

Constructing Learning Materials to Enhance Freshmen Students' English for Presentation Classes for the International Collaborative Event – The World Youth Meeting

Gary Kirkpatrick

Nihon Fukushi University, Japan

gkirk@n-fukushi.ac.jp

Abstract: In keeping with project based learning, which is a focus of the International Welfare Development faculty and its International Collaborative event, the World Youth Meeting (W.Y.M.), the outcome of this research project will be to produce materials to enhance freshmen students' English presentation skills. Students in the faculty of International Welfare Development (I.W.D.) take a central role in the event. Prior to the event they take a variety of classes to prepare for the various roles in the W.Y.M. This researcher will distribute surveys to Nihon Fukushi University (N.F.U.) and foreign participants who participated in the W.Y.M. as presenters. The survey will ask the participants to reflect on their experiences as presenters and to give advice to freshmen. The survey will ask for recommendations on preparing for and giving presentations at the event. The collected advice will then be examined to find areas of commonality. A compilation of the comments would then be used as teaching considerations for the freshmen English for Presentation classes. The intention is that by incorporating the previous participants' suggestions, it will increase the relevancy and narrow the focus of materials to better meet the needs of the students. In addition, it will provide an opportunity for the senior students to reflect on their experiences in the role of presenters at the W.Y.M.

Keywords: international collaborative event, materials production, student needs, reflection

Introduction

Producing materials that will enhance student's learning experiences and motivate students is a difficult process. Nunan (97) has said that materials production needs to consider theoretical concepts like motivation and culture. Furthermore, the materials need to involve tasks that are relevant to students and reflect their needs and to some extent their cultural backgrounds. Giving students a voice, in terms of tasks that give them an opportunity to express their own interests, is also seen as a way to foster student autonomy in the classroom. Hence, for teachers, it is important to assist students to achieve the goal of becoming 'legitimate producers of language within social groups both inside and outside the classroom' (Hall & Beggs, 98). There are neigh sayers who argue that student autonomy is a western concept and not culturally appropriate for Asian students. (Pennycook, 94). Within the context of the Nihon Fukushi University (N.F.U.) or the Japan Welfare University in the faculty of International Welfare Development (I.W.D.), some students are preparing to work for Nonprofit Organizations (N.P.O.s) or Nongovernmental Organizations (N.G.O.s) many of which are situated outside Japan or have strong ties to organization located abroad. These students must have both strong English language skills and language learning autonomy for their long term success, so they need an awareness of and the skills to cope with non-Japanese settings.

As is well known, student autonomy and motivation go hand in hand. Students need to acquire the opportunities to produce, perform and reflect on their own performance in order to build confidence in their own self-sufficiency (Dornyei, 01). Classroom settings and materials need to provide opportunities and reinforcement for this to transpire. The features of such a classroom would include collaboration, communicative language teaching and cooperative learning (Adamson, 04; Crandall, 99). With these features in place, students will be able to develop their sense of confidence and be able to motivate themselves without the anxiety associated with more traditional classrooms. In the traditional classroom setting, teachers become the sole provider of feedback and evaluation due to time constraints, need for formal grading and evaluation of student progress. Whereas in Nihon Fukushi University's (N.F.U.) International Welfare Development (I.W.D.) faculty and its International Collaborative Project (I.C.P.), the World Youth Meeting (W.Y.M.), an educational constructivist perspective is the guiding principal to which students 'actively construct their knowledge rather than passively receiving knowledge from their teachers or environments' (Kageto & Sato, 10).

Another important consideration is the effect the teacher can have on student motivation. Various studies have shown that teachers can both motivate and de-motivate students through their actions in the classroom (Dornyei, 01, Efram et al., 03). Therefore, the job of the teacher is to provide opportunities for positive kinds of learning, design appropriate materials, draw student's attention to positive models and assist them to set appropriate goals.

Research Questions

This study is meant to be part of an action research cycle. Action research is 'the systematic collection and analysis of data relating to the improvement of some aspect of professional practice' (Wallace, 98). The

main question is how to improve classroom materials with regards to the preparing and giving of presentations in English at an I.C.P. called the World Youth Meeting (W.Y.M.) for students in Nihon Fukushi University's (N.F.U.) International Welfare Development (I.W.D.) faculty. Students in this faculty take a central role in the event. In preparation for the event students in the I.W.D. faculty take a variety of classes to prepare for their roles at the event. Specifically, the materials would be used in the English for Presentation classes to enhance the first year student's awareness of all aspects associated with presentation preparation and performance from the perspective of senior students who have taken part in the event as presenters. Given the importance of senior-junior relationships within the context of Japanese culture, it seems appropriate to utilize this to give the first year students the benefit of their senior student's experience.

Research Design and Methods

Design

The first stage of this study involved the distribution of an open-ended survey to the senior students, consisting of 10 questions related to the various stages of presentation preparation and performance. The only criterion for participation in the survey was that the students had had experience making and giving presentations at the I.C.P., the W.Y. M. Students were asked to reflect on their experiences and frame their answers as advice for first year students who have not participated in the I.C.P., the W.Y.M. In the second stage, answers would then be examined to find areas of commonality. In the third stage, interviews would then be conducted among respondents to clarify the comments and advice. In the final stage of the action research, the collected advice would be adapted for use as teaching materials or included in the class textbook for use in the freshmen English for Presentation classes, which will be piloted in the next academic year.

Participants

A total of nine I.W.D. students agreed to take part in the survey. Those surveyed consisted of two-second year students, four-third year students, two-fourth year students and one graduate student. No foreign participants had returned their surveys by the time of the writing of this paper.

Setting

Nihon Fukushi University is in Aichi Prefecture, Japan. The university has six faculties including the International Welfare Development. This faculty's focus is on producing students with grounding in both welfare and with strong English skills who can 'contribute to organizational management and to the community. [...] Students are given the skills to support the self-reliance of people from developing countries in their nation-building efforts, to make international contributions to industry, and to be involved in business that transcends borders.' (Nihon Fukushi University Website, 13)

This I.C.P. is an integral part of and a large focus for the I.W.D. faculty's program. Classes in the faculty syllabus provide English language skills development as well as more specific event related instruction. These classes involve not only teacher instruction, but also a degree of collaborative interaction or scaffolding between teachers and students from the freshmen to junior years or first to third year.

Data Collection

The survey was distributed to students in the I.W.D. faculty who visited the N.F.U. English support center, the English Lounge, over a two-day period.

Stage One - Analysis of Survey Comments

For convenience of analysis, the comments were condensed to include just keywords or phrases. Furthermore, to see if there was any progression in the development of students' advice from the second-year students to graduates, the keywords and phrases were divided by year. The initial analysis of the results revealed links between the student's comments in sets of questions. Specifically, questions 1 and 4, 2 and 3, 5 and 6 and 7 and 8, will be examined together. Questions 9 and 10 will be examined separately. The questions focused on the following 1. Focus of the presentation theme, 2. research, 3. data collection, 4. team work, 5. writing, 6. making power point slides, 7. practicing, 8. giving the presentation, 9. Feeling nervous, and 10. other advice.

In questions 1 and 4, students commented that 'talk, discussions and conversations' with partners and teachers were the best means of both finding a focus for their presentation theme as well as a means to foster good team work. This may in part reflect the communicative nature of many of the faculty's English classes, as well as the educational constructivist theories that underpin both the I.W.D. faculty and the I.C.P., the W.Y.M., to which learners 'actively construct their knowledge rather than passively receiving knowledge from their teachers or environments' (Kageto & Sato, 10). The more seasoned students also included the use of brainstorming and using their imaginations as important techniques. Talk, in terms of self-talk, was also seen as a useful tool in dealing with performance anxieties or nervousness.

In questions 2 and 3, regardless of the fact that it had been pointed out to the less experienced students that it is difficult to judge the accuracy or veracity of information on Internet sites, they exhibited a strong reliance on the Internet as a main source of information over more traditional sources such as newspapers, media and books, which the senior students included. Teachers were seen as main sources of information for all of the students. This fits with both traditional classes and the I.W.D. faculty's social constructivist underpinnings, which cast teachers in the role as facilitators. However, in terms of writing in questions 5 and 6, teachers are the main source of suggestions and corrections. One of the most common teacher suggestions, to use simple sentence structure and vocabulary, has clearly been internalized by all of the surveyed students as indicated in their suggestions for writing tips and for power point slide preparation tips.

Under the headings of practicing and giving the presentation in questions 7 and 8, it was also interesting to note the progression in the sophistication of the focus. The more junior students advise paying careful attention to prosodic features as well as pronunciation and other voice related concerns, while the senior students stress the importance of audience and affective related issues. The senior students' confidence in public speaking allows them to go beyond worries regarding Basic English to the importance of understanding the content and focusing on the flow of language.

Finally, throughout the questionnaire, there was a strong focus on social and affective issues. Students were insistent that working collaboratively required a lot of formal sharing in the form of regular meetings, daily reports, time management as well as informal sharing in terms of talk, laughter, be(ing) sociable, not pushing one's opinion too strongly, controlling one's feelings, and just enjoying the opportunity afforded by the event. Students by their senior years appear to have fully grasped the importance of actively constructing their knowledge from a variety of sources available to them such as teachers, peers and event related activities. As a result, they have come to exhibit the hallmarks of seasoned public speakers.

Stage Two - Interviews with Selected Participants

In an informal discussion with several of the students who had taken the survey, the researcher asked the students to clarify several points. The first question was regarding how they perceived the role of the teachers and senior students throughout the preparation to presentation cycle for the I.C.P., the W.Y.M. The students, two-second year and one-third year student commented that in their view they preferred to rely on the support of teachers rather than other students. This fits with Iyengar and Lepper's (99) findings that Asian-American children had higher motivation when teachers or seniors made decisions. In comparison, however, Anglo-American children who preferred to make decisions themselves. When asked to clarify this further, one of the students said that she relied on both but for different reasons. She said she looked to the teachers for general advice as well as for English grammar and techniques, but on the other hand, she went to senior students for advice based on their first hand experience participating in the W.Y.M.

The same student related one incident when she felt frustrated in her interactions with her teacher. She said that her teacher wouldn't answer her question directly. It may be that the teacher in his/her role as facilitator wanted the student to find the answer herself rather than just give her the answer. The same student also said that the senior students were often unable to attend many of the meetings, which made things difficult for the less experienced students in her group. She said that despite these problems, her group was able to carry out their presentation successfully because they talked a lot and could find workable solutions.

Discussion and Suggestions

The responses to the survey reveal that students are successfully constructing knowledge by integrating the skills and techniques made available to them through their interactions within the

classrooms and during the I.C.P., the W.Y.M. Techniques such as brainstorming and group discussions provided a basis for solving problems that arose in connection with the event. The strong network of support, not limited to teacher-student interactions only, among students in their first to third years of study has created a positive dynamic. Teachers should address the various issues, in terms of problems that were mentioned by students in their survey answers, with careful guidance and exposure to techniques. Ample opportunities to think about and discuss problems such as too much data, over reliance on single sources and dealing with contrary evidence should be provided in the classroom.

The student advice revealed in the surveys can be put to good use in a variety of ways. First, teachers can incorporate relevant advice into related textbook chapters or lessons on specific points in the presentation cycle. For example, a textbook chapter or lesson on preparing power point files would benefit from student advice and examples that highlight both weaknesses and strengths. Similarly, specific opportunities should be provided for raising awareness of ways to foster positive group dynamics like sharing and encouraging. Another important area would be to teach the students how to organize group work such as setting up and running meetings. The inclusion of positive motivational quotes with student pictures at the start or end of chapters in the textbook could provide a motivational boost.

Problems that were mentioned in the surveys can be listed in a problem-solution section in the textbook or, conversely, be used as starting points for in-class discussion and problem solving activities. For example, discussion could be centered on dealing with data that doesn't support a group's original thesis. Furthermore, it may be important to raise students' awareness of the pitfalls of becoming overly dependent on single sources of information by introducing them to research resources on campus or within their community.

Finally, with regards to uncooperative or reticent students, it would be useful to provide opportunities to practice intercommunicative skills such as encouraging and eliciting information within classroom discussions. Teachers and senior students can act as role models for the first year students in classes and during other activities.

Conclusion

The intention of this action research was to elicit student advice to use for lesson materials production. While the sample size was not large, the input from a range of students from second year to graduate level made the quality of the advice both useful and insightful. It's for that reason this researcher feels that the inclusion of senior students' advice would be of benefit to the first year students. In preparation for the next academic year, the incorporating of the advice into class materials will increase the relevancy, interest level and change the focus of materials to better meet the needs of the students. It is also worthwhile to make this survey a regular feature of the English for Presentation classes as it will provide the teacher with useful insights, as well as give students an opportunity to reflect on their experiences as presenters in the I.C.P., the W.Y.M. This researcher thinks collaboration should be viewed in its broadest sense to include teachers, students and all the

resources relating to the classes. Feedback from students provides a unique perspective that can give teachers useful insights and allow them to construct better materials and classrooms environments as 'language skills cannot be improved without engagement and motivation is [...] the critical element for success in improvement of students' engagement in the classroom' (Wachob, 06) and for students' futures as well as the communities that they will be living in.

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