

《研究ノート》

How Conferencing Can Affect Motivation, Attitude and Production in EFL Writing Classes

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Abstract

Attitude, genuine interest, motivation and past experiences have been identified by researchers to be essential components of language acquisition, their absence found to inhibit the achievement of linguistic proficiency (Roessingh, 2005; Wong & Nunan, 2011). Using an action research paradigm, the research conducted for this inquiry sought to discover whether conferencing could positively affect students' attitude, motivation and performance in an L2 writing course given to Japanese high school students. The inquiry sought to use conferencing to provide stakeholders the opportunity to clarify and interpret errors, develop a teacher-student rapport, reduce student anxiety, and negotiate course content by incorporating students' ideas for writing topics in the course. The inquiry discovered that conferencing proved to be effective in reducing student anxiety regarding class participation and homework. Conferencing also helped foster a rapport with students that seemed to create a classroom environment more conducive to student participation, motivating students to dictate the course of their own learning by taking control of classroom discourse on writing topics chosen by the students. Conferencing also gave students the opportunity to express their opinions on course topics, which subsequently led to an altering of topics used as writing assignments. My findings suggest that English language writing teachers in EFL contexts should consider conferencing to positively affect student attitude and motivation which can lead to improvements in students' written production.

Keywords: L2 writing class, EFL, conferencing, attitude, motivation, production

Introduction

Learning a second language (L2) is filled with challenges, frustrations, times of improvement and stagnation. In particular, learning to write in an L2 can be one of the most challenging aspects of language acquisition, especially in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context where learners may not value or perceive the need to acquire this skill, and where opportunities to use it are minimal (Cooke, 2008; Katayama, 2007; McKinley, 2010). This

research investigates ways to improve student attitude, motivation, and performance based on a problematic and challenging writing class for high school students in Sapporo, Japan. In general, Japanese high school students do not take written English courses until their second year of senior high school, and research has shown that some Japanese students view writing as unnecessary and overly difficult (Cooke, 2008, para. 1). This inquiry into how conferencing can positively affect students' attitude, motivation and performance in an L2 English writing class will first provide a literary review on the use and benefits of conferencing in L2 classes. Next, a methodology section will be followed by an examination of the report's findings, concluding with an analysis on the implications the report's findings may have for EFL learners and educators of English writing courses.

The primary question that guides this research is whether conferencing can improve student attitude, motivation, and production in an L2 English writing course. This inquiry used an action research paradigm to gather data in the form of reflective journals that deal with the student-teacher meetings, students' writings, classroom environment, and personal impressions of the inquiry.

Literature Review

Motivation, interest, past experiences, and positive attitude have been identified by researchers as key factors that help lead successful language learners to achieve their linguistic goals (Roessingh, 2005; Wong & Nunan, 2011). The challenge for educators to address these issues is complicated within an EFL environment where levels of exposure, accuracy, and need to use L2 writing may be reduced (Katayama, 2007; McKinley, 2010). As noted by McKinley (2010), writing in English is viewed by some EFL students to have no "particular importance...in their everyday lives" (p. 20).

With this in mind, language teachers can help students overcome these learning barriers by employing procedures for the development of motivation and interest, such as one-to-one discussions, at various stages of the learning process (Ferris, Liu, Sinha, & Senna, 2013, p. 307). By examining the research done into motivation and attitude as they relate to L2 writing classes, this literature review will provide the theoretical background on methods to motivate students, improve attitude, and create interest in L2 English writing courses within an EFL context. The review will focus on research that demonstrates how conferencing can be beneficial in terms of enhancing interest and motivation by identifying learning styles, error correction feedback, enhancing noticing, building a rapport, navigating cultural expectations,

reducing stress, improving error retention and comprehension, and using student input into course syllabi.

Conferencing creates an opportunity for learners and teachers to clarify and interpret students' errors while also providing teachers the chance to better comprehend learners' learning styles and feedback preferences (Prabhu, 1990). Conferencing gives educators the opportunity to identify and address students' writing weaknesses, and to develop a rapport with learners that can reduce anxiety and lead to more acceptance and internalization of feedback (Bitchener and Knoch, 2008; Hyland and Hyland, 2006). Not all students accept feedback in a positive way, and conferencing may allow teachers to provide feedback that suits the students' learning styles and feedback preferences. As demonstrated by researchers such as Ferris et al., a correlation exists between positive attitude and a student's ability to reduce repetition of similar errors (Ferris et al., 2013).

Individualizing feedback and clarifying challenging aspects of writing in an L2 present occasions for teachers to augment motivation and production through conferencing. An example of this would be grammar and content errors, where conferencing gives teachers the chance to influence how students accept and react to the feedback being offered. By identifying and clarifying problematic grammar forms, learners' self-confidence, awareness, and proficiency can increase (Ferris, 2004). This emphasis on attentive noticing (Schmidt, 1990) can lead to improvement in writing accuracy, potentially higher confidence levels, and a more positive attitude towards L2 writing.

Regarding comprehensible feedback, Lee (2005) found that high school students in Hong Kong faced challenges comprehending written errors indicated by their teachers. To resolve this issue, teachers used conferencing time in pre and post writing assignments to provide feedback not only to clarify these errors, but also on "more important aspects of writing such as content and coherence" (p. 2). Conferencing presents opportunities for teachers to provide comprehensible feedback that is suitable to the learners' levels. Kaufman (2004) explains how teachers can use conferencing to "design appropriate, authentic and meaningful...instructional support and scaffolding to propel students to construction of higher levels of understanding" (p. 304). Without one-to-one meetings, writing teachers might be challenged to ascertain students' proficiency levels (both actual and potential) and provide appropriate feedback that takes into consideration students' writing abilities, as well as their capacity towards receiving feedback.

As well, conferencing allows teachers to consider socio-cultural norms with regards to offering and receiving criticism. As noted earlier, how learners interpret and accept feedback on their errors can influence the frequency of error repetition. While research done by Ferris

et al. (2013) and Lee (2005) explore approaches dealing with error correction and feedback through conferencing, the environment and educational/cultural norms in which their research was conducted (the USA and Hong Kong) vary from those in Japan, and may not address how these conferences can best be conducted. The fact that Japanese people tend to avoid use of negative terms (Japan External Trade Organization, 1999, p. 2) presents a challenge to native language teachers within a conferencing context. Ambiguous, indirect feedback is a part of Japanese communicative exchanges. Therefore, teachers employing conferencing may need to take into consideration such practices, where using negative terms is viewed as impolite and may prove de-motivating to students.

As previously mentioned, some students view writing in an L2 class as a negative, difficult or irrelevant experience (McKinley, 2010). To counter this, Prabhu (1990) asserts that it is important to build a rapport with students in order to understand the social, communicative, and psychological factors that exist within each learning context (pp. 162-163). Learning goals can be accomplished through the development of a closer teacher-student relationship that can promote achievement of course objectives for each student (Kumaravadivelu, 2001p. 550), conferencing seen as one method to foster this rapport.

Lastly, research has shown that learners identify fear of negative evaluation and fear of embarrassment in front of peers as sources of potential anxiety in L2 courses (Ohata, 2005, p. 9). In this sense, conferencing may help reduce learners' levels of anxiety, which is recognized as having a negative effect on L2 learners (Horwitz, Horwitz & Cope, 1986; Trang, Moni & Baldauf, 2012, p. 9). Private conferencing can establish an environment where fear of negative evaluation and embarrassment can be reduced. Conferencing presents an opportunity for teachers to address anxiety and self-confidence issues felt by many L2 writing students through dialogue, encouragement, and emphasis on students' writing strengths.

Methodology

For this independent inquiry, I used an action research approach with the writing class I was teaching. As detailed by Ferrance (2000), there are five essential steps to action research that are performed in a cyclical sequence, constantly challenging one another. In step one, teachers begin by identifying a problem within the school setting. In step two, information is gathered through both qualitative and quantitative means, collecting many sources of information (triangulation), and by researching studies on the topic in question. In step three, the data are analyzed and interpreted. In step four, and action is taken to try and remedy

the situation. Finally, reflection is performed to enhance the teachers' abilities to comprehend the classroom issues, to determine if the research was successful or not, and to act if results are not achieved (Alberta's Teachers Association, 2000, pp. 17-18). With the exception of triangulating various sources of data, this is the approach used for this inquiry into improving a writing class for high school students in Sapporo, Japan.

Data Collection

As previously indicated, I used an action research methodology of reflective journaling for data collection. I kept a reflective journal of the classes over a 5-week period that could confirm or indicate emergent themes. Mostly, the journal entries contain events that took place during conferencing, the classes, and my own reflections. These journals discuss the procedures I took to implement my strategy, the problems I faced with the students and with implementing the study, and reflections on both the positive and negative outcomes of using an action research approach to resolving a classroom issue. Five journals were used in this inquiry, mostly ranging from 2-3 pages.

I began by setting up appointments with each student to discuss the assignment given the week before. Even though one of the students missed the first appointment, I was able to note students' attitudes towards the class and towards the class content at these conferences. I was limited to the amount of data I could collect for this study, and would have liked to triangulate my observations with a wider set of observations. However, the journals provided several insights used for this inquiry. For each of the five weeks, meetings were held individually with students in an office in the teacher's room, and except for the first week, all of the students attended.

My observations in class and at the student-teacher meetings allowed me to reflect upon the benefits and constraints associated with using conferencing, and to question its validity and usefulness: Was I able to build a rapport with the students during conferencing? Were my teaching practices evolving and adapting to classroom realities? Were students becoming more motivated? Was their writing improving?

A coding system was implemented in order to keep students' identities confidential. In regards to our group ethics parameters, I ensured the data retrieved was used solely to inform my practice as teacher and learner. All data was encrypted and kept in a secure area outside of the teaching environment.

Analysis and Interpretation

In this analysis of my fieldwork derived from the notes and journals collected from conferencing sessions and observations after classes, several salient points emerged: 1) The creation of a student-teacher bond allowed for more receptive feedback from all stakeholders; 2) my teaching practices evolved as a result of collecting data and reflecting on class performances; 3) in general, students seemed more motivated to complete writing assignments.

By repeatedly reflecting on the information being collected, several factors were identified in the data to be causing a breakdown in student attitude, motivation and performance in the class. During the first conference, one student explained that her unfamiliarity with the writing topics was forcing her to spend much time completing the assignments, as well as causing her stress that her work was not being completed satisfactorily. Her issues of content and accuracy, information gathered during the one-to-one meetings, were shared by others in the course. By conferencing and collecting data, several flaws in the course became apparent early on. As a result, I was able to alter one aspect of the writing process in order to alleviate students' time and stress issues. One student also explained that during the classes, she was unable to comprehend explanations, both oral and written. The difficulty and speed of my explanations were not being understood by this one student. Therefore, with this awareness, I was able to better ensure the student's comprehension, and thus participation, in the class activities. As a result of the modifications to my teaching practices and course content, it appeared students were more motivated and interested in completing assignments.

Findings

In this inquiry, addressing students' needs and interests, and incorporating them into the course pedagogy (Ferris et al., 2013; Kumaravadivelu, 2001; Prabhu, 1990), seemed to positively affect students' attitude, interest and production towards the course content. Conferencing proved to be a useful pedagogical tool since, for example, it created an opportunity to gather information on students' interests. These private meetings also allowed for corrective feedback to be given in a stress-less environment.

During these meetings, I was able to clarify problems with students' writing (both content and grammar), judge the suitability of topics, ease anxiety with regards to homework and production, and seek to develop a rapport with students. As an example of this, student A suggested changing one assignment topic with a subject she was more familiar with. I realized

that the original topic did not strongly relate to the students' past experiences, and by using her suggestion, a stronger rapport was developed between us. Ideally, a student's sense of motivation and a teacher's sense of plausibility with the materials and method(s) used in class are compatible with each other. In the writing class observed for this paper, there was a clear disconnect between my identification with the class content and the intended motivation students would have for this content. Conferencing became essential in discovering and resolving this disconnect. Through conferencing, a rapport could be established that led to mutual understanding and negotiation of what constituted interesting materials. Once this was decided, motivation increased in some students, reflected in class participation and production.

Regarding anxiety and homework, conferencing gave student A the opportunity to express her frustrations concerning time spent doing the writing assignments, and the difficulty she had completing them. At that meeting, I offered advice on how to approach the writing assignments by worrying less about spelling and grammar. With the same student, I also realized that writing topics that did not interest students were a source of homework anxiety and poor production, and that my misperception of interest was actually affecting students' participation and production in class. Student C noted during one conference that, at times, she comprehended neither the course content nor explanations given in class. Once again, conferencing created such an environment that allowed students to voice their concerns and frustrations about my teaching and the class content.

Much of the student input used to modify the course content was gathered during conferencing. As mentioned earlier, students' suggestions were incorporated into the curriculum, and this generated much discussion in the class from all of the students. Working together, we were able to develop an essay in a very short time. Because of this, I felt that homework time and anxiety would be reduced since students seemed to develop the essay quickly and enthusiastically.

I observed that employing students' input on course topics was effective in increasing interest and attaching meaning to their work. During my five weeks of observations, there were two instances where the topic selected for an assignment was either unfamiliar to the students, or they exhibited a lack of interest in the topic. In the latter case, the topic was altered. In the first instance, a subject that students possessed little knowledge of (James Bond) was used for a short story assignment. However, two of the students in the class had never watched a 007 movie, while the class as a whole seemed disinterested in action/adventure/spy stories. In the second example, using one student's suggestion to alter the topic resulted in much stronger participation preparing for the assignment.

Although conferencing proved to be highly beneficial, it could not resolve all of the class issues. For example, I could not seem to build much of a rapport with student C, her participation and level of interest not noticeably changing week after week. Conferencing was not a magic formula that dispelled all of the students' difficulties and anxieties. While I was able to gather much information from most of the students, I could not call conferencing a complete success.

Conclusion

Conferencing was informative in that it uncovered misconceptions I had concerning the class that I might not have realized without the weekly meetings. For example, one student explained that the writing course was her most difficult and time-consuming, while another professed to not understanding the course or my explanations. As fostering a positive attitude played an important role in this research, I attempted to resolve these problems by offering advice and changing the curriculum. Listening to students' anxieties with the course, using their suggestions, clarifying and seeking ways to resolve writing difficulties all took place during the conferences, which for the most part, helped develop a student-teacher rapport.

Japanese students have been found to be reserved and feel anxiety having to participate in classes (Ohata, 2005, p. 9), but using student input to alter writing topics appeared to reduce their apprehension towards participating in the class and completing assignments. Using one student's suggestion for a writing assignment seemed to boost her confidence while improving class participation from all of the students. At the beginning of the course, writing on an unfamiliar or disinteresting topic led to poor production in terms of content and limited discussion of the topic during class time. When unfamiliarity with the topic occurred again in an essay assignment, using this student's suggestion to alter the topic created more participation from all of the students in the class. It also resulted in the students becoming more empowered to dictate the content and discourse of the topic, since they could rely on their past experiences and knowledge of the topic for the assignment. As well, this allowed me to facilitate rather than lead. One result of this was that the students' knowledge of the topic fostered interest, motivation, and ease of work, which I observed led to decreased anxiety and improved production.

For EFL learners attempting to develop writing proficiency in a second language, use of past experiences on topics of interest and relevance in their lives can help facilitate learning and ease anxieties. EFL learners should take advantage of conferencing with their teachers.

It benefits students to develop a rapport with their teachers, and to receive clarification on problematic areas of content and grammar. As well, conferencing gives students the opportunity to affect curriculums to better suit their learning needs, empowering them to take more control over their learning.

As for EFL writing teachers, it is important to accept that learning and teaching styles are not always compatible. My attempts to build a rapport with one student failed to motivate her to improve her participation and production in the class. As well, having an awareness of what interests and motivates students can help teachers select topics with personal meaning to students, using their past experiences to enhance their production, and thus avoid topics they have little interest in or knowledge of.

The reflective process of conducting this inquiry, of writing down my observations and frustrations, allowed me to discover not only how my students were developing, but also how I was progressing as their teacher. Conferencing allowed me to ascertain whether students perceived the course content as interesting to them, and to alter this content when it did not. Conferencing also gave me the opportunity to allay students' fears and anxieties with the course work, to aid them with their construction of writing assignments, and to exhibit my interest in the assignments. This, I believe, led to an improvement in the student-teacher rapport, which in turn, enhanced students' motivation and interest in the class.

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