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Listening to Students:
Perspectives on Dialogic Instruction
in the University EFL Classroom

David P. Shea

Introduction

Pedagogy that is built on dialog requires reciprocity, which means that it is incumbent upon an instructor to not only teach students but also listen to them as well, to find out what they think and why they respond the way they do in class. Listening is a form of triangulation, an evaluation based on more than a single data source, and since any one behavior has different meanings that shift according to the perspective from which it is viewed and experienced, asking students what they think is a fundamentally sound way to evaluate the university EFL classroom.

However, collecting student opinion is not a simple matter of asking a direct question. There are issues of face that mediate response to any given enquiry. One basic principle is that a sincere effort must be made to mitigate potential bias, even though there is no guarantee that informants will respond honestly, especially when there is something to be gained (or lost) by answering. A colleague once told me about the end of term evaluation on which he asked students to give their impressions of his class. The colleague insisted that students sign their names because he did not want them to make

irresponsible claims. His thinking was that students should take responsibility for their opinions. Without doubt, students will refrain from harsh criticism if it is clear who wrote the comment, but it is also likely that the results of the survey will be highly biased, especially if it is carried out before grades are submitted. It is absolutely essential that surveys be anonymous if they are to have any validity at all.

That said, anonymity grants students license to speak their honest opinions, which are sometimes ugly and unfair. Consequently, the teacher who asks for student feedback needs a thick skin to ignore negative criticism - or accept it gracefully. The converse, of course, is the tendency to look for affirmation, to be able to say, in other words, "My students like me." The feeling is understandable; everyone wants to be appreciated, even teachers, though it is important not to boast. In this respect, listening to students is like walking a tightrope: missteps are easy with potentially negative consequences. The effort is nonetheless worthwhile. The teacher's job is to push not only students but oneself out of the comfort zone, to incorporate diverse voices and different perspectives to better understand the dynamics of interaction in the language learning classroom.

Literature review

One of the more consistent findings of research in language education is that teachers dominate the talk that takes place in the classroom, whether on the elementary level (Cazden, 2001; Mercer and Littleton, 2007) or university, where the lecture mode of instruction is widespread (Hardman 2008). There is general consensus, however, that while teacher talk is important, successful language acquisition is grounded in communicative interaction which involves productive output (Swain, 2000) and sustained, extended talk and expression (Thompson, 2008), dialogic engagement that promotes

critical thinking and other analytic skills of academic literacy, as well. In Vygotskyian terms, the social context always mediates the shape and success of learning (Alexander, 2008; Mercer, 2016).

It is the goal of a dialogic approach to the L2 classroom to organize interaction in ways that position students as authentic speakers and provide opportunities to engage in cognitively challenging talk (Alexander, 2008; Barnes, 2008). While mainstream SLA theory emphasizes pairwork and task-based learning to produce interaction (Gass & Mackey, 2015), dialogic instruction prioritizes the role of the teacher in directing whole-class discussion, since without sufficient preparation, group work is "rarely productive" or successful in generating reflective, reasoned talk (Mercer & Howe, 2012, p. 16). The challenge for dialogic teaching is to structure opportunities to participate in academic discourse in increasingly authentic ways (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000) within the community of participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) that is the classroom. The direction which this participation takes is shaped both by elements that students bring to the setting and the kind of community constructed there by local participants. Following the concept of addressivity (Bakhtin, 1978), the audience shapes the kind of speaker a person can be, which suggests that features like motivation and effort are elicited and sustained by the social environment. In one respect, the classroom is dependent on the active and attentive engagement of students, but at the same time, student response is generated by the tone and character of the surrounding context. In other words, motivation and learning are constructed in situated practice, which raises empirical questions about how students view, not only their own performance, but the L2 classroom as a whole.

Assessment

Much of the literature on student feedback focuses on classroom evaluation in terms of accountability and quality of instruction. Broadly speaking, surveying student opinion allows administrators to make decisions, arguably informed, regarding the character of instruction, providing empirical data about whether teachers are doing their jobs. The logic, especially in an era of increasing fiscal limitations, is that administrators need to find out whether money is being wisely spent, but instructors balk at evaluation when it is used administratively to direct teacher performance and provide quality assurance in a "managerial approach" to customer satisfaction (Spooren, Brockx, & Mortelmans, 2013, p. 599).

There is widespread agreement among language educators themselves that the teacher is accountable for both the shape and effectiveness of instruction, but there is less agreement about how to measure that accountability. In part, the ambiguity depends on the definition of effective instruction. Coe *et al* (2014) argue that effective pedagogy consists of a range of factors, from command of content knowledge to instructional style as well as classroom management, which students, they argue, are in the best position to evaluate (p. 35).

Keane and Labhrainn (2005) report that feedback from students helped improve teaching quality by giving insight into the learning experience, but they also point out the importance of "nonthreatening" evaluation, where the purpose is not to control but to support teachers (p. 5). Keane and Labhrainn also recommend that care be taken not to make evaluation a popularity contest, because students often evaluate an instructor's style rather than teaching content. Further, since quantitative data prove difficult to interpret, Keane and Labhrainn suggest that numerical figures be supplemented with

qualitative data to pursue the reasoning behind student opinion, why students think the way they do.

Although survey questionnaires are perhaps the "most widely used form of teacher evaluation in higher education," student feedback did not improve the overall quality of teaching in a Hong Kong university context (Kember, Leung and Kwan, 2002, p. 411). While teaching improvement is possible in theory, Kember, Leung and Kwan report that there was little if any improvement in teaching performance based on questionnaire data (p. 417), reflecting how difficult it is to use feedback effectively to change instructional style (p. 419), especially with standardized survey questionnaires. Interestingly, Kember, Leung and Kwan found that there was little if any institutional incentive to improve the quality of instruction, since good teaching was not rewarded in promotion and contract renewal decisions (p. 421).

Spooren, Brockx, and Mortelmans (2013) make the troubling point that most student surveys of teaching lack content validity, in that they do not measure what they claim to measure because there is little definition of what effective teaching involves. A "clear understanding of effective teaching is a prerequisite" for valid surveys (Spooren, Brockx, & Mortelmans, p. 603), and in many cases, student perceptions of good teaching do not match the assumptions of a given survey. Further, there is a relationship between high grades and higher teacher ratings (p. 617), with strong evidence that student biases influence evaluation according to impressions that are sometimes almost instantaneous, regarding such indices as attractiveness and charisma, which makes interpreting surveys of student opinion a particularly "complex process" (p. 621).

Recent studies of professional development increasingly emphasize the role of reflective practice (Walsh, 2011), which encourages classroom-based

teacher-initiated research, with the goal not to generate administrative accountability, but to facilitate locally relevant inquiry into student engagement: what students are thinking, what motivates them, and how they are engaged in classroom activity. Expert teachers "consciously seek to draw upon students' experiences, interests, and approaches to learning" (Darling-Hammond, 2016, p. 86). Reflective practice, like action research, values teacher control of research, from a bottom up rather than top down approach, as teachers become researchers investigating their own classroom (Walsh, 2011, p. 139).

While the overriding goal of reflective teaching is to improve instruction, an associated concern is to integrate research and practice (Johnson, 2008), to better understand where students are coming from and how they participate. How do they see classroom discussion and its efficacy? Do students "get" the lesson and what the teacher is trying to convey? Do they participate in its enactment in a way that develops not only language proficiency but also proximity to the L2 in the third space of the FL classroom? In the next section, I review how I approached the topic of student feedback in a spirit of qualitative inquiry.

Methods

In order to gain insight into student opinion, I carried out a number of surveys, both quantitative, with numerical Likert scale multiple-choice questions, and qualitative, with open-ended questions about various aspects of the class. I explained to students that the surveys were for personal research purposes to better understand language teaching, and that confidentiality would be maintained. As a rule, I asked for feedback at the end of the class, after the lesson had finished. Students gave oral permission to use the data, and all surveys were conducted anonymously, with no means

Surveys				
No.	Code	Class	Date	N
1	K1	3–4 year seminar on social issues in business	Spring 2015	24
2	K2	3–4 year seminar on social issues in business	Fall 2015	21
3	K3	3–4 year seminar on social issues in business	Fall 2014	22
4	CI-s	1st year advanced English communication *ippan*	Spring 2015	19
5	CR-s	1st year advanced English communication *returnee*	Spring 2015	20
6	CI-f	1st year advanced English communication *ippan*	Fall 2015	20
7	CR-f	1st year advanced English communication *returnee*	Fall 2015	20
8	RI-s	1st year advanced English reading *ippan*	Spring 2015	20
9	RR-s	1st year advanced English reading *returnee*	Spring 2015	21
10	RI-f	1st year advanced English reading *ippan*	Fall 2015	21
11	RR-f	1st year advanced English reading *returnee*	Fall 2015	20
12	DI	1st year advanced English communication *ippan*	Spring 2015	18
13	DR	1st year advanced English communication *returnee*	Spring 2015	21

to trace who wrote which opinion. I promised students that I would not reveal real names, that their comments would in no way affect grades, and that participation in the study was completely voluntary. I also told students that I would check grammar for readability before presenting anything publicly.

Course title	No. of sections	No. of students	year of study
contemporary film	2 classes	39 (19 & 20)	1st year
short stories and nonfiction	2 classes	41 (20 & 21)	1st year
social issues in business	1 class	24	3rd & 4th year

I surveyed five content-based classes that I taught during both terms of the 2015 academic year. There were two sections each of required first-year English courses, one communication and one reading, and an upper level elective seminar in business and society. While the content and activities of the three courses differed significantly, the style of interaction was similar,

with a good deal of whole-class discussion activities, along with teacher-led Q&A, designed to "push" students to express opinions, present evidence, articulate persuasive argument, and generate other strategies of academic discourse.

In total, I collected 13 end of term class evaluations from the five classes in 2015. I added one survey (K3) from the upper level seminar from 2014 to balance the data sample. All surveys were carried out in English and contained a mix of forced choice Likert scale questions and open-ended questions, with an average of approximately 15–20 questions per survey, soliciting student opinions of class activities.

In addition, I collected over 30 open-ended single question surveys, generating more than 650 comments from students. Questions varied, generally asking about student opinion of class activities or materials. Data are tabulated in the Appendix.

All surveys were designed to elicit student evaluation of class activities, but in this paper, I try to avoid introducing data that praises or criticizes the class. Rather, my goal is consider whether students understood class activity and how they engaged with discussion, looking in particular at relevant themes of feedback.

Analysis

I evaluated the data heuristically, following procedures of qualitative inquiry designed to generate a grounded interpretation of the data (Patton, 2015). After reviewing and organizing the collected surveys, I narrowed the data sample, selecting comments that appeared significant and/or particularly insightful. I looked for patterns and similarities, carrying out a close, recursive review until theoretical saturation was reached where all student comments were accounted for. My overriding goal was to generate a sound

interpretation consistent with the data, to explain what students were thinking. In a sense, I was trying to construct a coherent narrative of the data in a way that made sense to me as a participant looking for answers to personally relevant questions. I did not aim to establish statistical significance or make objective generalizations about testable hypotheses. Following Walsh (2011, p 144), I was looking for an "emergent understanding" that would result in a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of classroom practice.

Findings

The first, most striking finding of the study was that the large majority of students consider themselves interested in and committed to language study, and that they are willing to put forth significant effort in the classroom to improve their proficiency. Correspondingly, most students expressed the feeling that, although the workload was heavy and challenging, the effort was nevertheless worthwhile. While there were a few students, approximately 2–3 per class, who appeared reluctant, resistant, and/or overwhelmed by the required workload, the overwhelming majority reported being enthusiastic about improving their language skills. Over 90% of students (94 of 104), for example, reported at the end of the spring semester that they worked hard in the class, giving their best effort. High levels of talent and commitment are a general characteristic of the student body at the university as a whole, but best effort is not a given, nor does the finding explain what actually motivated student effort, or what aspects of the class students found engaging and why. In the following sections, I pursue the issue of student effort in more detail.

Shifting Attitudes

Generally, student attitudes toward English seemed to shift over the course of the term, for the most part strengthening. The change suggests that not only do students want to be challenged, they value practical study that will likely improve proficiency. At the beginning of the term, for example, there was a good deal of skepticism in the face of what students saw as the heavy burden of homework. Students describe these initial feelings in terms of being confused, overwhelmed, and even sick. Homework, whether reading, writing, or viewing films, was for many difficult to deal with initially: some were resistant, others dismayed at the amount of time and effort required. Fortunately, there were strong indications of persistence in the face of the challenge, which over time, led to feelings of success and accomplishment.

At first, I thought I couldn't [get through] these books but as I read them, I started to like the stories. RRS,16

When I first read the book, I had a hard time understanding ..., but as I read more and more, I was able to see the emotion of each character, which was inspiring and interesting. RI 522. 2

While I was reading, my eyes got used to it. I felt to keep reading every day is important. RR4, 2

To be honest I thought it was a burden to have homework every week but now I don't mind so much. CI 12, 7

The resistance I had towards learning English faded through discussions in the class. DI,8–66

It gave me a headache though at the same time, it was rewarding because I'm getting better at it, and it was thrilling writing. RI65, 10

It cost me in a heavy burden but it has improved my English skills. RIF, 1

By describing their initial surprise and skepticism followed by recognition that the effort was worthwhile, students were saying that study was a kind of investment that paid off. What at first seemed exceptional became ordinary over time.

It is also possible to conclude that the shift in attitude reflects changing conceptions of English study, as students constructed new identifications with the foreign language. This adjustment changed not only the style of participation, but also the sense of identity among students. As the course progressed, many learners developed both a sense of increased confidence and a feeling of being more closely aligned with English.

It's a little hard but once it's done you feel a sense of achievement CI57, 3

in April ... I was almost dead to face the lack of my English ability. however I tried hard and got a little confidence. RIS, 18–1

It was sometimes difficult to express my opinions about the reading, but it made me read the article more carefully. K2–7,12

My impression changed, because at first, I thought the stories were sad and I didn't really understand. The more I read, however, the more interesting I realized they were. RR 5, 12

New orientations to English grew unexpectedly over time and seemed to be generated by the demonstrated hard work and perseverance, as daily effort produced changes.

Interestingly, the shift in attitude involved not only a concern for practical ability but also an increasing openness to other cultures and world views. A number of students in the reading classes said that they had never read a story set in India or Nigeria and, that while unfamiliar cultural customs and values initially proved difficult to understand, students found ways to make connections and find points of similarity.

I first found the book peculiar because the culture and names of the Indian characters were unfamiliar, but as I read, there were parts I could relate to which made the book interesting. RI 522. 5

When I first started reading, I focused too much on my lack of knowledge about Indian culture and the unfamiliar, but as I read more, I found myself able to relate to characters who were experiencing cultural dislocation. RR 5, 3

I have no idea of their world situation. Nigeria is too far away from me, but I felt that the story was more interesting than confusing and I wanted to know more about Nigeria. RR6, 1b

I did not feel improvement in terms of the speed reading, but I got a better understanding of social and global problems in English. RI12, 2

There are many characters who have different cultural backgrounds, so I get a chance to think from their perspective. RI 522. 8

If I didn't have this homework, I would never think about a topic like this. KP, 10

Students are suggesting here that they changed emotionally, becoming more open and aware, relating to English as a way of learning about the world and a means to understand other people and unfamiliar cultural backgrounds and customs. In sum, students are saying that they appreciated new challenges. They also seemed to recognize the shift away from grammar based approaches prevalent in high school, where English structure was the object of attention, toward the content-based approach of university study with its focus on practical issues of the wider world, involving globalization and social change. In one respect, students are saying that they want to be challenged, to learn new things about the world. In another sense, they are commenting on the kind of English they are studying, endorsing a practical use of the language as a tool of thought, communication, and activity.

Students noted that many of the activities positioned them in a new and different relationship to the L2. If it were not for the class, they said, they would not have been involved in the activity, whether reading texts or classroom activity. A number of students reported, for example, that it was the first time to do a presentation, while some noted that they had never read a novel in English before. Specifically, whole-class discussion in the classroom was a particular focus of attention.

Class Discussion

Students were fundamentally oriented to classroom talk, which was the central component of all five courses, both the medium of inquiry and the aim of instruction, by which I mean the ability to explain and present an extended argument about an issue under consideration, such as a particular

theme or response to a social issue. In the first-year communication seminars, for example, all students (100%) agreed that class discussion had been helpful. Student comments regarding the value of discussion clustered around three particular categories: receptivity, reassurance, and reciprocity.

Many students remarked on the importance of feeling accepted, pointing to the value of a non-threatening receptive atmosphere where an offered opinion was taken up and added to the discussion. Students felt less pressure because attention was placed on ideas, not correctness. One student wrote, for instance:

I can say whatever I want to say because there is no right or wrong. I just speak out. CI7, 12

Other students explained their feelings about a nonthreatening atmosphere, evident in responses to a request to describe what students liked best about the class. They wrote:

The friendly classmates and free environment. CIS, 16

There is a warm atmosphere in the class CIS, 16

The atmosphere was "bright and easy to speak"

everybody comes to improve their English skills, which gives me motivation. RRS, 6

Class atmosphere is easy to express opinions freely in English. CIF, 9

Students are suggesting here that motivation was gained from addressing an audience, which encouraged them to speak out without worry about a wrong answer. There was, students seemed to be saying, a feeling of shared membership, as class talk allowed a joint orientation to ideas. The group was supportive but it also granted a sense of responsibility and substance to the individual's language use.

To an extent, students brought positive attitudes toward English that provided the energy and motivation to persist in the face of the heavy workload. At the same time, this effort was elicited and sustained by the shared orientation of the group. In part, students may have been saying that, if other students are doing it, I can too. In part, shared participation in class discussion reframed language study, as students engaged with English communicatively, exchanging opinions, pursuing questions, and developing interpretations. There was widespread recognition that students used English in ways they would likely not have done so otherwise, engaging in new topics, goals, and identities.

Using English every week gives me a lot of opportunities to have a relationship with English CI 10, 11

Classmates are active and willing to express their opinions, which are interesting to listen to. RIS –16–6

How everyone is trying their best to explain their opinions and thoughts carefully. RRS–17–4

I had a lot of pressure to speak English in front of my colleagues, so I had to prepare for class. K3–1–8

> *This class is good because almost all the students are smarter than me.*
> *K3,4–14*

Sometimes, student effort was only part of the story, the pull part. One student noted the attraction of text materials.

> *It didn't take too much time to read, as I was dragged into the story.*
> *RR4, 6*

On the other side of the equation, students were pushed into the activity, accompanied by a shift in emphasis from linguistic structure to communicative content, a division that can be expressed as the shift from studying English to studying in English. As instructor, I was aware of the classroom atmosphere, but my instinctive reaction was to focus on activities and study materials, the pull function, but students are suggesting that the social is as important, if not more so. Interestingly, the student view is theoretically more sound. Learning is always situated in the social context of scaffolded, shared cognition.

Reassurance

Another key value of class discussion was that it allowed students to check comprehension. A number of students said that they felt reassured being able to confirm what the reading or film was about.

> *I couldn't quite catch what the book was trying to say... however,*
> *through the discussion in class, I was able to realize the deeper*
> *meaning. Through the discussion, I was able to have a more "curious*
> *framework" to reading. RR 5, 2*

Discussion helped me because I sometimes misunderstood the story. RR 5, 4

There were many things I couldn't realize on my own and class discussion meant a lot because of that. RRS16

Sometimes it is too difficult to read and understand everything in the article, which is why it's very useful to have explanation, RR 12, 5

Ideas from classmates stimulated me and I began to think more deeply. DR,9–1

Listening to other students, I can get another perspective on the same topic. KP, 3

Students were not saying that they did not do the assigned homework. In fact, the comments suggest that they were being thorough, going beyond the minimum, committed to understanding and seeking to increase certainty rather than trying to avoid a task. From my perspective, students almost always seemed prepared, so perhaps they are saying here that it was possible to think more deeply after making connections that became clear in discussion. In addition, perhaps students appreciated the chance to simply review the material.

In one respect, students realized that the group perspective was bigger than the individual's, but in a way that supplemented and extended individual understanding. In another respect, speaking to the group provided a built-in chance for repeated use to encounter words and ideas in different contexts, with different nuances and different voices. In sum, students were

beginning to realize that meaning is built socially, shifting according to perspective, connected to other voices, and addressed to other speakers.

Reciprocity

A third category of student response to class discussion involved the way in which thinking itself is reciprocal. Students began to see that discussion stimulated understanding, while talk generated thinking and ideas generated other ideas. For example, in the two communication classes, nearly every student (38 of 39) responded that they got "new thoughts and ideas from class discussion."

> *Class talk gives me new ideas and ways of thinking. When I talk to the class and the content is not enough, the teacher helps me compensate for it. CR11, 3*

> *The ideas of other people are interesting and change my viewpoint. CI4, 4*

> *I don't have confidence, I'm scared of saying my opinion, and I concentrate on listening to others. Sometimes they say what I wanted to say. What others think is a clue to write my essay. FRN, 17*

> *Talk in class helps me expand my thoughts. I usually tend to use only my own ideas and my essay. FRN, 15*

> *Other people's explanations help me think of other ways, different perspectives. FRN, 19*

> *Discussions in class helped me to understand the deep meanings in the*

stories. RR 5,

I learned what other people think and by listening to their ideas, my thoughts have become wider. CRF, 8

Students here are actually talking about the social nature of cognition, the notion that one idea stimulates another, that ideas are connected, and that they grow in expression and response. Further, students seemed to recognize that teacher response (along with that of other students as well) worked to "compensate" for partial, tentative ideas. In other words, students began to see that ideas are not preformed; rather, they need to be developed, argued and extended within the exchange between speakers. This conception of social thinking is at the heart of academic discourse, a radical shift of the approach to English study prevalent in high school study, where accuracy and correctness are paramount. Here, students are talking about ideas to analyze issues, as English becomes not only a tool of communication but a way of expressing identity and acting in the world.

The Value of Writing

An unexpected finding was that a number of students expressed a high valuation of writing assignments. My impression before undertaking the study was that students felt that writing was a heavy addition to an already heavy workload, a bothersome appendage to the language course. In the two communication classes, however, 92% of the students (36 of 39) reported that writing weekly essays had been interesting and educational, while in the two reading seminars, 93% of students (38 of 41) expressed a positive response to the "long" writing assignment essays (2000–3000 word). Some students spoke about writing as facilitating study, while for others, it was the

cognitive value of writing that stood out. Moreover, producing an essay seemed to be a way to expand English study beyond the classroom walls. Students wrote, for example:

By writing an essay, I could think deeply about the book and the characters. RI65, 4

Writing homework makes me think in English which helps me improve. CI 10, 6

I don't like writing essays, but it actually helps me to keep using English. RR4, 18

I got lost and confused what I wanted to say through writing, but it's good because I've began to feel that the book is interesting even though I didn't at first. RI65, 3

By writing an essay, I could think deeply about the book and the characters. RI65, 4

I don't like writing essays, but it actually helps me to keep using English. RR4, 18

It was difficult to write a 2–3 page essay. It's longer than my TOEFL writing section, but I felt great after finishing it. RR6, 14

Unless I write, I can never make my thoughts clear. CI 12, 13

Writing homework makes me think in English which helps me improve. CI 10, 6

Writing an essay changed the process of watching a film. Rather than passively observing the picture, I had to think about meaning and symbols. CI57, 3

I am not good at writing but I want to work hard at it. CI57, 13

Writing an essay made my thoughts clear. CI57, 14

Students are pointing to the facilitating role that writing plays to shape and clarify ideas, refining thinking and making students active. In addition, perhaps the high estimation of writing is related to the lack of contact with English outside the classroom. Apart from English class, students generally have few chances to use English in their everyday lives. Writing changes this dynamic. To produce an essay, students take home class discussion and continue to think and talk about issues as they develop arguments while thinking on their own. For students who are serious about improving academic literacy, essay writing is a concrete practice which brings visible results.

No student, however, mentioned one of the main purposes of writing assignments that I feel as a teacher is important: writing serves to focus classroom discussion. When there is a writing assignment that follows class discussion and allows students to draw from the ideas presented by classmates, students seem more attentive and their concentration seems stronger. Writing gives purpose to the discussion, which students seem to recognize, evident in increased notetaking.

Writing is certainly a challenge for students, hard work and, in some cases, a heavy burden. At the same time, it is one way to keep contact with English after class is over, which is important given the limited contact with English in Japanese society.

Small Group Work

Students made a number of comments about their reluctance to speak in front of the class, most in relation to the standup activity where everyone must stand and say something before they can sit down. I discuss student response to standup in another paper, where I describe the near universal support for being pushed to speak because the practice works surprisingly well to overcome the reticence of the reluctant and strengthen student response since, for many students, there is grudging recognition of the value of being compelled to speak. Students admit that, however embarrassing, active use of the language is essential to improve English skills.

In this study, however, there was a small minority of students who expressed resistance to whole-class discussion. These students registered a preference to talk in small group settings, which, they argued, allows more freedom and less stress. The reasoning was that a large group produces greater anxiety, while a small group proves easier to relax and express honest opinions. Proponents of small-group work assume that their friends will support what they have to say, and that smaller audiences will offer more turns to speak.

We could have done some group activities ... CIS, 18

I prefer doing discussion in pairs or groups of three because I can speak more and deepen my ideas. RIS 18

If you divide students into small groups, opportunities to speak our opinion will increase. K1 – 2

There are two issues here: pace and anxiety. Students are enthusiastic about more chances to talk, as well as the idea of more relaxed exchange, unfettered by anxiety. There may also be concern for having to speak in front of the teacher as well. These students likely felt that whole class discussion held them back, as it involved a slower pace. Understandably, enthusiastic students may feel held back by an ideal of full participation, which requires waiting for slower students.

Traditional wisdom suggests that anxiety is best addressed by not challenging students, but by increasing autonomy and structuring peer to peer interaction. At the same time, research on classroom discourse makes it clear that interaction in small groups is often neither fair nor balanced (Mercer & Littleton 2012). In fact, students themselves sometimes recognize problems with group work. One student wrote:

I felt uncomfortable talking in pairs because both of us could not understand what each other was saying. CI4, 12

In addition to difficulties with pronunciation, there are other problems too. It is easy to stray off-topic, as well as slip into the L1 which is far more comfortable, though it disrupts the English-speaking environment of the class. Further, it is easy to ignore the voices of the marginal, and few students understand how to elicit and support talk from other group members. While I recognize student preference for group work, I also see that it functions effectively in limited cases, primarily leading into whole class interaction. In sum, there is no need when listening to students to

always take up their suggestions, though explaining the rationale behind class activities may be a good idea to elicit understanding.

Discussion

The findings regarding student feedback presented here suggest that, on the whole, students recognize what is going on in the university L2 classroom, shifting language study away from an individual effort to master linguistic structure, toward a critical and communicative use of the L2 to develop academic literacy in content-based lessons. In other words, the data point to how student conception of talk is changing. Less worried about correctness and more concerned with articulating ideas, students are looking to classmates as partners with whom they not only talk but also construct ideas in shared engagement and cognitive collaboration that gives rise to new insight. That is to say, talking facilitates thinking. Within this conceptual shift from correctness to sustained explanation and argument, students are beginning to see English from a more complex perspective, in closer proximity to and identification with the language.

It is sometimes claimed by social critics in popular media that young people in Japan do not think for themselves. Nor do they read books, the argument goes, or express ideas in a clear, forceful manner. My response to this line of reasoning is that it is little wonder, given the background that many students have studying English in secondary school, with emphasis on receptive learning of grammatical form. Actually, I have no fundamental argument against the study of grammar, nor do I believe that Japanese high school English study is ineffective, as is also asserted by social critics and even sometimes by language researchers. My view is that, while there is certainly room for improvement, high school English education in Japan is generally effective and worthwhile. My argument is that most Japanese

students have little experience expressing ideas in creative, productive discourse, including academic argument. This is not exactly new reasoning, however. It is a point that Yukichi Fukuzawa made as far back as 1875 by building the *Enzetsu kan* to encourage independence of thought and public speaking. My point does, however, make clear that it is the role of university EFL classes to facilitate the shift from receptive study to active expression of ideas. There are other routes that can be taken, but arguably, it is the responsibility of the university FL classroom to facilitate this shift.

Talking to Think

I have framed the findings of this paper in terms of a sociocultural understanding of language learning as socially situated dialogic interaction, where thinking is tied to the quality and shape of talk. Students themselves do not use the vocabulary of situated cognition or scaffolded learning, but evidence from this study suggests that students do recognize the value of social interaction as a central component of language acquisition, and that many students do build ideas collaboratively with classmates. Students do not say they are talking to think or that they are constructing new identities within the third space of the bilingual classroom (Kramsch, 2009; Lin, 2010), but they do seem to recognize the social foundation and orientation of L2 development. In this respect, the results are reassuring, but from another perspective, the findings are not as much encouragement as a challenge to not let students down. At the moment, I do not feel that a true dialogic style of interaction has been reached – at least in my classroom. Moreover, the warm atmosphere that students relate to so strongly is not generated automatically by teacher intention. As any experienced educator knows, a positive environment cannot be imposed; rather, it is in many ways serendipitous, generated primarily by students themselves, and a source of

gratitude when it happens.

Surprised by Comments

Although I interpret student feedback in terms of a particular approach to education tied to dialogic interaction that I try to introduce in the classroom, I am surprised by the findings here. First, even though I assert the primacy of the social, I have always tended to dismiss student orientation to classmates as a kind of peer pressure, a form of teenage self-centeredness that requires suppression as much as appreciation. Further, as instructor I have probably tended to pay more attention to text materials as a source of motivation. My reasoning was that an interesting text will attract attention and ensure involvement. Now I realize that I need to pay more explicit attention to the social in the classroom environment and I wonder if there is more that I can do, over and above being grateful for when it is positive. I have always assumed that there is a sharp distinction between the personal and the professional, with one's individual feelings to be set aside in order to interact with students successfully, in order to avoid descending into sentimentality. There is a distinction between catering to students on the one hand, and on the other, making a personal connection that recognizes the value of a nonjudgmental response to ideas and explicitly encourages an atmosphere of collegiality.

Neither did I expect students to be so concerned with the role that review and checking comprehension played during class discussion. In this paper, I have framed the finding in terms of recognizing multiple viewpoints while developing a deeper, more nuanced interpretation, which is indeed an important element of generating an academic argument. Now I feel that I probably need to offer more chances in class to confirm understanding, not through teacher explanation, which would only emphasize monologic

transmission. On reflection, my sense is that I probably move too quickly to interpretative response, whereas a practical move would be to spend more time asking students to summarize the key points of an assigned text under discussion, or to add alternate ways to phrase a summary and "read the texts in a different way" (Kramsch, 1993, p. 136). If there is a shift from a concern with correctness to a regard for expression, as I have argued, it is natural that students want assurance about their initial understanding, since meaning so fundamentally depends on perspective, and any one interpretation compliments another, so that even contradictory answers can be right at the same time, and offer a chance to respond in multiple voices. Certainly, students struggle with the idea that talk constructs knowledge, steeped as they are in the ethic of individual effort, but the value of constructive expression is something that, dealing with different cultures and worldviews, the foreign language classroom can emphasize.

Finally, I never expected students to voice such strong support for writing. I assumed that writing an essay was an unpleasant assignment that only added weight to the workload that students report being so heavy. I did not think so many students would *want* to engage in composition and value its role in language study. On second thought, however, it is possible to see writing practice as a symbol of English study as a whole. Developing proficiency in the L2 certainly presents challenges, and certainly takes a great deal of time and effort. For students, learning English is study, but it is also tied to preparing for the future, involving careers, international access, and how they define themselves as global citizens. With their energy and willingness to engage with writing in particular, and with English in general, the perspective that students bring to language study is invariably different from my own, but that is just another reason why it is important to make an effort to listen to their voices regarding the EFL classroom that we share.

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Appendix

No.	Class	Date	Code	Question
1	RI-S	5.22	RI522	what did you think of the book?
2	RI-S	4.24	RI4	what did you think of the story?
3	RI-S	6.19	RI6	how did you read the story?
4	RI-S	6.5	RI65	what did you think about writing the long essay?
5	RR-S	5.22	RR5	what did you think of the book?
6	RR-S	4.24	RR4	what did you think of the story?
7	CR-F	9.24	RR9	what did you do over the summer to keep your English?
8	CI-F	9.24	CI9	what did you do over the summer to keep your English?
9	CR-F	12.10	CR12	what did you think of writing the long essay?
10	RR-S	6.5	RI6	what did you think of the story?
11	RI-F	12.18	RI12	how has your English reading improved?
12	RR-F	12.18	RR12	how has your English reading improved?
13	K2	11.25	KP	what did you think of doing the presentation?
14	K2	12.2	KPb	what did you think of doing the presentation?
15	RI-F	11.27	RI11	what did you think of doing the project?
16	CI-F	12.10	CI12	what do you not like about this class?
17	RR-S	5.8	RR58	what is your motivation to learn English?
18	CI-S	6.18	CI6	how do you listen in class discussion?
19	RR-S	5.1	RR51	what did you think about the story?
20	RR-S	5.15	RR515	what do you think of teacher feedback on your essay?
21	CI-F	10.28	CI10	what do you think of the style of learning in this class?
22	RI-S	5.15	RI515	what do you think of teacher feedback on your essay?
23	CR-S	5.7	CR5	what did you think of writing the essay?
24	CI-S	4.15	CI4	what do you think of the style of learning in this class?
25	CR-F	11.26	CR11	what is the value of talking this class?
26	CI-S	7.2	CI7	what do you think of the standup activity?
27	RR-S	6.26	RR626	what do you think of the standup activity?
28	K1	7.1	K7	what do you dislike about this class?
29	RI-S	5.1	RI51	how did your HS English class prepare you for this class?
30	RI-S	5.8	RI58	what is your motivation to learn English?
31	CI-F	11.26	CI1126	how talking helped your understanding?
32	CI-S	5.7	CI57	what did you think about writing the essay?