

Perceived Level of Understanding and Motivation of Students in an Academic Skills Program Taught in English

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The level of understanding the contents of a lecture by students affects various aspects of the evaluation of the lecture. The better they understand the lecture the more they become convinced, enjoy the lecture, are motivated, make a progress, come to like English and English learning, come to like reading textbooks written in English, and want to learn the other subjects in English. Almost all the questionnaire items given in this study asked about their feeling, which might be sensational, and be affected by the likes and dislikes of a certain aspect of the class and the instructor. In this sense, this study might leave some questions about its scientific reliability, but as far as learning a language is achieved only by a holistic devotion of their physical and mental selves (Tanabe, 1998), the description of their mental state by themselves should be a clue to comprehend the attitude toward their learning.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the effects of the English courses where English is used as the main classroom language on the emotional aspects of the students and the recognition of their own progress of some aspects of English skills.

Hypothesis

As is widely discussed in the field of second language acquisition, the use of a target language as a medium of communication provides the implicit opportunity of language acquisition for L2 learners. Davis, in 2000 for example, gave the example of the uses of English in the classroom such as, “greetings and farewells”, “instructions”, “enquiries”, “feedback”, and “chat” and pointed out that those instructions were learned as “common instructions” and soon became routines. Krashen, 1982 gave the theoretical background for the usefulness of comprehensible input and this style of teaching will provide much more opportunities of getting comprehensible input during the classes. A problem might arise, though. Even if this style of teaching is theoretically effective, the motivation of the students to participate actively in the classroom will affect the effects of the teaching in proportion to the quality and the quantity of communication. For the learners of L2 who have various learning experiences and various levels of motivation, using of a target language will cause various reaction to the teaching. To maximize the effects of the teaching, the understanding of the philosophy about the L2 and of teaching by the learners will be absolutely necessary. Ellis, 1985 presented the types of L2 knowledge, which consist of declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge. Procedural knowledge then consists of social processes or strategies, and cognitive strategies or processing. Cognitive strategies or processes are for learning L2 and for using L2. This model showed the limitation of the classroom given in L1 in the sense that it provides only a part of L2 knowledge, mainly declarative knowledge.

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Method

A questionnaire was given to the students who took the regular required classes of English and English Seminar which is selective at Tokyo Polytechnic University in 2007 from April to July. 137 students answered the questionnaire after the three months of the courses.

Subjects

The same contents were given to each class in the same approach. The difference between the required classes and the elective English Seminar was basically in the basic levels and motivation of the students. All of the 10 students who took English Seminar got the final grade of A, while average about 20% of the students of the regular classes got A.

Approach of the lectures

English is used as a medium of communication in the classes. The instructor and the students were required to speak in English almost all the time. The purpose of the use of L2 in the classes is to provide the opportunity to experience the procedural aspects of L2 such as, 1) providing as much comprehensible input as possible with the help of extra-linguistic clues and para-linguistic clues, and 2) giving as much opportunity of listening English and training processing input L2 data and motivating them by the practical use of the L2 in a project-based situation.

Contents of the lectures

Project-Based Approach by Tanabe, 2006 was used as a main textbook, which contained six projects, Section 1. Strategy Learning, 2. New Product Development Project, 3. Discourse Strategy, 4. Research Project, 5. Presentation Techniques and 6. Grammar and Vocabulary and two of the contents were dealt with in the semester, which were 1) grammar and vocabulary, and 2) a new product development project. 10 minutes were spent to test the memory of the basic sentences dealt with in the previous week and 30 minutes were spent to introduce the new basic sentences for science major students and 40 minutes for the project. For grammar and vocabulary, the instructor introduced about 10 sentences each time and explained the grammatical structure of the sentences in English. The chapter was originally written to let the students discuss the construction of the sentences among students and learn the structures inductively. (*Cf.*, Ellis, 1992) For a new product development project, the instructor explained the contents of the project and presented the useful expressions to use during the discussion, the negotiation and the presentation of the new product according to the progress of the project. The students were required to speak in English to accomplish the project.

Procedure

The basic stream of the class was:

- 1) greetings (1-3 minutes.)

Greetings and the review of the contents of the previous week.

- 2) test (10 minutes)

Testing the memory of the 10 sentences dealt with in the previous week.

- 3) sentence structures (30 minutes.)

Explaining the grammar of the new sentence structures in English.

- 4) project (40minutes)

See a sample of the projects in Appendix.

5) summary and farewells (1-3 minutes)

Summarizing the learning contents and feawells.

Results

Following are the results of the questionnaire:

Table 1. Have you ever learned English in English?

	yes	no	other	total
m1	19	4	2	25
m2	30	5	0	35
m4	30	5	1	36
f2	18	11	1	30
seminar	9	1	0	10
total	106	26	4	136
%	78.7	18.4	2.9	100

Table 2a. Did you understand the lecturer? Yes vs. No

group/leve	1	2	3	4	5	total
yes	7	19	55	22	4	107
no	4	6	12	3	1	26
total	11	25	67	25	5	133
%	8.2	18.8	50.3	18.8	3.8	100

Table 2b. Did you enjoy the lecture?

group/leve	1	2	3	4	5	total
1,2	8	20	6	1	0	35
%	22.9%	57.1%	17.1%	2.8%	0%	100%
3	2	36	32	0%	0%	70
%	2.9%	51.4%	45.7%	0	0	100%
4,5	0	5	22	3	2	32
%	0%	15.6%	61.1%	9.4%	6.3%	100%
total	10	61	60	4	2	139
%	7.2%	43.9%	43.2%	2.9%	1.4%	100

Table 3. Did you understand the lecture contents?

class/level		1	2	3	4	5	total
other	yes	1	32	44	17	9	103
	no	0	6	9	4	2	21
	subtotal	1	38	53	21	11	124
seminar	yes	0	7	2	0	0	9
	no	1	0	0	0	0	1
	subtotal	1	7	2	0	0	10
total		2	45	55	21	11	134
%		1.5%	33.6%	41.0%	15.7%	8.2%	100%

Table4. How much did you understand the lecture contents in each part?

group/content	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
2a, 1,2	62.3	60.2	63	70.6	68.4	76	80.1	71.5	69.0
STDV	17.6	18.3	21.6	19	18.3	17.5	19.3	25.8	19.7
2a,3	42.5	39.6	46.7	50.9	46	56.9	67.4	68.1	52.3
STDV	21.7	21.3	24.6	24.4	22.8	26	30.1	28.6	24.9
2a,4,5	25.2	23.8	28	27.8	21.5	40.8	47.8	50.5	33.2
STDV	17.7	16.2	19.9	23.7	15.4	26.4	32.8	31.1	22.9

1=grammar, 2=discourse, 3=project, 4=directions,

5=episodes, 6=assignments, 7=greetings, 8=announcements

Table 5. Which skills are learned most in the lecture?

group/content	listening	conv.	read.	write.	pres.	nego.	vocab.	other	N
2a,1,2	25	6	8	11	3	4	10	0	35
2a,3	50	10	15	13	8	1	11	1	75
2a,4,5	15	1	2	1	0	0	4	0	29
total	90	17	25	25	11	5	25	1	139
%	64.7%	12.2%	18.0%	18.0%	7.9%	3.6%	18.0%	0.7%	100%

Table 6. Which language is better for you as a media of the lecture? N=35

group/language	English	Japanese	both	total
2a,1,2	27	5	3	35
%	77.1%	14.3%	8.6%	100%
2a,3	38	33	4	75
%	50.1%	44.0%	5.3%	100%
2a,4,5	6	21	2	29
%	20.7%	72.4%	6.9%	100%

Table 7. Do you think you made a progress?

group/level	1	2	3	4	5	total
2a,1,2	3	20	10	1	1	35
%	8.6%	57.1%	28.6%	2.9%	2.9%	100%
2a,3	1	41	25	4	0	71
%	1.4%	57.7%	35.2%	5.6%	0.0%	100%
2a,4,5	0	3	13	10	4	30
%	0.0%	10.0%	43.3%	33.3%	13.3%	100%

Table 8. Was there any motivational change?

group/level	1	2	3	4	5	total
2a,1,2	7	13	14	0	1	35
%	20.0%	37.1%	40.0%	0.0%	2.9%	100%
2a,3	0	18	57	0	0	75
%	0.0%	24.0%	76.0%	0.0%	0.0%	100%
2a,4,5	0	3	23	1	2	29
%	0.0%	10.3%	79.3%	3.4%	6.9%	100%
total	7	34	94	1	3	139
%	5.0%	24.5%	67.6%	0.7%	2.2%	100%

Table 9. Should all the other lectures of your major be given in English?

group/level	1	2	3	4	5	total
2a,1,2	4	11	10	7	3	35
2a,3	3	5	29	27	12	76
2a,4,5	1	2	5	11	11	30
total	8	18	44	45	26	141
%	5.7%	12.8%	31.2%	31.9%	18.4%	100%

Table 10. What did you think of the textbook written all in English?

group/opinion	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	total
2a,1,2	4	20	7	8	2	12	0	0	53
2a,3	16	39	22	19	0	9	1	3	109
2a,4,5	15	5	14	2	0	3	1	12	52
total	35	64	43	29	2	24	2	15	214
%	16.4	29.9	20.1	13.6	0.9	11.2	0.9	7	100

1=too difficult to understand, 2=can be understood with explanation by the instructor

3=hard to review at home, 4=sounds intelligent, 5=motivating,

6=appropriate for university students, 7 should be used for the other subjects,

8=Japanese text would be better for me

Table 1 shows the number of the subjects who had the experience of taking English courses where English was a medium of communication. The left column shows the classes and m1 stands for the class in the first period of Monday, m2 for the second of Monday and so forth. 78.8% of the subjects experienced that style of class for the first time.

Table 2a shows to what degree the subjects felt they understood the lecture as a whole. They were asked to answer on a five-point scale from 1 that meant they understood very well to 5 that meant they did not understand at all. About 30% of the subjects answered they understood the lecture, about 50% answered they understood some parts but not fully, and 20% answered they did not understand well.

Table 2b shows how they felt during the class, which was answered in a five-point scale with 1 meaning they enjoyed the lecture very much to 5 meaning they did not enjoy the lecture at all. More than 50% answered 1 or 2 and about 40% 3 and 4% 5, respectively. The left column shows the groups of answers to the question 2 in Table 2. The group 1, 2 consists of the subjects who answered they understood very well or well the lecture, 3 so so, and 4,5 not so much or not at all. 80% of the students who understood the lecture very well or well answered they enjoyed the lecture very much or enjoyed to some extent, followed by the 54% of the group 3 and 16% of the group 4,5.

Table 3 shows the answers to the more specific questions than question 2a that asks some more general impression on the lecture by asking the understanding of the lecture contents to verify the uncertainty of the impression by the subjects. To the question 4 in Table 3 where about 35% answered 1 and 2, 40% 3, and 20% 4 and 5, respectively. Question 2a in Table 2a was compared with the results of about 27% answering 1 and 2, 50% 3 and 22% 4 and 5. The results did not show any major difference among the answers and the certainty of the impression of the degree of understanding was supported.

The comparison according to the experience of the class where English was spoken as a medium of communication showed no specific feature among the groups, about 35% answering 1 and 2, 40% 3, 20% 4 and 5, respectively.

Table 4 shows the specific contents of the lecture and the perceived levels of understanding of the contents by the students. The average levels of understanding of each content followed the tendency of their perceived level of understanding the lecture. Group1,2 in Table 2a answered their levels of understanding from about 60% to 80%, Group 3 from 40% to 70%, and Group 4,5 20% to 50%. In Group 1,2 in Table 2a, the order of difficulty of the contents, if the levels of understanding were interpreted so, was the explanation of the discourse of English explained by the instructor at the top (60.2%), then the explanation of grammar (62.3%) next, and the projects in which they were required to speak in English (63%), the episodes spoken by the instructor to inspire the students were understood about 68% of the story. The other three contents were highly understood by the students, the directions to manage the class were understood 70% of the contents, the assignments 76% and greetings about 80%. The level of understanding declines sharply among the members of Group 4,5. The order among the group was episodes spoken by the instructor to inspire the students being at the top, which was understood about 15% of the contents, and the explanation of the of discourse structure of English (16.2%) in the second place, explanation of the grammar (17.7%) in the third place, and then the project (19.9%), various directions given to organize the class (23.7%), how to do the assignments (26.4%), the announcement such as one about TOEIC examination held on the campus (31.1%), and greetings (32.8%). The members of Group 3 followed the same tendency.

Table 5 shows the skills the subjects believed they developed during the course. The three groups showed the same tendency of the answers and put the listening at the top (64.7%) and very much less

number of the students answered they developed the other skills, which were under 20%.

Table 6 shows the relation between the levels of understanding the lecture and the preference for the language that is used in the lecture. More than 70% of the members of Group 1,2 preferred English while almost the same percentage of the members of Group 4,5 preferred Japanese, placing Group 3 in the middle.

Table 7 compares the perceived levels of the understanding the lecture and the recognition of the development in the English skills by the student themselves. These two factors seemed highly correlated. Those who thought they understood well believed they made a progress in the learning of English.

Table 8 shows the answer to the question about the motivational change after the course. The results were categorized according to the level of understanding. In Group 1,2, about 60% of the students answered they came to like English or English learning much or better, and the rest of the members answered there was no change in their attitude toward English or English learning except for one student. In Group 3, only 24% came to like English or English learning better than before and 76% answered there was no change. In Group 4,5, only about 10% came to like English or English learning better, about 80% answered no change, and 10% came to hate English learning.

Table 9 shows the opinion about the use of English as a medium of communication in the other general subjects in addition to English classes answered on a five-point scale. 18.5% of the subjects wanted other subjects given in English, 31.2% would depend, 50.3% were negative.

Table 10 shows the opinion about the textbook written in English assigned in the English class. 16 subjects in Group 3 and 15 subjects in Group 4,5 answered the English textbook was too difficult and could not understand it, but in Group 1,2, 20 students answered they could understand the contents of the textbook when they were explained in the lecture. 39 in Group 3 answered the same way, while only 5 answered in the same way in Group 4,5. 22 subjects in Group 3, and 14 in Group 4,5 answered they felt difficulty in reviewing with the textbook written all in English at their home. One student in Group 1,2 answered they wanted to study with textbooks written in Japanese, while 12 people in Group 4,5 answered they would prefer Japanese textbooks.

Discussion

Understanding as a basis for positive attitude toward a lecture.

As is shown in the results, understanding the contents of a lecture affects various aspects of the evaluation of the lecture. The better they understand the lecture the more they become convinced, enjoy the lecture, are motivated, make a progress, come to like English and English learning, come to like reading textbooks written in English, and want to learn the other subjects in English. There is one thing that should be noted here. Almost all the questionnaire items given in this study asked about their feeling, which might be sensational, be affected by the likes and dislikes of a certain aspect of the class and the instructor. In this sense, this study might leave some question about its scientific reliability, but as far as learning a language is achieved only by a holistic devotion of their physical and mental selves (Tanabe, 1998), the description of their mental state by themselves should be a clue to comprehend the attitude toward their learning.

In what level of understanding do the students perceive they understand the lecture?

As are shown in Table 2a, 30% of the subjects felt they understood the lecture given in English well. 50% “so so”, and 23% “not so much or not at all”. By looking at the perceived level of understanding of each content in Table 4, the answer to the question will be lead. To make the students feel they understand

the lecture given in English, more than about 60% of the contents presented in a lecture should be understood by them. At around 50%, they will feel they understand to some extent but they are not fully confident. When their level of understanding goes below 30%, they seem to feel they do not understand well or they do not understand at all. Greetings and farewell are well-understood contents, but they are not enough to convince them they understand the lecture.

In what points of a lecture do students feel they understand?

The difference of the percentages of understanding the lecture contents between the groups where students thought they understood the lecture and the ones where the students who thought they did not understand the lecture well is widest in “episodes” and “directions”. In a classroom, instructors speak various kinds of episodes to inspire or motivate their students. In a classroom where English is a medium of communication, the basic organization of the class hours is the same regardless of the language used. These episodes will take the form of story telling and spoken longer than when they take the other linguistic acts. When the period of uncertainty of the contents spoken gets longer, students who think they do not listen to English well will conceive they do not understand the lecture. Another clue to understand the students’ perception of their understanding might lie in the directions given frequently in classrooms. For the students who have tasks to be finished during the class, or react spontaneously to the sudden request by an instructor might be a matter of life or death. The fear for misunderstanding or no understanding of the instructor’s directions could be a factor of the perceived level of understanding a lecture by students.

In what points do students feel they enjoy a lecture?

The perceived level of enjoyment of a lecture seems to depend on the perceived level of understanding the lecture. As was presented in Table 2b, 80% of the students who answered they understood the lecture answered they enjoyed the lecture, while only about 15% of the students who answered they did not understand much of the lecture answered they enjoyed the lecture. What understanding entails in detail is known from Table 4. Understanding of the episodes that instructors speak during a class to inspire their students and directions they give during a class seems a key to comprehend their perception of a lecture. The students seem to have a desire to understand what their instructor speaks for a long time, and know what they should do in the classroom clearly. When they feel they understand these two contents, they seem to feel they understand the lecture better.

Teachers’ assumption and learners’ interpretation

Teachers assumption in giving a lecture in English resorts to the philosophy of teaching (Richards, *et al.*, 1985). As far as the feeling of understanding by the students matters in every aspect of learning English in a lecture, the fulfillment of their desire to feel they are understanding the lecture should be necessary for the instructor’s part. The assumption of the instructors who use English as a medium of communication in their classroom depends, for example, on the activation of the LAD (*cf.* Shoji, 2006), Krashen’s five hypotheses about language acquisition (Krashen, *ibid.*), or other interactionists’ view about second language acquisition and are reflected in the approaches or methods such as task-based approaches, content-based approaches, or project-based approaches, where L2 is used as a medium to accomplish target tasks or projects. The intention of these instructors is to provide opportunity to take an appropriate quantity and quality of input of English as a target language, where their students acquire the language

naturalistically. In a practical L2 classroom it will be a mistake to assume only language acquisition that these facilitators intend takes place, in the process of performing a lecture, there are also opportunities to learn English formally, especially in the approaches given above and what is perceived most important by the students is this learning aspect of the lecture rather than the acquisition aspect. They overlook the negotiation that takes place during the communication in the classroom and focus more on the understanding the contents and tasks, and when the contents are beyond their comprehension when explained in L2, or the explanation by the instructors about how to do the tasks is too complicated to understand in English, they feel they do not understand the lecture and will cause negative effects on the language learning, even though the process of negotiation to understand the contents and the procedure to do the tasks is the main focus of the instructors.

Pedagogical Implications

As was discussed, the perceived level of understanding by the students affects many aspects of learning English. The recognition of their progress by themselves also is affected by the level of understanding. Table 7 shows that the higher the perceived level of understanding, the more progress they thought they made. This implies a positive cycle of understanding, motivation, and progress takes place among those students. The first thing that instructors of L2 who use English as a medium of communication in their classroom should have in mind is to make their students believe they understand their lecture. Then, the next question would be how instructors can make their students feel they understand their lecture given in English. One clue to this question was in the answers from the students in this study. Table 10 shows the impression about the textbook written in English, which suggests with the help of instructors the students can understand what they cannot understand by themselves. If it can apply to the other aspects of learning, scaffolding the area or contents they tend to feel they do not understand might help, which are episodes spoken by the instructors, the explanation about the learning contents such as the knowledge about the discourse of English, the explanation of grammar, the explanation of tasks and projects, and directions. By providing additional support such as visual aids, mimes, the use of extra-linguistic clues, and the use of grouping to make them help each other, instructors can give more opportunity to guess and negotiate meanings and messages. To make them feel they understand, at least 60% of the understanding of the contents is necessary as Table 4 shows. Some students will still feel they do not understand the lecture when the required level of understanding set by their instructor is fulfilled. For those kinds of students, the explanation about the philosophy of the course, approaches to realize the philosophy, concrete methods, etc.(Richards *etal.*, *ibid.*), should be explained. To this, a further study should be necessary. To conclude this, in a classroom where English is a medium of communication, much more care about the comprehension of the contents by the students should be taken by providing any possible clues and tell the philosophy and the mechanism of language acquisition in the classroom.

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Appendix

- [1] A sample of the projects

Project 2 Developing new type of media players.**【A】 Developing a new portable media player****Product development department**

You are the members of the new product development department of an electronic company. You are required to produce a new type of portable media player. Discuss the features, the functions, the size, the color, the design, *etc.* You can add any kinds of functions you think are interesting.

Publicity department

Draw the picture or make the model of the new media player and prepare the handouts for your presentation to electrical appliance stores.

Sales department

Give a presentation to your customers emphasizing the strong points of your product.

【B】 Stocking media players

Condition:

You are going to stock a new type of mdia player to sell at your store. Listen to the presentation given by the electronic companies and discuss among your members of the purchasing department. Decide one product as your main merchandise for the next sale.

- 1) Good Points:
- 2) Problems: