CASE STUDY

The student-teacher experience as a model for students as partners (SaP) and for enhancing student engagement among Japanese students

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ABSTRACT

Education in Japan and other Asian countries advocates the traditional passive style of learning where students learn through rote memorization in a teacher-centered environment. However, this is now changing due to globalization with Japan's Ministry of Education promoting learning strategies to involve students in the learning process actively. Many studies involving students as partners have stated that students feel more at ease when they learn with and from their peers and that working in groups makes them learn significantly better and allows them to put into practice what they have taught to others or learned from others. This case study on the Student-Teacher Experience activity aims to present the concept of students as partners to enhance active learning in Japan and its possible application in other countries and fields of study with a similar learning environment as Japan. The activity allowed students to actively engage in class and enhanced learning.

KEYWORDS

students as partners, peer teaching, peer-learning, student-teacher, dental English

Traditional classroom settings in Japan dictate that students should remain quiet, obedient, and not ask questions, which is based on Confucian values (Kaur, 2020; Claro, 2007; Kubota, 2001). Thus, in 2003, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology proposed a 5-year *Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities* (MEXT, 2003). Although schools have started implementing MEXT's proposal, one problem is the lack of student engagement and opportunities to develop English language learning skills (Morse & Nakahara, 2001; Rodis et al., 2013; Rodis et al., 2014).

Engaging students actively in their learning is the most common form of partnership. Partnership is a specific form of student engagement, with very high levels of active student participation. Students as partners (SaP) is a pedagogical approach that has been embraced recently by many higher education institutions primarily in the US, the UK, Canada, and Australia. SaP implies students and faculty/academic staff working in collaboration, as partners, to improve teaching and learning experiences (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2017). SaP is described as "a

relationship in which students, academics, and staff are actively engaged in and stand to gain from the process of learning and working together" (Healey et al., 2014 p. 12; 2015; 2016). Furthermore, student involvement in the process of course and curricular development fosters more responsibility for and engagement with learning in students. Students who are partners in their learning start viewing education differently and take on a more active role, becoming more engaged with learning as they develop a greater sense of responsibility (Cook-Sather, 2011; Werder et al., 2012; Storey et al., 2021). Peer-teaching, peer-learning, and peer-assessment are effective ways of engaging students and enabling them to take on some of the roles of the teacher, thus the term "student-teacher" (Freire, 2005, p. 264).

This case study aims to present the activities and rationale of the Student-Teacher Experience (STE) segment of the Dental English course for 3rd-year students in a dental school in Japan as a model for student engagement based on the concept of students as partners.

THE STUDENT-TEACHER EXPERIENCE

Background

During the 6-year dentistry course in Japan, students transition into student-dentists or student-clinicians in their 5th and 6th year, affording them real-life experiences in dental clinics while still in school. This practical training methodology is intrinsic to Japanese culture's apprentice-master system, famously epitomized by apprentices observing masters forging katana swords during the Edo Period (1603–1868). The Student-Teacher Experience adopts a similar approach of peer-learning and peer-teaching to facilitate active learning outlined in the Dental English core curriculum.

The Student-Teacher Experience is an activity where students become teachers to their fellow classmates through a group presentation on preassigned topics and presentation slides that is decided by the teacher. Each group member will prepare a script for their assigned subtopic, which is checked by the teacher before the presentation day. Each group will have to practice with the teacher at least once. After each group presentation, a question-and-answer and feedback session will follow.

Informed consent was obtained from all students at the beginning of each semester stating that the use of their Student-Teacher Experience feedback is for educational purposes and that providing feedback was voluntary and withdrawal did not affect course grades. No ethical approval was sought in this study since the Student-Teacher Experience is a longstanding and ongoing educational activity that used de-identified student qualitative feedback data. Moreover, the activity is included in the officially published course syllabus.

Activity and rationale

The Student-Teacher Experience is derived from the active learning concept of student motivation, student engagement, and the adage, "you learn by doing." It involves small groups of students being supported to teach core content in the course to other students undertaking the course. The student learners then give feedback to the presenting group to help them improve their work, all set in a highly supportive and collegiate environment. There are four stages to motivate and engage students: The first stage is to create a motivating condition for learning, thereby creating a pleasant and supportive environment in the classroom; the second stage is to

introduce initial motivating techniques by creating materials that are relevant and easy for the students; the third stage is to take care in maintaining and protecting students' motivation by offering stimulating activities and fostering self-esteem, self-confidence, and co-operation among themselves; and the fourth stage is to turn evaluation and feedback into positive experiences (Dörnyei & Kormos, 2000; Pinter, 2006; Juhana, 2012). Thus, the following four stages were integrated into the Dental English course as the integral parts of the Student-Teacher Experience activity: (a) creating a pleasant and supportive environment, (b) introducing motivating techniques/materials, (c) offering stimulating activities: practicing and presenting, and (d) turning evaluation into positive experiences: feedback and documentation.

THE FOUR STAGES OF THE STUDENT-TEACHER EXPERIENCE ACTIVITY

Stage 1: Creating a pleasant and supportive environment

Classroom setting and layout

Activity: For this activity, the classroom had movable chairs and tables, audio-visual equipment, wireless pin-type microphones, and a wide, open space at the front of the classroom. There were 239 3rd-year dental students taking the dental English course who participated in this study from the following academic years: 2014 (41 students), 2015 (40), 2016 (40), 2017 (39), 2018 (40), and 2019 (39).

Rationale: The physical environment of a classroom plays an important part in the ownership students feel about their school and more specifically their class (Bucholz, 2009). For example, desks and chairs arranged in neat, orderly rows may make movement easier but may not help create a friendly environment, encourage cooperative learning, or build a sense of class community, as with desks arranged in semicircles or clusters (Patton et al., 2001). If the courses have small-group discussion or presentation activities, a flexible classroom setup will be ideal. Moreover, a good video and audio system will ensure audience attention during lectures and activities. In Japan, hand gestures while speaking are seldom used so a pin-type wireless microphone is recommended. A pin-type wireless microphone enables students to have their hands free to be able to use hand gestures (Nishiyama, 2000). Students are supported to develop using hand gestures by the teacher through examples such as when saying a sequence (first, second, third…) and using the hands to complement it or when saying "this graph shows…" and using the hands to point to the graph.

Groupings

Activity: The class was randomly divided into five groups according to the five topics in the syllabus. Since there are approximately 40 students, each group had seven to eight members. A group leader facilitated correspondence between the members and the teacher, was the custodian of slides, and scheduled group practices.

Rationale: Small groupings have been known to create the best peer-learning and teaching environment (Jackson et al., 2014). Since the number of slides per topic is about 40 to 50 slides, each member had around four to six slides, allowing them to master their presentation without

much difficulty and actively take part in giving the lecture to their classmates with confidence. With a more manageable number of slides for each member, students were able to cover their topics comprehensively and had enough time to prepare and master it (Currens & Bithell, 2003; Villiers et al., 2003).

Stage 2: Introducing motivating techniques/materials

Topics

Activity: There were five topics namely: (1) "Branches of Dentistry 1," which introduces the etymology of the names of the basic specializations of dentistry; (2) "Branches of Dentistry 2," which introduces the etymology of the names of the clinical specializations of dentistry; (3) "The Mouth," which introduces the nomenclature of the parts of the mouth; (4) "The Teeth," which introduces the nomenclature of the parts of the teeth; and (5) "Oral Diseases," which introduces the nomenclature of the common oral diseases of the mouth and teeth.

Rationale: Most medical/dental English terminologies are derived from Latin or Greek origins, and learning these terms is difficult for most Japanese students. Thus, knowing the etymology can make mastering these terms easier. The strategy to analyze affixes and roots engages learners to analyze word structures (Yang, 2005). For example, to learn the dental term "stomatitis," or inflammation of the mouth, learners must learn the meaning of the root words, stoma (mouth), and -itis (inflammation).

Slides

Activity: The slides were prepared by the teacher in advance, saved in a USB flash drive, and handed out to the leader of each group 2 weeks before their group gives the lecture. Each member decided which subtopic to take. Then, they studied and wrote their own presentation script based on their own understanding of the contents of the slides. Slides for the presenting group had dental terminologies including definition, word root, and Japanese translations. The non-presenting groups received the printout version of the presentation slide with blanks which they had to fill out during the lecture. These printouts were distributed to the non-presenting students on the day of the lecture.

Rationale: Although it is important that the slides should be prepared by the teacher to ensure that all important information will be covered, students can modify or add/delete slides if they feel that some of the slides are difficult to understand. For active learning to be effective, learners must have the opportunity to use available resources, make decisions, and be creative (Holla & Selvaraj, 1999). Because they also make their own scripts by studying and researching about their subtopics by themselves, they are learning by themselves and when they make the presentation, they are teaching their classmates. Moreover, by writing their own script, they use simple words, which are easy for their classmates to understand. This makes retention of knowledge easier. As for the non-presenting students, they are compelled to listen to their classmates' lecture because they must fill out the blanks on the presentation handouts.

Stage 3: Offering stimulating activities: Practicing and presenting

Practicing

Activity: Group practices with the teacher had to be done at least once with all members of the group present. The teacher acted as a facilitator in preparing each of the group's preferred time for practice, classroom reservations, and ensuring students will have some level of confidence giving their presentations. Practicing with the teacher was usually for finalizing slide content, correcting scripts, adjusting individual and group timings, and for addressing major mistakes in information gathering. The teacher listened to the presentation of each member noting the good points and areas for improvement. At the end of the group presentation, the teacher gives point-by-point positive feedback and suggestions. For example, most Japanese are not comfortable with establishing eye contact while presenting, so if students lack eye contact during practice, the teacher asks the student to practice presenting one or two slides while establishing eye contact with the group members until the student becomes comfortable with the action. An alternative suggestion from the teacher would be to ask the student to mimic establishing eye contact through short glances at the back wall of the classroom if the student becomes nervous during the actual presentation. Building positive relationships with students strengthens the partnership.

Rationale: For most Japanese students, giving a lecture in English is difficult. Thus, the more practice they have, the more they get the chance to master their topics, build self-confidence, and overcome shyness. Verbalizing their ideas of the topic helps reinforce the concept and improves knowledge retention. Moreover, group practices offer the opportunity to get support from their group members through suggestions or advice on how to explain their topic in a simpler way or using easy-to-understand English terms (Secomb, 2008). Moreover, watching their groupmates make a good presentation can motivate and encourage others in the group to practice more and be better, compared to when they are practicing alone. Practicing will also be important because each member can be guided accordingly by groupmates, leader, or teacher (Pinter, 2006). The development of a safe learning environment by the teacher is critically important because developing communication skills requires risk-taking on the part of the learner (Bransford & Brown, 2000). Effective teachers focus on core topics and sequence information to cover basic material before introducing new topics. They are student-centered and demonstrate respect for their students' background, ideologies, beliefs, and learning styles (Allison, 2015). Additionally, they organize activities in strands, presenting content through small segments of instruction over several days, rather than planning one activity to address the entire concept. They assign students activities that promote understanding of skills and knowledge (Macsuga-Gage et al., 2012).

Presenting

Activity: The presenters could use tooth models, visual aids, or do role plays to explain their topics. They could also ask questions to their classmates as part of their lecture. At the end of their presentation, members from the non-presenting groups had to ask one question to the presenters. General feedback was also given by the teacher to the presenting group at the end of the class.

Rationale: For most Japanese, there is an inherent fear of making mistakes. Since culture plays a role in determining people's responses to humiliation, feeling humiliated in front of peers can be detrimental in building self-confidence (Otten & Jonas, 2014). In Japan, saving face is valued above all else (Hasada, 2006). Thus, each group is advised to practice for 2 weeks so each member can master their topics and help them reduce their shyness and anxiety in speaking English in front of their classmates. During practice, asking questions can also promote same-level interaction with each other and increase mutual interest in the topic (Rivers, 2017). Moreover, since students wrote their own scripts based on their understanding of the slides, remembering them was be easier. Overall, group practicing enhances a sense of responsibility and reciprocity between group members and classmates (Foss et al., 2022).

Stage 4: Turning evaluation into positive experiences: Feedback and documentation

Feedback

Activity: Peer feedback to the presenting group was done by the non-presenting students through comments on the Student-Teacher Shuttle Card (Oda, 1991; Rodis et al., 2010). The shuttle card is a journal containing an exchange of written entries between students and teachers, as a way to determine the students' level of comprehension during every lecture; progress in overcoming shyness; and questions, suggestions, and comments. Every week, the student writes comments or questions on the journal and the teacher collects it after each class, writes a response, and returns it to the student at the next class. Following the ladder of feedback (Perkins, 2003), a protocol or structure that establishes a culture of trust and constructive support by sequencing feedback in order that is constructive, peers were to ask questions to clarify and gather relevant information before giving the feedback. Then, they could comment on the strengths of the presentation or mention the points that they valued. Teacher feedback was done for verbal and non-verbal communication and for knowledge of topic. Indicators for verbal communication include clarity and speed; non-verbal communication indicators include eye contact and gesturing or use of laser pointer or facial expressions. Knowledge of topic indicators include fluency (not reading a script) and self-confidence (delivery, asking/answering questions).

Rationale: The value of feedback has been known to enhance student learning, particularly in the context of formative assessment (Lapham & Webster, 2003; Orsmond & Merry, 2004; van den Berg & Admiral, 2006; Cartney & Rouse, 2010). Students crave genuine feedback based on direct observation (Kurtz & Silverman, 2005). Peers and teachers can have the opportunity to provide this before, during, and at the end of a teaching encounter (Jackson & Back, 2011).

Documentation

Activity: All presentations were videorecorded. This was announced at the beginning of the course and students were provided with an explanation for the purpose of documenting their presentations. They were also given the freedom to decline being video recorded if they wished. However, they still had to make the presentation. At the end of the course, a video compilation of all presentations was distributed to all students.

Rationale: A copy of the video is intended to enhance self-learning, self-assessment, and peer-assessment after they take the course. Students will be able to see their own performance and compare it with their peers. Self-assessments through videos can help students acknowledge what is wrong and how they can correct it (Skovholt, 2018; Daniello & Acquaviva, 2019). There is strong evidence that video reporting can inspire and engage students when incorporated into student-centered learning activities by increasing student motivation, enhancing learning experience, developing the potential for deeper learning of the subject, developing learner autonomy, and enhancing teamwork and communication skills (Johnson, 2009; Willmot & Bramhall, 2012).

DISCUSSION

The observations in this study contribute to the sparse prior literature, especially in Japan, on the concept of students as partners. Moreover, this contributes to the literature on students as partners in dentistry and on learning technical terminologies in a second language. Drawing on the circle of values in the framework developed by Healey et al. (2016) namely Respect, Reciprocity, Responsibility, Trust, Empowerment, and Inclusivity, and the principles of responsibility and reciprocity (Foss et al. 2022), a connection was seen in the concept of SaP, group practices, and mentoring in terms of building students' sense of responsibility to accurately present their topics to their classmates and their sense of reciprocity to listen and learn from peers and do the same when their time to present came

The written free entry survey through the shuttle card through the 5-year period were the only source of feedback data from the students. Below are some of the student entries, copied verbatim:

- "This class was very fun and interesting for me and easy to understand. I wasn't interested in dental terms before, but I started to think that I try to memorize dental terms after I took this class."
- "I like your lesson style. I enjoyed every class."
- "In the first class, I expected that dental English would be difficult. But this class is very interesting. I think we should do student teacher experience in every class."
- "I really had fun at this class. All the other classes now is boring."
- "I think that learning by Student-Teacher experience and role play is better than learning by test. Presentation and role play are good opportunity for us to improve our English proficiency."
- "When I listened to my classmates' presentation, I understand more and more because they used simple terms."
- "I was scared at first but after practicing with my groupmates, I became confident and it became easy to teach my topic to my classmates by doing group teaching."
- "I was able to cooperate with my groupmates and contribute to our group's assigned topic."
- "Listening to my groupmates giving a good presentation during our practice made me feel I needed to practice more."

- "I was always looking forward to listening to my classmate's lecture. Some of them spoke English very well and I was surprised."

Students learn more when they are actively engaged in the classroom than they do in a passive lecture environment. A study showed that students in active learning classrooms learn more than they think (Deslauriers et al., 2019). Active learning requires students to be directly involved in learning and teaching activities (Ashiabi, 2007). As partners, students in the Student-Teacher Experience are afforded an opportunity to play an active part in the learning process. They also help teachers reinforce important materials, concepts, and course content to fellow students using actions or words that are easy to understand. However, it is important to note that there are some students who may still prefer the traditional passive learning style because they dislike interacting with other students (Fagen et al., 2002) and they resent the increase in responsibility for their own learning (Felder, 2010). Thus, in introducing the students-as-partners approach, the teacher should explain why they have adopted this approach to teaching, conduct regular assessments, solicit feedback, and respond to students' concerns.

The limitation of the study is that it lacks proof to establish the causality of the Student Teacher Experience activity due to the lack of comparison groups. Unfortunately, not much can be done in establishing a new framework that relies too heavily on under-theorized assumptions. Another reason for this lack of proof in regards to causality is that educators in higher education are obliged to follow standard school policies, strict curricula, and educational ethics, which can hamper the creation of control and intervention groups to prove causality. Further limitations include that outcomes in educational research often require many years to prove and that the study was limited to Japanese dental students. Thus, further studies are needed to assess its effectiveness in long-term student learning and in student-teacher partnerships.

CONCLUSION

The Student-Teacher Experience proved to be a good model for student partnership, engaging students to experience the delivery of teaching and learning. It is an effective active learning activity that creates a non-threatening and supportive environment in which students become part of the learning and teaching process. It enhanced peer learning and peer teaching opportunities, self-esteem, and self-confidence and encouraged cooperation among students during practice sessions and made it easily comprehensible for students who are learning technical terms in a second language.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR

Dr. Omar M. M. Rodis *is a dentist and a professor of education at Tokushima University Faculty of Dentistry. His research interests include behavioral pediatric dentistry, curriculum development, and active learning. He has managed scientific grants for clinical and dental education and has received two dean's awards for education.*

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