

TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGE COMMUNICATION DEALING WITH THE PSYCHOLOGICAL FACTORS OF THE LEARNERS: A CASE STUDY WITH INTERNATIONAL JOINT PROJECTS

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Abstract

This study reports a case study of the development of an English teaching method which focuses on the psychological factors of L2 (English) learners such as foreign language anxiety, confidence towards communication, and their willingness to communicate. With this method, the authors carried out two kinds of international joint projects with the cooperation of the teachers and their classes in NTI Gymnasiet and NIT in Japan. This teaching method set the particular types according to the results from the findings from previous studies in the following five factors as the keys. They are the types in: 1) communication anticipation in classroom activity (especially in speaking), 2) anxiety of failure in English class, 3) willingness to communicate in English classroom activity, 4) anxiety of failure in communication with a native speaker of English, and 5) willingness to communication with a native speaker of English. As the result of the projects with this method, the learners could participate each session and activity with less anxiety and more eagerness to the projects, and it was observed that some of the participants liked to increase the opportunity to communicate with other participants within and even after the projects.

1 Introduction

Language Anxiety is known as one of the affective varieties which obstruct the acquisition of the communicative ability in the foreign language. Related to this anxiety, the ultimate goal of this study is to construct a teaching method or a facilitation system and techniques for a foreign language learner to be more confident and willing to communicate in English as a foreign language to acquire the communication skills. Along with this objective, this paper reports a case study of two joint projects carried between English classes in Japan and Japanese and game designing classes in Sweden. The contents of the projects were designed based on the results of Sakamoto (2017), which analyzed the Japanese EFL learners' confidence and anxiety in the process of learning and communication in English.

1.1 Foreign language anxiety

Language anxiety had often been regarded as an individual variety and hence discussed in the area of the aptitude of learning the foreign/second language as dealt in Scovel (1978), Ellis (1994), and other scholars. On the other hand, the language anxiety has become to be noticed and studied as the “specific type of anxiety most closely associated with second language performance (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994:284)”. It can be defined as the feeling of tension and apprehension specifically associated with second language contexts, including speaking, listening, and learning (MacIntyre and Gardner, 1994:284). Since the definition of language anxiety was adopted by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), there have been related researches and studies as MacIntyre and Gardner (1989, 1991, 1994), MacIntyre (1994), McCrosky and Richmond (1991), and more.

Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) and Horwitz (1987) designed Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS), and identified several specific anxieties associated with school tasks such as test-taking and with academic subjects (Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope 1986:125). They found that the anxious students are afraid of making mistakes and feeling less competent than other students in classroom. As the pedagogical implication from their analysis, they suggested for the educators to take the options as helping learners so that they can cope with existing anxiety, or making the class less stressful (ibid:130-131).

MacIntyre and Gardner (1991) noticed that language anxiety is greatly influenced by the cognitive psychology, and they investigated an anxiety-provoking fact on the input stage, cognitive stimuli part, of their second language. McCrosky and Richmond (1991) studied on the language anxiety from the cognitive view and relationship with the communication behavior. They discussed the concept of Willingness to Communicate (WTC) as a personality-based predisposition which influences on human communication behavior. In their theory, Communication Apprehension (CA), an individual’s level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons (McCroskey, 1977, 1984), is one of the antecedents which differentiate individual’s WTC. They analyzed internal and external effects of CA to WTC, and claimed that an individual’s level of CA would be the predictor of the person’s level of WTC (McCrosky and Richmond, 1991:27). MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, Noels (1998) presented a heuristic model which shows the range of potential influences on WTC in the learner’s second language. In this model, there are six variables which consist of situational-specific influences on WTC as “Communication Behavior”, “Behavioral Intention”, and “Situated Antecedents”, and stable or enduring influences on L2 as “Motivational Propensities”, “Affective-Cognitive Context”, and “Social and Individual Context” (ibid:547). The suggestion in this study should be noted that the suitable goal of learning L2 is to increase WTC in L2, rather than to increase grammatical knowledge.

1.2 Psychological aspects of learning English in Japan

Yashima (1998) investigated the first language WTC of Japanese university students, and found that their WTC was significantly lower than American students in each aspect. Also, Yashima (2002) studied the relationship between L2 WTC and motivation of Japanese learners of English and found that highly motivated students tend to have higher confidence in communication and higher WTC.

Sakamoto and Hosaka (2016) studied on the language anxiety of Japanese learners of English and German. In these researches, the learners who had finished the English curriculum in junior high school were more anxious about classroom socialization than learning English itself. They did not feel difficulty or stress from the level of English they had learned in classroom, but to do the communicative activities in English with classmates as group work or pair work caused distress to them. Also, it is found that the learners regarded the communication in English as the language activities in English classroom, rather than the real communicative situations outside the classroom.

From the previous study discussed above and the literature, questions stem up as how and what kind of approach and teaching method would be effective to help the learners to cope with their anxiety and decrease the stressor in their process of learning the second language. Hence, in this research, it is focuses on whether and how a learner's self-confidence related to the psychological factors towards learning a foreign language and communicative activities in the classroom.

Sakamoto (2017) investigated the Japanese EFL learners' confidence and anxiety in the process of L2 learning and communication on 90 learners who studied English in a national college of technology (aged 16-21, male:female = 9:1). As the results of the factor analysis of a questionnaire with 70 items, 5 factors consisted of 40 items were extracted. They were: 1) communication anticipation in classroom activity (especially in speaking), 2) anxiety of failure in English class, 3) willingness to communicate in English classroom activity, 4) anxiety of failure in communication with a native speaker of English, and 5) willingness to communication with a native speaker of English. This result suggested that the learners have ambivalent feelings toward both learning and communication in English; they are afraid of making mistakes and failed to understand the contents, but on the other hand they have motivation to learn and communicate in English.

As the options of teachers' approach towards the anxious learners, 1) they can help them to learn to cope with the existing anxiety-provoking situation; or 2) they can make the learning context less stressful (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986:131). Learning from these previous studies, we concluded that it would facilitate to develop a learner's WTC to design a project and a task in order to make the situation which they could concentrate on other things than anxiety, such as curiosity, ethical priority, or motivation. That means, it is meaningful not only to design the activities and tasks which helps the learners to reduce their existing anxiety, it should also be helpful for a learner to reduce the anxiety relatively by increasing other positive feelings during the activities and tasks.

The present study reports two of those trials which intended to raise the learners' interests with project themes, and keep their motivation with reducing their stresses in the process of activities and tasks in the projects.

2 Present study

2.1 Collaboration projects between Japanese and Swedish school

We designed two joint projects for Japanese learners of English, Swedish learners of Japanese, and Swedish learners of game designing. The projects aim 1) to increase the participants' willingness to communicate with the tasks of making products through the cooperation with the people in foreign languages. 2) to reduce the participants' anxiety with constantly carrying pair or group activities and practice sessions for the communication sessions. In 2, we expected the participants would get used to speak in their foreign languages to another person or people through the small practice sessions in classroom activities, and raise enough confidence for the communication sessions with the participants of the other school.

We carried a bidirectional "travel-plan making project" for Swedish Japanese class and Japanese English class, and a "pixel game making project" for Swedish game designing class and another Japanese English class. In both projects, we set many tasks as planning the contents, searching information, drawing pictures and figures, writing e-mails and reports, speaking, and presentations so that the learners needed to cooperate with other students and all of the students were involved.

2.2 Participants

2.2.1 Swedish students

The Swedish participants belong to the NTI Gymnasiet in Sweden. They were from game-designing classes and Japanese classes in the Game-designing Department and the Art Department. All of them were the second or the third year students, aged 17-18. Each class consists of about 30 students, and all the sessions were carried out with the classroom activities and assignments in the subjects.

2.2.2 Japanese students

The Japanese participants were the second year students of NIT (Kosen) in Japan, aged 16-17. 80 students who joined the game-making project were from Electronics Controlling Department and IT Department, and 120 students who joined the bidirectional travel-plan making project were from Mechatronics Engineering Department, Electronics and Electricity Engineering Department, and Urban Architect and Environmental Engineering Department. The projects were carried in English classes once a week for 5 month, and all the sessions were carried out as training activities and assignments. All the participants belonged to a group consists of around 4 to 8 members, and they worked with the members in the group throughout the project.

2.3 Procedure

In both of the projects, we set the following procedure:

1. Japanese students make a proposal in English, and send them to the Swedish class.
2. Swedish students select the proposals, and send comments and/or questions to Japanese students.
3. Japanese students answer the questions and send comments to Swedish students.

4. Communicating each other through the e-mail or message applications, Swedish students work on making the plan along with the proposal.
5. Swedish students send the first draft to Japanese students.
6. Japanese students make comments and/or ask for modifications.
7. Swedish students send the completed plan to Japanese students.
8. Showcase of the plans in Japanese English class.

In the bidirectional travel-making project, Swedish students made travel plans of Europe for Japanese students and Japanese students made travel plans of Japan for Swedish students. Both Japanese class in Sweden and English class in Japan shared the similar purposes for learning a target language, which is learning not only language structures but also its culture and backgrounds. Hence we expected that the learners could find out the cross-cultural values and customs through exchanging information in the communication, and understand the differences from their own cultures. For example, we expected that both students had different perceptions of distance, time, and climate and that they had different cultures not only the obvious ones as food and architecture but also the invisible ones as what they can have for free from the society. Therefore we expected that they would obtain the opportunities to communicate in their target languages, but they also have a clue to notice those cultural differences through making authentic travel plans with the students from overseas and examining the proposals and plans from each other.

In the proposal of the travel making plan, students decided the purpose, destinations, interests, members (age, gender, relationships etc.), periods, and budget. When they make the travel plan from the selected proposal, it was expected that the students needed to give suggestions or ask for the modification of the conditions in the proposal. The students who received the first plan would understand the differences and similarities between the perspectives of both groups, and were needed to modify the proposal based on the given suggestions by the students in the other school and a teacher.

In the pixel game making project, Japanese students made proposals of pixel games for the students of game-designing class in Sweden, and the Swedish students made the specifications and the samples of the games along with the proposals. In the process of making games, both of the groups in Sweden and Japan modified the contents of the game through the communication in English.

In making a game, it is important to aware of the cultural factors in order to control how they localize or globalize the game, since they should be made without the needs from their market. Hence, it is considered to be meaningful for the students, who were the future game designers, to realize that which aspects in their environment were similar or different from other cultures. We expected that this project would become an opportunity for the students to aware of those view points and learn how to cooperate with the people who had different backgrounds. As for the Japanese learners of English, this project was expected to raise their motivation because of the popularity of the topic and the contents as creating an object communicating with the students living in another country.

In the present project, firstly Japanese students made a rough sketch of the pixel games as the proposal and sent them to the Swedish students of the game designing classes. Receiving the

proposals, the Swedish students started making the games with sending questions and suggestions to the Japanese students for the modification of the plans. After the modification, Swedish students made the midway reports of their works and sent them to the Japanese students. After more communications through the e-mail, the specifications and samples of the games were submitted to the Swedish teacher and sent to the classes in Japan. They were exhibited in class in Japan. Japanese students also had a chance to have a lecture in English from the teacher who carried the project in Sweden. The contents of the lecture were about Swedish culture, the school and participants of the project in Sweden, and its progress status in there. In the lecture, the students were also able to ask questions about their own plans and receive the advice from the Swedish teacher.

2.4 Classroom activities in English class in Japan

As for the tool of the communication, we chose the asynchronous media as sending messages, pictures and photos, and movies through the e-mail and other web applications. In order to reduce the stress of on-time or face to face communications on the abstract topics as the contents of game designs, synchronous media as web-chat or skype was avoided as the main tool. It was also difficult to set up the online communication between Sweden and Japan because of the time difference. We planned to set up the synchronous sessions only when we could see enough confidants in the learners towards the direct communication.

Instead, we set many activities and practice sessions in classroom. To modify the contents of the games or making answers and comments to the messages from Swedish groups, they discussed those topics in their groups, and orally reported the progress of the discussion in their group in the end of the class. The students who performed the reports were given some time for practicing with their group members first so that they can have confident from their preparation with the help of group members. The members of the group took turn for the reports so that all the students were able to have the opportunity to perform more than once.

2.5 Results and analysis

Both Swedish and Japanese students were keen on communicating each other to complete the projects in cope with the other students. Not only the students who usually commit the class more than other ones, most of the students including who are always passive in class tried to take a role and give a help to make the proposals and compositions to communicate with the group of the other school.

In the classroom, students seemed to get used to report about their works in the end of each class in English gradually. When they made a report, they received the positive feedbacks and the practical advice for the next report, and also they saw other students' performances and feedbacks. In the first session of the communication with the Swedish students, some students were even too nervous to send e-mails, so that they had to ask the teacher to send them on behalf of them, but when they received the replies and questions, they seemed to concentrate on the contents of the projects and sending polite messages to the other groups in Sweden.

It was observed that many students seemed to be more relaxed when they develop the projects and communicate as the group rather than working individually. They seemed to be less anxious

to the activities when they could see all the other students' performances and they could try the same type of session in the next time.

2.5.1 Communication

As for the communication with the Swedish students through the e-mails and message applications, the points that students struggled were mainly about how to express their politeness in English. It is generally known that there are typical expressions and forms in any languages to start or close the communication, or showing gratitude, encouraging another person, or suggesting better ideas, which would be helpful to carry the group work smoothly. They were able to translate those expressions from Japanese to English with a dictionary, but it seemed to be difficult for them to choose the appropriately polite expressions in a certain situation.

On the other hand, the students seemed to be relaxed when they started to identify each group member of the Swedish students through the video letters and the midway reports with their own photos. Since they started to receive the pictures and midway reports, they seemed to be more involved to the projects and started to make more detailed contents communicating with the other students. The communications between students were organized by themselves when they got used to. It was a good result from the purpose of raising students' willingness to communicate in foreign language. However, naturally it became difficult to tell the time when the project was completed since they kept modifying the plans outside the class as well. Because of this we considered that we should make more formal exhibitions in all the classes in Sweden and Japan or give a certificate or printed forms of the works to finish the projects officially instead of teachers controlling the students' communication.

2.5.2 Cultural differences

Generally, it is sometimes difficult to communicate without any cultural barriers or influences of their own backgrounds. In the present project, we could observe several examples of misunderstandings and questions which happened because of the cultural differences. For example, one Japanese group tried to use a Japanese old folklore for the basic story of the game. They chose it expecting to share it as a common knowledge, but they came to understand that it was not popular outside Japan after Swedish students suggested to change it to another story. Eventually they chose to explain the story to the Swedish students rather than using another one, by making a summary in English.

Since we chose the authentic topics as travel-plan making and game making, both teachers and students faced with the issue of value system such as the cultural gaps of the ideas towards a "good game", "fun place to visit", the relationships of the characters as a couple by two male main characters, violence, smoking and drinking, and so on. These topics would be interesting to exchange ideas in the communication, but teachers needed to give advice on the direction of the communication to avoid getting into such topics too much because of the participants' language skills, schedule and scope of the projects. To encourage the students' collaboration and communication and avoid the conflicts, we concluded that we should make a code about a few taboo topics which we would not deal with in the projects next time.

3 Future perspective

Observing the process and results of the present collaboration projects, we concluded that they were helpful to develop the participants' willingness to communicate although they have anticipations before starting the projects. Also they tried the presentations and compositions in class rather willingly when they knew that those activities help the development of the projects, and also all of the classmates do the same task eventually. On the other hand, we found out the points we should improve for the next projects. In the next time, we should increase the video letters and photos of the students in order to help the students to personalize the projects and the group members of the other school. If it enhances the students' motivation high enough to relatively lower their anxiety, it will be effective to set an online session when we manage the time difference.

4 Conclusion

In this paper we reported the collaboration projects between Swedish school and Japanese school. In the project we aimed 1) to increase the participants' willingness to communicate with the tasks of making products through communication, and 2) to reduce the participants' anxiety with constantly carrying pair or group activities and practice sessions for the communication sessions. As the results of the projects, we found that it was effective to increase the willingness to communicate of the participants with the practice sessions in class and communication sessions with the other school's students. We also found that they tried to be involved to the projects even more when they personalized the group members of the other group through visual aids as the photos and movies.

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