Original Papers

Joint Class: No Risk No Return - Mixing Classes

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“We are now interconnected to such a degree that we need to transcend our own culture and identity and risk meeting the other at a cosmopolitan level in an ongoing process of reciprocal interaction and influencing” (Villemoes, 2010).

Some Background

Most interactionist-minded teachers are well aware of the research and the social turn (Block, 2003) toward increased interaction in the classroom allowing students to be more active and learn more. Dewey’s early contention that students learn best through direct personal experience (Dewey, 1938) has been well illustrated and advocated in the language teaching profession for many years (Rivers, 1988; van Lier, 1996). Bateson also described it as “Participation precedes learning” (1994, p.41) and then with a Vygotskian slant, Holzman rephrased it as “learning to perform and performing to learn” (2009, p.45).

Peer assisted learning and tutoring (Gaies, 1985; Topping, 2001; Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 2001) has an equally long history. This has led to near peer role modeling (NPRMing) research (Murphey & Arao, 2001) showing that students can learn a lot from other students who are similar to themselves in diverse learning situations (Singh, 2010). When students interact with diverse others who are studying their language, they can also get inspired by each other through reciprocal NPRMing which can also lead to more healthy diversity modeling (Murphey, 2012, in press/online).

Our Experience of Mixing Classes

On May 31st 2012, at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) in Chiba, Japan, approximately 30 international students, from about a dozen countries, met 60 Japanese native speaker (JNS) students in a large room for interactive interviews in both English and Japanese (and occasionally in Chinese, Spanish, Korean, etc for a 90 minute class.)

The JNS students first sang the song “Make New Friends,” a well-known camp song which encourages people to make friends, for the international students. Then they started their interviews (two JNSs with one international student), with the international students rotating into new groups about every 15 minutes. Most students had prepared questions before for their interviews and were very excited. The international students focused on asking advice about learning strategies. To close, there was a short performance by a student an international student on the mandolin which was much appreciated. Students noticeably did not leave quickly for their breaks or next classes but lingered around to talk even more.

During each encounter students were asked to spend the first few minutes on introductions and then the international students asked questions in Japanese. We think we allowed the students real experiences (Dewey, 1938) with interacting with cultural diversity; they were participating before learning, allowing for better learning (Bateson, 1994); and this was not practice, it was the real thing, they were performing to learn (Vygotsky/Holzman, 2009). It was successful in that students enjoyed themselves and used their target languages for real socialization purposes. While it was a bit messy, we look forward to doing it again. However, we will let our students speak for themselves.
Some international students studying Japanese responded:

“The session was useful. We could share the same problems in learning foreign languages.”

“I made an effort to speak English well in “English time” because I felt that they expected us to speak English.”

“I think the class was really interesting. Having a conversation in Japanese was easy for me but a bit difficult in English. JNS students might not have prepared topics and questions beforehand. Thus, we (international students) had to initiate conversations both in Japanese and English.”

“It was really interesting. Since I was able to talk to many Japanese speaking students, I learned good ways of learning from them. (But) I’ve got very tired as we had to use both Japanese and English during the class.”

Some Japanese students studying English responded:

“Today, I really really enjoyed talking with exchange students!! I’d like to talk with other students!...I was happy that every student liked Japan and Japanese. Thanks for organizing today’s meeting.”

“All the foreign students worried about kanji. It is difficult for them, also for me. They can speak English very well. Their pronunciations were a little difficult for me. However, communicating with many people from any countries is good change to know a lot of different pronunciations.”

“They all can speak at least three languages very fluently. It makes me very surprised and inspired. I think I want to be a very active learner like them. They told me that they learn Japanese and English for only a few years but they are good speakers!”

Personal Perspectives from the teachers

Makoto Takeda: I suggested having this mixed class, inspired by the concept, Near Peer Role Modeling (NPRM). JNS students and international students have a common goal: learning a foreign language. They can thus be regarded as near peers, striving for similar goals and overcoming similar challenges and perhaps able to use similar strategies. I presumed letting them share their experiences in language learning would stimulate them and might eventually lead them to model each other’s productive behaviors.

Yumiko Uehara: I started doing class mixing 4 years ago. I found it is a great chance for students to interact with real people in real situations, meeting unknown people, and they all responded positively and asked for more.

Chiharu Yoshida: It seemed to be a good experience for international students to talk with JNS students about how to learn Japanese. Since they are both language learners, they seemed to share difficulties, tips and pleasures of foreign language learning.

Tim Murphey: They put their skills to use in a real performance situation and loved it! How can we make school more like this?

Recommendations to others who may wish to do this:

We heartily recommend that teachers try organizing such mixed classes at least once a semester to familiarize different groups of students with each other and to give more weight to the communicative components of our courses. Plan far ahead, ask participants to write name cards for each other to wear (the JNSs all loved their names creatively written by the international students when they first met!) Design a rotation system. Put on some good lively background music. Plan some pre and follow up activities, such as listening to recordings. Prime both groups of students with common topics to discuss. Don’t worry so much about learning objectives and homework, let them experience and perform. We definitely would allow the participants more time to talk freely next time.
References


