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The Call Triangle: student, teacher and institution

Supporting Low Ability Learners in a Tertiary Level Compulsory English Programme using CEFR Based Online Language Software

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Abstract

This report describes the processes, methods and results of using language software based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in a tertiary level institute in Japan in order to facilitate the learning of low ability learners of English. None of the learners were English majors, all were between the ages of 18 and 20, and the classes were compulsory. Approximately 100 learners were divided into four classes, A, B, C and D, in order of decreasing ability, according to their performance on a placement test. This research focuses on Classes C and D. Students in these classes were all at or below the CEFR's A1 level in their English ability.

Online language software was first used in order to tackle factors which were considered by Lynch (2011) to be the cause of lower performance in students in Classes C and D, namely the lack of four factors: motivation, achievable goals, concentration ability and proper classroom management. In the first year, the lowest ability class, Class D, used online software designed to teach vocabulary at level A1 of the CEFR for 25 minutes out of a 90 minute session for a total of 15 sessions, while the higher level classes were taught using traditional methods. The software was used in such a way as to tackle the four factors for lower performance, mentioned above. It was found that Class D eventually performed as well as Class C (in terms of ability shown in a CEFR-based examination) after the 15 sessions.

In the second year of the study (with new participants), Classes C and D both used the computer program yet Class D performed better in terms of the quantity and knowledge of vocabulary covered. The reasons for this are discussed in this paper with particular attention paid to difficult to control classroom circumstances. One significant difference between the classes was the achievement targets set by teachers, with the lowest ability class, Class D, having a target being only half of that set for the next higher class up, Class C. Despite this, the Class D average performance was significantly higher than that of Class C.

We present our hypotheses for the above results in this paper, and it is hoped that it will be useful for other teachers of low ability language learners using CALL in the classroom.

Keywords: Low ability EFL learners; performance factors; classroom management

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1. Introduction

A study carried out by Lynch in 2010 identified four factors affecting performance of low ability EFL learners in compulsory English classes in a Japanese university. These four factors were: ① motivation; ② achievable goals; ③ concentration ability and ④ proper classroom management. Past studies compared two classes, class C and class D, with the class C students all being of higher ability than the class D students based on a placement test, the TOEIC® Bridge. It was found that the lower level students, the class D students, performed as well as the class C students at the end of a course of study when performance factors were tackled for the D class, in combination with a CALL environment.

The research was undertaken with a number of objectives in mind: to give the (new) C class the same CALL software as the (new) D class and see the results; to investigate the effect of satisfying performance factors, with both classes having a level playing field (both using CALL software); to investigate differences in the teaching methods of/approach to the classes, in terms of results (volume of study using the CALL software); to show that satisfying factors affecting student performance results in higher performance (in terms of vocabulary study), regardless of initial ability; to show that different teachers produce different results due to circumstances beyond their control.

2. Method

Participants were first year students (all aged 18-20 years) at a private Japanese university. None were English majors, but all were required to pass a one year compulsory English course (30 sessions x 90 minutes each). The student body was divided into 4 classes, A, B, C, D, by descending ability. This study focused on classes C and D during the final 15 classes (second semester). Each class (C and D) used CALL software (Lexical Learning Limited's WORDREADY®, www.l2.co.uk) for 25 minutes of each class during the second semester. Differences in the four performance factors were present in classes C and D as different teachers were used.

The four performance factors were dealt with in the following way:

- a. Motivation: For both classes C and D, intrinsic motivation was not tackled. Students take the class only to gain required credits for their degrees: they are forced to take the English class as part of their compulsory education. No students signed up for optional English the following year, which could be taken as an indication of a lack of motivation towards L2.
- b. Achievable Goals: For class C, the goal decided by the teacher was set at 60% of the CALL vocabulary list (CEFR A1 list). Students indicated that the goal was unachievable and, as a result, seemed not to take it seriously. The goal was achieved by only 6.9% of the class, with 27.6% of them covering 30% or more of the word list. In the case of class D, the goal was negotiated with students and set at 30% of the same CALL vocabulary list. Students seemed to feel responsible to achieve the goal they had negotiated. By the end of the semester, the goal was achieved by 100% of the class.
- c. Concentration Ability: For both classes C and D, the 90 minute class was broken into a 50-60 minute lesson and a 30 minute CALL lesson. This was to aid those students with limited concentration ability.
- d. Proper Classroom Management: The teacher of class C had limited ability in the students' L1, which hindered classroom communication. Furthermore, the larger number of students in this class (29 students) made class management relatively more difficult. On the other hand, the teacher of class D was proficient in the students' L1, which aided communication. Furthermore, the class had a smaller number of students, facilitating class management.

3. Findings and Results

The class C and class D students' performance (in terms of the percentage of CALL based vocabulary covered) was recorded automatically by the software and was stored in a database. An extract of the data is shown as follows in Table 1.

Table 1. Extract of performance of C and D class students, in terms of percentage of CALL-based vocabulary covered.

	Week 2		Week 6		Week 12		Week 15	
	C Score	D Score	C Score	D Score	C Score	D Score	C Score	D Score
Max	2.0%	1.1%	35.2%	28.4%	82.6%	70.4%	92.1%	80.9%
Min	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	7.5%	1.4%	26.3%	1.4%	32.0%
Mean	0.3%	0.5%	7.5%	15.1%	20.4%	41.2%	28.0%	48.3%
Std Dev	0.5%	0.3%	7.3%	5.1%	17.1%	11.9%	18.5%	14.7%

For class C, n= 29, for class D, n=18. The means are statistically different to a degree of confidence of greater than 95% at week 15, as the results of a t-test give a p value of p=0.0416.

The results of this study revealed that class D outperformed class C in terms of the amount of vocabulary studied (and, therefore, the amount of time/effort spent studying that vocabulary); both class C and class D showed an increase in study effort from the week that goals were set for the students, but class D's jump was significantly greater. Further to this, although the highest score was obtained by a C class student, the D class students performed better overall. Other results showed that all D class students had a minimum score of over 30%, while the minimum for the C class was 1.4%, and that the slope of class D's study curve was to be steeper than class C's, showing a greater effort being consistently made, relative to class C. Finally, class C had a larger standard deviation than the D class.

4. Conclusions

Class C and class D mainly differed in two areas: achievable goals and proper classroom management. The results seen from this led us to three main conclusions. Firstly, that setting a lower (achievable) goal and negotiating it with students was effective. Secondly, that using L1 in the classroom was effective for classroom management and finally, smaller class sizes resulted in improved results, despite the fact that the CALL software was designed to nullify that effect (i.e., each student studies using computer software designed for individual study).

5. Further research

Further research could be done on the following: Investigate co-teaching classes C and D (teaching the classes together using two teachers, one of whom is proficient in students' L1); investigate if joining the two classes into one large class (with two teachers) will have a negative effect or otherwise, from the point of view of student performance and classroom management and the assess the impact of setting easier (more achievable), negotiated goals for all students.

6. References

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