

# Engaging Students in the Collaborative Learning Activities

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## Abstract

The present work addresses a series of learning activities implemented among the undergraduate TOEFL-ITP<sup>®</sup> students with an aim to consolidate their knowledge of correct English grammar and word usage. The results of the survey indicate that most of the respondents find it beneficial to work on the TOEFL-ITP<sup>®</sup> style grammar and word usage questions with a peer after completing a writing task. This suggests that a collaborative learning atmosphere allows the learners to make their knowledge of English more resistant to memory loss (Miller et al. 1977).

## 1. Introduction

There is general acceptance that those who instruct students, especially language instructors, should often reconsider or modify their teaching methods in order to effectively guide students through the course material for better learning (Matsunuma 2016; Blaz 2018). This is because effective guidance may lead to enhancing the student's performance or learning outcomes. The pedagogical approach to achieve these goals may vary depending on the nature and aim of a course, the academic level of students, materials and the length of the course among others, however, as a method to improve the learning outcomes of students, language instructors often utilize a variety of peer activities (Uchiyama et al. 2017; Blaz 2018).

The purpose of this study is to report on the effectiveness of an interactive



approach tailored for guiding Japanese undergraduates through Section 2 Written Expression on the TOEFL ITP<sup>®</sup>, which mainly tests the understanding of English word usage and grammar (Tajino et al. 2012). By analyzing the results of a student survey, implications of such an educational approach are discussed within the context of educational psychology, so that in the future, further improvements in guiding young learners may be made. The basic idea behind the present study is derived from what we understand from the notion of collaborative learning in educational psychology; the notion suggests that the interaction amongst students may facilitate a better, more in-depth understanding of the subject matter (Johnson et al. 1993). It is acknowledged that peer interaction tends to be more egalitarian than the interaction between the instructor and the classroom students in that the content to be learned is equally shared among their peers (King 1998).

The present study examines the effectiveness of peer interaction in the the Intensive Course for the TOEFL-ITP<sup>®</sup> Practice (hereafter, ICT Practice), where the author had implemented a series of in-class learning activities facilitating students' learning for a full year (as of November 2018). The ICT Practice is offered by the Center for General and Liberal Education for the undergraduates in the spring and fall semesters on the Imadegawa and Kyotanabe Campuses at Doshisha University. The course is designed for the learners of English who wish to study abroad in the Doshisha Go Abroad Program. Those who enroll in the ICT Practice are required to meet once a week for a 90-minute session over 15 weeks (one semester). At the end of the semester, the students take TOEFL ITP<sup>®</sup>, which rigorously tests the English abilities of the examinees in the three sections including listening comprehension, structure and written expression and reading comprehension.

The organization of the present work is as follows. Section 2 provides an overview of the activity-orientated learning in the classroom. Sub-section 2.1 explains an individual task of English writing, followed by an analysis of common mistakes in 2.2. Sub-section 2.3 discusses the in-class learning task whereby a pair of learners assimilate elements of the feedback on their work. Sub-section 2.4 discusses the results of the survey evaluation given to the course attendees on an anonymous basis. Section 3 concludes our discussion.

## 2. Activity-based learning

Each class session is conducted by utilizing the course textbooks, Stafford and Tsumatori (2010) and Tajino et al. (2012). The materials offer a wide selection of English grammar reviews as well as multiple-choice questions for listening and reading comprehension that may appear on the official TOEFL ITP<sup>®</sup> test. However, since the textbooks do not provide students an opportunity to practice their writing skills, the author has supplemented the material with two in-class writing tasks, each of which is related to studying abroad. Demonstrating one's English writing skills requires a good command of English grammar and word usage stored in one's active vocabulary lexicon. The author's concerns revolve around finding an effective instructional method of preventing the Japanese learners of English from committing common errors in English writing. Fig. 1 features the three primary components of our activity-based learning. The students work on a writing task, receiving some feedback on their work from the instructor. The in-class collaborative learning is initiated based upon the feedback:

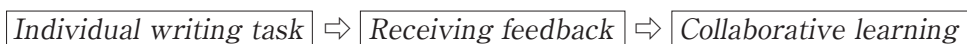


Figure 1 The structure of the activity-based learning

### 2.1 Individual writing task

Let us now deal with the individual writing task, or the first component of the activity-based learning in Fig. 1. The first writing task is usually assigned mid-way through the semester whereas the second task is given towards the end of the semester. For each task, the students must complete a 20-25-minute writing task using approximately 100 words. They are permitted to consult dictionaries in order to write their texts as clearly, concisely and correctly as possible. The suggested topics of the in-class writing task are cited and translated from Doshisha University's *Study Abroad Manual* (2018), as exemplified in (1). This booklet



provides the students of Doshisha University with a wide range of useful resources regarding overseas study at tertiary institutions. The learners in the course are advised to form their opinions about each writing task topic, however, they are assigned a particular topic in class by the instructor.

(1) Examples

- a. What motivates you to study abroad?
- b. Describe your greatest achievement.
- c. Describe your most memorable experience.
- d. Describe your strengths and weaknesses.
- e. What are your most important values in life and why?

## 2.2 Common mistakes

To help the language learners avoid some pitfalls of using English words and phrases, Powell (2016) shows common mistakes made by foreign language learners of English based on the past official language exams. Uchiyama et al. (2017: 37) assert that “the mastery of a language, [...], inevitably takes many mistakes and subsequent learnings on the part of the learner.” The implication is clear that if the language learners familiarize themselves with frequent mistakes in the target language, they will be able to avoid them in the examination and elsewhere. Therefore, it may be beneficial to observe what mistakes are commonly made in the writing task so that elements of the feedback to the students’ written sample may be focused afterwards.

In-class observations made by the author reveal that one of the most common misuses made by the undergraduates stem from the usage of the adverbs *recently*, *lately*, and temporal adverbial phrases, such as *in recent years* and *these days*, as shown in (2). (the asterisk denotes the incorrectness of the sentence due to the word(s) that is in italic).

(2) Typical misuse of the adverbs and adverbial phrases

- a. \*One of my cousins works part-time in a restaurant *recently*.



- b. \*There has been an increase in foreign tourists in Japan *these days*.

Another misuse in English is due to the student's inability to distinguish transitive verbs from intransitive verbs in the writing task. Occasionally, the transitive verbs, such as *study*, *consider*, and *understand* are incorrectly used as intransitive, as in (3).

(3) Typical misuse of the transitive verbs

- a. \*I would like to *study about* the nature of artificial intelligence.  
b. \*Studying abroad may provide me an opportunity to *consider about* the differences between Japanese culture and American one.  
c. \*It may well be important to *understand about* the overseas cultures.

The reader may have noticed that there is an increasing discrepancy between the learners' recognition of the meaning of the words (i.e. their passive vocabulary) and how the learners should use the words correctly in the sentences that they are writing (i.e. their active vocabulary). The author believes that the students who have worked on the writing tasks will recognize the general meaning of the target adverbs, adverbial phrases and verbs, as shown in (2) and (3). Regardless, the words and phrases in the learners' vocabulary lexicon were incorrectly used, the reason may in part be due to the fact that the language learners are likely to overestimate the quality of the text that they produce (McCormick 2003), allowing mistakes to creep into the text created subsequently. In such a case, it may take some time for them to acquire the correct contents (Matsunuma 2016). Accordingly, the learners are advised to review the accurate contents in and outside class, time and again, so that the contents will be drilled into their web of knowledge of English.

The word-for-word translation of a Japanese word and/or phrase into English may be another explanation of making a mistake in English. For example, instead of the phrase 'immerse oneself in a foreign culture' or 'familiarize oneself with a foreign culture,' the misuse of the English verb 'touch' as in (4a) is often seen among the students. Appropriate guidance for the TOEFL-ITP<sup>®</sup> students on this type of misuse is to recommend them to memorize what verb is likely to collocate with 'a foreign culture.' Another example in (4b) reminds us of the necessity of encouraging

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the Japanese learners of English to familiarize themselves with English collocations or chunks, as Blaz (2018) stresses. Though the Japanese phrase *keiken wo suru* is an accurate collocation, the English verb *do*, which is often literally translated to *suru* or *wo suru* in Japanese, does not collocate with the noun *experience*. Instead, the verb *gain* should be used in (4b).

(4) Literal translation from Japanese to English

- a. \*One of the purposes of my studying abroad is to *touch* a foreign culture.
- b. \*Many students *do* a lot of experience during the study abroad program.

## 2.3. Collaborative learning

The collaborative learning activities start with some feedback given to the students in class (see Fig. 1). In order to nurture sharp and analytical eyes in the student's recognition of common errors in English, the author not simply corrects the errors before returning the students' written work to them, but also presents several English sentences on the blackboard with one of these errors included. The sentences written on the blackboard are cited directly from *COBUILD* (2012) and *OALD* (2010), and four words or phrases in the sentence are underlined with A, B, C, and D in parenthesis as they would appear on Section 2 Written Expression (see 5). One of the underlined parts of the sentence contains a mistake whose nature is identical to the mistake the students made in the writing task. The sentences in (5) were presented in class during the spring semester in 2018, where the paired students were encouraged to write down their notes and accordingly detect the incorrect usage of words and phrases underlined in each sentence. This was done because "taking notes by hand is far superior to doing so on a keyboard, in terms of retention" (Blaz 2018: 1).

(5) Sentences on the blackboard

- a. One of the reasons<sub>(A)</sub> of<sub>(B)</sub> coming to England is<sub>(C)</sub> to make money<sub>(D)</sub>.
- b. The school has received<sub>(A)</sub> various grant<sub>(B)</sub> from<sub>(C)</sub> the education department<sub>(D)</sub>.
- c. A friend of<sub>(A)</sub> mine has<sub>(B)</sub> gone to<sub>(C)</sub> live in<sub>(D)</sub> abroad.

d. Tom wanted<sub>(A)</sub> study mathematics<sub>(B)</sub> and<sub>(C)</sub> statistics in UK<sub>(D)</sub>.

Upon observation, most students in class appear to find it helpful to take advantage of either a bilingual dictionary or a monolingual dictionary to find clues to the error in each sentence. The students are allotted about 10 minutes to discuss where the error may lie and how best the error is corrected. This is precisely where the practical value of peer interaction lies; the Japanese learners of English are expected to exchange their views on the correct usage of the underlined words and phrases in the target sentences amongst their peers. Usually, there are approximately 10 paired groups during the interactive learning activity. Interactive learning may actively promote the learning processes more than the passive lecture-style teaching when we guide the students through the Section 2 Written Expression. This is largely because in educational psychology, “knowledge is socially constructed through the process of interaction and activity among individuals” (King 1998: 57). Fujioka (2012) also asserts that when students in a pair or group work on the task in class, they may help each other communicate and share the contents of learning interactively.

After a period of approximately 10 minutes, one student in the pair is asked to explain, in Japanese, what is wrong with the sentence on the blackboard and suggest what needs to be done in order to rectify the incorrectness of the sentence. When the student states the correct answer, the author endorses his or her approach with praise. On the other hand, when the student is not able to detect an error in the sentence, one student in another pair is told to explain what is wrong with the sentence and how to restate it correctly. Note that a failure to detect the error in the sentence and provide a subsequent correction goes without any punishment (Blaz 2018). A healthy learning environment in which the student expresses his or her opinion about the question allows other members of the class to clarify their own understanding of the content to be learned or to correct their own misconceptions of the content, if any (Bargh and Schul 1980). This learning process by nature may consolidate their knowledge structure, as a result of which the contents to be learned will be etched on their memory (Miller et al. 1977).



## 2.4 Survey

This section shows the results of an anonymous survey which the author carried out in December 2018 on 23 students in class in order to assess educational impacts of the in-class activity. In conducting the survey, the students were informed as follows: A research report would be written based on the analysis of their answers to the survey questions. They had the right to avoid answering the survey questions on the sheet without having to provide any reason for their refusal. The respondents were then asked to grade the usefulness of learning English on a learning activity basis in class and indicate their choice on a five-point scale. The maximum score of 5 shows that the respondent feels it very useful to participate in the in-class learning activity, inclusive of the writing task, revising task and peer discussion. The minimum score of 1 shows that the respondents find the in-class activity the least useful. They were then told to provide a specific reason for stating that opinion on the sheet.

All the students responded to the survey questions. There is no student who rated the learning activity as 1 on the scale. The results of the survey show that the average rating hovers around 4 on the five-point scale, suggesting that the students found it very helpful to join the in-class activity. Interestingly, another survey conducted by Uchiyama et al. (2017) indicates that the in-class activity where the students learn grammar is the least favored by the respondents. It may seem that, uniquely enough, our study contrasts with Uchiyama et al. (2017)'s findings in that the learners in the present study are exposed to a range of output-orientated activities, such as the writing task, and collaborative task to revise the mistake embedded in the sentences (see Fig. 1). Thus, it may be beneficial to implement a systematic in-class learning activity where the students can learn English grammar and a wide range of word usages.

Let us now examine the students' comments with respect to the usefulness of the in-class activity. Due to space limitations we can only present a representative comment provided by the respondent according to each scalar rating since the results of the survey ran the gamut of evaluative comments given by the students. To begin with, one respondent who gave the rating of 2, stated that the writing



task should be provided *after* the error-correcting activity. One respondent, who rated the activity 3, stated that due to lack of further opportunities to demonstrate what he/she learned in the activity, this respondent had found the in-class activity mediocre. Importantly, among those who rated the learning activity 4 on the scale, the collaborative learning allowed individual learners to enhance their memory of a correct word usage in English. One respondent who gave a full score of 5 on the usefulness stated that in general, subtle mistakes in English may appear in the students' written works, particularly when they write English without scrupulously heeding correct words usage. Participating in the learning activity has helped this student recognize that such mistakes had gone unnoticed and accordingly should be corrected.

### 3. Summary

The fact that there are not many opportunities of assigning writing tasks to students in class might not entirely assure us of the effectiveness of the present activity-based teaching method. The ICT Practice is not primarily designed for facilitating writing skills of the Japanese learners of English. Under the current circumstances, it would not be possible to trace the impacts of this activity-based learning to individual students' test scores on Section 2 Written Expression and elaborate on them in the present paper. This would require a longitudinal study to be conducted with the students. However, the present learning activity does provide students with piecemeal learning of examples from which they are expected to abstract regularities in acquiring English grammar and word usage.

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