

Class Book: A Case Study of a University English Class Sharing Their Experiences to Enhance Learning with Peers

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Abstract

Dewey (1938) argued that educational activities should begin from the immediate personal and social experience of the learners. He also advised educators to use things within the range of existing experience of students that have the potentiality of presenting new problems which will encourage further experience. As university students in Japan are often passive about expressing themselves and actively being engaged with the class, I developed a class portfolio-making activity named Class Book into which a series of different learning skills are incorporated using students' actual life experiences. In this activity, students make their own biography to share with peers. This case study examined the consequences of the learning based on students' experiences for a particular sophomore English class in a university in Japan. My findings indicate that the participants had active interactions with peers, took responsibility of their own learning, and created a positive learning environment. This case study indicates that students' life experiences are an effective form of learning materials. However, it also suggests that teachers give adequate structured support for students to take advantage of their experiences at the fullest. This presentation will resonate with the conference theme in that it describes how students' life experiences affect their learning in a positive way.

Keywords: case study, university English class in Japan, experiential learning

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Introduction

As young adult learners in Japan are often passive about expressing themselves and speaking in front of others despite their English skills, they hesitate to participate in class activities actively and lack a sense of peer learning. When it comes to Japanese university students, it is often the case that they put lesser importance on English classes, which are normally compulsory in the first and second years, compared to elective or specialized classes in their own major. However, in my opinion, any learning opportunity should be experienced meaningfully by the learners and class as a community.

I have experience in teaching requirement English courses at several universities in and around Tokyo. Normally, students are divided into different classes depending on their English level within their majors. And most of these courses are taught with textbooks designated by the school or teacher, and designed to prepare students for the test at the end of each semester. Teachers are randomly assigned to these classes. Thus, students have few chances to take control of their own learning over what to learn and who to learn from and with. This may cause passive learning among Japanese university students in the school in which their freedom to learn is limited, and their learning is initiated from external sources so that they are indifferent to their class activities and peers.

As opposed to this reality, Schmitt and Schmitt (1993) say that learners are now increasingly encouraged and expected to take an active role in their own learning, and point to the necessity of learners having the skill to help manage their own learning. However, as far as my teaching experience is concerned, many university students are facing problems that affect their learning and improvement: One is that their learning style is limiting their motivation to learn, and the other is that as a result their engagement in their class and with their peers do not seem to be successful.

Let me describe one actual example. I taught a sophomore speaking class at a women's university in Kanagawa, Japan, a suburb of Tokyo, for a year starting from April 2012. Some of the students did not show motivation in the class and had little interaction with their peers as I believe they could not identify themselves with the course materials and also with their peers.

Therefore, my responsibility as a teacher is to facilitate learners' active participation and interaction by incorporating an effective way that they could connect with the class activities and peers. To fulfill my responsibility, I carried out an experimental class portfolio-making activity named "Class Book" in the above said class for 5 sessions in December 2012 and January 2013 (See Figure 1). The students wrote their biography to talk about their interests and experiences, and visualized and personalized it onto two sheets of paper with photos, illustrations and other decorations. These sheets are called My Page. Then, I had the students talk in groups and ask about their My Pages. Surprisingly, the lesson turned out to be more active than usual with all the students intently engaging in their conversations. This finding led me to wonder about the effectiveness of learners' actual interests and experiences.

Consequently, I argue that teachers should create a rich learning environment that is meaningful for students. Thus, my research questions are the following;

- How does incorporating students' actual interests and experiences into learning affect their participation and interaction in the class?
- What implications do these findings have for English educators?

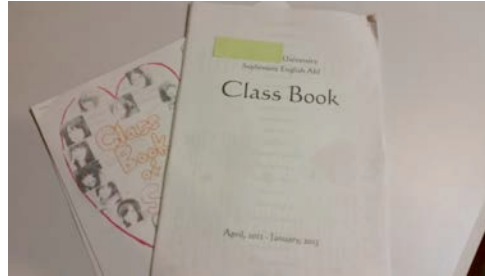


Figure 1: Class Book booklets

This study is significant because it aims to explore possibilities of student' interests and existing experiences as learning materials for learning English with peers in an active way. It introduces a new approach to encourage students' learning and also provides students opportunities to be active learners who can manage their own learning.

Related Literature

Traditional Learning vs. Experiential Learning

In many university classrooms in Japan, students most of the time follow the instruction of the teacher who gives what should be learned, and receive few opportunities to actively participate in their own learning. Dewey's (1938) definition of traditional education is to prepare students for future responsibilities and for success in life, by having them acquire the organized bodies of information and prepared forms of skill. Consequently, students become passive, receptive and obedient while the teacher transmits to them a chain of knowledge. To imposition from above is opposed expression and cultivation of individuality; to external discipline is opposed free activity in which students learn through actual experience (Dewey, 1938, p.19).

Therefore, learning from texts and from above, mainly from teachers, may limit students' motivation to learn. According to Rogers and Freiberg (1983), in experiential learning students themselves are part of the learning process, they are willing to learn from within, and know their own needs. Which direction should university education today move forward, traditional or experiential learning? Adults need learning to be meaningful; they are autonomous, independent, and self-directed; their prior experiences are a rich learning resource (Kerka, 2002, p.1). Adults should learn better if their learning is experiential and learner-centered as Kerka said that learner centeredness is a distinguishing characteristic in adult education. Learner-centered instruction includes:

- techniques that focus on or account for learners' needs, styles, and goals.
- techniques that give some control to the student.
- techniques that allow students' creativity and innovation.
- techniques that enhance a student's sense of competence and self-worth. (Brown, 2001, p.46-47)

Rogers and Freiberg (1983) summarized that students make decisions about their learning, and take responsibility for and evaluate the results of those decisions by exploring their own interests. Furthermore, Benson (2001) described Rogers' view of the teacher's role as a facilitator who adopts a non-judgmental role in helping the learners achieve their goal and intervenes as little as possible in the development of the learner.

Free from the “Banking Concept”

On the contrary, even today teachers do not fully understand what kind of learning students appreciate. Instead, they become the center of the class and teach things from outside the range of students' understanding. Freire (1970) stated that students tend to consider the teacher as the one who has knowledge without realizing that they know things they have learned in their relations with the world and with others. He argued that the teacher often elaborates on a topic that is completely alien to the existing experience of students. Benson's (2001) view is that in traditional education, knowledge is transmitted from the teacher to learners, and that learners are assimilated into the logic of the teacher. Freire (1970) called this flow the “banking concept”. In contrast to this view, Freire urged educators and learners to know that knowledge emerges from “inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other” (p.53). Student existing experiences and interests probably can change learning from being simply transmission of knowledge from the teacher to presenting what is meaningful for students' social experiences.

Experience for Learning

Dewey (1938) argued that educational activities should begin from the immediate personal and social experience of the learners. According to Benson (2001), Dewey viewed learning as a process which generates problems that must be solved to satisfy individual students' needs, and the school and the classroom are considered microcosms of the community in which students work together to solve those problems. In fact, Dewey (1938) asked “how many found what they did learn so foreign to the situations of life outside the school as to give them no power of control over the latter?” (p.27). It is often the case that what students learn in school is beyond the reach of the experience that they already possess.

Dewey (1938) then advised educators to use things within the range of existing experience of students that have the potentiality of presenting new problems which will encourage further experience. Marshall (2002) also contended that meaningful lessons relate to students' world, and originate in prior experience and evolve from there to the creation of new knowledge, experience and a richer understanding of life. Students' interests and experiences should highly

reflect their personal and social elements of their daily life, as per Dewey (1938), who put an importance on “materials which at the outset fall within the scope of ordinary life-experience” (p.73).

Constructivist Approach

Candy described constructivism as a cluster of approaches that knowledge cannot be taught but must be constructed by the learner (cited in Benson, 2001, p.35). Benson (2001) takes Vygotsky’s view on the importance of social interaction in which learning starts from the learners’ existing knowledge and experience, and evolves through social interaction. Vygotsky (1978) explained that in his zone of proximal development theory there are two levels of development: learners’ actual and potential levels of development. According to Lantolf and Appel (1994), the former shapes learners’ ability to perform certain tasks independently without help from others, while the latter characterizes ability that learners can carry out with help from others. This difference existing between what learners can do independently and what they can do under the guidance of more experienced others is referred to as the zone of proximal development defined as follows: “it is the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86). Students’ actual interests and experiences can be used as a rich learning resource. Sharing them in collaboration with peers, learners can reach out of their actual level of development to their potential level of development.

The Affective Filter Hypothesis

Krashen (1981) proposed some hypotheses that describe how people learn a language: one of them is the Affective Filter hypothesis. The “affective filter” is an imaginary barrier which prevents learners from acquiring language from the available input (Lightbown & Spada, 1999, p.39). According to Lightbown and Spada the filter will be “up” (blocking input) when learners are stressed and unmotivated while it will be “down” when they are relaxed and motivated. Krashen, thus, stated that if learners feel confident in themselves about using language, they will probably use it more frequently by taking risks. Krashen (1981) defined an effective teacher as someone who can provide comprehensible materials in a low anxiety situation. It seems likely that students’ own interests and experiences lower students’ affective filter, motivate them and encourage their learning.

Study Details

Participants

I selected a sophomore English speaking class of twenty female students at a women’s university in Kanagawa, Japan. At this university, first and second-year students take three required English classes of different skills: reading, writing and speaking. They are divided into appropriate classes depending on their year, major and English level. This target class of my study met for a 90-

minute class once a week and learned together for one year starting from April 2012. The students in this class understood main points on familiar topics daily encountered in school and spare time, and talk about them in English. I assigned a textbook to this class and basically designed different kinds of oral fluency practice taking elements from the textbook. For example, the students did speeches of different length, conversations, games, group work and discussions. Through observing this class, I came up with two concerns. First of all, the students hesitated to express themselves and speak up in front of the others. Second, I did not recognize much interaction going on among them. They did not seem to care who they were learning with in the class besides their close friends. Generally speaking, educators in Japan often claim that students are passive about expressing themselves in class thus they do not actively participate in class activities and lack a sense of learning together with peers. This particular class was no exception.

Class Book

Class Book is a class portfolio-making activity I designed using students' interests and existing experiences. The procedure is: (1) students are given a sample biography template to prepare themselves for making their own biography and go over useful vocabulary and phrases (Appendix A) (2) they are provided a biography template to fill out with their own experiences and interests (3) they visualize and personalize their written biography onto two A4-sized pages named My Page with photos, illustrations, decorations and coloring (4) they choose six items that hold a story to tell from their My Page and mark them 1-6 (5) they write a short speech for each of their six choices (6) they have a small-group speaking activity named My Story in which they throw a dice and talk about the item from their My Pages marked with the same number that the dice shows (7) they get a copy of Class Book, a booklet compiled with all the My Pages of the class at the end. These procedures were spread out into five sessions for my students.

Data Collection & Analysis

I constantly observed the students' reaction and interaction during the five sessions and collected all their My Pages besides ones who were absent. Also, I conducted a post-study survey. The collected data is analyzed qualitatively. According to Merriam (1998), there are four characteristics of qualitative research: the researcher (1) is interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed (2) is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis (3) must get involved in fieldwork such as observation, and (4) employs an inductive research approach in which theory is built from observations and understandings gained in the data collection.

Findings

Student Observation

Although the initial reaction of the students to the introduction of the Class Book activities was not as positive as I had expected, they seemed to gradually

enjoy doing the activities as they moved on with different sessions. For instance, in the first session in which the students had to be rather receptive while they listened to what I said as I demonstrated how to fill out the biography form with new key vocabulary and phrases, they did not show much interest or excitement. Also, there was not much interaction among the students since this session was mostly individual work of writing. However, once they were on their own to complete their biography, some of them occasionally made comments in Japanese to each other about their experiences and interests that they had written such as “I didn’t know that we’re from the same city,” “I have a toy poodle too. Do you want to see his photo?” and “You went to Turkey?” I saw students who had barely known each other throughout the school year conversing friendly for the first time.

Having had the first session as an ice-breaker, in the following two sessions more of the students became fond of the Class Book activities as they were getting more familiar with their peers. Actually, these two sessions were spent on visualizing each student’s written biography onto 2 pages of A4-sized paper with real-life materials so-called realia such as photos in addition to stickers, drawing and coloring. The visualized biography pages were called My Page (See Figure 2). This hands-on practice involved more interaction between the students. For instance, they asked peers for some materials they needed in addition to short comments in Japanese. Then, I told the students to ask in English for I found it a chance to enhance peer interaction in English. I taught them expressions like “Do you have a glue?”, “Can I use your marker?” or “I like your page” to list a few.



Figure 2: My Page example

On the other hand, the following fourth session was comparatively low-key. In the previous sessions, a positive peer-learning atmosphere was already established in the class so that this session was quite comfortable despite the fact that the most of the class time was individual work of writing. In this session, the students chose six important moments or items from their My Page and wrote a short speech about each of their six choices.

In the final session of the Class Book activity series, the students had a speaking activity in small groups of three to four. By this time, almost all the students knew each other even ones that they had not been close before, so they participated in the session very actively. A great deal of peer communication with questions, answers, short comments or laughing was observed in most of the groups. The students lead their group work on their own without my help as

they had previously prepared themselves ready with their My Page and short speeches to use in this final speaking session. The same positive student participation was maintained even when groups were shuffled a few times so that the students were able to interact with as many peers as possible by speaking English. In addition, when a copy of the Class Book was handed out to each student, everybody seemed absorbed by riffling through all the My Pages of their peers (See Figure 1). The class put a period to their one year of learning together with their Class Book.

Student Survey

As I previously mentioned, I conducted a post-study survey to see how the Class Book activities had affected their learning. The students rated their answers on a 1-5 scale with 5 being “I really think so”, 3 “OK” and 1 “not at all”. The survey was done in Japanese and was later translated into English by myself. 17 students out of 20 answered the survey.

Questions	1	2	3	4	5
1. It was a good opportunity for your peers to know about you.	0	0	0	2	15
2. It was a good opportunity for you to know about your peers.	0	0	0	0	17
3. It was fun to know about your peers' personal interests and experiences.	0	0	0	0	17
4. You like sharing your personal interests and experiences in class.	0	0	2	5	10
5. It was good practice to make your own learning materials using your own interests and experiences.	0	0	0	1	16
6. It was meaningful to make the Class Book to commemorate your class.	0	0	0	2	15
7. Your My Page enabled you to talk about yourself well in English.	1	0	4	9	3
8. You can express yourself well if you have a visual aid like your My Page.	0	0	2	7	8
9. You can understand your peers well if you have a visual aid like your My Page.	0	0	0	5	12
10. You can speak English easily if it is about your personal interests and experiences.	0	0	3	3	11

From the overall survey results, I can claim that the respondents' reaction toward the Class Book activities was quite positive. First of all, according to questions 1-4, almost all the respondents were successful in getting to know more about their peers and having their peers know more about them finding it

interesting to share their personal interests and experiences with their peers without hesitation. Furthermore, questions 5 and 6 reveal that the students were highly capable of or in favor of managing their own learning by making their own learning materials using their actual interests and experiences. It can be also said that the students liked to be closely connected to each other and united as a class.

As I said earlier, the students did not hesitate to share personal life elements including interests, experiences and background with their peers. Rather, as questions 7-10 indicate, they claimed that their My Pages helped them express themselves fairly well and learn about their classmates well as a useful visual guide. However, if you look at questions 7 and 8 again, when it comes to using English to express themselves, on one hand speaking English turned easier for most of the students, but it is not necessarily true to everyone in the class. Let me also introduce actual respondents' comments.

- The My Page activity was fun as I got to know more about my classmates.
- It was a good opportunity to know my classmates' personalities, favorites and interests.
- The final My Story speaking activity was a fun way to practice speaking.
- I enjoyed reading other people's My Pages.
- This whole series of the Class Book activities was interesting as it was like making a year book for graduation.

Conclusion

To respond to my research questions, I identified the following prominent themes that provide evidence of how learners' existing experiences and interests affect possibilities for their learning: comfortable learning environment, effectiveness of familiar topics, learners' management of their own learning, active peer interaction, development through collaboration with peers and unity as a class as summarized in the discussion. This study indicates that students' real experiences and interests can be definitely used as a meaningful learning material for achieving their active participation and peer learning in university English speaking classrooms.

To conclude, I would like to make the following implications. First, more research on the effectiveness of learners' actual experiences and interests has to be done, preferably on different kinds of groups of learners, to investigate its validity. For example, is the Class Book activity series attractive to male university students or groups of younger or older students? Second, it is also necessary to see how learners' experiences and interest affect learning when incorporated into different language skills such as listening, reading, writing, grammar or vocabulary building.

Additionally, students' own experiences and interests should be used within a specific structure such as the Class Book activities as it prepares learners for what they want to talk about. As learners encounter their peers' experiences and interests, they learn new vocabulary and ideas as well as connectedness with

their peers. At the same time, it often requires them to respond to unexpected questions or comment, which could be difficult for learners. Therefore, structured support like the Class Book's worksheets and lesson plans is highly recommended to be used along with the actual practice. Also, error correction and a follow-up reflective activity by the teacher to review learners' performance would be effective as well.

The Class Book technique can be used by different kinds of learners and teachers of English to experience the possibilities that it brings about. As my project was conducted only on a group of twenty individuals, further study will be necessary to appeal to a wider, more general community of learners and teachers of English.

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