

A report on some extra-curricular activities in English extension classes

— raising an awareness toward English learning in the EFL context —

英語課外クラスにおける活動事例報告

— EFL環境において英語学習への気づきを高める試み —

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Introduction

For many learners of an EFL (English as a foreign language) context, due to the extremely limited opportunities of being exposed to the target language in the natural environment, the learners are required to learn outside the classrooms with their own initiative. It is often, however, difficult for immature language learners to do even at a university level. These days, almost all educational institutes, including tertiary level, are strongly expected to develop more effective ways to support learners. This paper intends to introduce and discuss three extracurricular activities provided as extension programs for diverse level students at a university aiming to raise the awareness toward their autonomous English learning. The first reports popular license tests mainly about TOEIC then the difference of impacts between a general English course and a TOEIC preparation course. The second discusses how to use reading materials including

“Graded Readers”, and the third introduces an interactive style activity through e-learning.

Extension class case1: TOEIC preparation class

The background

Among EFL/ESL countries, especially in Japan, various assessments have been formed to evidence language learners' progress of using the target language, English. For instance, graded proficiency tests like STEP (Eiken) or Can-Do lists from the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) are widely suggested in modern Japanese schools. Among them, the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) has been widespread and attracting the most number of test-takers, especially university students and business persons. They are expected to show negotiable communicative language skills with the high scores of TOEIC. That may often urge them to focus on more effective test-taking strategies before finding it valuable enough to

keep learning English autonomously.

TOEIC is the test that the Japan Federation of Economic Organizations (Keidanren) requested Educational Testing Service (ETS) to develop for assessing communicative skills and knowledge in English. Since Japanese leading retailing companies, such as Rakuten and First Retailing (UniQlo), announced their common language would be English from 2012, the number of TOEIC taker has skyrocketed. It is said that a certain level or higher scores would be required for a promotion, while lower scores might be used for the reasons of demotion or even dismissal. Such stories may impel more and more people to score-hunt in TOEIC to prove their language capability.

It has, therefore, obviously impacted on the language learning at universities. TOEIC is often a big challenge for student test-takers. One of the reasons is that they should answer no less than 200 questions in 2 hours. Novice students are simply overwhelmed by it. They need to learn and get used to how to complete the questions promptly and precisely. In addition, TOEIC is designated for almost all-level English learners from beginner to advance. Considering this current situation, it is no wonder that a great number of Japanese universities result in offering various supplementary English courses for the test preparation.

TOEIC preparation course

As teachers who have been in charge of such classes, we often find difficulties to plan and teach effectively to fit all levels of students. Lower level learners, with TOEIC scores of less than 450, are overwhelmed or demotivated, and put off taking TOEIC, even IP (Institution program) tests, or even stop attending the class. Trew (2013) suggests one of the solutions can be finding or creating effective approaches and using enjoyable materials. There are large numbers of TOEIC reference books and materials in bookstores and online.

One is focusing on the contexts which often appears in TOEIC. TOEIC measures the communicative skill in daily lives or in working

situations (Figure1). For the young students in particular, before being employed with no experience living abroad, the business scenes and the daily routines in English are often full of unknown terms and occasions. In this case, the practice questions can be good aids for expanding their limited knowledge. As an example, basic questions below ask students to assume and connect the keywords with the scenes:

Eg. Find the activities with the keywords given

1. stock, goods, warehouse, run out, count (the answer is 'checking the inventory')
2. timetable, bound for..., destination, delay (the answer is 'taking a bus or train')



{TOEIC Newsletter, 2013, No.119, p.2}

Figure 1 Situations that appear in TOEIC tests

Some other materials focus on vocabulary or grammar problems embedded in TOEIC styles. Using both schema and grammatical knowledge, students analyze the structures. That is easier to fit diverse level students. Also there are books focusing on the test taking strategies, such as skimming, scanning, or analyzing the questions. The students are rather familiar with these styles, but it is often time-consuming and unable to cover everything during 15 classes in one semester. All materials are beneficial to some extent, but usually the learners do not have enough time to master the skills in class.

Also, once complicated questions appear, the questions often cause lower-level learners fear. They tend to lose the concentration quickly and even give up while higher ones are excited and vice versa in a mixed level class. Then, we tried to choose simplified and shorten materials to avoid threatening the lower level learners. That is one of the effective

ways for beginners although it includes the danger of making the learners dependent on limited range of vocabulary and scenes that are prepared for practices. Eventually, these trials contributed to make the lessons easier to catch up and get them some confidence, but the real TOEIC tests surprised the students on the amount and complexity at the end.

TOEIC and Self-Regulated learning (SRL)

Back to learning, it is a process for achieving individuals' goals and actions. Thus, if students want to attain learning objectives, they should use proper strategies and adjust them to each lifestyle. Since 1970s, Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) has been discussed as an effective theory in various educational fields to support learners. In the EFL, particularly, the language learners need to take the responsibilities of their learning process and results, and that fits all the learners regardless of each level. Zimmerman(2008) asserts the need for planning, monitoring and reflecting on learners' own studies are essential phases for regulating successful learning cycles. SRL theory entails setting proper vision of goals, study strategies, monitoring the efforts and progress, and reflection of the outcomes to the successive learning cycles.

We tried to encourage our students to regulate their study cycle along the theory. By using weekly study plans (inside and outside classes), time-management sheet, and a portfolio for reflection were introduced in a supplementary class of 2011. The class was selective and focused on general English grammar. Later, some of the students replaced or added TOEIC preparation course to it. The class was consisted of wide range of diverse level students (the first English proficiency test, made out of Eiken 3rd to pre 2nd, resulted in range from the lowest 18 to perfect out of 100). They were strongly recommended to take TOEIC IP test, but it was not necessarily required to. Many of the test-takers took TOEIC IP test once a year. That prevented us from surveying their progress with enough data. The table 1 shows a few excerpts of the scores, limited in

which were taken twice in 2011 (showing with their permission).

table 1 excerpts of TOEIC IP score of 2011

	June, 2011			December, 2011		
	Listening	Reading	Total	Listening	Reading	Total
A	240	190	430	260	215	475
B	245	120	365	295	180	475
C	210	90	300	235	125	360
D	140	90	230	190	90	280

All of them were in the first grade and highly motivated to study English. None of them has stayed abroad more than one month by the time of the IP test. With the data, it is obviously impossible to generalize the effects of extension classes nor reflective SRL items, but the average students showed progress of around 50 in the total score, with relatively higher scores in Listening part. Shibata and Inoue (2005) researched the effect of context based class, and resulted in the shorter time tendency to be higher in Listening than the case with only TOEIC test strategy materials. As the table shows, Student B demonstrated the highest progress in TOEIC IP test. Although Student A started with a higher score (she already passed Eiken STEP 2nd grade before enrolling the university). The difference between them seemed in the number and type of extension classes. Student A replaced general English class with a TOEIC preparation class in the second semester, while Student B added the class to the general English class. Tagashira et al. (2010) compared English major students and non-English major students, and reported specified class on TOEIC seemed effective only with lower level students, but not so much for higher level students. Probably the general class was not challenging

table 2 the extension classes taken by the test-takers

	English extension class	
	2011(first semester)	2011(second semester)
A	general (grammar)	<u>replaced</u> general class with TOEIC prep. class
B	general (grammar)	<u>added</u> TOEIC prep. class
C	general (grammar)	<u>continued only</u> general class
D	general (grammar)	<u>continued only</u> general class

enough to Student A, but only TOEIC preparation class was not enough for her progress.

Concerning reflective SRL items, Student B was reluctant to use them. He confessed in the post program interview, he would not like to be assigned to report his daily routines since he wanted to be free from being in control of someone. His comments involve his desire to be an independent learner. Looking at his highly progressed score, however, he started to think over the effect of SRL as well as various extension courses. He went abroad to study for one semester in his second year, and continues to study English until present days.

After all, educators cannot control learners but only support them by providing a good learning environment with opportunities. Various extension courses experimentally enable learners to find most adaptive and effective learning styles for themselves.

Extension class case2: Using Graded Readers

One of the key objectives of the extension classes is to help students become self-initiated learners. There is only so much that the teachers and the students could do in class and it is what the students do outside of the class that really makes difference. One of the indicators of the effectiveness of their own learning is to see how they do on English tests such as TOEIC. However, Smith (1998) asserts that testing students would look at 'how well' they performed, and identify 'problem' students instead of looking at "the degree of their interest and comprehension" (p. 64). The teachers need to be aware of the students' learning process and help them become aware of their own learning process and their needs.

In order to do that, we prefer to set tasks that enable us to diagnose what students need to practice. We often use texts from various graded readers, and here is an example of what we did. We had a group of students do a gap fill exercise using a story from a graded reader. We made a photocopy of a page from the graded reader, painted the second-half of some of the words with white ink, and gave

them a photocopy each of the page, which had some illustrations depicting some of the scenes from the story. We didn't give them any words to choose from. The following are some of the sentences with gaps:

The task:

- 1) Mr Spry li alone above his sh. Mr Spry sold sweets a cigarettes.
- 2) There were some empty bo beside the door.
- 3) The box w not very strong. The wo broke and Toby fell.

Here are some of the sentences that some of the students wrote:

Student 1:

- 1) Mr Spry liked alone above his shy. Mr Spry sold sweets at cigarettes.
- 2) There were some empty body beside the door.
- 3) The box was not very strong. The work broke and Toby fell.

Student 2:

- 1) Mr Spry lives alone above his shop. Mr Spry sold sweets and cigarettes.
- 2) There were some empty bottle beside the door.
- 3) The box was not very strong. The wood broke and Toby fell.

Original sentences:

- 1) Mr Spry lived alone above his shop. Mr Spry sold sweets and cigarettes.
- 2) There were some empty boxes beside the door.
- 3) The box was not very strong. The wood broke and Toby fell.

Now we have to say that Student 1 is one of the most capable students in class whereas Student 2 is one of the least capable ones. And yet, Student 2 managed to complete 'wood' and 'shop'. She also managed to write 'lives' in sentence 1) although the tense was not correct.

Student 1 said, when we asked why he wrote 'liked' and 'body', that he used the first half of each word as a clue and completed the words. When we asked Student 2 why she wrote 'shop', she said that

she noticed 'sold', 'sweets', and 'cigarettes' in the sentence following. When we asked her why she wrote 'wood', she said that since the box broke, it must have been made of something breakable. With that observation and the first half of that word, she guessed that the box was made of wood. And of course, there was an illustration of a boy falling off a broken wooden box! The difference was that Student 2 looked at the half-completed words in the context, focused on the meaning of the sentences with the help of the illustration whereas Student 1, looking at the same half-completed words, depended only on the prints on the page. The more he focused on the prints, the less he could see the meanings. Smith (1975) characterizes this as "tunnel vision" and argues that schooling and adults are training children out of their natural ability to be able to read for the general meaning by guessing and skipping difficult words. Goodman (1986) asserts that schools break language into abstract bits and pieces, into words, syllables and isolated sounds, to make it nonsense and hard to learn.

After working individually and getting something like the above, the students in class then pair up or form a small group, compare what each of them put down and discuss the reasons for their choices of vocabulary. Soon, you would hear them say, "Oh, I see. I think yours is right.", "Oh wait, this is here so this must be this." or "This is the subject, so this must be a verb." By comparing with each other, they see alternatives and choices. This is what Duckworth (1996) says. "They recognized things only when they see an alternative, something to compare with. If they made a sentence with mistakes, that is a very valuable source for the students to firmly understand how it should look like" (p. 28).

Here is another type of exercise from which we find out many things about students' understanding. Students are asked to separate the words, add punctuation and re-write the whole paragraph.

*manystudentsinjapanbelongtovolunteergruops
theyenjoytakingpartindifferentactivitiesandsa
ytheylearnalotsomeremovesnowfromroofssom
eperformpuppetplaysinfrontofchildrenandoth*

*ersevendovolunteeractivitiesforchildrenoverse
as*

This is the original paragraph.

"Many students in Japan belong to volunteer groups. They enjoy taking part in different activities and say they learn a lot. Some remove snow from roofs, some perform puppet plays in front of children, and others even do volunteer activities for children overseas."

These are some of the sentences that some of the students wrote down:

Student 1

"They enjoy taking part in different activities and say they learn a lot some remove snow from roofs."

Student 2

"They enjoy taking part in different activities and say. They learn a lot some removes now."

Student 3

"They enjoy taking partin different activities and say they learn. A lot somere moves now."

As you can see, there is quite a variety in terms of their understanding. Testing wouldn't give us the kind of insight that we would gain from the exercises that we just described.

The next step from here is to ask students to compare with each other what they did and have them discuss why they did what they did. When we gave them the exercise, they first said it would be impossible. After the exercise, these are their words:

"It was fun. It was like solving puzzles."

"I feel that I have used my brain. It was so different from the usual class." "I thought it was impossible at the start but I was impressed with myself that I managed to complete it."

Smith (1998) asserts that if students are doing something with interest and understanding, they are learning, and argues that testing disregards the view that "you can see whether people are learning by observing what they are doing (p. 60)."

Extension class case3: Interactive activities using Facebook.

The use of ICT and e-learning has now become widely popular in the education field. The benefits that it can provide to students and teachers are unlimited as new technologies keep arriving. The activities presented in this case involve the use of social networking sites (SNSs) and their interactiveness. The use of e-learning platforms like Moodle are well known for creating interactive networks but in this case Facebook was chosen since it makes possible an easier and fast way of sharing media (Petrovic, Jeremic, Cirovic, Radojicic and Milenkovic 2013).

Selwyn (2009) claims that SNS may “benefit learners by allowing them to enter new networks of collaborative learning, based around interests and affinities not catered for in their immediate educational environment.” On the other hand educators are also concerned that the use of Social networking sites may negatively affect the academic performance of students (Pollara, Zhu 2011).

Purpose

The social network site Facebook was used in extension classes since most of the students already had an account and were used to the platform characteristics. The purpose of using Facebook in Extension classes was to determine if the use of it will support student participation and interest to the subject by making them interact in and outside the class. The following is one example of the extension class where Facebook was used.

Extension class A

After checking that all students had accounts on Facebook, a private group page was created specifically for the class. Students were invited by the administrator (teacher) to become part of the group. In this case the class was formed by 28 students. Every week the teacher will assign homework that students will have to present (post) on Facebook. The posts will be seen by the whole class so everybody can share information about their work. Posting

works differently from one SNS to another, and the management of posts was easily done on Facebook. Facebook makes it possible to check and identify every post viewed so the teacher can know who is checking it and who is not. If a post was seen by all the class members, Facebook displays it as “Seen by everyone” (Picture 1).

Interactive group rules

- a) All Posts must be related only to the class.
- b) Students must check other classmates’ posts.
- c) Try to use only English.

On Picture 1 the interaction outside class between the teacher and students (subject A,B,C) can be seen. They were asked to write their opinions about the topic of the last class. The second picture shows an interaction between only students (Picture 2). The interaction happens in both English and Japanese and they show how the students share information by sending site links. As well as picture 1, we can see that students interacted not only with computers but also via mobile devices. This demonstrates how Facebook makes possible a continuous interaction between students since it’s not limited to computers but can be used on many other devices as well.

Results

Facebook is at present the most popular social network site used in the world. Most of the students are aware of the use of it and have accounts on it. The use of Facebook on classes didn’t need major explanation and students responded positively on its use. The use of social networking for extension classes showed how students interact in and outside the classroom making it possible to share ideas and information related to the class. The use of a social network site like Facebook supported the class by making possible a continuous and wider interaction between students. The easy access and media sharing to Facebook by mobile devices facilitated an environment where students felt more stimulated to see the posts made by other classmates. In conclusion, a correct use of social network sites can



Picture 1 Interaction between teacher and students (subjects A, B, C).



Picture 2 Interaction between students.

provide a better learning environment where student involvement and access to different kind of media is possible.

Conclusions

This report showed three different extension cases. In one, we observed the practice of two extension classes: a TOEIC course and a general English course. The result implies that providing multiple extension activities may work more effectively to have diverse language learners find their own adaptive learning styles and opportunities, while the intensive license course may be efficient especially for beginners. The second showed examples from the activities using reading materials that indicated that focusing on students' learning process reveals what needs to be worked on and therefore makes students aware of their own learning, which helps them become self-regulated learners. Finally, the third showed the results of an e-learning interactive activity that took the advantages of social networking sites providing a virtual environment where students get involved in and out classes. In conclusion, the efforts described in this report showed some pedagogical keys that can be applied in different learning environments in order to help learners raise an awareness of their own learning process. On the other hand, it is important to point out that the approaches presented in this paper just introduce a starting analysis that has to be continued and requires the inclusion of more cases from other extension classes.

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