

Effects of Meaning-Focused Activities in EFL University Classes

YAMAMOTO, Azusa

1. Introduction

How can a teacher motivate students who associate English with negative feelings? In a survey the author conducted in the beginning of the semester, 35% answered they liked English, while 65% disliked English. When the students answered that they did not like English, they described the reasons as follows: “I don’t understand it,” “I hate grammar because I don’t understand it,” and “It is boring because I don’t understand it.” On the other hand, the students who liked English commented: “I enjoy it when I understand,” and “I like communicating using English.” The students’ answers of their attitude towards English seem to be largely based on how much they can comprehend what is being taught. Then what are some ways to help students feel that they understand English, and gain positive attitude towards learning English?

Nation (2007) demonstrates the framework for a well-balanced course: the principle of the four strands. This principle states that the equal amount of time should be spent on each of the four strands: meaning-focused input strand, meaning-focused output strand, the language-focused learning strand, and the fluency development strand. Hence, main goal of all of the four strands except language-focused learning strand is on delivering and receiving the message.

This paper shows a case study of two meaning-focused activities in five English classes in a private university in the suburb of Tokyo. First, the principle of four strands will be described in detail. Then two meaning-focused activities, 10-minute writing and listening log, will be explained followed by the data collected. Finally, the author will examine how these two activities have affected students’ motivation towards English learning.

2. The Four Strands

Nation’s (2007) principle of four strands suggests the framework for planning a balanced course. In the meaning-focused input strand, the main focus is on comprehending the message through listening and reading. The activity, listening log, described in this

paper fits within this strand as the students listen to the video clips containing some unfamiliar words, but focus on the message. The meaning-focused output also involves the message delivery but through writing and speaking. The third strand is the language-focused learning strand where the students learn from “deliberate attention to language features, including spelling, pronunciation, vocabulary, multiword units, grammar, and discourse” (Nation & Yamamoto, 2012). The last strand is the fluency development strand aiming at “helping the learners make the best use of what is already known.” Activities in this strand can be reading a graded reader, speaking activity 4/3/2, and 10 minute writing in which the students write about the topic of their choice for 10 minutes. In sum, these four strands principle consists of three meaning-focused strands and one language-focused strand, and each strand should make up of equal time in a language course.

3. Method

3.1 Participants and Setting

Two meaning-focused activities were implemented in five target classes. The data for the 10-minute writing was collected from two freshmen classes and one sophomore class. One of the freshmen classes were placed at the lowest in the university placement test, while the other two were placed at the 6th out of 9 classes. The listening log, which can be categorized into the meaning-focused input strand, was conducted in two second-year university classes that are both ranked at the lowest out of 9 classes. All the classes met once a week.

3.2 Procedure

10-minute writing (10MW) was conducted as the first activity in the class. Firstly, the students chose a topic from the list given by the teacher in the beginning of the semester. This list included familiar topics for the students such as *My family*, *Music*, *My favorite movie*, *Food*, etc. The students were also allowed to create their own topic if the list did not include one. In this activity, the students used pen and crossed out the word with a line when they wanted to rewrite it. The students wrote for 10 minutes without talking to anybody, or consulting a dictionary. When the students met some language difficulty, they were encouraged to choose a simpler way of saying something in English or compromise what they wanted to write. After 10 minutes, the students counted the number of words they wrote. At this time, they were allowed to look up one word that they wished they knew, using dictionary or asking the teacher. This information was written on the writing log sheet along with their reflection of writing in Japanese. These looked-up words served as their own vocabulary list for future reference. Finally, the teacher gave them written feedback. To encourage the message focus, the feedback did not include any grammatical corrections but the comments on

the writing content.

The listening log (LL) was mainly done as a take-home assignment, and the students used their smartphones (69%) and/or computers (50%) to complete this assignment. First, the students chose their own video clips to watch on the video streaming website YouTube from the list given by the teacher. The list included various genres such as tutorials, short movies, daily vlogs, sitcom shows, children's programs, and movie trailers. The list also included some tips to search based on their own interest such as "[your favorite movie] + trailer" "[your hobby] + tutorial" "[Japanese fairytale] + English" and "[your favorite celebrity] + interview." The students were encouraged to watch clips shorter than 10 minutes, however, if the clip they wanted to watch lasted longer than 10 minutes, they had to separate it into blocks shorter than 10 minutes. For each 10 minutes, they jotted down some words that caught their attention, along with five phrases they could understand. The students were allowed to replay the clips as many times as they needed, and also to change the clips unfinished if they found them uninteresting or too difficult. For each 40 minutes, the students chose their favorite title, and one favorite word or phrase with the reason why they chose them in Japanese. The log was collected after completing one-hour minimum of listening.

4. Results

4.1 10 minute writing

The increase of the number of words was measured by the mean of the first three writing samples and the last three writing samples. As shown in table 1, the first year listening class had the highest increase of word number throughout the semester indicating 24%, and the sophomore listening class had a 22% increase. The class with the least word number increase was the first year reading class with 14% increase.

Table 1. Course names and increase in number of words

Course (Level)	Increase in number of words
Freshmen Listening (6)	24%
Sophomore Listening (6)	22%
Freshmen Reading (9)	12%

The increase in number of words was also categorized by how many times the students participated in this activity. The students who participated in 10MW for 11 times had the mean of 25% increase, the students with 10 times with 33% increase. The students who participated less than 10 times had less increase on their word number.

Table 2. Times participated in the activity and increase in number of words

	Times participated in the activity (Number of students)					
	11 (9)	10 (17)	9 (9)	8 (5)	7 (3)	6 (1)
Increase	25%	33%	2%	12%	6%	1%

4.2 Listening log

Every 40 minutes, the students chose a word or a phrase that caught their attention. The reasons for the choice of the specific word or phrase varied, including the importance, the easiness, and the memory and feelings of their own associated with that word or phrase. However, the majority was based on the practicality of the phrases. The phrases chosen were usually accompanied by the real life situation they could be used in. The following table shows some examples of the students' favorite phrases and the reasons why they chose them. The spelling errors were modified and the reasons were translated into English by the author.

Table 3. Students' favorite phrases and the reasons

Stop, stop!	I can use this to tell someone to stop.
You like it?	I can ask this someone, or use this when I want to show off.
Don't worry.	I can say this when someone asks me if I'm ok.
Let me help you.	First time hearing this phrase.
Hello, everybody.	I can say this when greeting.
That's right.	I can use this when answering.
Hurry up.	I use this phrase in Japanese all the time.
Because I'm happy.	I can use "because" when talking about reasons.
gonna	Good pronunciation practice.
Look at this!	I can use this to show something to someone.
well	This word means "good" but also used as a filler.
Let's	I heard "let's" a lot, so this word might be common.
No, thank you.	I need this word.
I wish I had a beautiful dress.	This phrase got stuck in my head.
Don't stop	This one is easy to use in real life.
See you again.	I can use this in a conversation.

The log sheet also included many errors. As shown in table 4, there were mainly three types of errors: mistaken words, omitted words, and spelling errors. Students' errors are corrected by the author in brackets.

Table 4. Types of errors

Mistaken Words	Omitted words	Spelling error
Please work [walk] this way.	boy name [named] Kintaro.	Today is [a] bowring [boring] day.
Justing [Just in] time.	Would you like [to] try?	You much [match] the number and colors
Some think [thing] long [wrong]?	You [You're] very good swimming [swimmer].	
Very sleeping [sleepy].		

5. Discussion

At the end of the semester, the students were asked to write freely about 10MW and LL. Though these two activities are in the different strands, they share the nature of them being meaning-focused, thus the comments also included similar aspects. In this section, the students' comments and the data will be discussed.

Through 10MW, the students realized the importance of training. The reflections included "10 minutes started to feel shorter and shorter every time," "I am now faster to translate Japanese into English," "Because we had this activity every week, I felt practice was sufficient, and started to feel at ease." The students' fluency in writing improved over the semester as shown in the tables. In all three of the classes, the improvement was seen; however, a closer look at the data suggests that there might be conditions for a definite increase to occur. First, the students need to have a certain level of linguistic knowledge to carry out writing for 10 minutes. This can be assumed because the increase in word number for the Freshmen Reading class, which was placed at the lowest, had the lowest increase (12%) when compared with other two classes (24% and 22%) . Another condition may be the consistency in participation. When looked at the relation between the number of times the students participated in the activity and the increase in number of words, the students who participated 11 or 10 times had more increase than those who participated less than 10 times.

The most common reflection of the two activities was that 10MW and LL made them notice the gap between their own interlanguage and the ideal level of language proficiency. The gap was found in various aspects of language such as the lack of their vocabulary, grammatical, and phonological knowledge. This is described by one of the three functions in Swain's (2005) Output Hypothesis: the noticing function. It claims that "while attempting to produce the target language, (vocally or silently) , learners may notice that they do not know how to say (or write) precisely the meaning they wish to convey."

Reflections about 10MW usually started with a statement "writing English is very

difficult,” and they continued to analyze what was difficult for them. One student wrote “it [10MW] was useful because I could know, at a single glance, which words I did not know, what grammar I am not good at.” The common problems they described were related to vocabulary, spelling, and grammar. The examples of the grammatical aspects mentioned were: be-verb usage, the difference between various prepositions especially *at* and *in*, and the difference between each transitional word. In addition to noticing their problematic areas, some students suggested how to improve their writing as follows:

- It is fun when I set a goal in this activity, such as “use 5 words that I studied for the vocabulary test.”
- Review grammar.
- Use simple sentences, but make them more complex by using transitional words successfully.
- Ask the teacher beforehand when I have unknown expressions.
- It is not meaningful if I memorize words just for the day of the vocabulary test. I must make them available in my head at all times.
- If there is a word that I do not know, I should use my brain to find simpler expression.

Like 10MW, LL also gave them an opportunity to give attention to their microskills on listening. According to Schmidt and Frota (1986, as cited in Ellis, 1994) , “for noticed input to become intake, learners have to carry out a comparison of what they have observed in the input and what they themselves are typically producing on the basis of their current interlanguage system” . By taking notes on the log sheet, the students had the opportunity to rethink what they have heard in the video clips, tried to recreate it by writing, and noticed the gap.

Many students mentioned how their English is different from the native speakers’. Some common comments were that the speakers in the video clips spoke with wide opened mouth, the pronunciation was very different from what they have been used to at school of the Japanese teachers, and the speed of English in the video clips were a lot faster than the CDs of their textbooks. They also noticed microskills of the listening such as stress (*but* sounds soft, it is easy to miss *a* and *the*) , linking, and shortened words (*wanna* means *want to*) .

In addition to noticing the gap in their language level and the native level, they mentioned how they could compensate for the gap. The most common strategy suggested, usually paired up with the linguistic difficulties, was gaining linguistic knowledge; “I should learn how they shorten words,” “I should learn the intonation, and analyze what kind of intonation and sounds are difficult for me to comprehend,” and “I should learn frequently used words in conversations by the native speakers.” The second strategy was to change the materials. In the beginning of this assignment, the students were restricted to choose the clips from the list. However, as they got used to the activity, they requested to watch more than what were on the list. Since the motivation and

the willingness to watch in English were thought to be important in this activity, the teacher accepted the request. One type of the materials frequently chosen was song. When choosing their songs, they deliberately chose slower-paced songs. There were also students who found it easier to use subtitles either in English or Japanese, for subtitles in English made it easier for them to check what they dictated, while the Japanese subtitles made it easier to simply understand the meaning in general. Through these actions of the students, it seems that the students objectively reflected on their language proficiency and limitations, and chose the right material for their level.

For the students like the target group who roughly dislike studying English, it is important for them to get motivated. In the beginning of the semester, none of the students had written an English paragraph. Along with their negative aspects and inferior conception towards English learning, they were reluctant to 10MW. However, the students' reflection at the end of the semester showed otherwise:

- It is fun, to my surprise, to write in English.
- When I write a lot of words, I feel like I'm good at English, and it makes me happy.
- It's good because I can write whatever I want.
- It makes me happy to write about random daily things in English.
- English is a mean to communicate through writing and speaking.

As seen in the comments, their success experience in writing affected positively towards English learning.

The students felt that LL was “fun and fresh” since they had never had such an assignment where they had the freedom to choose video clips and watch YouTube: one of their favorite pastimes. It felt new to them because only 12% of the students had watched English video clips on YouTube before this assignment. However, because of this free nature, there were students who confessed that it was tiring, too difficult, and easy to forget because it was done outside the class.

According to the survey, all the students were enrolled in the classes because of the university requirement. However, when they were asked what they would like to learn from the classes, 73% mentioned something related to communication skills such as being able to talk with foreigners, giving directions, or simply carrying conversations. 13% specifically answered functioning overseas when traveling, studying abroad, or even living in the states. Therefore, the activities were motivating to the students because they felt that 10MW and LL could bring them closer to their learning goals. 10MW gave the chance to practice outputting real-life messages, while LL introduced how English is used in real-life settings.

- I started to think about English daily [to think about what to write during the next 10MW].
- I'm starting to think that if I can do this [10MW], I can communicate with foreigners.
- It's easier to memorize words [through LL] because I can see them in context with a picture.

- I can use these phrases in speaking.
- I loved it [LL] because I got exposed to the “real-life” English rather than the textbook English.
- I got used to the native pronunciation.

There are many positive aspects of these activities, however, there are a couple of things we have to give attention to. Firstly, the data collected is limited in sample size, and different groups of students with different language proficiency and motivation may have different results. Therefore, more data needs to be collected for a comprehensive study.

Although the LL should fit into the meaning-focused input and fluency strands, the students tended to miss the first condition of the clips to be within these strands: the material should be at the right level. Keeping this condition in this activity is extremely difficult because it seems that what they want to watch is often way beyond their comprehension level. When that happened, many students chose their interest over their language proficiency, resulting in comments such as “very difficult” and “I did not understand at all.” Although some mentioned that since they were interested in the content of the clips, they could keep watching it without being intimidated or tired, it was clear that one of the biggest challenges of this activity was to find the clips each one of the student would be interested, but somewhat comprehensible. In their study, Karimi and Dowlatabadi (2014) show the benefit of using authentic listening materials, yet the benefit and limitation should be looked at more carefully. In addition, it became clear that it is necessary to equip students with the skills to choose the material at their level.

As shown in the data, students’ production included numerous errors. However, it is necessary to remember that these activities are part of meaning-focused strands, and as long as the message is successfully delivered and received, the goal of these activities are met. Furthermore, the students’ common errors could be a great opportunity to teach grammatical features, which then perfectly would fit into the language-focused strand.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, the implementation of the two meaning-focused activities, 10-minute writing and listening log, in EFL classes was discussed. As seen in the data, the 10-minute writing activity can be one of effective activities to practice writing fluency while focusing on delivering the message. The listening log gave students an opportunity to be exposed to authentic English in real-life settings. In addition, these activities raised the students’ awareness of the gap between their interlanguage and the target-like language. The students noticed what lacked in their language ability and determined how to compensate for that gap. Furthermore, these activities made the students realize

what they needed to learn in order to receive and deliver the needed message, and this experience seems to have increased the students' motivation in English learning.

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—Abstract—

In this paper, the author describes two meaning-focused activities to motivate students who associate English with negative feelings in EFL university classes. These two activities, 10-minute writing and listening log, were implemented in class based on Nation's (2007) principle of four strands, which states the importance of well-balanced course. By focusing on the message rather than linguistic features, the students seemed to realize what they needed to learn more, and they became intrinsically motivated.