Learner Autonomy and Hand Raising in the EFL Classroom: Exploring Willingness to Talk

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Abstract
This paper describes an ongoing, reflective-practice, qualitative study of Japanese university students' willingness to raise their hands and actively communicate in English as a Foreign Language classrooms. We educator-researchers want to understand students' motivations and the limitations to students' willingness to share their ideas with the teacher and classmates. Three student focus groups explored the students' experiences with and interpretations of hand-raising and contributing to classroom discussions. Coding of the focus groups' discussions revealed themes that coincided with our expectations as well as ones which contradicted our expectations and others that were unanticipated. We discuss ways this practitioner-research can be used to improve instructional practices at the institutional level.

Keywords: hand raising, class participation, focus groups, axial coding, practitioner research, English as a Foreign Language

Introduction

Practitioner-research is promoted and encouraged as a faculty development activity by a wide range of teacher organizations, including the National Education Association (DeMott Painter, n.d.), Teachers of English as a Second Language (www.tesol.org) and the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (www.iatefl.org and http://resig.weebly.com/) among others. In fact, this project was sponsored and funded by our own university through a collaborative research grant as part of faculty development. Practitioner-research is a form of action research which encourages teachers to pose questions about how they teach and how their students learn. It follows the process of selecting a research method appropriate to the questions, analyzing the data, and reflecting on the outcomes to inform future teaching practice (DeMott Painter, n.d.).

Foreign faculty in Japan often encounter a disconnect between their expectations of classroom participation and those of Japanese students. At our university in Western Japan, we observed that our own expectations of students signaling a desire to participate in class discussions by raising their hands were not being met by the students. The EFL program where we teach is based on cooperative learning theory, requiring students to participate and talk in the target language during class (Jacobs 2004; Jacobs, Power & Low 2002; Kagen 1994). This led us to question how the students viewed hand-raising and class participation and to examine how our own views were informed.

Review of Literature

Cutrone (2009) reviews a number of studies which have focused on the issue of Japanese students' hesitancy to speak in foreign language classes. He found that some studies focused on psychological anxiety, (e.g.: Townsend & Danling, 1998) while others suggest a difference in what is culturally acceptable (e.g.: Anderson, 1993). Another explanation has been the culture of classrooms in Japan, where the ideal student is quiet, obedient and passive (Nozaki, 1993), where ritual defines behavior (Lebra, 1976 and Doyon, 2000), or where evaluation and competition is emphasized to the point that mistakes are feared (Nozaki, 1993 and Doyon, 2000). The demeanor of the teacher has also been pointed to as a source for Japanese students' anxiety in language classrooms (Shimizu, 1995, Hadley & Hadley, 1996, Long, 1997, Cutrone, 2001).

More recent studies have examined students' point of view through surveys. These studies have focused on Japanese students' willingness to communicate, their perceptions of silence, and motivations. Based on a study of 63 students, Hayashi and Cherry (2004) conclude that Japanese EFL learners prefer certain tasks associated with communicative learning styles, but many do not favor risk-taking behaviors such as talking to friends in English or talking with a partner. Furthermore, they identify a successful strategy: gradually requiring students to answer questions of more difficulty, specifically moving from questions with one word answers to those with longer answers. Similarly, in their 2014 study on hand raising actions in different classroom situations, Kawabe, Yamamoto, Aoyagi and Watanabe found that Japanese students' lack of confidence to raise hands is due to pressure associated with active participation. Their results also showed that question difficulty and positive or

negative reactions present in the room affect students willingness to freely raise their hands. Likewise, Kim, Ates, Grigsby, Kraker, and Micek (2016) surveyed 45 Japanese university students and found that responses to silence were highly individual across the students. Some students in their study perceived silence to be a form of participation – actively listening and processing information. To take these students' view of silence into consideration, the authors promote group work with revolving roles (e.g.: leader, reporter).

Similar to these studies, our research questions focused on examining hand rising from the students' point of view. We wanted to find out how Japanese university students perceived our expectation about signaling one's desire to participate, either asking a question or volunteering a comment, by raising one's hand. Specifically, we posed the following research questions:

1. How do Japanese university students view hand raising in the classroom?
2. What encourages or inhibits hand raising by Japanese university students?
3. How does their view of hand raising differ by classroom context?
4. How does their view of hand raising differ when interacting with peers or teachers?

Methodology

Unlike previous studies, we chose not to use a survey instrument with listed response options. Focus group data is considerably different from survey data in that it uses group interaction to collect not only the views of individuals, but also data which reflects their shared social reality (Williams & Katz, 2001). Like other qualitative methods, focus groups capture responses that are unanticipated and unlikely to appear in quantitative methods such as surveys.

As teachers in a specific EFL for academic purposes program, we chose to investigate the beliefs of the students in that program. The program includes 12 clock hours of instruction per week. Volunteers in the second year of the program were recruited to participate in focus groups. Prior to volunteering, students were informed that they would need to speak and understand English to participate in the focus groups and that the conversations would be recorded and used as data for a study. If the students objected to the use of any information, they were informed that they could have it expunged from the record.

Three semi-structured, open-ended focus groups were conducted. Group A consisted of two female and three male students, group B consisted of five female students and group C consisted of four female students. The students' paper-based TOEFL scores ranged from 467-543. They were all completing their third university semester, and were enrolled in five different classes in the same EFL program. The focus groups took place the last week of spring semester 2017. The students' placement into groups was based on their schedule availability.

The list of questions for the focus group discussion was generated by delving deeper into the meanings of the research questions. Several revisions were made and as a result, we asked the participants eleven questions. The focus groups were led by one practitioner-researcher to avoid intimidating the students, and the same researcher

facilitated all three focus group sessions for consistency. During the focus groups, the researcher placed a digital recorder on the table in full view of the participants. Students were asked to introduce themselves and then the researcher asked the questions. As students responded the researcher asked follow up questions to draw out more information from the students.

The focus group conversations were then transcribed by two professional transcribers. The transcriptions were double checked by the researcher who conducted the focus groups while listening to the recordings. The researcher also blinded the transcripts by removing student names and any identifying references to their teachers.

After the transcripts were verified as accurate, we used Axial coding to analyze the data. Axial coding refers to making connections or finding similarities in the data to create themes and categories (Dornyei, 2007). First, we used the search feature in MS Word to look for keywords that appeared in the transcripts, for example "ashamed" or "nervous," to find every instance of that word and its synonyms across all three transcripts. We next assembled the identified words with the context of an entire quote or turn for each word and examined them for meaning. For example, we considered whether the student was saying "I feel ashamed when I make a mistake" or "other people seem ashamed of their mistakes" or "I'm not ashamed of mistakes." We then categorized the quotes by intended meaning. For example: positive feelings about raising hands versus negative feelings about raising hands. Then we divided the categories into themes. For instance, "missing one's chance" was one of three themes within the negative feelings about hand-raising. We went through multiple revision as we cross-checked themes and each others' placement of student remarks and turns. After the matrix was complete, we had a third person read the resulting table of categories, themes, and quotes / turns to check for consistency and how we interpreted the students' words. The third reader found 5 questionably placed quotes or turns. We reexamined those and adjusted our placement accordingly.

Results and Implications

Examining the data for patterns revealed categories and themes across the three different focus group conversations. We identified 6 categories and 25 different themes within those categories. Not all of the categories or themes were equally represented across the focus groups. Considering only the themes which were represented across all focus groups and reflected turns from multiple participants in each group, we realized that we had three types of findings: those which reflected our beliefs about hand-raising, those which contradicted our beliefs, and those which were completely unexpected.

Based on our classroom experience and research conducted by others (Nozaki 1993 and Doyon 2000), we anticipated that students would report they felt negatively about raising their hands because they were afraid of making mistakes. Indeed, the focus group transcripts showed this. Students said they were worried about saying the wrong answer or making a mistake, so they avoided raising their hands or contributing to class discussions. This was mentioned 11 times total: 3 times in the first focus group, 5 in the second, and 3 in the third. For example, in the first group, a student recounted her first year teacher's expectations about participating, and then said, "So the students feel stressed about it, and we don't want to answer the question

because she is so strict, and sometimes no you are not correct. So maybe we influence to… ah her giving pressure influenced on the answering the question." In the second group, a participant said "I feel negative sometimes because I am afraid of making mistakes, or when I saying was wrong I feel afraid." In the third group, a student reported hesitating to volunteer answers in class because "I try to answer, but I think my answer not correct."

However, we also found that focus group participants directly contradicted what we expected them to say. As practitioners of cooperative learning, we often use pair / group work in class as preparation for larger full-class discussions. Yet, in these focus groups, pair / group work was not viewed by the participants as being supportive of volunteering to contribute their ideas to a whole class discussion. Comments to this effect occurred 12 times in total: 3 times in the first group, 4 times in the second and 5 times in the third. For example, in the second focus group, a student reported during group work, not all members practice speaking in the target language to prepare for later, full class discussions: " ...usually in my class it is prohibited to speak Japanese, but in small group they tend to speak in Japanese, so I don't like that, so even if I want to speak in English, my friend respond in Japanese. Some people do that, so I feel uncomfortable with them…" In the third focus group, a participant stated, "For the peer group or the work group, it doesn't matter, we are working together and we are sure with this answer. And the teacher say 'stop.' So and the teacher asks us, 'do you have any ideas?' Even we my peer group know the answer, we are confident with it, they won't say the answer." This calls into question advice, such as that given by Kim et al. (2016), to have students work in groups first to promote more speaking time in class using the target language. Surprisingly, students may feel that group work is a chance to avoid the target language or that they have already achieved a satisfactory answer and do not need to elaborate further. As teachers, we are considering ways to frame group work so that students appreciate the goal of practicing the target language multiple times and that sharing group answers increases the depth of response for everyone.

The last type of theme we found were factors we had not anticipated being a part of students' views about raising their hands and contributing to class discussions. One of these was that students categorized teachers' questions into "common knowledge" and "not common knowledge." By this they meant questions which do not involve "opinion" were easier to answer. Students repeatedly mentioned that they felt more comfortable raising their hands and volunteering to answer if the question was a simple one: a fact that everyone in the class already knows, something that occurs word for word in the text being studied, or an "easy topic." They contrasted these types of questions to more difficult questions which involved "having and exposing one's opinion." In our data, comments in this vein were mentioned 11 times: 4 times in the first focus group, 3 in the second, and 4 in the third. For example, in the first focus group a participant stated, "...depends on questions. About daily life or not high academic topics another student can answer for such questions. But teacher always tells high academic topics, so I can't answer or I can't understand how to think about it." In the second group a participant remarked, "For instance, in Japan the divorce rate is high or low, related to other countries. It's common knowledge, so it's not my personal opinion, so it's comfortable to answer." In the third group, a student explained, "...I think many students like to answer the comprehensions (reading questions). We know that you can find the answer in the textbook or exactly the word,

you can find it. But, for the discussion or your own opinion, we won't say it aloud…" After finding this theme in our data, we researched the more recent literature and found that Kawabe et al.'s (2014) investigation revealed "the difficulty level of questions affected confidence" which changes students' willingness to raise hands.

Completing the intricate and time consuming work of transcribing and coding the focus groups gave us insight into our own EFL classes. Dividing the themes from our data into expected, contradicting, and surprising helped us as practitioners develop ways to use these results in our teaching. As practitioners, using this qualitative methodology yielded richer results than a survey would have. We were able to explore students' opinions bringing to light unexpected ideas from their responses. This allowed us to consider the basis of our expectations and make changes to our practices.

Limitations

The conclusions which can be drawn from this study are severely limited in scope. As practitioner research, it serves more to inform local practices than to contribute to overarching language learning theory. With only fourteen participants from one EFL program at one university in Japan, the findings are very locally situated. This particular university has a student population which is 75-78% female depending on the year. The study volunteers reflected this gender bias as 11 of the 14 were female. Kawabe et al. (2014) also commented on the need for a more uniform study in the future; a study in which an equal number of women and men are questioned.

The focus groups were conducted entirely in English, which is the participants' second language. As a result, at certain points in the data, it was difficult to determine what the participants meant. Thus, some of the data was removed from consideration. Ideally, we would ask the participants for clarification in one-to-one interviews; however, we have not been able to do so yet. In one-to-one interviews, comments to the original focus group discussions could be elaborated on with probing questions to uncover more meaningful results. Similarly, the set of questions asked were frequently focused on "hand raising" behavior, such as "In what situation are students comfortable raising their hand or sharing their ideas with the class?" or "Describe a time when you wanted to raise your hand but didn't? What happened and how did you feel?" However, the volunteer student participants frequently talked more generally about their "willingness to talk." The focus group discussions may have been influenced by this gap in researcher and participant terminology. Asking more general questions such as "In what situations are students comfortable asking their teacher a question?" may elicit different results (see Appendix 2 for a complete list of the focus group questions).

Despite the small size and limited scope, this practitioner research project allowed us to examine the experience of raising one's hand in order to participate in a university EFL class from the Japanese students' perspectives. This allows us to reconsider our teaching practices and make adjustments. For example, we have reduced the use of "hand-raising" in the classroom. Instead of asking students to raise their hands to signal readiness to participate, we have started asking for students to call out answers which can be done as one person or by several at a time. During group work, we designate a "reporter" for each group so that the expectation to share answers is clear

and the group member expected to speak has time to prepare. Another classroom management idea is to remove the consequence or risk from wrong answers by not assigning points to students who answer questions.

As a result of this study and the themes that emerged from coding the participants' responses, we have identified a number of additional questions for further research:

1. How widespread or common are these students' views and observations about hand raising and participation?
2. How can teachers seeking to promote discussion as an instructional tool, engage students in contributing to a discussion in an orderly way while acknowledging the reluctance to raise hands?
3. Would training in cultural expectations about hand-raising / discussion encourage students to participate and answer more difficult questions in front of peers and teachers?

Conclusion

In this qualitative study of learner participation and willingness to hand raise in foreign language class, we transcribed nearly 50 pages of student focus group discussions. The data was then methodically analyzed and coded to reveal categories and themes. The process of qualitative axial coding was time consuming and challenging, but the results provided insight into what a small sample of students at this university in western Japan have to say about hand-raising to signal their willingness to contribute to class discussion and share ideas with classmates and professors. The results of the study have also contributed to our development as teachers as we look for ways to encourage participation while taking the students' point of view into consideration.

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Appendix 1: Abridged Qualitative Axial Coding Table

This abridged version of the axial coding table focuses on the categories and themes discussed in this paper. For a full table, please contact the authors.

	Focus Group			
	A	B	C	Total
Category 1: General feelings/emotions about hand raising (negative)				
1.1 I am afraid/ashamed/shy/nervous/have no confidence	1	7	9	17
1.2 Have/say wrong answer/make a mistake/not correct	3	5	3	11
1.3 I missed the chance	3	3	0	6
Category 4: Reasons or motivation for NOT hand raising				
4.1 Against Japanese tradition and culture	1	0	0	1
4.2 Working in pairs/groups/group work	3	4	5	12
Category 6: Type of questions or topic of discussion				
6.1 Common knowledge/fact/easy topic questions/answer in text	4	3	4	11

Appendix 2: Focus group questioning route

1. In what situations are students comfortable raising their hand or sharing their idea with the class?
2. In what situations are students comfortable asking the teacher a question?
3. Do you think students like to say their ideas to the class, why or why not?
4. In what classroom situations do students want to raise their hand but don't.
5. In what situations are students not comfortable asking a question in class?
6. In general, how do students feel about hand-raising in English classes to ask and answer questions?
7. Can anyone here describe a time when you raised your hand during English classes. Why did you do it and what happened? How did you feel?
8. Describe a time when you wanted to raise your hand in English class but didn't. What happened and how did you feel?
9. If no student in your class answers the teacher's question how do you feel? What do you do?
10. How do students feel about hand-raising to answer or ask a question during a student presentation?
11. I'd like you to now think about hand-raising outside of English classes. In what ways are your feelings the same or different from what you have already said during this discussion?