Listen to Our Voice:
Research Projects in an EFL Classroom*

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Abstracts

The purpose of this paper is to report an attempt to improve students' communicative competence in making research project reports in an EFL classroom with the aid of multimedia equipment, and to pursue the question of what EFL in university general education should be.

This is the study of one of the *Eigo III* (English III) classes in the second semester of the Heisei 13 (2001) academic year. In order to increase the opportunity to communicate in a class with diverse levels of proficiency and interests, the teacher encouraged the students to take the initiative in communication in English, choose their own topic, collect information and materials in English on the internet, give an oral presentation in English with the aid of multimedia equipment, and write a research paper on that topic. They also evaluated their classmates' presentations and their own.

Although the students' evaluation of the project was generally favorable, I point out several problems, such as the possible conflict with one of the aims of general education, class size, and manipulation of the equipment.

Key Words: research project, EFL, communication, presentation, multimedia

1. Introduction

The pace of change in the world now continues to accelerate: globalization and the spread of computer networks promote the use of English; while, at the same time, this fact causes the reassessment of other languages and their cultures. The unity and diversity of language, the theme of the 12th World Congress of Applied Linguistics held in 1999, succinctly reflects these phenomena. The English language, therefore, has a variety of roles, from a language which is closely related to the cultures of people who speak English as their native language to a tool for international communication irrespective of any particular culture. EFL (English as a Foreign Language) in university education should reflect this situation: before and after graduation, the students are

sure to face the necessity of communication in an international context.

It is pointed out, however, that the academic ability of university students is regrettably declining, as is their language proficiency. If this is true, the English teachers will be in charge of classes where there is a great disparity in the students' proficiency. What is now important is to motivate them to take an active part in communication and give them opportunities to state their opinions, preferably in English.

The purpose of this article is to report an attempt to improve students' communicative competence in their introductions of research projects in an EFL classroom with the aid of multimedia equipment, and to pursue the question of what EFL in university general education should be. Here I will report the research projects carried out in an English class at Shigakukan University in the Heisei 13 (2001) academic year. First, section 2 explains the background, such as curriculum and characteristics of the course. Section 3 is devoted to detailed descriptions of the class, including the topics the students chose and the reciprocal evaluation done by the students. In section 4, I state the results of the students' post-course evaluation of the class. Section 5 contains my conclusions.

2. Background

In the Heisei 11 (1999) academic year, Shigakukan University drastically reformed the general education curriculum offered to students of both the Faculty of Humanities and the newly established Faculty of Law. In this new curriculum, more emphasis is laid on computer and foreign language education: in other words, information and communication. The four English courses are classified according to level and contents. *Eigo I* (English I) and *Eigo II* (English II) are general English courses for 1st-year students which assist students to study the basics of the four skills. *Eigo III* (English III) and *Eigo IV* (English IV), on the other hand, are 2nd-year courses which concentrate on aural/oral communication skills (listening and speaking) in the former, and on written communication skills (reading and writing) in the latter. This is a case study of an *Eigo III* class, where students were encouraged to communicate not only orally but also with the aid of audio-visual equipment and computers. The purpose and methodology, therefore, are new in that the course involves both information and communication.

It is intended that students who wish to take *Eigo III* will register for one of the sections appropriate to their interests and the school they belong to.　The reality, however, is that the teacher has to teach students with a diversity of levels and interests, and, in the Faculty of Humanities, students of all majors.　This fact makes it extremely difficult to set aims for a class.　The maximum number of students in one section is limited to 45 due to the limitation of the facilities in the LL (Language Laboratory).　This limitation fortunately increases the efficiency of a lesson: the smaller the class is, the more chances the students have for communication, although 45 is still too a large number for a foreign language class.　The LL is equipped with a system designed for CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) and 45 student booths.　On the computers (Mac OS 8.1) the students can browse the internet, send and receive files, and listen to CDs and CD-ROMs.　Since most of the sections are paired with other sections to share the LL, they also use other classrooms.　Because of this, in accordance with the students' wishes I reserved a computer room (also with Mac OS 8.1) where they read their research papers utilizing a variety of multimedia equipment.

3. Methods and Details of the Class

This section will show the details of my *Eigo III* class in the second semester of the Heisei 13 (2001) academic year.

3. 1. General Information

As was already mentioned in the last section, the proficiency levels and interests of the students were diverse.　Twenty-two students registered, all from the Faculty of Humanities, and from each of the departments, i.e. Japanese Literature, English Language and Literature, and Human Studies.　They were 2nd-, 3rd-, and 4th-year students, and some of them were transfer students.　To my regret, some students never showed up or quit in the middle.

The overall objective of the class was to enhance the students' communicative competence: their ability to receive and send information in English.　They were two main activities.　The first activity, introduced as a warm-up for the second activity, was to listen to a dialogue set in an everyday or travel situation and have a short dialogue with classmates and the teacher using the expressions they had just learned.[1]　The

second one was to conduct research projects: to collect information via the internet, etc., analyze it, give a presentation of the results using multimedia equipment, and write a research paper as a summary. The teacher increased the amount of time devoted to the second activity, i.e. research projects, as the class proceeded.

The classes were carried out in most cases in English: directions, explanations, handouts, worksheets, and notices on the bulletin board. The teacher switched to Japanese, the students' first language, when necessary. In order to facilitate communication, an extra rule was established: the students could get extra points if they asked questions or made some comments in English, even if they needed some assistance from the teacher to make themselves understood. They were encouraged to use any kinds of dictionaries: English-Japanese, Japanese-English, and English-English, as well as on-line dictionaries, and even allowed to utilize software or internet sites for translation if readily accessible.[2] The freedom to employ any necessary means was regarded as an important strategy to communicate.

3. 2. Research Projects

The first stage of our research projects started with short teacher-student dialogues concerning the students' interests and hobbies. After the teacher's explanation about the basic use of the browser, they put their key words into the search engine and practiced searching for necessary information on the internet.[3] Although it should have been the first time for almost all of them to do these sorts of things all in English, they did fairly well, probably because they already had the schemata for computers and their own areas of interest.[4]

The students decided on their own topic and were asked to fill out the form below:

Table 1: The Entry Sheet

English III 2001

Research Project

Your Name:

Your Topic:

Your Key Words:

Cool Websites:

Short Description of Your Topic:

Each of them briefly explained their own topic based on the information written on this sheet and answered the teacher's questions in front of other students. At this stage, many of them were being very shy and did not talk very voluntarily nor fluently.

Let us now look at the topics they chose for their research projects:

Table 2: The Topics

Entry #	Name	Topic
1		Napkins
2		Baseball
3		New Year in America
4		Rebirth of 'biohazard'
6		Japanese Tea Ceremony
7		Network Security
8		Cheese
9		Sheena Ringo
10		Music
11		Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone
12		History of Electric Guitars
13		Trout Fishing in West Virginia
14		Why Do People Believe in Mysteries, Especially UMA?
15		What's a UFO?
16		Words by Prime Minister Koizumi

(Only the topics which were actually reported on are shown here.)

They chose a variety of topics, ranging from hobbies to graduation research topics. At an earlier stage, some students were interested in the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, which must have impressed these young minds very strongly. However, they later switched to other topics, saying that terrorism was too difficult a topic to study in English. They instead settled on everyday topics and topics with personal connections, which led to fascinating presentations in English.

Our class then moved from the LL to the computer room. The teacher used the first three classes for deciding the order of presentation, explanation of the facilities including use of the multimedia equipment, explanation of presentations and paper submission, and preparation for presentations, and the last three to presentation sessions. To determine the order of the presentations, the students were requested to draw lots.

The teacher gave a model presentation explaining presentations and research paper writing, with the aid of some of the equipment and software available to the student presenters. First, the equipment accessible to students were computers (Mac OS 8.1) equipped with an MO drive, a projector, a multimedia viewer, an OHP, a VCR with a monitor TV (borrowed from other room), and a portable MD/CD/cassette player (the teacher's own). The combination of projector with computer and multimedia viewer inspired some impressive presentations (they showed photos, etc.). As for the software, PowerPoint 98, Word 98, Excel 98, Internet Explorer 5 and others were already installed on the computers, and public folders were later created in order to distribute files quickly. Some students brought in their own materials: notebook computers and their own small props, such as a napkin, a bat and a ball, flies, and so on. Utilizing the equipment available was strongly recommended; some of the students, however, distributed handouts instead, where they referred to the information they had collected on the internet. They were requested to report to the teacher in advance what sorts of equipment they would like to use for the presentation in order to make the session progress smoothly.

Each presentation consisted of a 10-minute oral presentation, a short question and answer session, and a peer- and self-evaluation. The students were asked to submit their manuscripts to the teacher for her comments or/and come to the teacher's office for consultation at least two days before the presentation.

The teacher gave them tips for oral presentation; in other words, she advised them

to follow the rules of public speaking.[5]　First, the three most important things were to take a 'you-attitude' (to look at and talk to the audience), to keep in mind 'KISS (keep it short and simple),' and to prepare notes and practice hard.　She emphasized that oral presentations are communication between the presenter and the audience.　The second point she showed to them was the typical organization of a presentation: introduction (greetings, attention-getters, objectives), body (main points and the details), and conclusion (summary, conclusion, closing remarks).　The next point was the list of useful expressions for oral presentations: for example, 'I would like to talk about/explain/describe/show...' and 'Please look at the table/figure/picture/screen/handout.'

There were three presentation sessions, and in each session, around five students gave a presentation.　The teacher chaired the sessions, and encouraged the presenters to do their best on the stage, and inspired the audience to give them a big hand and ask them questions.　The students received the same number of evaluation sheets as the number of presenters and were asked to evaluate themselves and each other (self and peer evaluation, respectively).　In an actual presentation, the presenter set up the equipment, distributed handouts if necessary, greeted the audience and started his/her presentation.　Though they were already told the desirable length of a presentation was 10 minutes, they did not obey this rule very strictly. (In fact, they talked as long as they liked.)　They were allowed to look at notes during the presentation; however, the presenters who were able to take a 'you-attitude' and did not look at their notes very often seem to have been more successful.　After each presentation a short question-and-answer session followed: they got extra points if they asked questions, and if nobody would volunteer, the teacher instead asked the presenter several questions and in case of difficulty, assisted him/her and permitted him/her to employ some Japanese expressions.　Every one of them had made steady or significant improvement since registration and performed better than expected.　It would be no exaggeration to say that the best presenters could read a paper at an international conference (on the condition that they study their specialty hard).
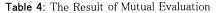
While the next presenter was setting up the equipment, the audience evaluated the presentation which they had just seen.　Now look at the evaluation sheet below:

Table 3: Mutual Evaluation Sheet

Evaluation Sheet			
No.		Name	
Presenter			
Topic	very good	good	effort needed
Organization	very good	good	effort needed
Fluency	very good	good	effort needed
Grammar	very good	good	effort needed
Attitude	very good	good	effort needed
Comments			

The students were requested to evaluate each of the presentations, including their own, from the points of view listed in the leftmost column. They were encouraged to write comments at the bottom, in English if possible. The teacher compiled the evaluations and gave the results to each of the presenters. The following is an example of the evaluation summary sheet:

Table 4: The Result of Mutual Evaluation

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                              English III
                    Student's Evaluation of Presentation

        Name: (Surname, First name)
        Topic: (Topic)
   Score (very good=3, good=2, effort needed=1):
                      Topic: 3.00
                Organization: 2.54
                    Fluency: 2.88
                    Grammar: 2.70
                    Attitude: 2.98

   Comments: * Her explanation told Tea Ceremony in detail. I could know a lot of
               things of it. Her presentation was perfect.
               * His presentation is very interesting. I didn't know fly-fishing, but I
               could understand it easily by his hand out and article. If I go to the
               United States of America, I would like to try fly-fishing.
               * When I heard his topic, I recognized that the computer we quite often
               use always had many dangers in Internet.
               * When I heard his explain of Ichiro, I could understand how great
               tequniques, batting, catching, and all kind of his tarrents. And I
               understand how he like Ichiro very much. Especially, his demonstra-
               tions were very good idea. I enjoyed very much.
               * I have never heard about Chupacabra. I believe in mysteries,
               because I can imagine everything about unidentifide living thing. His
               presentation is a little difficult, but I enjoyed his presentation.
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The presenter's name and research topic are at the top of the sheet, and the average marks for each criterion are shown in the middle. The teacher copied the comments as they were. (Here I have collected the comments randomly to show what the students wrote to their classmates; in the actual sheet this column is a collection of the comments on the individual presentation.)

　　The teacher asked the students to submit a research paper by the end of examination week, which was meant to be the term paper. She gave a rough idea of a research paper before the oral presentation sessions: the organization of a paper (title, introduction, body (several sections), conclusion, and references/bibliography), the format of references/bibliography (book, paper, website), and the style.[6] It is too well known that the written and spoken styles are different. The teacher, however, was not particular about this, because it was the first experience for most of the students in the

class to give a presentation and write a paper in English. It would be more motivating if they did not have to pay too much attention to details and could experience the fun of expressing themselves in English.

The course grade was determined considering listening worksheets, research projects (oral presentation and research paper), and attendance. They were given extra points if they stated opinions, asked questions, etc.

4. Evaluation

We have now examined the background and the details of the *Eigo III* class. In this next section, I will refer to two sorts of post-evaluation of the class.

The first one is the teaching evaluation conducted by the FD Committee of Shigakukan University (Faculty Development Committee, a specialized subcommittee of the Academic Affairs Committee) at the end of each semester. Each teacher is requested to choose one of his/her courses and ask the students to evaluate it. The sheets are collected and analyzed in the Academic Affairs Section of the office. The result for each teacher's chosen class is given to the teacher concerned, and at the same time, a table of all the results is published without identification of the teachers or classes. Below is the result of teaching evaluation of my course:

Table 5: The Results of Teaching Evaluation

	Questions	strongly disagree (%)	disagree (%)	neither agree nor disagree (%)	agree (%)	strongly agree (%)
1	The contents of the class were too much	11.1	77.8	11.1		
2	The class was too fast	10.0	70.0	10.0	10.0	
3	The class was difficult		55.6	33.3	11.1	
4	The teacher articulated and explained clearly				60.0	40.0
5	The textbook and handouts helped your understanding				60.0	40.0
6	The teacher was enthusiastic about the class				40.0	60.0
7	The aim of the class was clear			10.0	40.0	50.0
8	The teaching materials were adequate			10.0	40.0	50.0
9	The contents closely matched the syllabus description			20.0	50.0	30.0
10	The class was worth attending			10.0	30.0	60.0
11	The class held my interest			10.0	50.0	40.0
12	I was satisfied with the class				60.0	40.0
13	The classroom was adequate			10.0	70.0	20.0
14	I actively participated in the class				50.0	50.0

	Question	0–20% (%)	30–40% (%)	50–60% (%)	70–80% (%)	90–100% (%)
15	I attended …% of the classes				40.0	60.0

(English translation by the author)

Around 10 percent of the students agree that the class was too fast (10.0%) and difficult (11.1%). This shows that it is still difficult for a teacher to focus on a certain level and conduct a class suitable for all the students, although the teacher let them choose their own topics and gave them some individual assistance. The syllabus is another issue to be considered, since she did not mention details such as scheduling there. She rather proceeded, modifying and adapting. This shortage of prior information and haphazard style could have confused the students. On the other hand, all the students who evaluated the course agreed (60% agree and 40% strongly agree) that they were satisfied with the class. Generally speaking, the classes seemed to be evaluated as favorable. It should be borne in mind, however, that the opinions of the students who decided not to come to class are not reflected here.

The second type of evaluation is more casual. The teacher asked them to write their impressions of the class freely in either language and anonymously at the very end of the class (She reminded them this would not be considered in grading). Their impressions were generally favorable, as is often the case with this sort of question-naires. Let me here refer to the ones including points which are important to this case study:

It was an unusual but interesting experience. (English translation by the author)

I collected information on the topic I chose and gave a presentation on that topic. I do not think I did it very smoothly due to lack of experience. But by reading the paper, I was able to learn how to express in English what I wanted to say. I have learned a lot from this and I am happy with it. (English translation by the author)

The class was really interesting. And I studied a lot. When I had my manuscript corrected, I felt English was fun. *Eigo III* was the last English course I have to take. I am happy that I took it. (English translation by the author)

I don't like English nor English classes but I enjoyed the listening exercises. But I did not know what to do with browsing the internet in English. I would never have done such a thing by myself. I was able to learn how to use a computer in this English class. I had a hard time with oral presentation in English. I couldn't express

myself just as I wanted. I didn't know how to construct a sentence. I had no choice but to express myself using a lot of simple sentences. It would have been hard even in Japanese. To manipulate a language is difficult. (English translation by the author)

As my comment of the whole lecture, I thought that I was able to spend very significant time. Because there were a lot of topics, so I was teached by them. I understood, to have curiosity something such like "otaku" was good for studing English. (original text)

In order to accomodate students' different interests and English proficiency levels, the administration of the course emphasized respect for individuality and individual differences, which I believe on the one hand inspired the students to express themselves in English; on the other hand, I admit that this did confuse those who were used to other teaching methods. The teacher should provide appropriate directions in order to avoid this confusion.

Having examined the results of the evaluation done by the students, I will state a few other points which I am now aware of and which should be considered in future classes.

First, as I have already pointed out, it is extremely difficult to set a goal of a class and therefore to choose teaching materials such as textbooks, particularly in a class which is a mixture of various majors, interests and levels of English proficiency. One of the overall aims of general education is, as has been often discussed in our university, to assist the students to study various academic areas and enable them to see things from a wider perspective. This, in fact, was one of the significant changes in the curriculum introduced in the Heisei 11 (1999) academic year. In my *Eigo III* class the emphasis was laid on communication at the expense of this 'wide perspective' and the students chose their own materials according to their interests, which could have been against that aim. I earlier referred to some of them switching from terrorism to another topic. I rather welcomed this change, because the major aim of the class was not to think how we can solve difficult problems with our contemporary world, but to improve their communicative competence. One of them remarked that he/she benefited from the presentations on a variety of topics. I hope this will compensate for the possible

shortcomings of the class.

The second crucial issue is the size of a class. As can be easily imagined, this *Eigo III* class would have been impossible if there had been 45 registrants, which is the maximum number in one class of this course. The oral presentation sessions, the individual consultations with the teacher, the short dialogue practice—the teacher would not have been able to give sufficient time to all these communicative exercises. The size should be kept smaller so that the students can find enough chances to communicate with each other and the teacher.

The third point is relevant to the character of this particular course, that is, information as well as communication, as a faithful reflection of the goals of the new general education curriculum. The teacher and some students in fact were not so skillful with manipulating multimedia equipment. We sought the assistance of more skillful students and staff members of the Computer Education Room, to whom I feel most grateful. This successfully made the skillful students more confident in themselves and helped the less skillful students acquire new knowledge; most importantly, it let them all realize how important it is to help each other.

To conclude this section, let me add one thing. Recall that the teacher compiled the results of the evaluations and gave the sheets as in Table 4 to each of the presenters. Although it was not reflected in the post-evaluation above, the students must have found a variety of comments and encouragements by their classmates, and I hope they will keep it for future reference and as evidence that they made it in English.

5. Concluding Remarks

In this paper I have reported an attempt to enhance the students' communicative competence in introducing research projects into an EFL class in university general education, including background and teaching evaluation. In order to give them as many opportunities to communicate as possible in a class with divergent proficiency levels and interests, the teacher encouraged them to actively communicate in English, choose their own research topics, give oral presentations with the aid of multimedia equipment, and write their research papers. These activities were, in general, done in English, which was the first experience for most of them. Though the teaching evaluation of the class was generally favorable, I also pointed out some problems with this project, such as class

size, equipment manipulation skill, and the possible conflict between one of the aims of general education and that of English language courses.

Recall that one of the students remarked that the curiosity of an *otaku* (enthusiast) is good for studying English (see Section 4).　Actually, students who showed more effectively in the oral presentation how much they loved the topic ended up with greater success.　Through the process of research projects, the students became aware of the importance of expressing themselves and communicating with the audience.　They had their own communicative need, which made the audience want to listen to their voice.

Notes

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1. The textbook used for listening and speaking activity was Dale Fuller & Linda Fuller (2001), *Essential Listening* 2: *Questions and Answers*, Tokyo: Macmillan Language-house.　The CD coming with this book made the learning more efficient: the students utilized it at their own pace as a self-study material before, during, and after the class.　To describe this activity in detail would be beyond the scope of this short article.　In addition to this, the teacher introduced some other activities to warm them up such as songs and 'spot the difference.'

2. One of the useful sites for translation is *excite* <http://www.excite.co.jp>.

3. The search engines most frequently used by the students were *google* <http://www.google.com> and *Yahoo* <http://www.yahoo.com>.

4. A schema is the background knowledge used by the reader to make sense of the text. It is not only the knowledge about the world but also about texts.　It is often said that the teacher's role is to help the students to activate an appropriate schema, which helps them to decode the text more efficiently.　See Michael McCarthy (1991), *Discourse Analysis for Language Teachers* (Cambridge Language Teaching Library), Cambridge, etc.: Cambridge University Press: 168-9.

5. The teacher advised the students to refer to the books on giving a presentation such as Kyoko Hosoi & Ruth C. Fallon (1996), *Hazimete no Eigo Purezenteesyon* [An Introduction to Presentation in English] (Bizinesu Eigo no Kihon Sukiru [Basic Skills

in Business English] 1), Tokyo: Goken; and Koji Sakimura (1998), *Eigo de Ronritekini Hyoogensuru* [Expressing Yourself Logically in English], Osaka: Sogensha.

6. The teacher showed the students several books on writing research papers, which are easily available or held in the library, for example, Koji Sakimura (1991), *Eigo Ronbun ni Yoku Tukau Hyoogen* [Useful Expressions for Research Papers in English], Osaka: Sogensha.