful rationale for learning English. This motivation supplied them with a positive attitude that buffered them against discouragement which is inevitable in the language learning process. Successful students who participated in this study also demonstrated shame resilience. Instead of withdrawal or avoidance, which are both common

responses to experiencing shame, they chose to connect with their peers to solve problems and to clarify ambiguous instructions. This allowed them to avoid getting stuck and to move forward in the learning process. Furthermore, another successful strategy that was employed was preparation. In addition to utilizing preparation as a tool to improve their language skills, students also used preparation to distract themselves from anxious thoughts related to the classroom. Preparation helped students to discharge their negative emotions while focusing on improving their class performance.

A reflective questionnaire was co-developed with participants to share the findings with their EFL community as a means to empower students to influence the programs that serve them (See Appendix A). The focus group participants decided that students should review these questions regularly to enhance their self-awareness and cognizance of potential issues in the class. The reflective questions were designed to be used alongside a diary in which students can record their thoughts and develop strategies for the next class. It must be noted that the questionnaire was developed as a reflective tool for Japanese university EFL learners and not as a measurement or performance evaluation tool.

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APPENDIX A: Reflective Questions Created by Japanese Students for Self-Reflection

Student's Self-Reflective Questions



Check the boxes that apply to you:

1. I have a clear and meaningful motivation for learning English.
2. I actively use the new vocabulary and phrases that I learn in class.
3. If I didn't understand something, I tried to figure it out (e.g. by asking the teacher or friends to explain)
4. I am well prepared before coming to class.
5. I understood what the class was about and what I had to do.
6. I understood what homework I have to complete.
7. I communicate well with the teacher.
8. I respect and encourage my classmates (I don't laugh at their mistakes)
9. I know how to stay calm when I feel nervous in class.
10. I contributed in class and didn't suppress my own opinions.
11. I spoke less Japanese in class.
12. I was brave enough to speak without trying to be perfect
13. I try to enjoy my learning and don't take things too seriously.

#

Score total:

Look at your final score and write a few sentences to answer the questions below.

14. What did you do well?

15. What can you do better next time? (Explain how you might improve this.)

APPENDIX B: Students Questionnaire

My Advice for EFL Students in Japanese Universities

This survey is voluntary and completely confidential. Please be honest, your answers will not affect your grades in any way.

Gender: Female Male Gender Diverse

Ethnicity: Japanese Other _____

Age: _____

My English Level: Beginner Intermediate Upper Intermediate Advanced

Please answer the following questions:

1. What questions do you think EFL students should ask themselves to reflect on their learning to improve their English skills? (You can list up to 3 questions.)

2. What advice would you give Japanese EFL students to improve their English.

Thank you for participating!

APPENDIX C: Focus Group

Help Create a Reflective Tool for EFL Students in Japanese Universities

Your participation in this focus group is voluntary and completely confidential. Please be honest, your answers will not affect your grades in any way.

Focus Group: Demographic Data

Gender: Female Male Gender Diverse

Ethnicity: Japanese Other _____

Age: _____

My English Level: Beginner Intermediate Upper Intermediate Advanced

Focus Group Interview Schedule:

Hi students!

Please have a look at the list of questions provided. These questions were created by the students who participated in the questionnaire (including you!).

In groups, please discuss the following:

- What general themes can you identify in these questions? In other words, what topics are the questions about?
- What questions are not listed here that should be listed in your opinion?
- What questions are not relevant?
- Do you have any suggestions as to how students should engage with these questions?

Please write the group's ideas on the note paper provided. This will be collected at the end of the discussion.

Thank you!
