

Raising Awareness of Learner Responsibility Through Group Activities

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The author examines a classroom activity which uses small study groups to foster students' sense of responsibility in the classroom. The participants are first-year elementary level students, who rotate taking responsibility as the leader in groups of four members each. In every class, there is a different group leader, and he/she has two main responsibilities. First, the leader has the responsibility to check the homework completion of the group members. Second, the leader takes the initiative to complete a variety of tasks in the group. Students are encouraged to help each other in the group to become more responsible and autonomous learners. The author conducts questionnaires and interviews students to investigate how this study group activity works to make students more responsible and independent in studying English. It is found that students involve themselves more actively in classroom activities in the group, and they build a mutual learning environment with the other members of their groups.

1. Introduction

For every English teacher, it is a challenge to stimulate students' motivation for learning. Especially in lower-proficiency classes, raising students' sense of responsibility for their own learning can be a key to having a successful learning experience. In this paper, the author introduces group activities designed to give students an experience in taking responsibility as a leader in a daily classroom setting, to raise their awareness of the importance of active involvement for a better educational outcome. Then the author evaluates the activity through questionnaires and interviews.

According to the definition of Scharle and Szabo (2000), responsibility is "being in charge of something, but with the implication that one has to deal with the consequences of one's own actions", and autonomy is "the freedom and ability to manage one's own

affairs, which entails the right to make decisions as well". The following is their quotation on the relationship between responsibility and autonomy. "In order for learners to be actively involved in the learning process, they first need to realize and accept that success in learning depends as much on the student as on the teacher. That is, they share responsibility for the outcome. In other words, success in learning very much depends on learners having a responsible attitude." According to the definition of Holec, H. (2007), "autonomy" refers to a learner's ability to self-control his learning and "autonomous learner" will refer to a learner who knows how to control his learning. Learners' autonomy also has a close relationship with motivation. Also, Tanaka, H. and Hiromori T. (2007) show that completing a particular group project contributes to enhance students' motivation and to meet learner's three psychological needs ;

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autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Both responsibility and autonomy require active involvement in students' own learning, and these two ideas are very much interrelated. Especially, raising awareness of a learner's responsibility is the very first step to be more responsible and autonomous.

2. Purpose and method

The purpose of this study is to evaluate a classroom activity which is designed to give students opportunities to practice being responsible as a leader, raising the learner's awareness. The activity explained in the following sections describes the author's own attempt to stimulate students' sense of responsibility in an English-language classroom setting; it is an original research and activity design, with no direct bearing on any previous author's work. The research question is the following: Can group activities help students become more responsible?

The participants were forty-one first-year college students at Aomori Public College. Those students all major in Management. All of these students were in a required English course, Business English 2, which focuses on practicing English skills for business needs. There are 90-minute sessions twice a week, for a total of 24 classes over a semester. Their TOEIC Bridge average score for tests taken in July, before classes started, was 120.92/200. As the questionnaires given in the first class were to show, most of these students have relatively low confidence in English, and also low motivation. The questionnaire shows that their three main stated needs for studying English are, in order of precedence, getting credits for graduation, practicing English conversation, and getting a higher score on the TOEIC.¹⁾

To investigate students' reactions, question-

naires were conducted twice during the semester. To supplement the results of the questionnaires, interviews were conducted after the semester ended. Questionnaire 1 was done on September 25th, 2007, in the first class, and Questionnaire 2 (see Appendix) was done on December 14th, 2007, in the tenth week of the course. Both of the questionnaires were written in Japanese. After the semester ended, ten students were chosen for interviews based on their final course grades, and an interview was done for them. The intention was to include a mix of abilities with both stronger and weaker students represented. Six of them were among the best students in the class, with an average of 84.8/100; the other four lower ones earned an average of 61.2/100. The author met these ten students individually for about 15 minutes each.

3. The activity to raise awareness of students' responsibility in a group: the "Group leader system"

Under the system I used in this study, the following steps are taken.

Step 1: Organizing groups

Students are randomly assigned to be in groups of four (the author uses numbered chopsticks that students pick randomly). If the class is not evenly divisible by 4, this author prefers a group size of 5, more than 3. Students take the same seats for six weeks, the first half of the semester, and study in the same group.

Step 2: Using the group portfolio and the homework check sheet

Each group decides its group color as its group name, and gets a group file. Each group file contains a homework check sheet and it identifies the class session dates and daily leaders. The homework check sheet is

also used to keep a record of the homework points.

Step 3: Explaining the responsibilities of the group leader

(1) Checking homework

In every class, different students take responsibility as the group leaders. The leader checks the homework completion of all the members in the group and gives homework points. The homework points can range from 0 to a maximum of 3 points. The leader decides these points, so the leader should finish all of the assignments before the class starts. Thus, if the leader forgets his/her homework, everyone in the group will get 0 points. Students repeat this homework-checking activity every class, speaking in English as a warm-up activity to start the class. It usually takes about five minutes.

The teacher has to pay close attention to this rule to be fair for each group. Since the members of the group can differ greatly in their performance, this rule should not always be strongly enforced. (Individual teachers or the same teacher at different times can use this procedure in a flexible manner: some may choose to be more strict about the homework

points system, while others may choose to be more relaxed in its application.) The teacher explains that the purpose of this activity is to get ready for the class, and to encourage each other to have productive classes and do classroom activities smoothly.

(2) Leading in-class activities

The leader also takes the initiative to accomplish a variety of activities to get other students more involved. Some of the activities require the leader to pull together opinions from other members, for example, or to check the answers for the grammar questions, to prepare for possible explanation to the class.

(3) Distributing task sheets

The group file is often used to collect or distribute some class handouts. The group leader manages these handouts for both the teacher and the students.

4. Results

4.1. Questionnaires

The Questionnaire is scaled between 1~6, with 1 as "strongly disagree" ranging up through 6, "strongly agree". The following chart shows the average value for each question.

		Q1 Sept. 2007	Q2 Dec. 2007
Question 1	I think studying in a group helps me in my own learning.	4.67	4.76
Question 2	I think studying in a group helps me to be an autonomous learner too.	4.62	4.62
Question 3	I think checking homework in a group helps me to be more responsible for my own learning.	4.62	4.67
Question 4	I think we should have more group work.	4.10	4.01
Question 5	I think studying in a group is meaningful, because we can help each other.	4.49	4.69
Question 6	I prefer working with one partner to studying in a group.	3.46	3.67
Question 7	I prefer working by myself to studying in a group.	2.97	2.79

Table 1

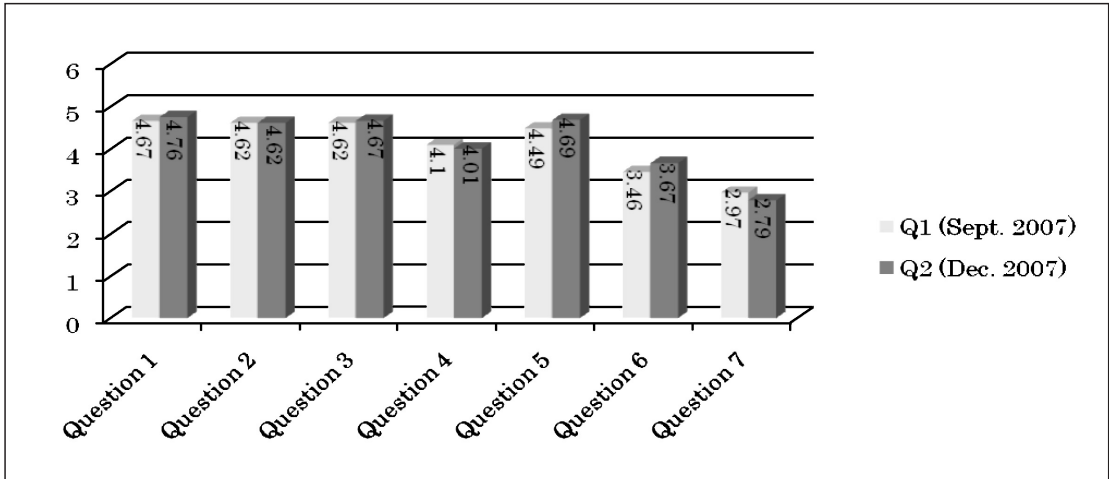


Figure 1

Questions 1 through 7 (see Table 1) are asked in both Questionnaire 1 and Questionnaire 2, and results are given in Figure 1. Generally, the results show that studying in a small group helps students' learning and that students find it meaningful to study in a group, because they can help each other in a group setting (Q1 & 5). The activity also works to help them become one step ahead of

dependence on the teacher, to be more independent and autonomous (Q2 & 3). In the class, I try to prepare a variety of in-class activities - individual work, pair-work, and group work - and to balance the quantity of each type of work. From the questionnaire, they enjoy working in a group more than studying by themselves, and they welcome more activities in a group (Q4, 6 & 7).

		Q2 Dec. 2007
Question 8	I understand my responsibility in a group.	4.19
Question 9	In this English class, I can study without pressure.	3.74
Question 10	In this English class, I can feel achievement about my improvement.	3.76
Question 11	In this English class, I am satisfied with my own learning achievement.	3.81
Question 12	In this English class, I am satisfied with my own learning effort.	3.93
Question 13	In this English class, I have a good learning environment with my classmates.	4.27
Question 14	In this English class, I have a cooperative relationship with my classmates when we work together in a small group.	4.49
Question 15	In this English class, I think we have a friendly atmosphere.	4.43
Question 16	In this English class, I have an encouraging learning environment with my classmates.	4.31

Table 2

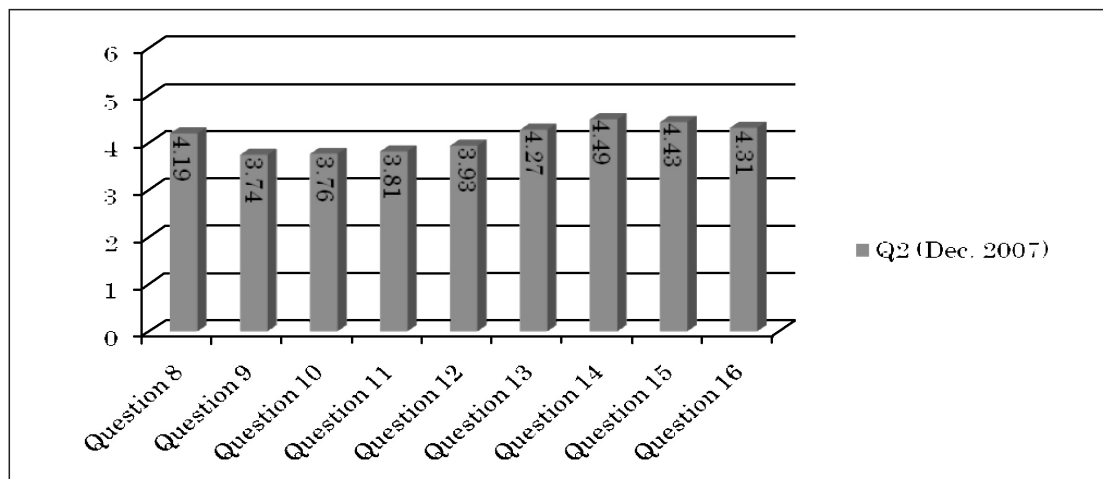


Figure 2

Questions 8 through 16 (see Table 2) are from Questionnaire 2, and results are shown in Figure 2. Through both personal observation and the results of the questionnaires, it seems students enjoy studying in the small group context. It is because they feel less pressure from the teacher in the class and can get help from other students. After they study in a group for ten weeks, developing the homework checking activity, most of the students understand the things they have to do, and begin to be more aware of their responsibility as a leader (Q8). Students do not hesitate to ask questions of other students to make sure what they should do (Q9). In this English course, students have to come to class twice a week, and they have an assignment for almost every class. They also have daily small quizzes to check their understanding of the previous class, and they have two speaking tests and two paper tests during the semester. So, they think they are in a tough class. That is why most of the students are satisfied with their learning achievement. Even though the students have more confidence in their in-class achievements, their confidence in the four basic skills (speaking, listening,

reading, and writing/grammar) did not change. It is not easy to see measurable progress in a short period. Students' positive feelings about their improvement hopefully do encourage measurable progress over time (Q10, 11, & 12).ⁱⁱ⁾ Spending six weeks in the same group, students established a cooperative relationship in a good learning environment (Q13, 14, 15, & 16). Studying together with the same group members, as we see in the following interview section, leads to less anxiety in practicing speaking English. Students feel it is easier to ask for and to offer help.

Through the twelve weeks of this course, the students worked hard to achieve their goals. Attendance was quite good, and they also worked enthusiastically in a group. I believe studying in a group is one of the most effective processes for creating a learning situation less controlled by the teacher. While the leaders are checking homework, I circulate around the classroom, and I find most of the students have completed their homework before the class began. On the other hand, it is very sad but I have to admit that some of the students copy their homework just before the class, which is far from being either responsible

or autonomous.

Teachers should try to give students opportunities for a real experience in which their effort makes differences on their long-term learning, ideally helping to trigger the habit of self-motivation.

4.2. Interviews

The interviews were done for ten students who were in the course. The interviewees were chosen based on their final grades. Six students whose final course average was 84.8/100, and four students whose final course average was 61.5/100 agreed to be interviewed individually.

The interviews were for about fifteen minutes each, from May 23rd to May 30th, 2008. Some of the questions from Questionnaire 2 were adopted for the interviews, to find out how the students acted in the groups as leaders.

During the interviews, most of the comments were positive toward group activities. From both the higher-score and lower-score groups, they reported that they learned more actively in the group and received a benefit from helping each other. Especially when students practice speaking, they can start talking immediately because they feel less embarrassed with group members than with a randomly assigned partner from the class as a whole. On the other hand, since they became much closer friends, they tend to chat more about topics unrelated to the classwork. It is also found that they say it is sometimes difficult to check friends' homework and to be strict about it. Some hardworking students felt they are rather unfairly depended upon by some other students. The following are some of the comments from students in the interviews:

4.2.1. (Generally positive comments)

"I have fun studying in the group."

"We can help each other in the group."

"When I am the leader, I try my best to finish my homework and take the initiative in the group activities."

"We can practice speaking with the same partners, so it is easy to get started and we don't need to be tense."

"I check the dictionary more to find the reasons for the answers."

"I try my best not to cause problems for other members in the group."

4.2.1. (Generally negative comments)

"I can't be strict when I check the homework."

"Some of the members do not do anything in the group."

"I chat too much with my partner."

"I depend too much on the other students."

5. Conclusions

According to the questionnaires, students feel that they have built a mutual learning environment in the small study groups through homework-checking activities and other group activities. They also are more aware of their responsibility as a leader in the group, and more aware that their contribution to the class is important for everybody's progress. The experience working as a group leader and interacting closely with the other group members seems to have improved the sense of responsibility. During the interviews, the author also heard positive comments indicating that this group activity helped students to become more aware of their responsibility as learners. The results of the questionnaires also show that even if some students did not gain confidence in the four basic skills, many students felt increased confidence in their accomplishment

of classroom tasks. It seems that students could build close relationships with other members of their groups, so they learned to better collaborate and cooperate to complete classroom tasks and to improve English learning efficiently.

Although this experience was limited, it is to be hoped that students apply this not only in the group or classroom setting, but in other areas of their lives as well. It will need further investigation to explore how the area of small-group responsibility may affect learning over a longer period of time, and to see if it really can improve their second language proficiency.

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Notes

i) Additional questions were asked in the questionnaires, but are not included in the graphs, as they were only supplementary to the main focus of this research:

1. What are your main purposes in studying English?

TOEIC	English conversation
Grammar	Composition
Earning credits	TOEFL
Hobbies	Studying abroad
Getting a better job	Other
[]

ii) (Supplementary questions continued...)

1. Are you confident in speaking in English?
2. Are you confident in listening in English?
3. Are you confident in understanding English grammar?
4. Are you confident in reading English?
5. Are you confident in writing in English?

9. References

- Holec, H. (2007) *Autonomy in language learning: a pedagogical revisiting of a pedagogical approach*. Presentation material from The Independent Learning Association 2007 Japan Conference.
- Scharle, A. and Szabo, A. (2000) *Learner Autonomy : A Guide to Developing Learner Responsibility*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tanaka, H. and Hiromori, T. (2007) The effects of educational intervention that enhances intrinsic motivation of L2 students. *JALT Journal*, 29 (1), 59-80

Appendix

Questionnaire 2

Business English 2

E1 ・ E2

ID# _____

これまでの授業を振り返って、英語の技能に対する自信、学習の目的、グループでの活動について、あなたの考える適当なところを丸でかこんでください。アンケートの結果は授業改善に役立てるために使用します。

1	2	3	4
強否定	否定	肯定	強肯定

[Part 1] 英語の技能に対する自信

1. 英語を話すことに自信がありますか。

1	2	3	4
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2. 英語を聞きとることに自信がありますか。

1	2	3	4
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3. 英語の文法の理解に自信がありますか。

1	2	3	4
---	---	---	---

4. 英語の文章を読むことに自信がありますか。

1	2	3	4
---	---	---	---

5. 英語の文章を書くことに自信がありますか。

1	2	3	4
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[Part 2] 英語学習の目的

自分が英語を勉強する目的は何ですか？当てはまるものに○をしてください。

TOEIC 英会話 文法 作文 単位
TOEFL 趣味 留学 就職
[その他: _____]

[Part 3] グループ活動に関して

授業の前半、後半で2つのグループでいろいろな活動をしてきました。そのことについて伺います。

1	2	3	4	5	6
強否定	否定	少し否定	少し肯定	肯定	強肯定

7. グループで勉強することは、自分たちの学習に有効である。

1	2	3	4	5	6
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8. グループでの活動は、自分たちの自主性を高めるために有効である。

1	2	3	4	5	6
---	---	---	---	---	---

9. グループのリーダーが宿題をチェックするのは、自分たちの学習に責任を持つ上で有効である。

1	2	3	4	5	6
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10. グループでの活動量をもっと増やすべきである。

1	2	3	4	5	6
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11. グループでの活動は、学生がお互いを助け合えるため、有意義である。

1	2	3	4	5	6
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12. グループでの活動よりも、ペアの活動のほうが、自分たちの学習のために有効だ。

1	2	3	4	5	6
---	---	---	---	---	---

13. グループでの活動よりも、個人の活動のほうが、自分たちの学習のために有効だ。

1	2	3	4	5	6
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14. グループにおける自分の責任を理解している。

1	2	3	4	5	6
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15. この英語の授業では、授業の進め方の希望などを教員に伝える機会が与えられていると思う。

1	2	3	4	5	6
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16. この英語の授業では、プレッシャーを感じずに勉強をすることができると思う。

1	2	3	4	5	6
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17. この英語の授業では、「できた」という達成感が得られると思う。

1	2	3	4	5	6
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18. この英語の授業では、「よくがんばった」と満足感が得られると思う。

1	2	3	4	5	6
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19. この英語の授業では、自分の努力の成果が実ったという満足感が得られると思う。

1	2	3	4	5	6
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20. この英語の授業では、同じ教室の仲間と仲良くやっているとと思う。

1	2	3	4	5	6
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21. この英語の授業でのグループ活動・ペアワークでは、協力し合う雰囲気があると思う。

1	2	3	4	5	6
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22. この英語の授業では、和気あいあいとした雰囲気があると思う。

1	2	3	4	5	6
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23. この英語の授業では、同じ教室の仲間同士で学びあう雰囲気があると思う。

1	2	3	4	5	6
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24. その他、グループ学習に対して希望などがあったら書いてください。

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Thank you very much for your cooperation!
I will continue the effort to improve my class!