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Cooperative Learning Project : Using Advertisements in the Classroom

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to determine the effectiveness of cooperative projects which intend to help students develop their ability to think on their own and improve their English skills. Based on the results of questionnaires, it evaluates a cooperative project in which twenty-six Japanese students enrolled in an English course were introduced to authentic visual materials and instructed to utilize them for analysis and presentation activities. The findings revealed that students had a positive attitude to cooperative activities which encouraged them to brainstorm and discuss. In addition, authentic visual materials were effective in raising their awareness of target language culture and developing their communication skills.

1. Research Background

1.1. Cooperative Activities

In Japanese educational settings, students are accustomed to the teacher-directed and controlled teaching methodology. Even in many language classrooms, teachers transmitting information and students taking notes or filling out work sheets are often seen¹⁾. This predominant student role as passive recipient tends to limit their communication abilities. One of the best ways for students to verbalize their feelings and ideas in the language classroom is through group-conscious learning activities²⁾. Some reports in the literature also deal with cooperative tasks in English language teaching³⁾. These activities are effective in that students solve problems in realistic ways and exchange information extensively with others⁴⁾.

Another effective approach to promote students' active participation is project-based learning activities in which students are given student-centered, open-ended projects²⁾. Project-based learning plays an important role for students to connect their learning in the classroom and using it in the real world⁵⁾. In this activity, the instructor needs to focus on how and what students learn from each other

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and if the aim of the project is appropriate for the proficiency level of the students. Instructors' role is more like facilitating and guiding meaningful student interactions in the classroom¹⁾. However, the effectiveness of cooperative learning projects for students at lower proficiency levels is still an issue to be considered in the language classroom.

1.2. Authentic Visual Materials

Recently a wide range of authentic visual materials have been exploited for use in the classroom, since they are considered to offer a variety of classroom activities which provide students with considerable exposure to the target language and its culture. "The outstanding feature of video films is the ability to present complete communicative situations"⁶⁾. Because of this educational benefit which supports many aspects of language learning, much has been written about the effectiveness of using TV commercials in the classroom^{7),8)}.

One of the major features of TV commercials is that they are entertaining and provide culturally rich examples of language⁴⁾. Another is that they are relatively short and present a simple message that is easy for students to follow. Using commercials in the classroom increase students' motivation and their cultural awareness⁴⁾. However, some instructors think such authentic materials are too difficult for students to understand. This is because there are often some nuance and connotations that certain words have to convey cultural attitudes, beliefs and values⁹⁾. Unfamiliar colloquial expressions and coined words also make it difficult for students to understand both written and spoken messages in the commercials. As a result, students with limited language ability particularly feel frustrated¹⁰⁾. Although being simply exposed to such authentic resources is not enough to improve students' language abilities, there appears to be very little research on how to help such students make the most of TV commercials to facilitate their language learning.

1.3. Research Questions

The research questions investigated in the present study were :

- To what extent does the cooperative learning project using TV commercials lead students at lower proficiency levels to develop their English skills and increase their cultural awareness?
- How students perceive the cooperative learning project as a tool to collaborate their ideas and increase their confidence to become active students, compared to traditional classroom activities?

2. Methodology

Participants

The participants of this project were twenty-six Japanese students who were taking an English course at a university. Many of them had learned English for six years and had attained at least a beginners' level of proficiency. They were used to the traditional teacher-directed language learning approach taken in a large lecture-type classroom¹¹⁾. Therefore, some of them were inclined to rely more on the instructor when tackling any tasks. They had little or no experience in engaging learner-centered activities and group projects in the language classroom.

Materials

As authentic visual materials, the TV commercials were taken from *Watching TV Commercials (II)*¹²⁾. The students used this textbook in the classroom. It included a wide range of commercials such as household products commercials and public service announcements. Most of the messages were easy to understand and some were humorous. They presented a variety of everyday situations which demonstrate different uses of language than students were likely to see even in their native language. Although they aimed both at adults and children audiences and some of them were not up to date, they had a variety of topics which were relevant to the existing knowledge that students had already possessed.

Procedures

The project was implemented in a half-term English course that the students took as one of their elective classes. The course was based on the analytical learning approaches proposed by recent studies^{4),13)}. The classes were all scheduled for one and a half hours each week and therefore students were expected to supplement classes with independent activities. The course was organized on the basis of project activities. Before the project started, regular teacher-directed instructions had been introduced into the classroom. There was also a period of guidance and adjustment which was offered by the instructor for the purpose of making students understand the nature and major benefits of the project.

The following is the procedure of the present project.

Incorporating cooperative work

First, the students were divided into groups of four or five who sat together in class. Students were diverse in language ability levels. For the purpose of mixing both stronger and weaker students, the instructor formed the groups, rather than allowing students to se-

lect themselves. One of the purposes of forming this kind of mixed-ability groups was for stronger students to help other weaker members of the group.

Previewing activities

Students were given different video clips and were required to watch them for the main ideas. Then they determined what they understood about the story from the visual images. The speed at which English was spoken was one of the problems in understanding commercial messages. Therefore, in order for students to get used to the speed at which the commercials were shown, they were made available to students on a self-access basis. Each short segment was recorded so that students were able to pause and repeat it by themselves. This helped students understand even a small segment of the messages. After students understood the general meaning from their watching, they read through the scripts.

Analyzing commercials

Subsequently, students as a group analyzed the commercials to interpret the meanings. Students were given a question sheet which focused on the issues and topics used in the materials and searched for the information required to answer these questions. If necessary, they did some research on the products or services in the commercials through the Internet. Here is an example of how students analyzed one of the commercials.

Could your airline stand a little room for improvement? Next trip, fly Alaska Airlines.
Because we're not comfortable with a flight until you are.

Excerpt from *Watching TV Commercials(II)*

In this commercial, two heavyset men at both window seats were moving towards the middle. These two men, who had thought there should be an aisle in the middle, bumped into each other in the middle of the plane. Students understood that the first sentence, "Could your airline stand a little room for improvement?" was the question which was asked just to make the viewer think about his/her regular airlines. Many commercials based on the promotion of sales focused on the consumers' own problems. They made an analysis based on the questions below.

(1)What is advertised? What is the product or service being promoted?

- (2) Who is the target audience? Who would be likely to be interested in the commercial?
Can you identify their age or social status?
- (3) What are the highlighted features? Pay close attention to the visual images and sounds.
- (4) What is the intended purpose of the commercial? To persuade to buy?
- (5) What is the central message conveyed by the commercial? Is it about the promotion of sales? Does it give advice or information?

Students were told not to try to understand the general surface-level meaning in the commercials. They checked specific vocabulary for certain topics and made a glossary of them they needed to understand the commercials. For example, students understood that personal pronoun *you* in this commercial referred to the consumer and the consumer felt that he/she was a part of the commercial. They also tried to pay attention to body language such as gesture and facial expression. They, then, discussed, for example, cultural differences in airline business in between Japan and U.S. Students understood that, since there were various messages created by the same images and sounds in the commercials, there was no one right answer⁴⁾. They identified the details and then wrote a summary.

Making a presentation

Students prepared for the group presentations for every week. Each group was given approximately two weeks to prepare for the presentation. In the preparation stage, they talked about how to approach the presentations and decided who was going to do what. Materials on the Internet also helped the preparation of the presentations. In addition, students were told to answer all the questions for comprehension provided in the textbook. These exercises aimed at helping students understand useful words and expressions relevant to the commercials, such as flight, aisle, and sardine-packed, students then used them as a reference for future work. Based on their analysis, students made a presentation and listened to their classmates' ideas. For all these procedures, students were given as much time as they needed to complete their work.

Evaluating the project

The content and procedures used in the project were evaluated by students by means of a set of questionnaire which contained both closed and open questions in order to examine students' individual comments on the possible benefits and problems of the project they had

completed (see Appendix).

The results of this questionnaire were discussed at a later stage in the classroom. This evaluation process provided students with opportunities to reflect on their own learning processes. By exploring the problems and benefits of the project, students were encouraged to think about how each activity was accomplished and how it could be improved the next time. By asking some questions, the instructor helped them become more self-directed students. The emphasis was more on the process than the products of learning. This entire process helped them become more sensitized to their language learning approaches.

Measure

The rating scale used in the questionnaire was the 10 point Likert scale with 1 representing strongly disagree and 10 strongly agree. In order to attain a mean response for each question, the responses were totaled and averaged. For the purpose of examining any statistically significant differences between the students' responses, a standard deviation was also attained. The data are presented in this paper as mean $\pm$ SD.

3. Results

The results of the questionnaire indicate that the students accepted the project very positively. The findings suggest that almost all the students felt the present project helped students improve their English proficiency levels, compared to the regular classroom activities. Average ($\pm$ SD) of this response was 7.13 ($\pm$ 1.42). The following are the students' comments on the overall evaluation.

"Unlike many activities in the classroom, we can learn many different new ideas from other members of the group."

"I enjoyed working on this project because I compared the notes with other members."

"Although my English proficiency level is not so high, I think my level has been improved through the interaction between other students."

Also, a majority of students responded that the project increased their interest in analyzing TV commercials. Average ($\pm$ SD) of this response was 8.03 ($\pm$ 1.69). As is evident from the statements, some students retained a feeling of control of their own learning. In addition, many students wanted to continue the same kind of project as future work in the classroom. Average ($\pm$ SD) of this response was 7.63 ($\pm$ 1.73). Some comments from the students follow.

“Since we work on the project on our own, I think we understand what we are doing and what we should do to accomplish the work better. I think it is more effective to work collaboratively with other students.”

“If we have a problem with the understanding of the message delivered by the commercial, we are able to look for the information we need to know. This project had a very different learning approach from any of that I had previously experienced in the classroom.”

“Unlike many other classroom activities which were required of us, this project inspired us to learn more.”

“I think my listening skills have been improved because the materials were not contrived and artificial.”

“As the course proceeded, I could easily understand the message by paying more attention to the questions provided.”

As for the difficulties and drawbacks, however, non-participatory behavior was still observed throughout the project. A majority of students stated that there were a few reluctant students who were more likely to depend completely on someone whose English level was high. Also, almost half of the students found that it's difficult to reach a consensus among other members of the group. In addition, some students noted that listening to other group's presentations were like attending the teacher-directed language classroom. Consequently, as some students stated, students did not feel they benefited fully from the project. Some of these comments include :

“Because there were some uncooperative members, it was sometime difficult to work on the project together.”

“It took some time to complete the project since everyone had a different opinion on particular topics.”

4. Implications

One of the benefits that many students suggested is that they greatly benefited from accomplishing their work as a team and collaborating their feelings and ideas. The results of the questionnaire indicate that, compared to their regular classroom activities, they felt that more learning took place on the part of the students. In this project, many students helped other members of the group. Advanced students were able to offer valuable support to other students. The weak students, on the other hand, got the benefits of learning how advanced students approached the work. Some students gained even good leadership skills. In addition, noticing other students' mistakes and presenting different points of view were good exercises as language awareness activities. "Getting students to correct and edit one another's work can be beneficial since it's easier to detect another person's mistake than one's own"¹⁴⁾.

Another benefit is that, through the project, many students felt they had made some progress. Particularly for those at lower language levels, through the analytical and decision making processes, language learning was seen as an active process rather than a passive one. This process also built the confidence of the students in their ability to express their opinions in front of other students. By using authentic visual materials as the basis for stimulating group discussion, students were able to understand a variety of expressions used in real life situations. The students understood that authentic materials reflect a naturalness of form and an appropriateness of cultural and situational context that would be found in the language¹⁵⁾. The retrospective evaluation process at the end of the project also encouraged students to have a sense of achievement.

There was a problem, however, in that some students were not active participants in the analysis and discussion process. There were also many passive listeners during the presentations and they behaved the same way as they did in their regular lectures. Although the present project is particularly suited to multi-level classes in Japanese educational settings, it is important for the instructor to determine how to establish appropriate cooperative learning environments for those students through ongoing research projects.

5. Conclusion

It has proven that cooperative activities based on the analysis of commercial messages have great potential for encouraging communication from all students. In addition, cooperative work used in the present project helped students even at lower proficiency levels overcome major difficulties in understanding authentic spoken and written texts and motivated them to learn English. Although the present project raised a number of methodological questions which need to be addressed in a future project,

the guiding principles outlined in this paper can be applied to any teaching situations. The cooperative activities implemented in the classroom will be a key contribution to active classroom interactions.

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Appendix Evaluation Sheet

Mark each of the following statements on a scale from "Strongly disagree" to "Strongly agree".

Strongly disagree 1—2—3—4—5—6—7—8—9—10 Strongly agree

- (1) Compared with teacher-directed instructions, how much the present project helped you improve your English proficiency?
- (2) Compared with teacher-directed instructions, to what extent has the cooperative project aroused your interest in analyzing TV commercials?
- (3) How much do you want to include the project as a future class work?

Overall Evaluation

Describe what you think about this project. Write problems and benefits of the project in short sentences.

Problems

Benefits
