

Learning in Interaction: Four Snapshots of an English Resource Center

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Abstract—This paper outlines four aspects of the English Resource Center (ERC) at Saitama University, Japan. The first snapshot details a brief history of the Center and illustrates its socially situated learning community. The second snapshot considers the significance of an English for academic purposes event, which occurred in the ERC. The third snapshot reveals how the Center's Drama Workshop enhances English as a second or other language performance as participants each experiment with their English identity. Finally, the fourth snapshot analyzes English proficiency gains by the Center's attendees. In sum, working together as a whole, the differing interactive contexts of the ERC strongly support linguistic and cultural growth and development.

Keywords—component; language education; social interaction; language learning environments; English for academic purposes; drama; language proficiency and improvement

I. INTRODUCTION: SNAPSHOT 1 OF SAITAMA UNIVERSITY'S ENGLISH RESOURCE CENTER

A. The History of the Center

The English Resource Center (ERC), which is located in the Center for English Education and Development at Saitama University (CEED), Japan, is a place where the instructors feel a social responsibility to provide additional space for learners of English in the university community who are interested in improving their English outside of their contextual departments and courses taught in English. During the academic year of 2004, a small classroom was secured for students and teachers to facilitate learning in English. As a center without initial funding, we depended on donations of English books, resources, and visual aids given as a genuine gesture to create an English learning community. Subsequently, in 2005, the ERC grew slightly because it fulfilled a service for the university student-body and moved to a larger portable structure at the corner of the campus.

Followed by the CEED's careful planning and negotiating, a state-of-the-art electricity and water saving smart room was designed for our learning community and in 2006, the ERC re-opened at its new and current location. Securing this environment was a significant accomplishment, as Sheerin (1991) (a self-access center specialist) argues that language learning centers involve a considerable amount of planning, organizing, and political negotiating, which takes time, money, and effort [1]. And for these reasons, many language programs around the globe cannot afford to see their planning and efforts realized.

Favorable developments in the new location for the Center have slowly and carefully been met with the

flourishing demands of supporting more learners, yet the desire to keep some traditions have been preserved such as providing beverages and having some spaces in the room that feel more relaxing and less institutional. The reasons for preserving these features are because they have continually helped support language learning while celebrating the diversity of over 250 Japanese, international native and non-native English speakers of English attendees who have come to the ERC in the past year and a half.

B. Renewal for Supporting Social Interaction

Even with encouraging signs of the language improvement in our English for Academic Purposes Program, The Drama Workshop, and from the attendees who join the ERC from three to five in the afternoons on weekdays, we felt that delving deeper into making improvements for the learners' socially situated environments were needed. In February 2010, after analyzing the traffic flow of attendees in the ERC, getting feedback from our participants, and observing Language Centers at Universities in Hong Kong via the Self-Access Centre tour at the Independent Learning Association 2009, the four authors sketched out a floor plan and decided to do away with some unneeded furniture and several shelves of excess resources, which did not fit the students' interests or language levels. This created much needed spaces to facilitate the growing community. Although, we work together with the learners to address their individual language needs with questions and concerns they have, we also support authentic dialogues in the ERC so the interaction can be observed and a wider circle of learners can benefit from the guidance. Esch's work (2009) on the conceptual distortions and discursive dissonances between individual personal learner autonomy (crash) and critical socially situated learner autonomy (clash) in language learning reminds us of this tension [2]. In the ERC, the tension leans towards the clash side, not to exclude the individual cognition of learners, rather so we can focus more on the whole community approach of socially situated learning. In turn, the focus helps learners and teachers to support more learning gains for learners on their terms.

C. An Emblematic Afternoon in the Center

On a typical afternoon when the ERC is opened with one of the authors present each weekday, a considerable number of the students come to practice English communication and/or socialize, perhaps over a cup of coffee or tea. Others join for various specific language purposes such as asking for feedback and advice on their papers, scholarship applications, English job interviews, letters of recommendation, studying abroad, and English homestays—

and we get the occasional request about how to enter various prestigious or regional universities. During the two hour period attendees also come to borrow our resources, including English DVDs, graded readers, books on various subjects graded in levels based on the Test of English for International Communication Test (TOEIC) bands, English study guides, English language proficiency tests, and English games. We also hold special cultural events and concerts when possible.

This socially situated approach to the running the ERC seems to support more of the learners' own language community and helps them to consider identity and agency issues through formal presentations for academic purposes as described in Snapshot 2 and experimenting with identity and language construction through theater as detailed in Snapshot 3. As a result, and as researched in Snapshot 4, students who attend the ERC also experience substantial increases in their English language proficiency.

II. SNAPSHOT 2: ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES

A. Overview

As Kasper (2004, pp. 552-554) outlines, former studies of interactions involving learners in different activities and participant configurations suggest that ordinary conversation can be a particularly productive environment for language learning—the learning in conversational interaction being not limited simply to the negotiation of meaning [3]. In addition, ordinary conversation and institutional talk—such as classroom interaction or formal speech events—offer differing opportunities for language learning (Markee, 2000) [4]. To this end, as mentioned in Snapshot 1, the ERC provides an adaptable and multipurpose setting for social interaction and language learning. Not only does the ERC serve as a self-access center, conversation room, study space and classroom, but it also provides an ideal site for special and specific events. One such event worthy of note—bringing together staff and students from a range of departments across the university—includes a practice presentation evening for students about to embark on international studies (requiring high proficiency in a second or foreign language).

B. Purpose

The goal of this study was to determine an audience's reaction to a presentation practice event, held in the ERC space. Findings are to be used to better comprehend the interaction and learning occurring in the ERC environment, and to better implement subsequent events.

C. Research Process

A short questionnaire was administered following the completion of a presentation evening. The gathered responses were examined and collated. A summary of essential findings follows.

D. Summary of Findings

The questionnaire analysis revealed:

- most audience members attended the event because

they were well acquainted with the ERC and knew the ERC staff personally

- the audience found the ERC to be a most agreeable location for such an event
- respondents indicated that the ERC event made possible a valuable and unique experience for the presenters, providing (a) opportunities for academic improvement and linguistic development, (b) positive pressure to mature scholastically, and (c) chances to practice formal presentations under realistic conditions *before* being required to do so abroad
- the audience indicated that the presentation event provided opportunities for reflection—for audience members and participants alike—drawing attention to positive characteristics of the event itself along with challenges yet to be faced.

E. Additional Findings

The additional findings from the questionnaire analysis revealed:

- the ERC teaching team could collaborate with other university departments, better guiding future developments of university courses, requirements and directions
- delivering presentations to a live (and unfamiliar) audience encouraged presenters to embrace topics that developed their abilities and broadened their views of the world
- respondents enjoyed hearing the opinions and ideas put forward by the student presenters, and were impressed with the students' display of effort and confidence
- the event provided a realistic setting for the delivery of formal academic presentations (with ensuing open audience forum).

F. Conclusions

The ERC proves itself to be an extremely versatile setting for a) reaching out to other departments and centers across the university, and b) social interaction and language learning. To take but one example of its flexibility, the ERC practice presentation evening provided a fine platform for the development of the qualities and skills expected of students soon to study abroad—being the skills of research, academic rigor and formal public speaking. The ERC environment provided students with a realistic experience of delivering a formal presentation. Crucially, from across the university, both students and staff alike were able to reflect upon performances—noting strengths as well as those weaknesses in need of attention. In preparation for study abroad, the practice presentation evening held in the ERC provided a unique opportunity for students to work through all the processes necessary of preparing a formal presentation and delivering it to a critical audience—endeavors integral to academic development and life-like social interaction for second language learners.

III. SNAPSHOT 3: THE ERC DRAMA WORKSHOPS

A. *Drama as a Strategy to Enhance EFL/ESL Performance: Introduction*

The benefits of using drama in early education have been studied extensively (Novelly, 1985; Cassady, 1993), but not much is available about the effects of theatrical techniques on language learning programs for young adults and adults [5], [6]. Fortunately the social and cultural value of theater as a learning tool has been analyzed by sociologists like Ervin Goffman, whose studies on the organization of experience provide a fascinating insight on the effects of theater action and language on the actors as well as on the audience.

Based on the experiences acquired during the seven ERC Drama Workshops (2006 – 2010), we firmly believe that it is necessary to achieve a better understanding of EFL/ESL university students in Japan as a population with distinctive and specific needs, and to acknowledge that these needs are deeply connected to the challenging development of a higher level of language competence and communication skills.

B. *Outline of the Research*

1) *Objectives and Development* This research combines the theoretical framework obtained from drama studies sources with the available sociological studies on language, performance, and behavior to create an environment in which the participants have the opportunity to interact using a variety of dramatic elements. This project is also contributing to the design of a more complete and efficient EFL/ESL curriculum, where creative spaces may become key elements of language performance. Sharing with the national and international community of educators not just our findings, but also our methods, expectations, and professional experiences in the search for a more comprehensive educational environment is vital to the Workshops' development.

Methodology: Action! Simple activities, such as role-playing, dramatic reading, and story-telling, are used to introduce the participants to the "other side" of language learning. The plots and characters they read and learn about allow the players to comprehend, identify, deconstruct and reconstruct situations, improving their skills to understand and communicate facts, ideas, and feelings, and to "read" the reactions of other players.

During the workshops, participants are expected to grow to know the characters they are responsible for bringing to life by allowing the dialogue between the literary sources and their personal experiences in situations that provide a frame of identification. This dialogue is expected to help the participants to experience some of the cultural elements that define the language they are learning, and to establish a connection between its structures and its "humanity." Through movement and improvisation, participants are introduced to new ways of connecting their physical and emotional levels with their language skills.

The structure of the sessions provides the frame to contain the natural fear that learners feel when attempting to use a new language in a social situation. Participants face their fears step by step, from the initial reaction towards the other players to the eventual interaction with an audience. The identification and resolution of fear leads to self-confidence building (Freire, 1996) and even to the manipulation of the new language to respond to personal needs [7]. Getting into the cultural structure created by the plot of a play or by the drama guidelines provided during a session requires that the participants learn to "jump in" through a series of emotional, intellectual, and physical exercises (Bert & Bert, 2003), which are gradually and carefully guided at the beginning of our sessions, and develop towards a *sidecoaching* method (Spolin, 1986) [8], [9].

2) *Language is performance*, and as such it allows us to communicate beyond words: we learn the rules of interaction through communication; we learn about different mentalities and cultures, we discover the sociolinguistic value of gestures, and learn to understand and respect difference. Our players (particularly those who participated in more than one workshop) have demonstrated a clearer understanding of situational verbal and body language, in many cases beyond the expectations of the researcher.

Their level of confidence in a "foreign" situation increased dramatically, and although further data needs to be obtained, it is possible to say (based on follow-up meetings) that they developed a deeper emotional connection with the language. As they "act" it out, they begin to "own" it.

IV. SNAPSHOT 4: COMPARING ERC ATTENDEES' ENGLISH PROFICIENCY GAINS TO NON-ATTENDEES'

As teachers working at least two to four hours per week in the ERC during its open hours, we know from our interactions with attendees that students who frequently visit the ERC experience noticeable improvements in their English proficiency. We often share stories of this or that student, who after attending the ERC frequently experienced a 100 or 200 point gain in their Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) score. But are these just isolated cases, and how do ERC attendees' proficiency gains compare with those of other students at our university? Saegusa (1986) and Ross (2000) indicate that the number of hours a language is studied is the strongest predictor of proficiency gains, while Mizumoto and Takeuchi (2009) reveal a significant correlation between students' amount of input-seeking behavior and their TOEIC scores [10], [11], [12]. As the ERC offers students two hours of rich language input every weekday, we hypothesized that students who attend the ERC experience significant TOEIC score gains over students who do not attend. To test this hypothesis, we embarked on a systematic, quantitative analysis of ERC attendees' TOEIC score gains versus the gains of others who did not attend the ERC. The following describes the study design and results of our first attempt at such an analysis.

A. Sampling and Data Collection

For this study, our target group comprised non-native English speaking students who attended the ERC during open hours (between 3:00 and 5:00 pm) more than once during a period of 180 school days between April 22nd, 2009 and July 30th, 2010. Gathering the necessary information for this group turned out to be unexpectedly challenging, as our only record of ERC attendance for this period was our ERC “log book” in which attendees were supposed to write their name and major before they left the ERC that day. Not only did attendees sometimes forget to sign the book but, even when they remembered to sign, they often wrote only their first, last, or nicknames. Thus, it proved impossible to properly identify all of those who signed the book.

Approximately 254 students attended the ERC during the study period including 19 native or near-native speakers of English and 94 non-native, one-time visitors. Of the remaining 140 students, 95 were properly identified. Of these 95, pre and post TOEIC score information was available from the university for 69. These 69 students comprised the target group for this study.

The control group was gathered from all other Saitama University students for whom pre and post TOEIC score information was available ($n=8265$). This pool of students was drawn from such that each ERC attendee was randomly paired with a non-attendee who had an identical score on their initial TOEIC test. This randomized, stratified pairing was done 10 times to create 10 sets of 69 target-control pairs.

Pre TOEIC tests were taken as English course placement tests by all of the students in this study upon entering Saitama University, while post tests were usually taken a year and a half or two years later. As discussed below, only some of the participants took their tests during the period for which ERC attendance was recorded.

B. Analysis and Results

To compare ERC attendees’ TOEIC score gains with those of non-attendees, a one-tailed paired t -test was performed contrasting final TOEIC scores for each of the 10 sets of 69 pairs and the results of the t -tests averaged. ERC attendees’ overall mean final TOEIC score was 635.14 whereas non-attendees’ mean final score was 550.67. Thus, ERC attendees’ scored on average 84.48 points higher than their non-attendee counterparts (with a mean standard deviation of 130.13 points, a mean lower limit of 53.22 points and mean upper limit of 116.74 points at the 95% confidence interval). This difference was significant for all 10 contrasts ($p<0.001$) with a mean t of 5.41. To understand how much higher ERC attendees’ gains were than non-attendees, further analysis was done, the results of which showed that, on average, non-attendees’ scores rose only 32 points, whereas attendees’ scores rose an average of 116 points or about three times as much as non-attendees.

C. Further Analysis

Although the comparative gains of attendees versus non-attendees impressed us, only 21 of the 69 attendees had taken both their pre and post test during the study period (the others had taken one or both beforehand). In other words, we

could not be sure if all 69 members had begun attending before or after they had experienced their TOEIC score gains. Thus, we redid the above analysis including only the 21 attendees (and the 909 non-attendees) who had taken both their pre and post TOEIC tests within the study period.

The 21 ERC attendees scored an average of 94.45 points higher than their non-attendee counterparts (with a mean standard deviation of 124.86 points, a mean lower limit of 42.62 points and mean upper limit of 156.29 points at the 95% confidence interval). This difference was significant for all 10 contrasts ($p<0.01$) with a mean t of 3.71.

Thus, the 21 attendees who took both of their tests within the study period experienced an even higher mean gain over their non-attendee counterparts than the whole sample of 69 attendees.

D. Conclusion

This preliminary study confirms that, indeed, students at our university who attend the ERC experience significantly higher gains in their English proficiency than those who do not attend. Although these results are quite exciting, we still do not know how much of those higher gains is due to time spent interacting at the ERC versus such factors as English coursework and individual motivation. Thus, we look forward to doing further research on the relationship between ERC attendance and English proficiency gains.

V. CLOSING REMARKS

Our initial view through the camera lens led us deeper in observing, recording, and reflecting in order to have a better view of our community of interactive learners. Similar to the process outlined by Smith (2003, p.8) the authors consolidated their understanding of interaction in the ERC through a reflective process in order to gain expertise in the Center’s experiences and to learn –just as a learners do [13]. Looking at each snapshot, our first provided a brief historical description of the ERC, the second showed reactions toward a community-wide English for academic purposes event, the third revealed how drama enhances the learners’ English identity and mastery of content, while the fourth snapshot analyzed English proficiency gains by the Center’s attendees. Although additional snapshots need to be taken in order to comprehend the rich ERC environment more completely, the four snapshots presented in this brief study suggest that the provision of support for learning and increases in linguistic proficiency go hand in hand with interactive learning contexts.

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