

How to Enhance Self-Directed EFL Learning in an Authentic International Collaborative Learning

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This study aims to clarify how to enhance self-directed learning based on authentic settings, such as international collaborative learning. We set an international collaborative project for the students to try the joint presentation overcoming the conflicts that occur in the process of completing the presentation. The Japanese have a tendency for keeping an island mentality due to the fact that Japan is surrounded the sea and more than 98 percent of the people are Japanese. It has been difficult to have opportunities to use English as a communicative language. But recent technology has been changing this environment. Through the recent disaster in Japan, we could learn how the world works at once due to the internet. Plenty of relief goods and financial support has been arriving and pushing the people in the Tohoku region toward recovery. The good news lies in the new technology and English use as international language(a lingua franca). The environment of second language acquisition has changed rapidly. It was found that for students as EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners, more attention should be directed to an exposure to English using ICT or authentic settings where communication is in English and the acquisition of role models for effective presentations by observing them

Keyword: scaffolding, global interactive learn, ICT, scaffolding strategy, cross-cultural awareness education

Introduction

We have been hosting the International Collaborative Project (ICP) named the World Youth Meeting (WYM) since 1999. That is a stage for “Experiential Learning Model” by the Kolb (1984)’s theory. It emphasizes repeating a cycle of “Planning”, “concrete experience”, “reflective observation” and “abstract hypotheses” (Figure 1).

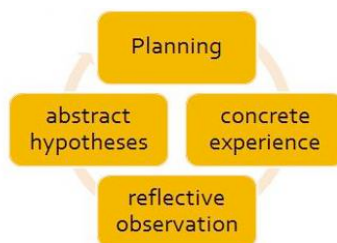


Figure 1. Experiential learning model (Kolb, 1984)

Jonassen (1999) also advocated that knowledge is individually constructed and socially constructed by learner based on their interpretations of experiences in the world. Particularly, the importance of reflective observation has often been pointed out in many earlier studies, and finding a suitable role model

for the participants is one way of achieving effective reflection (Kageto & Sato, 2009). John Dewey (1915) refers to the importance of collaboration between learners, in “School and Society”. As society changes, education is also urged to change. School itself is one pure form of evolving society (Dewey, 1915). Educational activities of collaboration are essential at school to teach diligence, responsibility, sincerity, and cooperation, which are all important qualities in taking a part in a society after leaving school. One can learn these qualities by working cooperatively with friends. In 'The important viewpoints and policies for motivating young people and promoting well balanced growth.' it is stated that “the learning experience should be established in all young peoples' lives. Trial and error, competition with each other should be fostered” (MEXT, 2007). Ministry of Education in Singapore also suggested the keyword regarding 21st century skill. That is Communication, Collaboration, Computer, Continuing learning, Critical thinking, Creativity, and Cross-cultural understanding. These have been involved in as critical issues of PISA (2012). They are pursuing the relative policy setting two main policies, “Be self-directed learner” and “Know how to collaborate” (MOE in Singapore, 2012).

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is Vygotsky’s concept of how social interactions can be most productive for helping learners internalize mental functions. Vygotsky defined the ZPD as the distance between what a learner can accomplish independently in a domain, and what the same learner can accomplish while working with a more skilled adult or peer. Vygotsky’s view of the role of culture has led to the consideration of this event as cultural contexts. The goal has been to develop WYM cultures that enable students to interact with colleagues learning within their ZPD that provides a structure for assessing participating students learning potential. Within the ZPD, students’ skill and activities are conceptualized. They could implement the task that could not be done independently. Professors and teachers also play a role of skilled peer to help them internalize important skills. This guidance is often referred to as scaffolding, guided participation, and responsive teaching.

Background

It is important to consider self-directed EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learning in Southeast Asia where English is used as a foreign language, as a tool for the younger generation to expand their perspectives. English and ICT (Information and Communication Technology) have become indispensable tools for them to deepen their knowledge while sharing their opinions. Considering the people who are capable of speaking in English, every year there appear more than 90,000 people who pass the English proficiency test, intermediate level: which is equivalent to Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) 550 level. That means there are more than 3 million people in Japan who can use English as a communicative tool in their daily lives and in business. The Japan Ministry of Education points out that it has been trying to enhance educational methodology by indicating new policies.

To help students enhance their communication competency in conversational English may help to contribute to peace and global education by facilitating direct and frequent communication with those from other parts of the world. What is needed is for students to be the kind of people who can play a significant role in the international community especially in South East Asia which has long faced various problems with regards to their economies and territories. Discussion must extend not only to how to collaborate but also to how to solve the conflicts that are caused naturally by the differences in culture and communication competency. We may say that it is inevitable that students will have to face such problems imbued with differences in culture, history and ways of thinking.



Figure 2. WYM web site

Thanks to experiences based on authentic events such as, “the World Youth Meeting (Figure 2)” or “the

Asian Student Exchange Program”, students are able to come to know that international ties based on constructivism can surely change mindsets which cultures have strongly burnt into individuals. They could change their mindsets by experiencing both occasions and opportunities for communication on a face to face basis well prepared by utilization of ICT. One of the highlights was the usage of the Social Network Service FACEBOOK on the preparatory stage toward the face to face meeting. Students are able to share ideas and feelings immediately.

The first stage of WYM was the preparatory stage, they try to communicate to decide the theme and gather data by sending questionnaires to each other to enrich their presentation. They are scheduled to do the joint presentation after coming to Japan that has gathered more than 700 participants from outside and inside Japan. The joint presentation in English is the one significant outcome that tells how the students collaborate internationally. In the process of completing the presentation, overcoming the conflicts is needed. In this way they come to understand what are 21st century skills that enable them to acquire the mastery to break through the wall of strained circumstances.

Research Questions

This study tried to clarify the effective linkage between self-directed learning and an authentic setting in an International collaborative project. In the process of planning, managing and evaluating their activities, a learning environment was created, in which “school knowledge” was promoted to “active knowledge”.

This study aims to clarify the following two questions.

1. How should Self-Directed EFL learning be designed focusing on constructivism theories, allowing students to get active knowledge?
2. How do the students get a role model that enables them to study autonomously by using ICT?

Methodology

100 students are in the charge of the member of the student steering committee. The aim of this organization is to carrying out the International Collaborative Project. Especially those who work as a member of the “presentation” group are responsible for completing the presentation with the overseas students from different cultures that need effort to overcome the conflict, cultural differences and different ways of communication. They meet once in a week in the normal classroom lesson “International facilitation” that allows students to know how to manage the event according to several methods such as coaching time management.

Subject

The participants consisted of about 50 freshmen and 50 sophomores who joined the WYM. They were from the ages 19 to 21 years old. Once in a week the students steering committee regularly join the normal class with the textbook in which they learn how to organize, where they could check the progress of management. Compared with the “Banking Style of Education” (Freire, 1970), they can find the meaning by themselves rather than passively receiving the knowledge. As the student steering committee comprises 13 groups with 7-8 students of both freshman and sophomores.



Figure 3. Skype session with the Philippines

When focusing on the presentation group, they start communication with their overseas friends to

negotiate how to proceed with the presentation that will be presented on the designated day of the WYM. Skype (Figure 3) or Facebook and email are very efficient to build up the concept that turns into the outcome.

This group usually reports their activity to other member on how they were making the presentation focusing on three elements, organization, file making, and the way of delivery. Other students who are not involved in this group always pay attention to the process since they know English presentation is a kind of skill needed for their future and they also join the lesson titled “English Presentation”.

The Procedure

Students are required to give their presentation in front of the audience made up of participating schools from inside Japan in June when the preparatory meeting was held. They have to prepare the presentation material and script for that group. According to some good model, firstly they tried to rephrase the script of the presentation conducted the previous year. After that, they need to analyze the composition of former presentations by studying the file making or delivery. From the viewpoint of SLA (Second Language Acquisition), it is inevitable to listen to the presentation performance over and over again and do shadowing and to learn facial expressions and the way of delivery.

Tools

Figure 4 shows the supportive web site conducted by junior students. They kindly try to make E-learning contents easily accessed via web pages. This site also encourages freshmen and sophomores to get used to the presentation and to tell them what level of vocabulary was needed. From the viewpoint of South Asia English communication, not only the contents spoken by native English speaker, but also the contents led by good role models for Japanese speakers are needed. Compared to the native speaker, this type of contents becomes familiar to the learner. This site provides from basic to higher levels leading the students to get used to the elements of presentation.



Figure 4. Studio video shooting and web site

The Process of Making Collaborative Presentation

After participating in an international collaborative event, students come to know that there are some procedures to complete their joint presentations. Finally, they are all required to give presentations in front of a big audience. Since the designated day was confirmed from the start, they have to accomplish the whole presentation with that deadline in mind. While discussing and negotiating they could learn the world-class professional skills of collaboration which allows for the conflicts in the first stage to be transformed into collaborative work including their new vision in the last stage (Figure 5). They have been seriously working to prepare for the designated day.

Guidelines for conflict resolution should be very helpful for them to conclude the renewal agreement to their mutual satisfaction.

To that end, we have referred to the Dual Concern Model (Adams et al., 2006; Rubin et al., 1994) as a useful conflict resolution model for the participants to use. As for the participants it clearly points out the solution and was persuasive.

In this model five approaches are introduced to solve conflicts, examining both concerns for Self and Other on a scale of high or low (Thomas, 1992) (Figure 6). According to this model, the coordinator encouraged the students to reach their goals.

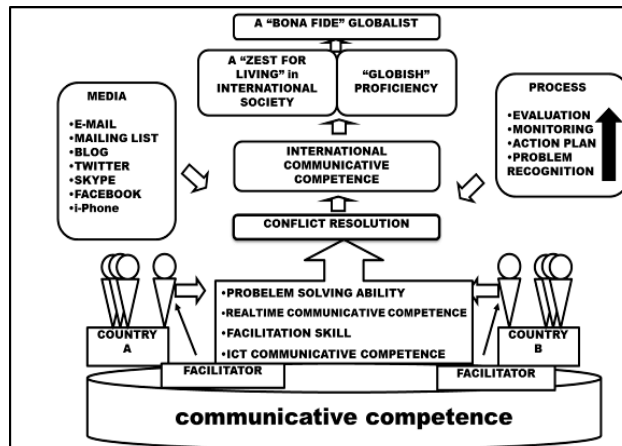


Figure 5. Possible outcomes international exchange program

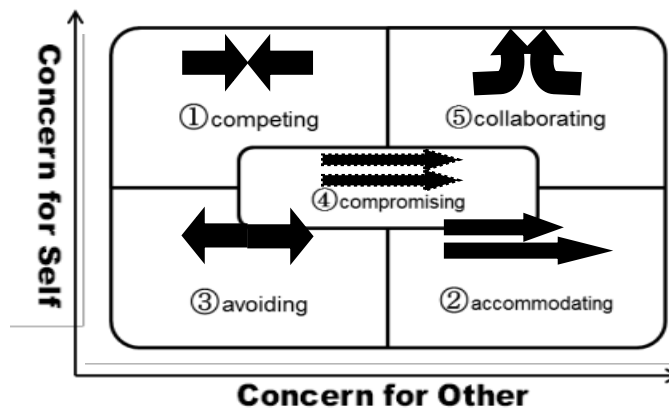


Figure 6. Dual concern model (Thomas, 1992)

Competing. Since students have prepared scripts and presentation files in advance, in the preliminary stage they maintained the attitude that they did not want to change their prepared scripts and files. In this stage maximizing Self results in the minimizing of the Other. They have high concern for Self and low concern for Other's thinking regarding how to succeed. Students keep the tendency to value success over collaboration or trying to create new ideas. They don't know the procedure of how to reach a collaborative outcome.

To overcome this low level situation, we arranged an excursion to a famous Japanese traditional sightseeing spot as a group of 50 to enjoy shopping and eating together. This opportunity was considered an "Ice braking" event. This event allowed students to realize that the success of the group presentation requires them to take their counterparts ideas into consideration.

Accommodating. This means yielding the upper hand to others; maximizing Other and minimizing Self. After coming to understand the international nature of their circumstance, they came to set a higher value on the relationship over that of winning. Most Japanese students show this tendency. Reflecting on their poor experience in collaborating to create something with foreigners they hesitate to assert themselves even when it's necessary. The Japanese coordinator suggests that firstly they should try to explain their topic with regards to the theme of the event by using bullet points on a power point sheet. To write out their ideas and show them to the other group members is crucial in the process of making a collaborative presentation. In a situation where they are faced with dealing with other cultures or communication manners, before hesitating Japanese students have to recognize what should be done to communicate with overseas friends and optimize their time with them.

Avoiding. This means having low concern for both Self and Other. They miss mutual gains, and

neglect the underlying relationships. They fail to take advantage of the opportunity to achieve mutual understanding despite having come all the way out to Japan. If coordinators find this situation, they ought to have them consider the purpose of the meeting and the event leading them to better understand the process involved in achieving their mutual goal. We have been storing the lots of presentation files which were made during this process stage of which there are many as we have been hosting the event for over a decade.

Compromising. This means a halfway point between competing and accommodating. Both sides would gain something but feel a sense of incomplete success. The final presentation by itself would be a very incomplete bearer of meaning. They say, “Let’s meet halfway on this matter”. Coordinators surely want students to achieve their goal, but due to time limitations, it’s easy for them to fall in to the “compromising” approach. Coordinators should advice them to make something new after carefully examining the ideas or resources they each brought.

Collaboration. This quietly satisfies both sides of the participants after joining the international collaborative project. Participants from different cultures will inevitably face some conflict. They could overcome this by keeping their mutual goal in mind while trying to find a solution that satisfies both sides. They also could find that there is no other way to go about it than to be committed to creating a new concept for their presentation that was found in the process of having their needs met. At this stage, they need some instruction on how to make their meeting time notable for creating their new concept.

EFL Learning

Up to university, Japanese students will have studied English for more than 6 years, Junior High School 3 years, Senior High School 3 years. While in secondary school, they are trained to only think and study towards the entrance examinations for university. To get good grades was very important for them since they were under the impression that to enter a good university would decide their future from the view point of future job hunting. To this end students rushed into their English grammar studies with a focus on attaining high scores on university entrance examination and not necessarily to master English communication. For the international collaborative project, students need to be able to express themselves and communicate with the participants dealing with the challenge of English conversation and non verbal communication not limited to an understanding of English grammar.

Kageto (2010) pointed out that English should be taught using audio recording functions and video clips to enhance language acquisition. The Figure 7 illustrates the process for Japanese students to acquire a certain level of English competency after getting an ability to listen and understand spoken English at a speed of less than 100 words per minute. Referring to our thesis regarding EFL, we consider achieving communication ability in English to be different from that of achieving an ability in reading and understanding.

Since 2000, there has arisen a great deal of controversy with regards to functions of the brain. Some research advocates that competencies, listening, speaking, writing and reading, are related evenly to each part of a person’s brain. Reading and understanding lay in the Wernicke’s area of the brain. This function is different from that of Speaking or Listening comprehension. To improve speaking and listening abilities, learners have to train their action memories, the more they listen to English sounds, the more they get used to speaking since human beings can only pronounce words that they have heard. Taking into consideration the functioning of the brain, we could classify the procedure for students’ improvement. The Figure 6 shows the criteria of English acquisition for Students.

At a basic level. They have to be able to hear English sounds to get used to that. We suggest that if they can hear 1,000 words, they can come to speak about 100 words being accustomed to that level. Action memory works like a muscle becoming stronger. This situation should be assigned as a basic level.

Second level. After getting used to hearing words, Learners come to try to speak. The sounds experienced help them to speak. But the content looks quite limited, up to 5 or 7 words that are useful for interpersonal communication. This is called the second level. Learners can start a conversation at an international occasion.



Figure 7. Criteria of English acquisition

Third level. After having enjoyed oral communication, as the next phase, they start trying to write down their message in English. Referring to the basic sample English sentences they have learned, they write sentences taking into consideration grammatical issues.

Fourth level. Communication in several ways, oral, English documents, finally they evoke communication design. They consider what topic should be first when they deliver the message, what's first and what comes next.

Final level. Not only is the English message effectively formed, they come to pay attention to visual aids. This is the power point file, using sophisticated impact images that describe the contents, or simple but worthwhile statistical charts, they start composing. The presentation in English becomes a final goal for them to share ideas with friends from different countries while keeping communication design in mind. They finally understand that compared to their mother tongue, EFL needs some meticulous consideration when making the message for both oral delivery and for academic writing.

Main Procedure for the EFL Learner

In the conventional Study, they come to the classroom to study and gain an understanding focusing on grammatical issues. How much they read or understood is the key evaluation point. But in my faculty we prepared an authentic setting like the international collaborative project, the World Youth Meeting. Students are involved in this project due to the compulsory nature of the subject that it is. In joining the event they have a lot of opportunities to talk directly to overseas friends in order to proceed with the event. During activity, they came to notice how English works for gaining an understanding of each other, especially among non native English speakers. Most of the Japanese students had started wondering whether they should keep studying English or not after entering university. It might be hard work for them to study English continuously, and to always be evaluated as an English speaker. This collaborative project motivated them to keep studying since they could recognize English to be an indispensable tool to broaden their perspectives. It will take a long time to improve their English compared to say the study of algebra. In mathematics, if one can find one solution for an equation, it works for another question, and later they can solve problems automatically. In the case of language study, one has to see the study of words as a continuously unfolding new horizon.

Analysis

Formative evaluation was conducted to check the student feedback on the autonomous study of group work. The participants consisted of 82 students who joined the WYM. The questionnaire was given to them at the end of June. They used computers almost everyday to communicate with peers checking e-mails and web sites. The instrument comprised 6 items with a 4-point multi-choice Likert-type scale (1. I strongly agree. = 4 points, 2. I agree. = 3, 3. I disagree. = 2, 4. I strongly disagree. = 1). We also focus on the slow-learner comprised of 40 members judged from the score of a placement test. As for the

questionnaire item “Did you come to know how to make an effective presentation?”, the whole body’s means were 3.06 (Figure 8a). The slow learner group was 2.95 (Figure 8b). It indicated that most of them relatively appreciated the presentation conducted by the group in charge of that task since the medial value is 2.5. They also could share the information via the system designed for their activity such as the Social Networking Service or File Transfer Protocol server. That is, it suggested that the experiential learning worked well and should be evaluated affirmatively reflecting their achievement. They have been finding and learning how English worked on global communication through activity in virtual and face to face occasion. Also significant tendencies were found in the question “Do you want to give the English presentation in the near future?” (Figure 8c, d). A positive reply indicates that the slow-learner students want to try the presentation while learning from their role model and finding tips for further improvement (Figure 8d).

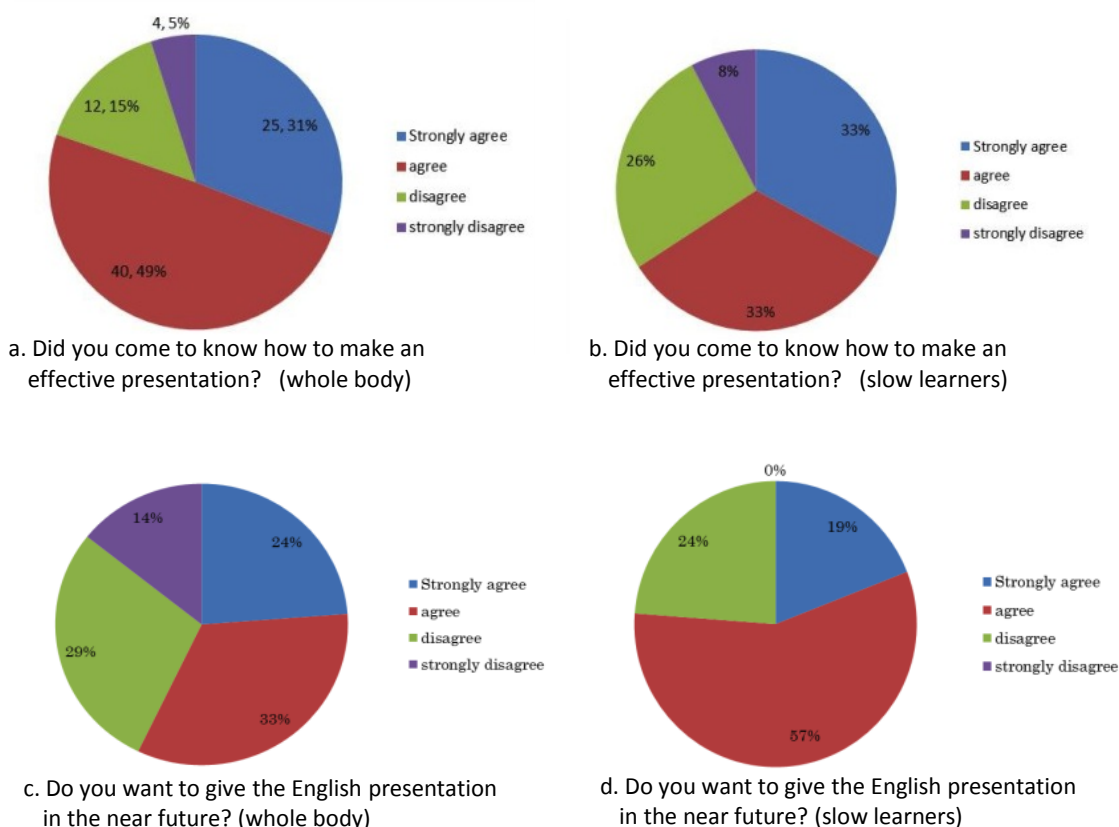


Figure 8. Results of the questionnaire

Findings and Conclusions

This report tries to clarify and enhance self-directed learning through ICT utilization. Firstly, authentic settings are effective and needed to lead the students to become self-directed EFL learners. The event related to the real-world has embedded a great deal of autonomous effort in it. They could find daily practice and activities based on ZPD deeply satisfying and useful with the utilization of ICT.

Secondly, when focusing on the motivation of the slow learner group, they became more enthusiastic since they could grasp the role model facing the performed in front of them on the event (Figure 9). The more they are involved in the authenticity, the better their motivation will be enhanced. Lastly, ZPD worked well when students try to break through the wall of using English in South East countries. Along with the time passing, Students came to know how English works with people who come from far away from Japan.

The closer they get to the designated day, the more often they are required to use English in an authentic occasion with in ZPD environment.

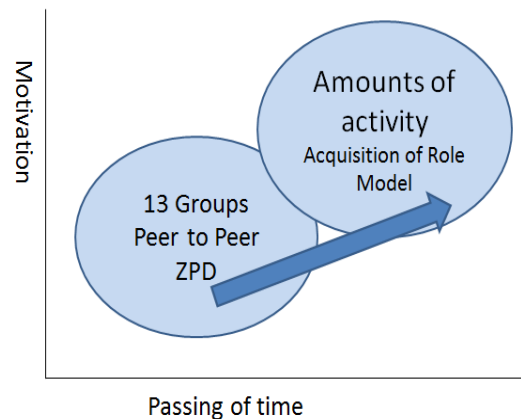


Figure 9. Group work and learning

The closer they get to the designated day, the more often they are required to use English in an authentic occasion with in ZPD environment. A daily meeting with overseas friends surely helps to enforce the Japanese student's ability to use English and join in the discussion. This occasion trained and nourished the English area of their brain more efficiently than ever.

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